



A Better Way A Fair Way

Provincial Bargaining for

Saskatchewan

School Board Support Workers

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Prepared by CUPE Research



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INTRODUCTION

The Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) is the largest union in the province, representing over 26,000 members who work at health care facilities, school boards, municipalities, universities, libraries and community-based organizations.

CUPE is the predominant union representing support staff in Saskatchewan's K-12 education system. We represent over 6,200 school board employees in 19 of the 28 school divisions in the province, including 14 of the 18 public school divisions and five of the eight separate school divisions.

Our members work as educational and teaching assistants, secretaries, library assistants and technicians, caretakers, bus drivers, computer technicians, social workers, speech assistants, trades workers and in several other classifications.

Our members' work makes our schools work. CUPE members ensure that school children arrive safely to school. They assist teachers in the classroom and work one-on-one with special needs students. They maintain school libraries. They supervise outdoor activities and coordinate community events in schools. They type report cards and exams and maintain school records. They shovel walks, check boilers and clean floors to ensure a safe and healthy environment for students. CUPE members are proud of their work and the critical role they play in ensuring a high quality learning environment in both our public and separate school systems.

While many recognize the value of the work our members provide, CUPE education workers continue to be denied the same provincial bargaining rights that teachers have enjoyed since the 1970s. Our union has been seeking these same bargaining rights for over a decade. We have lobbied the provincial government, met with the Saskatchewan School Boards Association and consulted widely with our members. We believe the arguments for provincial bargaining are stronger now than they have ever been.

In 1997, CUPE represented about 2,800 school board employees in just under half of the school divisions in Saskatchewan. Over the last decade, many more school board workers throughout the province have joined our union. Today, CUPE represents 70% of the approximately 8,850 school board support staff in two-thirds of the school divisions in the province.

CUPE school board locals have made important bargaining gains in a number of areas. However, the costly and time-consuming negotiation of separate collective agreements with each school division has resulted in substantial wage and benefit disparities among school support staff. We believe there is a better way that will ensure fairness for all.

THE CURRENT BARGAINING STRUCTURE

Unlike teachers who negotiate wages and benefits provincially, school support workers in Saskatchewan must bargain all issues in separate local contracts. Currently, CUPE has 58 collective agreements in the school board sector and is in the process of negotiating seven first contracts. With the amalgamation of rural public school divisions on January 1, 2006, and the subsequent merging of rural CUPE school board locals, the number of contracts that CUPE will have to negotiate in this sector will decline.

Nonetheless, even with fewer contracts, the current bargaining structure will remain time-consuming, costly and inefficient.

The process of negotiating multiple collective agreements across the province requires a significant expenditure of time and resources for both school board and union negotiating teams. Although there are occasions when a settlement will be reached after a few meetings, most school board negotiations will require 10 to 15 bargaining sessions spread over two years. Some contracts have taken three to four years to negotiate.

Typically, union and employer bargaining committees will comprise four to eight representatives each at a school board bargaining table. The negotiation of 65 school board contracts would thus require anywhere from 500 to 1,000 combined union and employer bargaining representatives for 6,200 workers.

The costs involved with supporting the current bargaining structure are considerable. On the employer side, school boards provide a stipend to trustees for every bargaining session they attend. In some cases, Directors of Education and Secretary-Treasurers may take time off in lieu of overtime because of their involvement in negotiations.

On the union side, costs include the staff time involved with negotiating and typing up contract proposals and agreements, as well as bargaining committee expenses, which may include a minimal per diem. When negotiations occur during work hours, the employer may sometimes cover the wages of the union bargaining committee.

Although it is difficult to determine an exact cost, the resources that both sides expend for dozens of local negotiations are significant. But more importantly, the current bargaining structure has produced significant wage and benefit inequities across the province.

Wage Inequities

There are vast wage disparities among the same classifications in CUPE's collective agreements with school divisions. For the most part, school support workers in the larger urban centres receive higher wages than their counterparts in rural Saskatchewan. But there also exists significant wage inequities among school employees within urban centres and among workers in different rural school divisions.

The following are just a few examples of the wage inequities facing school board support workers:

- An entry-level educational assistant working for the former Humboldt School Division makes a maximum of \$18.31 an hour, while an educational assistant employed by the former Good Spirit School Division makes a maximum of \$10.76 an hour - or \$7.55 an hour less.
- An entry-level secretary working for the Saskatoon Separate School Division makes a maximum of \$19.35 an hour, while their counterpart at the former Maple Creek School Division makes a maximum of \$12.02 an hour – or \$7.33 an hour less.
- An entry-level Library Assistant at the Saskatchewan Rivers School Division makes a maximum of \$17.43 an hour, while a Library Assistant at the former Borderland School Division makes a maximum of \$11.71 an hour – a difference of \$5.72 an hour.
- A bus driver at the former Souris Moose Mountain School Division earns a maximum daily rate of \$46.92, while their counterpart at the former Turtleford School Division makes a daily rate of \$31.00 – a difference of \$15.92 per day.
- An entry-level caretaker working for the former Souris Moose Mountain School Division makes a top hourly wage of \$18.44, while their counterpart employed at the Ile A La Crosse School Division receives a maximum of \$10.68 an hour – a difference of \$7.76 an hour.

The significant disparities in wages highlighted in the above examples also apply to the many other classifications in Saskatchewan's school board sector.

Furthermore, it should also be noted that the number of steps it takes to get from the starting wage rate to the maximum wage rate for any classification varies widely from contract to contract. In some collective agreements, the starting and top rates are the same. In other contracts, a school board support worker may have to work as long as 132 months to get to the top wage rate in their classification.

Benefit Inequities

CUPE school board locals across the province must negotiate benefit plans separately with each individual school division. The ability to bargain these benefits will depend on a number of factors: the resources and financial commitment of the employer, the size and strength of the union local, and the trade-offs that are made within an overall compensation package during bargaining. Consequently, there exists a tremendous disparity in benefits coverage among school support workers:

- *Extended health care benefits:* only 15 of the 58 current CUPE school board collective agreements have 100% employer-paid extended health care benefits. However, these agreements cover our largest bargaining units. As a result, 2,915 workers or 47% of our school board members have 100% employer-paid EHC benefits.
- *Dental plans:* 17 collective agreements, covering 48% of our school board members, have a 100% employer-paid dental plan.
- *Vision plans:* only 12 of our collective agreements, covering 44% of our school employees, have a vision plan that is 100% employer-paid.

Whereas nearly half of our school board members have 100% employer-paid extended health and dental plans, the other half – primarily members in rural Saskatchewan – are paying half the costs of the premiums for their benefit plans.

Moreover, a significant number of our school sector bargaining units have even more limited benefit coverage:

- 27 collective agreements do not have any extended health care benefits.
- 21 agreements have no dental plan coverage.
- 12 agreements have no benefit coverage whatsoever, including core benefits like long-term disability, group life insurance, AD&D and Employee & Family Assistance Plan.

In addition to the above, there are no uniform sick leave provisions in CUPE's school board contracts. The number of sick days earned per month ranges from one to two days and maximum sick leave accumulation varies from 50 to 200 days. In some contracts, there are no sick leave provisions whatsoever.

Unlike school support staff, Saskatchewan teachers have a comprehensive government-paid benefit package that includes vision, dental and extended health. It's unfair that CUPE school board workers - many of whom only earn \$14,000 - \$18,000 a year - have to pay to get any benefit coverage at all.

PROVINCIAL BARGAINING FOR SCHOOL BOARD WORKERS

Many school support workers across Canada have provincial bargaining rights. In New Brunswick, school bus drivers, custodians, tradespersons and maintenance workers are covered by one province-wide agreement and teaching assistants, secretaries, clerical staff, library assistants and school intervention workers are covered by another provincial agreement. Prince Edward Island also has two provincial collective agreements covering school support workers: one covering teaching assistants and another for all other support staff. School board workers in Newfoundland and Labrador are covered by multiple collective agreements, but a common classification and wage grid has been established across the province.

In Quebec, all classifications of school support staff are covered by one provincial agreement. More recently, school board support workers in Nova Scotia reached a framework agreement with the provincial government to establish provincial bargaining for a collective agreement to be effective April 1, 2007. As part of the agreement, a Joint Working Committee will standardize classifications, job descriptions and workloads, ensuring that every worker is paid the same rate for doing the same work.

In Saskatchewan, teachers have enjoyed provincial bargaining rights for wages and benefits since 1973 when *The Teacher Collective Bargaining Act* was passed by the provincial government. The legislation established the composition of bargaining committees and outlined the items to be negotiated provincially and locally under the new bi-level bargaining structure. Salaries, principals' and vice-principals' allowances, pension, group life insurance and sick leave were among the items to be negotiated at the provincial table. Substitute teachers' salaries, sabbatical and educational leaves, pay periods and special allowances would be covered by local collective agreements negotiated between the Saskatchewan Teachers Federation and each school board.

Our Provincial Bargaining Proposal

CUPE's provincial bargaining proposal would replace the current 58 collective agreements that are negotiated separately with each school division with one provincial collective agreement covering all classifications in both the public and separate school systems. Bargaining would take place at one central table. Where necessary, local agreements and letters of understanding addressing local issues would still be negotiated at the school division level.

The structure of the union and employer provincial bargaining committees would need to be determined by each party. That said, the structure could follow the example set by the health care sector where the Saskatchewan Association of Health Organizations acts as the bargaining agent authority for the health district employers and union members elect their bargaining committee in accordance

with their provincial council bylaws. This process allows for representation of different types and sizes of health care employers from across the province on the SAHO bargaining committee.

In the school board sector, an employer provincial bargaining council could be established that would act as the bargaining agent. The bargaining council and individual school divisions could all be identified as the employer under the terms of the provincial collective agreement. Though much would depend on the exact model adopted, we believe provincial bargaining rights for school support staff should be enshrined in legislation under the *Education Act*, which now outlines the bargaining process and structure for teachers, or in a stand-alone piece of legislation.

A provincial agreement would eventually standardize job descriptions, classifications, wage rates and benefits for CUPE school board support workers across the province. The guiding principles for this process could be established in an initial framework agreement.

Provincially Funded Benefits

Standardized benefits for all CUPE school board workers would be a key element of a provincial agreement. As noted above, these benefits vary considerably from one CUPE school board local to the next. Half of our school board members either have to cost-share their benefits, which often are limited, or they do not receive any benefits at all.

As part of a framework agreement, the provincial government could commit funds to close the benefit gap among school support workers. According to our calculations, it would only cost an additional \$6 million annually to ensure that every school board support worker received full benefit coverage: group life insurance, AD&D, long-term disability, extended health care, dental and vision.

Another option would involve the establishment of a provincially funded benefits plan that would cover the full cost of premiums for school support staff. The cost of such a plan would depend on a variety of factors, including the total number of staff covered and the level of benefit coverage. We have calculated the costs for a provincial benefits plan that would cover CUPE support staff and the estimated total number of school support staff in the province.

According to our estimates, an extended health care, dental and vision plan would cost about \$7.5 million annually for 6,200 employees and \$10.7 million annually for 8,850 employees. A full benefits plan (including group life insurance, AD&D, long-term disability, as well as extended health care, dental and vision) would cost approximately \$11.5 million annually for 6,200 employees and \$16.4 million for 8,850 employees.

The cost of providing a provincially funded benefit plan to school support staff would be much less than the funds the provincial government provides to cover the full premiums for teachers' benefits. In the 2006-07 provincial budget, the government allocated a total of \$25.7 million for teachers' benefits – \$14.9 million for an extended health plan, \$9.1 million for a dental plan, and \$1.8 million for group life insurance.

The provincial government funds the full premium costs of benefits for the vast majority of provincial government and public sector employees in Saskatchewan, including provincial government employees, SIAST, agencies, health care workers (represented by SUN, HSAS, CUPE, SEIU and SGEU) as well as teachers. In the last round of public sector bargaining, the provincial government also agreed to increase its funding of extended health benefits to most of the above groups.

CUPE school support workers deserve to be treated the same as other public sector workers in Saskatchewan. School support workers and their families should have access to provincially funded benefits, just like teachers and other public sector workers.

ADVANTAGES OF ONE PROVINCIAL AGREEMENT

There would be many advantages to establishing a single provincial agreement to cover all school support staff in Saskatchewan.

Cost Savings

Provincial bargaining would produce significant cost savings, since only a fraction of the bargaining representatives would be required to negotiate one agreement. School divisions could redirect funds and time allocated towards negotiations to other educational priorities. Provincial bargaining would allow for the more effective and efficient use of staff, negotiators and resources, and facilitate the resolution of immediate workplace concerns.

A provincial bargaining framework that includes a provincially funded benefits plan would free up even more resources for school boards to spend on other priorities, such as new positions, supplies or infrastructure repair. Direct provincial funding of benefits could save school divisions hundreds of thousands of dollars in premiums for support staff.

Furthermore, the provision of fair wages and benefits – with adequate funding from the provincial government - would assist all Saskatchewan school divisions in their efforts to recruit and retain support workers, which would reduce turnover costs.

Improving Administration

A single provincial agreement with uniform contract language would likely reduce the time and costs involved with grievance and arbitration procedures. As the language gets tested through the grievance procedure in different situations throughout the province, both the union and employer would develop a similar understanding of how the contract provisions are to be applied. Interpretation and application of specific language could be shared among school divisions, which would reduce the need to arbitrate the same issues in different school divisions.

Over the next few years, the 12 newly amalgamated rural public school divisions will each have to negotiate the merging of several collective agreements into one contract. It would be more efficient to establish one provincial agreement rather than go through protracted negotiations in each of the new rural school divisions. One provincial agreement would be far easier to administer than multiple local agreements.

Fairness for School Support Staff

Addressing the wage and benefit disparities through a provincial agreement for school support staff is simply a matter of fairness. Why should an educational assistant or secretary in one school division be paid up to 70% less than their counterparts in another school division who perform the exact same work? The work performed is just as valuable, regardless of where it is performed. When one school board worker is paid less or receives fewer benefits than another doing the same work, the implication is that their work is less valued.

A teacher in one school division receives the same salary and benefit coverage as their counterpart working in another school division. Health care workers and provincial government employees are paid according to the work they do and receive the same benefits regardless of where they work in Saskatchewan. The same standard should apply to school support staff. Every school employee should be paid the same wage rate for doing the same work.

The wage and benefit parity that would eventually result from one provincial bargaining agreement would make a real difference in the lives of Saskatchewan school board workers and their families. Many school board employees' incomes fall below the Low Income Cut-Off Line. Yet the same employees who can least afford it are expected to pay half the premium costs for supplementary health and other benefits – or to do without.

The provision of 100% employer-paid benefits would not only put \$60 to \$80 per month in the pockets of many school board workers who would not have to pay premiums, but more importantly, it would provide access to health services like prescription drugs, dental care and orthodontic treatments for children, the costs of which can be prohibitive to many workers.

Most education support workers are women. Although our union has made progress in negotiating pay equity adjustments at some bargaining tables, in many cases female-dominated classifications still continue to be paid less than positions typically staffed by men. Unfortunately, the provincial government's Pay Equity Policy Framework continues to exclude school board workers. But the establishment of wage parity for school support workers would increase wages for thousands of women, which would represent a major step towards implementing pay equity in the education sector. The provincial government could then easily take the next step to ensure equal pay for work of equal value for education workers by bringing this sector under the Pay Equity Policy Framework.

Supporting Rural Communities

While all school support staff would benefit from a provincial agreement, the impact would be most pronounced in rural Saskatchewan, where school board workers tend to receive lower wages and typically have to pay half the costs of their benefits, if they receive any at all.

Like other public sector workers, CUPE school board employees living and working in rural Saskatchewan make a vital contribution to their communities. A 2004 study by the Centre for Rural Studies and Enrichment concluded that public sector employment is essential to helping small communities survive and flourish. The study, entitled the *Economic and Social Contributions of the Public Sector in Rural Saskatchewan*, found that the work of the 55,800 public employees living in rural Saskatchewan at that time generated an estimated 21,762 additional spin-off jobs.

The Centre also found that public employees living outside of Saskatchewan's two major cities spent 75% of their wages in rural communities. Every \$100 spent by public employees generated an additional \$44.34 of spending in their community. In addition to economic contributions, the study found that 73% of public employees surveyed in Melville and Meadow Lake volunteered in their community, providing an estimated \$200,000 in free skilled labour.

The income that rural school board workers receive, however modest, helps support local businesses in their communities and, in many cases, family farms. Many CUPE education workers also volunteer for local charities, sports teams and church groups, which further strengthens and enriches life in their communities. The wage adjustments that many rural school board workers would receive as a result of a provincial agreement would be spent at local businesses, helping support rural communities across the province. As noted above, the provision of 100% employer-paid benefit coverage would also free up funds to be spent in the local economy.

Taking Action for Vulnerable Workers

A provincial collective agreement that includes a provincially funded benefits plan for school board support workers would demonstrate progress in the government's broader initiatives to improve conditions for vulnerable workers.

Earlier this year, the *Commission on Improving Work Opportunities for Saskatchewan Residents* made 25 recommendations to help improve the access of part-time, low-wage and other vulnerable workers to work opportunities, employment income and benefits in Saskatchewan. Among the recommendations, the commission proposed that the provincial government "fund a program to provide supplementary medical benefits such as prescription drugs, dental and optical, for vulnerable workers."

The commission notes that vulnerable workers would typically include women, the chronically low-paid, and those lacking access to benefits such as extended medical insurance, dental plans, and disability coverage. These characterizations would apply to many school support workers, especially in rural Saskatchewan where pay is lower and many have no benefits. As mentioned above, many school board support staff would fall below the Low-Income Cut-Off Line.

Extending benefits to school board workers lacking coverage would also be consistent with the vision outlined in the November 2005 Throne Speech "that no one in the Province of Saskatchewan will work for wages that leave them in poverty, and that every worker in Saskatchewan will have full access to health care and pension benefits."

CONCLUSION

The current bargaining structure for school board support staff is costly, time-consuming and inefficient. More importantly, the negotiation of multiple contracts with individual school boards has created huge wage and benefit disparities across the province. In many cases, wage gaps of \$5 to \$7 per hour exist between school support workers doing the exact same work.

Only about half of the school support workers represented by CUPE have 100% employer-paid extended health and dental benefits. Most rural school support workers are either paying half the cost of benefit premiums or have no coverage at all. These inequities are unacceptable.

School support workers need to be recognized and valued for the important role they play in our education system. This recognition must start by eliminating the significant wage and benefit disparities that exist across the province. It's a simple question of fairness.

In recent years, the provincial government has started to reinvest in K-12 education. Between 2000-01 and 2006-07, the government increased school operating grants by \$137 million or 32%. The provincial government needs to continue this trend towards greater education funding to relieve the burden on school boards and local property taxpayers and to designate new funding to eliminate wage and benefit inequities. Education is a provincial responsibility. The provincial government needs to pay its fair share of the cost of our K-12 education system.

The province continues to enjoy booming resource revenues and strong economic growth. For only a modest cost, the provincial government could help ensure fairness and equity for Saskatchewan school board workers.

A provincial collective agreement for school support staff would have a far-reaching, positive impact for workers, school divisions and communities across the province. This impact would be most pronounced in rural Saskatchewan, where support workers' wages are typically lower and benefit coverage limited. Any wage increases resulting from a provincial agreement would be spent at local businesses, which would help sustain and strengthen rural communities.

CUPE education workers are committed to achieving the same provincial bargaining rights and provincial benefit coverage as Saskatchewan teachers and other public employees. There is a better and fairer way. It's time to replace the current fragmented system of negotiations with a modern, efficient process of provincial bargaining.

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