

# Up to the Certification Challenge

*Study Highlights*



Literacy Program  
CUPE Education  
September 2005



# CUPE and Basic Skills

## Basic skills or literacy?

In this booklet, we use the terms “basic skills” and “literacy” to mean the same thing. Basic skills are the skills we need for work, learning and life. They include: reading, writing, math, using computers, oral communication and critical thinking.

CUPE has had a national literacy program in place for the last five years. During this time, the union has helped many locals set up workplace education programs based on the specific needs of their members. A key goal of the program is to make literacy a part of everything the union does. This goal, along with labour’s literacy principles, guided the research for this study. CUPE’s statement on literacy says that:

Union literacy programs are key to ensuring that all our members can participate fully in union education, as well as face the demand for increased literacy skills at work, at home, and in their community. Literacy and basic skills classes can provide the upgrading these members need, and open the door to union education and/or other education and training.

The union supports workplace education programs that:

- enable workers to have more control over their lives and jobs
- build on what workers already know
- address the needs of the whole person
- are developmental
- reflect the diverse learning styles and needs of adult workers
- involve workers in decision-making
- seek to integrate literacy training with other aspects of workplace training
- are confidential
- are open to all
- are accessible

# About this Booklet

*This booklet is about ways union education can support workers to meet licensing or certification requirements for their jobs. It presents highlights from the study, Up to the Certification Challenge: A Study of Education Initiatives to Support CUPE Members. The Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) sponsored this study.*

## Why we did the study

We did this study because we wanted to look at the union’s use of basic skills programs to help water and wastewater workers qualify for their operator certificate. We felt the research would be helpful to this sector and to others facing similar issues. We also wanted to see what else the union could do to support water and wastewater workers and other CUPE members who face demands for certification or licensing.

Our study recommends that CUPE should:

1. Lobby governments and employers to strengthen and

improve certification systems and processes.

2. Strengthen and coordinate the union’s efforts to support water and wastewater workers as well as other CUPE members who face mandatory certification.
3. Find out the needs of other sectors facing mandatory certification. With this information, CUPE should develop a strategy to make certification a shared responsibility between individual workers, their union, employers and governments. Right now, most of the responsibility is on individual workers.

**“He makes really good water, the best water, but he just has [less than Grade 8]. There’s no way he is going to get his certification.”**

*—A plant operator talking about a co-worker in Saskatchewan’s Water and Wastewater Workers Essential Skills Project.*

**“What we’ve got is working. We’re providing a better service, with public dollars, than what the residents would get from a private owner.”**

*—Blaine Parkman, utility foreman, City of Charlottetown, Local 830 as quoted in Our Times magazine*

(For more about these recommendations, see the section of this booklet called The way forward.)

## Why the water sector

The water and wastewater sector is a good example of the stresses of certification on workers, and the role basic skills education can play to help them meet this challenge. The sector is undergoing major changes, including increasing regulation of facilities and workers. Because of public concern for water safety and problems brought to light by the Walkerton and North Battleford water inquiries, provinces are bringing in mandatory certification of facilities and operators. Operators are the workers responsible for the day-to-day operation, repair and maintenance of water and wastewater facilities. The mandatory certification requirements affect thousands of workers across Canada.

## The union’s role

CUPE members in the study were clear that they want and

need support from their union to help them with literacy and other education barriers related to their jobs. They want worker-centred programs that start from the reality of their lives and help them with the skills they need to do their jobs. Our study shows that the union is well-placed to provide this support—we have the necessary resources and expertise. Basic skills programs already in place in our locals have proved their worth as valuable education tools for CUPE members.

## The link with privatization

The study also notes that the challenges of certification and other job requirements in today’s world are closely linked to broader economic and social issues. A key issue is privatization, which threatens CUPE members’ jobs and service quality. CUPE believes it is in the public interest to make sure that services are of high quality and that the public sector workforce is the best it can be. This is why the union fights to keep public services publicly owned, operated and delivered.

The union also continues to advocate for better and more accessible training programs, national occupational standards, stronger job protection and good labour adjustment programs.

## How we did the study

We did a broad Internet search to find out how key provinces approach certification of water and wastewater workers. We focused on Nova Scotia, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, British Columbia, Ontario and Prince Edward Island. We reviewed provincial regulations for the water and wastewater sector. We also looked at provincial approaches to training and certification in the sector.

We wanted to learn from the experience of a number of CUPE locals helping workers get ready for certification exams through basic skills education. We looked at five case studies: Local 734 in Truro, Nova Scotia; Locals 830 and 501 in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island; Local 21 in Regina, Saskatchewan; Local 500 in Winnipeg, Manitoba; and Saskatchewan Water and Wastewater Essential Skills Project.

We did in-person, telephone and e-mail interviews with key people from the locals, such as CUPE members and staff, instructors, and project committee members. We also looked at any available reports from the programs and projects.

**“CUPE will advocate better training of water workers and will insist that training expenses be paid by the employer... Workers should not be required to undergo testing without adequate training and preparation.”**

*—From CUPE’s Plan to Strengthen Canada’s Public Water and Wastewater Systems*

## Using this booklet

This booklet contains information from the study on:

- the real-life challenges facing workers who need to qualify or re-qualify for their jobs, or who want to upgrade
- specific ways the union can support these workers' educational needs
- examples of union literacy and education programs, and lessons learned
- the value and importance of a labour approach to education

## Who will find this booklet useful?

The information in this booklet will interest:

- activists and leaders in all sectors where members face rising job requirements
- municipal CUPE locals
- CUPE National Executive

Board and Provincial Division executive board members

- literacy and education activists in CUPE and other unions
- activists lobbying government and employer representatives about literacy and workplace certification

While the study was specific to the water and wastewater sector, it is also useful for other sectors facing certification and licensing demands. Many workers who need to qualify or re-qualify for their jobs have been out of school for a long time. They find it tough to write exams that will decide whether or not they'll stay in their jobs or be able to upgrade. More and more, employers are insisting that workers get certificates and licenses even in sectors that don't legally require these things. For example, educational assistants, child and youth workers, nursing aides, custodians and social service workers are among the groups of workers increasingly required to meet such demands.

## Case Studies at a Glance

*These five case studies are examples of how literacy can concretely become part of the union agenda. They show that union literacy rooted in the workplace can be a real support to workers in many ways, including easing the stress of meeting job requirements.*

### CUPE Local 734 and the Town of Truro, Nova Scotia

The local and the town put together a program to help members get their General Education Development (GED) diploma, certify as operators and build skills for further education. The local played the lead role in developing and promoting the program. All participants obtained their GED and certification.

### CUPE Locals 830 and 501 and the City of Charlottetown

The local was part of the project team that hired a workplace education instructor to work with members on math skills so

they could pass their certification exam. All participants eligible to write the exam passed it. The project team now wants to offer a 40-hour course on all aspects of the certification exam, led by a CUPE water worker with training experience.

### CUPE Local 21 and the City of Regina

City water and sewage workers facing certification exams participated in the joint union-employer Return to Learn program (R2L). The content of the program came from the needs identified by the workers. All passed their exam. Another R2L session is being planned for water and wastewater workers.



# Six Key Findings

Six key findings emerged from the five case studies and research into provincial certification systems:

1. Good programs are based on the needs of workers and their work situation.
2. Programs are better when the union plays a strong role.
3. Training systems need to be improved.
4. We need standard exams and different ways to take exams.
5. Employers and governments should pay for certification.
6. Workers who don't pass exams need job and wage protection.

## CUPE Local 500, Water and Waste Unit, and the City of Winnipeg

This project involved assessing and preparing about 220 water and wastewater workers for certification. A training coordinator was hired and Red River College contracted to assess the workers' math skills. All fees and costs were paid through collective agreement provisions the local negotiated with the city, including a joint training fund. Based on the assessment, members were either referred directly to certification training, or to a math review seminar.

## The Saskatchewan Water and Wastewater Essential Skills Project

This project involved CUPE, the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour, the Communications, Energy and Paper Workers Union, and employer, education and government representatives. A key goal was to do a needs assessment to identify training gaps. The project found that many workers faced literacy challenges and were anxious about the certification exam. The project report suggested ways to develop a basic skills program to meet the workers' educational needs.

### Finding #1: Good programs are based on the needs of workers and their work situation

The five case studies confirm that operators want to upgrade their basic skills, and offer models for meeting these workers' education needs. Although each program model was different, the case studies as a whole offer lessons in two key areas of education programming: needs assessments and course content (curriculum).

### Needs assessments: finding out what workers need

The programs in all five case studies used some type of participant needs assessment:

- Regina's Return to Learn program was the least structured—participants identified their own learning goals.
- Truro's workplace education program did individual assessments.



**“Initial confidence building is essential. A course like this one needs to begin at a basic level, reviewing basic math skills, perhaps through warm-up exercises. This helps boost participants’ confidence and develops group camaraderie.”**

*—A lesson learned in the CUPE Locals 830 and 501 math education program in Charlottetown, PEI.*

- The workplace instructor for Charlottetown’s program held individual interviews with participants, using assessment tools related to the math course content.
- The City of Winnipeg program and the Saskatchewan Essential Skills project both used standardized tests.

All of the needs assessments showed that participants wanted support with math, including basic math review; metric conversion; use of formulas; and use of scientific and conversion calculators. Many workers said they were anxious and stressed about writing certification exams.

Standardized tests, a method used in two of the case studies, present challenges for labour. Concerns about these types of tests include: whether they are really objective and fair; that they often measure the wrong things; and that they can be intimidating because they focus on what people don’t know instead of what they know. These tests are also often expensive, and

designed and administered by outside organizations.

In addition to individual needs assessments, it is also important to look at the bigger picture of the workplace. This bigger picture includes factors such as the degree of workplace support for learning, and access to training and continuing education.

The labour movement, including CUPE and the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), generally recommends an organizational needs assessment (ONA) to get a sense of the workplace. An ONA involves consulting with a cross-section of people: workers, supervisors, trainers, the union and management. An ONA helps unions develop courses and strategies that address the broader needs of the membership, beyond immediate demands such as certification rules. In our study, the Charlottetown and Regina projects conducted an ONA as well as individual needs assessments.



### **Curriculum: program content that “fits”**

CUPE promotes programs that are based on the needs and experiences of workers, build confidence, and use a group, problem-solving approach. The programs in the study used a range of approaches and course materials to respond to the needs that the workers themselves had identified. Instructors sometimes made changes along the way to improve the courses.

The Return to Learn (R2L) program in Regina was the most flexible. It used an approach called “emergent curriculum.”

In this approach, the course content comes from the interests and ideas the workers come up with as the program progresses. This approach is appealing for workers in many sectors. It can be especially helpful to workers who have been out of school for a long time—just bringing them back into a regular classroom is not likely to work well.

The study found that programs that respond to workers’ needs could help water and wastewater workers:

- make better sense of a complex system of regulations, terms and players

- know their rights and obligations, and get information about procedures
- get insight into the values the system is based on, how it developed, and how it affects workers, employers and communities
- educate and mobilize for action to change the system

## **Finding #2: Programs are better when the union plays a strong role**

Our study concludes that CUPE has the expertise to build and deliver these types of programs for workers. To do so, the union must be active in all aspects of the program: planning, coordination, design, delivery and evaluation. It must also draw on

### **Emergent curriculum at work**

In the Return to Learn (R2L) program, participants chose the content. The sessions included a large group discussion and small group activities:

- The first half of the session was a large group discussion. Workers looked at ways to solve problems, make decisions, work with others, improve writing and think critically. An example of critical thinking is to look at what the employer and union can do to help workers certify and achieve other learning goals.
- In the second half, peer tutors helped with the math problems in the Water Certification Study Guide, writing and how to use documents.

The R2L program also included tips to prepare for exams and cope with stress (including how to concentrate and other study skills).

the knowledge and experience of CUPE researchers, servicing representatives, educators and activists.

The case studies show how important it is for programs to be started and run by members. The more connected a program is to the union's structures and priorities, the more likely members will have the trust to take part in it. Involving both rank-and-file members and leaders is key, especially when the union is part of a process with many players.

The case studies also confirm that joint employer-union committees must be real partnerships in order to work. This means the union must be in a position to make decisions, not just recommendations.

All but one of the programs in our study had a joint steering committee. CUPE's level of involvement and its ability to achieve labour-based literacy goals varied from program to program. For example, the Truro project had a smaller team, and

the union was active and able to include labour materials in the course content. In Charlottetown, participants in the math course benefited from the expertise of other CUPE water and wastewater workers.

The study found that locals can and should take their place at the table as experts. With CUPE's depth of experience in worker education, we have much to contribute to planning and coordinating programs. We often know more about setting up and delivering an education program than the employer does. CUPE National can offer help to locals that don't have a lot of experience in worker education. There's a section at the end of this booklet that provides information on workshops and how to contact us.

Steering committees that work:

- clearly define labour values and goals
- decide the purpose of the committee and what it will do early on

## **Resources for joint programs**

*Learning for Our Lives: A Union Guide to Worker-Centred Literacy, by the Canadian Labour Congress. This publication has guidelines for unions involved in literacy programs.*

*Sample Partnership Agreement for Workplace Education Programs, by CUPE National. This document provides guidelines for partnership agreements and terms of reference for joint worker education programs.*



### The exams we have now don't work

“The exams are full of word puzzles. Operators tell me they can't get through the questions let alone give answers, the way they're worded.”

–Merv Simonot, CUPE Local 47, City of Saskatoon

- draw CUPE representation from existing committees and structures
- select members with expertise in the sector and in literacy; members also need a commitment to the program, with resources, support and authority to make decisions and represent the union

### Finding #3: The training system needs to be improved

Well-designed literacy programs will help operators get certified or re-certify and keep working as operators. But that's only part of

the solution. The training system itself needs to change.

In the water and wastewater sector:

- Training programs are decentralized. Accessibility varies by region and is very limited in small and remote communities.
- There are no national training standards. Course content also varies.
- A wide variety of trainers deliver courses for certification exams and continuing education using different content.

- Freelance trainers and private training companies are major players.
- Many operators learn on their own with reference manuals, or take correspondence courses.

Our study suggests the need for more research on training in certification courses and continuing education. Key issues include:

- What type of training do employers, private institutions, public institutions, freelance instructors, professional associations and others offer?

- What are the costs? Who is paying?
- Are there gaps in training? What can be done about them?
- What improvements do we need so that training serves the interests of employers, workers and the public?

### Finding #4: We need standard exams and different ways to take exams

CUPE activists, educators and even employers are calling for changes to the certification

### What our study says

“Currently, water and wastewater operator exams come from the Association of Boards of Certification (ABC) in Iowa, United States. In recent years, ABC has revised the exams for Canada, using metric measurements and Canadian terminology. CUPE presses Canadian provinces to go further by settling on national standards and recognizing equivalent certificates earned out-of-province. The Canadian exam should reflect not only Canadian practice but also clear language and design principles.”

“We desperately need to come up with a standardized Canadian exam, with terminology that is used in every province. And if a worker is certified in Nova Scotia, it should be recognized in B.C. or Ontario or New Brunswick, or whatever province the worker happens to be in.”

–Danny Cavanagh, President of CUPE Local 734 in the Town of Truro, as quoted in Our Times



system. Our study confirmed the need for changes such as:

- exams that use a national standard, Canadian content and clear language
- credit for work experience as an alternative or supplement to exams and formal education requirements
- different ways to take exams—not just written, but also oral and through one-on-one assessments; employers and governments should pay the costs for these different options

### **Finding #5: Employers and governments should pay for worker certification**

Individual workers should not have to pay the costs of mandatory certification, including the time they need to prepare for exams. Cost for training and exam fees, study and reference documents, and lost wages for study time were a major concern for members interviewed for our study.

### **Bargain a joint fund**

Locals can take action on the issue of certification costs by making it part of their bargaining agenda. In the Winnipeg Local 500 case study, the employer paid for the costs of hiring a training coordinator, the math assessments of workers, the math refresher course and all fees associated with the training. This is because the local negotiated a \$3 million joint training fund and a provision that says the city will pay the costs of all licenses and accreditations that are job requirements.

### **Lobbying**

CUPE has lobbied for paid training and employer payment of certification fees with limited success. Data gathered for this study suggest that in most cases individual workers pay the costs of meeting new standards. None of the six provinces we looked at earmarks funds for workers facing the new certification requirements. Employer-paid training is uneven and limited to large municipalities. In Nova Scotia, the Department of

Education's Workplace Education program covers instructor costs for upgrading classes; employers and employees have to cover wage replacement, books and facility costs.

### **Finding #6: Workers who don't pass exams need job and wage protection**

Many of the workers in our study who needed to pass certification exams said they were concerned about job security and opportunities to move ahead. These concerns added to the already high anxiety of preparing for the exams. These issues highlight the union's

responsibility to help workers with rising job qualification demands:

- At the provincial and local levels, CUPE has demanded employment and income protection for operators who fail certification exams. A worker who fails a certification exam and is transferred to another job should not lose pay.
- CUPE has also called for a clear process to implement certification. Certification should not limit access to promotions and allow employers to favour some workers over others.

# The way forward

*Our study suggests a path for CUPE policy and action in the water sector and in other sectors where members need to meet certification or licensing requirements. CUPE should:*

## 1. Lobby governments and employers to strengthen and improve certification systems and processes.

Governments and employers should:

- fund worker-centred literacy programs that (a) include organizational needs assessments and problem-posing curriculum; (b) reflect true union-employer partnerships; and (c) meet union literacy principles
- develop a training strategy for the water sector that reflects national standards and course content, and relies on the public education system

- fund training for water and wastewater workers, both certification prep courses and continuing education
- implement certification exams that: (a) use a national standard, Canadian content and clear language; (b) credit prior work experience as an alternative or supplement to exams and formal education requirements; and (c) include options such as oral exams and one-on-one assessments
- provide job security and promotion opportunities to existing water and wastewater workers

## 2. Strengthen and coordinate efforts to support water and wastewater workers as well as other CUPE members who face mandatory certification.

CUPE activists need opportunities to share their experiences and coordinate their efforts both provincially and nationally. By sharing experiences with provincial regulations, contract language, and education strategies, CUPE locals and divisions would be in a stronger position to achieve the goals identified above. National coordination is important for achieving Canadian standards and inter-provincial recognition of workers' credentials.

## 3. Find out the needs of other sectors facing mandatory certification.

Based on the results of this needs assessment, CUPE should develop a strategy to make certification a shared responsibility between individual workers, their union, employers and governments.

Right now, most of the responsibility is on individual workers.

The needs assessment should look at:

- the occupations and number of members affected by certification
- the impact of certification on members
- bargaining issues and solutions
- learning opportunities, including training and continuing education courses, exam preparation programs and resources, training providers, barriers built into exams, and options such as oral exams and credit for work experience
- privatization issues related to certification

## More information

- [Get a copy of the full study, Up to the Certification Challenge: A Study of Education Initiatives to Support CUPE Members.](#)
- [Find out more about worker education and literacy programs.](#) CUPE offers workshops to help locals advocate for and build workplace literacy and basic skills programs. Our workshops are designed to meet your local's needs.

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Visit [www.cupe.ca/www/literacy](http://www.cupe.ca/www/literacy) to learn more or to download a copy of the study.

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