

SECTOR PROFILE

Education

NATIONAL SECTOR COUNCIL CONFERENCE

This profile is intended to provide CUPE members with basic information about the sector they work in from a national perspective. Find all our sector profiles and more information online at cupe.ca

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More than half of all education workers across Canada are CUPE members. CUPE represents over 138,000 workers in elementary and secondary schools across Canada in every classification in the school system – except teachers and management – in over 400 education bargaining units.

From almost 55,000 members in Ontario to representing 100 per cent of the education workers in New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island, CUPE's Education Sector remains one of the strongest in Canada. We represent the full range of support staff classifications in nearly every province.

Issues

CHRONIC UNDERFUNDING

Funding increases have not kept up with the costs of providing education and maintenance demands, leaving school boards under enormous pressure. With \$16.7 billion backlog in school repairs, the Ontario government's scrapping of the \$100 million school repair fund has left school boards in a worse position as they incur additional deferred maintenance costs forcing them to make impossible choices between repairing heating systems and funding programs. In Toronto alone, the backlog of necessary repairs has reached \$3.5 billion. The ongoing shrinking of funding to school boards has school board administrators scrambling for resources as they try to address budget crises and the needs of a growing and diversified student population.

In many provinces, public funding is going to private schools that charge exorbitant access fees and reinforce systemic oppression and differential access instead of being used to close the funding gap in the public system. BC, Alberta, Saskatchewan,

Manitoba and Quebec all provide some public funding for private schools. In Alberta, the UCP eliminated regulations put in place by the previous NDP government that would make it difficult to collect fees from students. They also eliminated a class size reduction grant which had been in place for more than a decade and scrapped the requirement for school boards to report on class sizes, making it difficult to track this information. They removed restrictions on "charter" schools and recognized private schools as an integral part of the education system in Alberta while also giving Federal dollars (aimed at supporting the reopening of schools during COVID) to private schools.

CUPE members across the country will continue to defend the public school system and call on governments to take bold action to adequately and consistently fund education. Instead of downloading additional burdens onto local school boards, or using their own manufactured funding gaps to justify giving public dollars to private schools, governments must step up to provide a public school system that meets the needs of our communities.

AMALGAMATION AND FUNDING STRAINS

Some CUPE members are feeling the impact of declining enrolment in communities across the country. As more provincial governments have adopted per-pupil funding formulas, declining enrolment has created intense funding pressures for many school boards. Education locals are constantly fighting off budget cuts invariably aimed at CUPE members who are often treated as the expendable, "non-classroom" staff.

In Manitoba, the government is currently undertaking a “comprehensive, independent review of the K-12 education system.” The report and resulting legislation have been delayed by COVID-19. Manitoba is the last jurisdiction in Canada where school trustees set and collect education property taxes. The expectation is that this funding arrangement will change, along with a drastic reduction to the existing 37 school divisions, with greater control being given to the Minister of Education and a handpicked advisory council.

In early 2020, the CAQ government in Quebec invoked closure to shut down debate and rush through legislation to eliminate the province’s school boards. Quebec’s school boards have been replaced with “service centres”, run by a board of directors, a move that critics say hands more power to the Minister of Education.

In an earlier example of eliminating the democratic control of school boards, in 2018, the Nova Scotia government dissolved the province’s seven elected regional school boards and created a single provincial advisory council made up of people appointed by the minister of education. In Ontario, the Toronto District School Board is moving forward with plans to close dozens of “surplus” schools, which are hubs for all kinds of educational activity, ranging from early childhood education and parenting centres to adult language and general interest courses.

There are some positive signs for school enrolment. In Saskatchewan, student enrollment in K-12 education increased 4.8 per cent since 2015. Unfortunately, this increase in enrollment was not matched with adequate funding. From 2015-2016 to 2020-2021, funding has dropped \$300 per student in Saskatchewan.

In British Columbia, enrolment has increased almost six per cent since 2015 and is expected to rise another 2.8 percent by 2025. The BC government has responded by increasing operating grants by almost \$300 million over the past two years, including increases for children and youth in care, children

from low income families, students with mental health challenges, special need and Indigenous education.

The implementation of early childhood education programs in Newfoundland and Labrador, PEI, Nova Scotia, Ontario and BC has offset job losses related to declining enrolment. Often the positions being created, however, are not new jobs, but rather represent a shift of employment from child care to the education sector.

VIOLENCE IN SCHOOLS CONTINUES TO RISE

Most of the public is unaware of the routine violence and threats experienced by education workers who deal directly with students. But our members are acutely aware of it. CUPE locals are pursuing better training and reporting mechanisms and enforcing members’ rights under occupational health and safety acts. CUPE education workers in Saskatchewan released a report called “At the Breaking Point” detailing the increasing levels of violence faced by education workers in the province and calling on the provincial government to address it. Taking measures to combat violence in the workplace was a significant issue in the Ontario School Board Council of Unions’ latest round of bargaining with the Ontario government in 2019.

In BC, the Joint Health and Safety Taskforce, Support Staff Education Committee, Evaluation (JE) Committee, and Provincial Labour Management Committee (each of which were established in the last round of bargaining) have all been convened and are continuing their work throughout the pandemic. The Taskforce is currently developing an evaluation tool that will be sent to health and safety committees, at every K-12 work site across the province, in order to assess how well H&S committees are functioning and where improvements are needed.

PRIVATIZATION

Piecemeal privatization is occurring in some areas of the sector, such as busing, information technology, trades and maintenance. Shared services – the

merging of some administrative functions between school boards – are being increasingly promoted by some provinces. Most of Ontario’s 72 individual school boards are now part of a transportation consortium with a neighbouring board. The provincial government has indicated its intent to expand shared services into other areas that would affect CUPE members but has not yet taken any steps to do so.

We’re witnessing the introduction and internalization of business-like practices, techniques and terminology in the public school sector. Public education services are being handed over to the private sector with public-private partnerships (P3) and contracting out, and we face the importing of ideas and practices that mirror the private sector, including the evaluation and surveillance of education workers and the use of merit pay schemes.

Some governments have chosen to build new public schools through expensive, decades-long public-private partnership (P3) deals with for-profit corporations. From the earliest P3 schools in Nova Scotia (which were eventually bought back by the Province at significant cost) and New Brunswick, to more recent education P3s in Alberta and Saskatchewan, major problems persist with P3 schools. They cost more than schools that governments finance and operate publicly. P3 schools are associated with lower quality, restrictions on after-hours access, and design that does not meet the broader community’s needs. Furthermore, P3s lock the public into lengthy contracts, often 20 years or more, that are inflexible and limit community control. CUPE 737 in Manitoba successfully fought against a proposal to build four new schools as P3s with their “raise red flags” on P3 schools campaign in 2018.

COVERING THE EARLY YEARS

Starting public education at a younger age offers improved child development and well-being, women’s equality and employment, higher quality

care, and better jobs for child care workers. In 2019, the government of Nova Scotia expanded its public education system to include the early learning years (ages 4 and 5). There is currently a campaign under way in British Columbia, led by CUPE members, pushing for a similar expansion.

In 2019 the CAQ government passed legislation to make pre-kindergarten available to four-year olds across Quebec. Unlike other provinces, Quebec’s existing subsidized daycare network meant that this move simply created an unnecessary parallel system while adding further funding strains and higher student-teacher ratio in Quebec’s schools.

Pensions

Over 90 per cent of CUPE members in the school board sector are covered by defined benefit pension plans, and virtually all CUPE members in the sector have access to a pension. Members in Manitoba have been pushing employers to adopt defined benefit plans to replace the inferior defined contribution plans that are widespread in the sector. Some locals were successful in their most recent round of bargaining, but much work remains to be done.

A significant development in Ontario was the establishment of the CUPE Education Workers Benefits Trust (CUPE-EWBT) which took effect in 2018. The trust provides a common benefits plan across the province, funded by the provincial government but administered and controlled by CUPE. It is the second education sector trust in which CUPE is involved, following one established in BC several years ago. In Quebec, most CUPE members in the education sector belong to the FTQ Intersectoral Parity Committee’s multi-union, multi-sector benefits plan.

Bargaining

MOVE TO CENTRAL BARGAINING

Twenty years ago, education was funded primarily through locally-raised property taxes, and most CUPE locals bargained directly with local school boards. This funding model started to change in the 1990s when provincial governments across the country began amalgamating school districts and centralizing education funding, prompting a corresponding shift towards province-wide bargaining.

Today, CUPE education workers in seven provinces bargain monetary and other major items at provincial tables. Local bargaining deals mainly with local issues. Only the three Prairie provinces have no formal central bargaining structure.

In 2019, CUPE education workers in Ontario negotiated their first central agreement as the Ontario School Board Council of Unions (OSBCU). Facing a hostile Conservative government which had already implemented public sector wage restraint legislation, the OSBCU mobilized its 55,000 members across the province to put the issues of understaffing and workplace violence at the forefront of negotiations. The OSBCU fought off major concessions while negotiating mandatory paid training on violence prevention, renewed job security language and \$78 million to fund the reinstatement of 1,400 jobs.

In addition to their province-wide mobilization for bargaining, CUPE education workers in Ontario demonstrated their solidarity with Ontario teacher's unions as they engaged in rotating strikes throughout the province in early 2020.

In New Brunswick, CUPE 2745 represents educational and clerical support staff across the province. The local has been in bargaining since 2018 and is now awaiting the newly elected majority Conservative government to resume bargaining. CUPE education workers in New Brunswick will carry forward the provincial mandate to resist austerity and rollbacks.

In PEI, CUPE education workers were awarded wage increases that set two important precedents. Taking place in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the arbitrator rejected the argument of the employer that a "pattern" had been set for wage increases. The arbitrator recognized that such small percentage wage increases did little to help casual workers – which make up a large portion of CUPE's membership. The arbitrator also recognized CUPE education workers' contributions to the community by working during the pandemic without receiving the provincial bonus that other essential workers did, and thus accepted the union's wage proposal.

In Quebec, central bargaining has been underway since late 2019, with CUPE tabling proposals aimed at improving services and addressing staffing shortages in the public schools and CÉGEPs. These proposals are aimed at meeting students' needs as families increasingly turn to costly private sector options for specialized learning.

COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on schools across the country. By late March, schools had shut down and started to transition to online learning. In many provinces across the country, CUPE worked to ensure that education workers did not suffer massive layoffs. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, CUPE has highlighted the importance of education workers such as custodians, administrators, bus drivers, EAs and ECEs who make our schools run effectively.

Some provinces have shown a greater commitment than others for ensuring a safe reopening of schools. In BC, for example, the NDP government provided \$42.5 million in provincial funding for the "Public School Safe Return to School Grant". This was used to provide PPE, enhanced cleaning, hand hygiene and assistive technology. CUPE's K-12 Coordinator in BC, and relevant staff have been meeting with government frequently since the beginning of the pandemic, including as part of a provincial K-12 steering committee that meets weekly.

COVID-19 has shown that, more than ever, provincial governments need to invest in properly staffing, and resourcing public education, to ensure a safe learning environment for children and workers.