

Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE)

MASSIVE CUTS TO STUDENT SUPPORT

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REGINA—Hundreds of educational assistants (EAs) have lost their jobs while the number of intensive needs students climbs steadily, according to new numbers obtained by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Saskatchewan.

Ministry of Education documents obtained through the Freedom of Information Act show that 350 full-time equivalent EA positions have been cut since 2007. Because EAs typically are part-time workers, the union estimates the loss to be many hundreds of individual EAs from the education system, province-wide.

During the same time period, enrollment rose by 5,676 students. The number of identified intensive needs students increased by 764.

Intensive needs students may have learning disabilities; behavioral issues or both.

To have the same EA-to-intensive needs student ratio as the province had in 2007, an additional 738 full-time EAs would need to be hired for the new school year.

Conversely, there were 97 fewer employees working in schools throughout Saskatchewan. The reduction in staff comes from 350 fewer full-time-equivalent EAs and 81 fewer classroom teachers.

Scant increases to offset the massive cuts were mostly related to ancillary positions for roles like psychologists and occupational therapists.

Staffing changes appear to align with two documents which were distributed by the Ministry of Education to all Student Support Superintendents in the province at the end of 2009.

The Golden Rule of Providing Support in Inclusive Classrooms directs the use of mainstream or accelerated students to assist intensive needs students. The “Golden Rule” is “ask three before me,” which calls on teachers to train struggling students to ask three classmates for assistance before approaching a teacher for help.

Enhancing Opportunities through Full-Service School Divisions calls for the number of EAs in Saskatchewan to be reduced by 70 per cent within seven years.

“The concept that students should sacrifice their own learning, concentration and order in the classroom to instruct other students is ludicrous,” said Jackie Christianson, who is an EA as well as the chairperson of CUPE’s Education Workers Steering Committee.

“Students—children—are not equipped to address other students’ learning or behavioral issues,” said Christianson. “It’s not fair to ask them to do that and I think we’ll see less bright futures for all our students using this method.”

While CUPE and the Education Workers’ Steering Committee does support the small increase in ancillary service employees, like psychologists, EAs are joined by parents in maintaining that those services won’t replace the one-on-one support that EAs provide.

“Many students need both one-on-one support and ancillary services in order to be successful,” said Christianson. “The Education Act leaves no ambiguity—we must provide the best education we can for Saskatchewan’s young people. Trying to balance the provincial budgets on the backs of intensive needs students and their classmates is not honoring that commitment.”

CUPE and its Saskatchewan Division is the largest union in the province, representing about 30,000 members who work in the health care, education, municipal, community-based organization, universities and other sectors. Nationally, CUPE represents nearly 600,000 members.

The Education Workers’ Steering Committee is a democratic provincial committee within CUPE, comprised of K-12 education support workers.