

Madam Chair, Trustee Esslinger;
Trustees;
Superintendent Schmidt;
Staff Members;
Ladies and Gentlemen;

CUPE 3550 Members Are YOUR Support Staff

On behalf of the members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees Local 3550, I appreciate this opportunity to outline what this non-teaching staff group believes should be considered by schools, central departments and the Board in reviewing, amending and developing the 2009-2010 Proposed Budget and future multi-year plans.

My name is Trudy Grebenstein. I am the President of the Canadian Union of Public Employees Local 3550, also known as CUPE Local 3550.

CUPE Local 3550 represents approximately 1800 permanent full-time and part-time non-teaching education workers, and approximately 500 hourly non-teaching education workers that are also your Support Staff at Edmonton Public Schools.

CUPE Local 3550 members contribute to our students' bright futures on each and every school day. At least 2000 CUPE 3550 members are on the job in this District's central office and schools every day. These non-teaching Support Staff workers are proud to provide front-line services to all the staff, students and parents that encompass the K-12 community of Edmonton Public Schools.

CUPE Local 3550 members, as partners in public education, are the Educational Assistants, Administrative Assistants, Clerks, Secretaries, Food Preparers, Science and Library Technicians and Interpreters that are on the job every day, supporting teachers and students by making it possible for them to do their best work.

The ongoing partnership of school staff groups that do this very important work of teaching and learning that we call public education depends on contributions from each and every staff member: teachers, support staff, maintenance, custodial and exempt staff.

Bright futures for our students' means that all of these partners are providing high quality teaching and learning experiences and are committed to high public education standards, whether their work is in Central Services or in our school sites.

Reality for the CUPE 3550 Members

As you are all well aware, delivering public education in Alberta's economic boom included challenges in attracting and retaining qualified Support Staff, Custodial and Trades & Maintenance workers, all CUPE members at Edmonton Public Schools.

We faced those challenges together, made changes to attract and retain support staff, worked hard toward making Edmonton Public Schools an employer of choice.

Right now, we can only hope that reduced education funding for 2009-2010 is an ugly rumor because that will surely create lay-offs and reduced hours of work for Support Staff. It would also surely destroy the credibility of saying there is stable employment at Edmonton Public Schools. Recruitment and retention initiatives would be sorely compromised.

As little as one year ago, Alberta's hot economy and continued labour shortages led to open discussions about barriers to recruitment and retention of qualified support and other non-teaching staff; resulting in this Board's offer of a non-teaching staff wage adjustment with an extension of all three non-teaching collective agreements to the end of 2011.

As a result, the membership's reality is that wage increases are tied to an annual Alberta Weekly Wage Earnings increase until September 2011. Unlike the Tory MLA's that recently took a "pass" on their annual AWE pay raise, CUPE Local 3550 members cannot afford to forgo an annual automatic cost-of-living pay increase.

Premier Ed Stelmach's January 30, 2009 press release promised public service employees, specifically those providing health-care services, teaching and police, would see no rollbacks and no reductions in the upcoming year. CUPE 3550 members are expecting that the Board's and administration's decisions regarding education funding received for the 2009-2010 will uphold that promise.

Student achievement soars, and teachers do their best work, when an adequate number of well trained Support Staff are on the job.

News that the Alberta government's deficit will be one billion (\$1 Billion) dollars is of great concern to the membership. Many are the survivors of the severe cutbacks to public education funding in the 90's. The projected deficit figure becomes even more intriguing because Alberta announced back in April 2008 that eliminating AHC premiums will save an estimate one billion (\$1 Billion) dollars.

The world's economic downturn is affecting our provinces economy too. CUPE Local 3550 is bracing itself for possible bad news when the 2009-2010 public education funding is announced later this spring. The membership's reminder to this Board is that regardless of the funding, in the interests of bright futures for our students, maintaining fair wages and retaining employees is imperative as we weather the economic storm.

Stable Funding for Support Staff Collective Agreements

The CUPE Local 3550 collective agreement echoes the ATA Local 37 contract regarding annual wage increases in accordance with the Alberta Weekly Wage Estimate (AWWE).

It is important to remember that our provincial government is under absolutely no obligation to annually provide Edmonton Public Schools with funding in accordance with the AWWE in order to support the CUPE Local 3550 collective agreement.

The Local is requesting that the Board immediately lobby and request that the provincial government annually fund non-teaching staff collective agreements in the same manner as the government is currently automatically funding teacher collective agreements.

Such progressive measures would provide relief in the Board's annual budget planning process that today may mean decisions between allocating funding for educational programming or allocating funding for the collective agreement of the valuable Support Staff that are partners in teaching and learning at Edmonton Public Schools.

Job Evaluation Committee & the Support Staff Classification Manual

The Joint Classification Manual Review Committee's work ground to a halt in November of 2006. This manual is in current use and is now well over 11-years old, a manual that at its inception was meant to be a living document.

Support Staff work has certainly changed a lot in the past five to ten years. Classification of positions and compensation for the more complex duties that have evolved within some positions or were added to other positions is often more complex. Today's Support Staff are expected to bring superior skills and abilities to their jobs every day. The considerable variety of educational

programming this District provides for our students; as well as the technology skills expected in today's District offices demand it.

The union and the administration have struck a Job Evaluation Committee to take on the task of improving how positions at Edmonton Public Schools are classified and compensation is determined. The union is requesting your support for the CUPE 3550 members on that Joint Job Evaluation committee. To become a full partner in the Job Evaluation process, the union's representatives will from time to time need to participate in training provided by the Canadian Union of Public Employees. Approvals for those leaves of absence are important. Without training, these members cannot do their best work on this project. This time, the project to update the Support Staff Classification Manual cannot be allowed to grind to a halt as more unfinished work.

Job Evaluation is important work aimed at not only the current Support Staff members, but also critical for the future success of recruitment and retention of Support Staff.

Today's newly hired and long-time Support Staff are often asked to update their position description. First they refer to this outdated manual. Next, many members, in total frustration, contact their union for assistance. Others do the best they can on their own, often with mixed results.

The District's Staff Performance Review process that takes place at least every three years is tied to every CUPE Local 3550 members' position description. Ongoing support staff training and development also relies on the information in this manual.

As you can see, the Support Staff Classification Manual is important and the work to update it can no longer be delayed. Your support for the work of the Job Evaluation Committee members is an important decision for the future of this work.

Support Staff Training & Development is Essential to Teaching & Learning

In spite of their very serious concerns about classification, work-load and compensation, Support Staff are delighted to be part of the quality teaching and learning that takes place every day in Edmonton Public Schools safe and well-kept facilities. What keeps CUPE Local 3550 members on the job is the children and

knowing that we are making a difference in their school experiences and achievement.

Over half of the current permanent Support Staff have worked for Edmonton Public Schools for (10) years or less. This District's commitment to the work of the Joint Support Staff Development committee assists the newest CUPE Local 3550 members in becoming their very best by offering opportunities to receive customized Edmonton Public Schools training.

Support Staff that are not considered to be the "newest" members are asking for opportunities for training and development too. In particular, Educational Assistants are looking for ways to keep up to date with the latest practises and techniques that relate to the educational programming they are working in. There are currently very few such opportunities provided by Edmonton Public Schools for this group of dedicated workers.

All of this compounds the need for continued and additional financial support for Support Staff Training and Development. The Local is requesting that significant additional financial support be allocated to relieve this situation in 2009-2010.

The Local has not given up. It is also again requesting that consideration be given to providing an annual District wide Professional Development Conference for Support Staff. Historically, such conferences have been successful, and this conference would be a wonderful opportunity for Support Staff to learn and upgrade skills.

Support Staff Mentors

As of January 2009, Edmonton Public Schools Educational Assistant Mentors have been hard at work at individual schools, supporting other Educational Assistants to help them become the "very best" for students and teachers. This important work supports the teaching and learning for special needs students in our District's very integrated classrooms as well as the educational programming developed to provide all students with challenging learning experiences.

The Local thanks the Board and the Administration for recognizing the need for two Educational Assistant Mentors. They join the work of the two Administrative Assistant Mentors whose work has been a huge success for the past four years.

Workload & Overwork vs Balance & Wellness

The accepted culture of overwork at Edmonton Public Schools and other public school districts not only this province, but also around our globe is very similar and continues.

Dedicated education employees accept this work environment because they believe our students are worth it, know the funding is never enough, and our reality is that if public education is crippled or allowed to fail, private schools that serve only special interest students and parents will soon fill the gap.

In spite all the issues that come along with overwork, all District staff members, not just CUPE Local 3550 members, continue to do their very best. As Support Staff, CUPE Local 3550 members need opportunities to participate in the professional development and training that will provide the knowledge to win that daily challenge of a huge multi-tasking workload. Professional development and training can only make support staff better at “working smart” in the best interests of our students.

The downside cannot be ignored. Dedicated CUPE Local 3550 members, knowing they are valuable partners in public education every day, often willingly participate in the abuse of their good will, dedication and health “for the good of the team/students”.

This as often as not puts personal and/or organizational health at risk and can have cumulative negative outcomes, regardless of whether or not it is done with the best of intentions and good will.

The Local is requesting that this Board provide additional resources for professional development and training to assist all staff in becoming more familiar with worker wellness.

This will save money in the long-run as support staff have the opportunity learn about and recognize the symptoms of overwork such as stress, burn-out, mental exhaustion, worker/family conflict, anxiety, depression, feelings of hopelessness, musculoskeletal injuries and know what they can do about it well before these symptoms result in extended absences from work to recover their health.

Statistics Canada reports that the average work days lost in a year (2006) is eight (8) days and that one (1) in twenty (20) employees experience some form of

depression. The Canadian Mental Health Association tells us that lost productivity due to mental health issues costs Canadians more than \$14 billion per year. How do we compare at Edmonton Public Schools?

It is a well-known fact that the results of overwork and burn-out mean that very valued and experienced staff members may be unable to perform their duties due to increased medical appointments, sick leave, and in extreme cases, long-term disability or WCB

due to life-long health difficulties that were contributed to or created by their work at Edmonton Public Schools.

When this takes place, it is not only a personal tragedy but also a great loss to the District. The Local believes that raising such awareness will initiate a better understanding for all District staff of what it really takes to achieve that ever elusive work-life balance and organizational health that we all strive for.

Support Staff Staffing Formula

Developing a Staffing Formula for Support Staff is needed to assist in forecasting this District's annual needs and addressing work-load issues. Such a formula would scientifically look at human resource requirements versus workload and form a pre-set, "ideal" staffing ratio as well as have the ability to consider other internal or external factors that impact every worksite's ability to serve their customers: parents, students and staff.

Such an analysis can focus on current and future needs as well as the impact of proposed program or procedure changes. It can also focus on the distribution of work among staff in a work unit and consider task duplication, task value and clarification of task responsibilities. Such a formula would be reviewed and updated as procedures, technologies, and dynamics change in order to ensure a true staffing picture.

Alberta Health Care (AHC) Premiums

As we all know, Alberta Health Care premiums were canceled in January 2009. (At that point, monthly premiums were: Single \$44/Family \$88 and annual premiums were: Single \$528/Family \$1056.)

How many medical procedures will be de-listed due to Alberta's current deficit budget, the now one billion (\$1 Billion) fewer health care dollars and a maverick Health Minister's decisions remains to be seen.

In view of that and the recession we are now also sliding into, whether those premiums will stay cancelled is anyone's guess.

Many, many years ago, the support staff at Edmonton Public Schools made a reasonable choice about their compensation. Instead of taking a larger raise, the membership and the Board ratified an agreement that saw Alberta Health Care premiums paid by the

Board. Since then, as negotiated in good faith, Edmonton Public Schools has paid AHC premiums on behalf of its Support Staff.

At the end of every collective agreement, CUPE 3550 Negotiations Committee members continue to be told that their new collective agreement's compensation package has a limited amount of dollars. If during negotiations most of the money in that compensation package is directed toward other issues, then the raise in wages will be less. That is easy to understand.

Alberta Health Care premiums were fully funded for the 2008-2009 school year, yet cancelled in January 2009 and none of those negotiated dollars have been returned to the CUPE Local 3550 memberships' benefit plan. CUPE 3550 members are patiently waiting for those dollars to be returned to them in the form of benefit premium coverage in other areas.

The Local understands the administration's current let's-wait-and-see decision due to a concern that the government's 2009-2010 education funding may include a claw-back of dollars formerly intended for AHC premiums. Earlier this month Premier Stelmach said that there will be no reductions or rollbacks in public services. A claw-back would mean that our Premier is not "walking the talk".

The Local understands the need for caution but also continues to believe those AHC premium dollars should rightfully be returned to CUPE Local 3550 members. The Local is requesting that the Board supports this resolution.

Public Private Partnerships (P3's)

In spite of a growing body of research on the experiences with P3's across Canada and around the world that points out the dangers both to public finance and public accountability that these arrangements with the private sector represent, the Alberta government decided to proceed with construction of new schools financed by P3's.

The Alberta government no doubt thinks it can silence nay-sayers because taxpayers, especially those raising families in newly built neighborhoods have

been "starved" for school infrastructure and parents with now school age children are desperate for a community school.

CUPE members are keeping a close eye on the new school sites in Edmonton and have reported they are moving at a snail's pace. The Local reminds this Board that the

contractor is a subsidiary of Babcock and Brown , a company whose shares have plummeted due to the recession. That company has publically declared that it is on the brink of bankruptcy. None of that can be good news as this P3 school project proceeds.

The membership is also very interested in knowing the Board's expectations of the implications of all this new classroom space on the District's existing public schools.

Trustee Support for Public Education

The future of K-12 public education for Alberta's children depends on today's Public School Trustees. It has never been clearer that Public School Trustees are the last line of defence against forces that would weaken public education and what it stands for.

Community members, parents and district employees, CUPE Local 3550 members are counting on this Board to continue to strategically lobby Alberta Education, join with other Boards and staunchly rekindle the battle to bring back Alberta Education's support for the funding that all public school students so rightly deserve.

Representation is Important

The membership of Local 3550 is serving notice now that the membership expects to see Trustees at the table when 2011 negotiations begin. It has been said here before and it has not changed: Local 3550 members always put a great deal of importance on Trustee participation in the bargaining process and count on their understanding of Support Staff issues.

Thank-you very much for your time and your attention this evening. The Local is optimistic that this presentation has been thought provoking and that the Board and administration will seriously consider CUPE Local 3550's suggestions in the development of the 2009-2010 Budget.

Trudy Grebenstein,
President, CUPE Local 3550