



CANADIAN UNION OF PUBLIC  
EMPLOYEES LOCAL 3550

BUDGET PRESENTATION  
TO EDMONTON PUBLIC  
SCHOOLS TRUSTEES

MARCH 2010

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Mr. Chair, Trustee Fleming;

Trustees;

Superintendent Schmidt;

Staff Members;

Ladies and Gentlemen;

**CUPE 3550 Members Are Your Partners  
In Public Education @ Edmonton Public Schools**

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 2010-2011 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.

With me here tonight are several members of the elected executive of CUPE Local 3550 who will stand as I introduce them to you.

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 often referred to as 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 Local 3550 members are on the job daily in this District's offices and schools. These non-teaching Support Staff workers are proud to provide front -line services for all the staff, students and parents that encompass the K-12 community of Edmonton Public Schools.

CUPE Local 3550 members, as this Board's partners in public education, are the Educational Assistants, Administrative Assistants, Clerks, Secretaries, Food Preparers, Science and Library Technicians and Interpreters that support teachers and students by making it possible for them to do their very best work.

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This ongoing partnership of all 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: support staff, maintenance, custodial, teachers, and exempt staff.

Bright futures for our students means that all of these partners are providing high quality teaching and learning experiences demonstrating commitment to the highest public education standards, whether their work is at our central departments or at our school sites.

### **Reality for the CUPE 3550 Members**

As you are all well aware, delivering public education in Alberta's economic boom included many challenges in attracting and retaining qualified Support Staff, Custodial workers and Trades & Maintenance workers. We faced those challenges together, working hard toward making Edmonton Public Schools an employer of choice.

Right now, we can only hope that our government's promises of reduced education funding for 2010-2011 and 2011-2012 is continued speculation. Such fiscal actions will surely create lay-offs and reduced hours of work for CUPE Local 3550 Support Staff.

Currently wage increases are tied to an annual Alberta Average Wage Earnings Index until September 2011. Unlike the Tory MLA's that gave themselves a 30% wage increase and then magnanimously agreed to a "pass" on their annual AAWEI pay raise, CUPE Local 3550 members, who are not at all in the same salary league, cannot afford to forgo annual automatic cost-of-living pay increases. Many CUPE 3550 members hold second jobs to pay for basic family necessities.

Premier Ed Stelmach's January 30, 2009 press release promised public service employees would see no rollbacks and no reductions. This was followed by refusal to fund the wage increases negotiated with the Alberta Teachers Association and decisive orders to school boards across Alberta to do the same with their non-teaching staff group collective agreement.

For 2010 Premier Stelmach promised public sector wage and hiring freezes as well as reduced funding, followed by staff reductions and rollbacks in government offices. Then in February 2010 Finance Minister Morton and Education Minister Hancock delivered a public education budget that looked reasonable to the public eye but really means this Board and every other school board in our province will be looking for operating budget reductions in order to fund collective agreement obligations.

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Translation: Deliver high quality public education and create bright futures by increasing the number of students in every classroom and provide fewer non-teaching supports for students and teachers. Due to government funding, public education is always changing how it responds to fiscal issues but the actual children we're working with and their needs remain fairly constant.

We are working here because of the children.

That's what has to drive our work each and every day and is our challenge as the Alberta government continues to take its responsibilities for public education on a roller-coaster ride. In March 2010 Finance Minister Morton says frugal budgets should signal "wage restraint" is necessary as the province comes out of the recession. Another government prediction, or is that a warning (?) to all public sector employees.

### **Underfunding K-12 Public Education**

The membership clearly understands that the Alberta Legislature can annually pass a budget bolstering education or reduce funding. Members also clearly understand that in the end, all that really matters is that all partners in education must focus on their students even when their sources of funding are uncertain.

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

The Alberta government's deficit declarations and underfunded K-12 education budgets continue to be of great concern to this Local's membership. Many members are the survivors of the severe cutbacks to public education funding proclaimed by the Klein government during the 90's. Facing that again will have many members examining their retirement options, and that could create a tsunami-like wave of retirements resulting in a huge loss of experienced and talented CUPE 3550 members. Recruiting talented people to replace them will mirror the recruitment challenges and struggles experienced during the recent economic boom.

Well aware of the budget shortfalls for 2010-2011, the CUPE Local 3550 membership continues to brace itself. The memberships' reminder to this Board is that regardless of the K-12 funding, in the interests of bright futures for our students', retaining employees, respect in the workplace, honouring collective agreements and fair workload expectations continue to be a CUPE Local 3550 priority.

### **Stable Funding for Support Staff Collective Agreements**

The CUPE Local 3550 collective agreement echos the ATA Local 37 contract regarding annual wage increases in accordance with the Alberta Average Weekly Earnings Index (AAWEI).

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 AAWEI 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 assist with the Board's annual budget planning process that at any time may mean making decisions between allocating funding for educational programming or allocating funding for the collective agreement obligations to valuable CUPE Local 3550 Support Staff workers that are important partners in the teaching and learning at Edmonton Public Schools.

### **Support Staff Training & Development is Essential**

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. On behalf of the membership, I would like to take this opportunity to thank CUPE 474 Custodial workers and CUPE 784 Maintenance & Trades workers for their partnership in the important work.

As Support Staff, CUPE Local 3550 members need continued 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.

What keeps CUPE Local 3550 members on the job are the children in our schools and knowing that as partners in their education, we are making a difference in their school experiences and achievement.

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Over half of the current permanent CUPE Local 3550 Support Staff have worked for Edmonton Public Schools for (10) years or less.

This District's continued commitment to the work of the Joint Support Staff Development committee assists 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 have also been asking for opportunities for training and development and they have been heard. Their opportunities are increasing and on behalf of the membership, I thank-you for hearing their concerns.

In particular, Educational Assistants will have a first-ever professional development opportunity this school year to examine ways to keep up to date with the latest practises and techniques that relate to the educational programming they are working in.

Administrative Assistants now have opportunities to meet to share best practises. Many members interested in becoming Administrative Assistants had an opportunity to attend fact-finding meetings and a pilot training program for future Administrative Assistants will begin soon.

It seems fair to warn this Board and the administration that this membership and their union, who have lobbied long and hard for such professional development opportunities, will continue to remind you of the importance of continuing such initiatives. Such actions make Edmonton Public Schools an employer of choice.

The Local is again requesting that continued significant financial support be allocated to provide in-house professional development opportunities to facilitate the personal growth and expertise of its CUPE 3550 Support Staff members.

### **Support Staff Mentors**

Edmonton Public Schools Administrative Assistant and Educational Assistant Mentors have been hard at work at individual schools, supporting other support staff members to help them become their "very best" at supporting students and teachers. This is important coaching work and provides the membership with a multitude of opportunities when accessing the services of a Support Staff Mentor.

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And by the way, support staff mentor services are provided at no charge upon request.

In addition, Support Staff development opportunities include these Support Staff Mentors in the planning, development and delivery of staff development opportunities. Since there are two (2) thousand CUPE Local 3550 members on the job every day, these Mentors have a considerable workload to meet the needs of principals, administrators and CUPE 3550 Support Staff.

The Local thanks the Board and the Administration for recognizing the importance of having Support Staff Mentor positions and requests an increase of one Administrative Assistant Mentor position in the upcoming year.

### **Workload & Overwork vs. Balance & Wellness**

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

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

In spite of all the issues that come along with overwork CUPE Local 3550 members, continue to do their very best every day.

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. Occupational disabilities become a factor.

The Local is requesting that this Board provide additional resources for professional development and training to assist CUPE 3550 members in becoming more familiar with worker wellness and work/life balance.

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This will save the Board money in the long-run as support staff have the opportunity learn about and recognize the symptoms and possible solutions to overwork such as stress, burn-out, mental exhaustion, worker/family conflict, anxiety, depression, feelings of hopelessness and musculoskeletal injuries. It is important for the membership to have the tools to know what can be done well before these symptoms result in extended absences from work to recover their health.

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 for the CUPE 3550 Support Staff member but also a great loss to the District. Their personal stories are heart-wrenching. 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 Ratio Formula**

Developing a Staffing Ratio 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 assist our Principals. It would focus on current and future needs of Edmonton Public Schools 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 required staffing picture.

The Local is requesting that the Board and administration examine the feasibility of establishing a Support Staff Staffing Ratio Formula. A good place to begin may be by creating a staffing formula for the six (6) new schools which will have integrated special needs classrooms that will be opening in the fall. These new

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schools with integrated classrooms are expected to have a total population of up to five (5) thousand students.

### Site-Based Decision Making

In the mid-1980's site-based decision making was the buzz -word and this philosophy soon became well developed at Edmonton Public Schools. In fact this District continues to be recognized for its successes with site-based decision - making. Educators from all over the world come here to see how it's done.

Implementing site-based budgeting means CUPE 3550 support staff members working in school offices and central office faced huge changes in how their work was done. Every new school year brought changes to how work was to be completed and also added additional tasks for everyone. As the transition was completed, many additional tasks formerly completed at central office not only changed but became additional duties for CUPE 3550 members working in school offices. Members working in Central Services faced similar challenges as site-based decisions making changed their jobs.

Transition to site-based decision making moved forward at a steady pace. There continues to be some debate about what works well as a site-based decision model and what still does not. Opportunities for improvement should not be arbitrarily dismissed.

I would like to draw attention to what one of these changes meant to school staff. Working in a school office continues to be an extremely busy, demanding and multi-tasking position. If you have been in a school lately, you will have noticed that.

It has always been a mystery why it was important that the data entry work done to pay the bills (which is done in Oracle software) must be done at the school level. That school-based task does not get those invoices paid any faster. The Accounts Payable Department reviews that data for accuracy and the Finance Department eventually makes the payments. Once the school site's cost-coding and signature has been provided, this data entry task would surely be more effectively completed elsewhere: by CUPE members who are specialists in such data entry in an expanded Accounts Payable Department.

CUPE 3550 members working as Administrative Assistants in our schools are valuable and experienced staff; removing this data-entry task would certainly

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assist their work-load issues (especially in Elementary Schools with fewer staff). The value added by this task remaining as a site-based task is elusive.

The Local is requesting that the administration review the effectiveness of this data entry taking place at individual schools versus it taking place in the Accounts Payable Department in order to determine the value added to the educational programming for students ( especially in Elementary Schools) in continuing with this site-based data entry procedure.

### **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. Six (6) will be open for our students in the upcoming school year.

The Alberta government no doubt thinks it can silence nay-sayers because taxpayers, especially those raising families in newly built neighbourhoods 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 opening this fall. It's not just curiosity to see the massive shift of students and staff.

The Local is looking forward to continued financial reports to Trustees that will be shared to provide and the public with information comparing the operating and maintenance costs of the new P3 schools with other comparable Edmonton Public schools.

### **Volunteers**

The Local and the administration recently jointly reviewed the District's Volunteer Handbook, which is now posted on the internal intranet. This document is an excellent resource for all staff and I invite you to review the result of this committee's good work. This Board recently updated the Board's Policy regarding use of volunteers in our schools. The Local is very concerned that due to upcoming budget reductions, this policy will encourage school administrators

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to ignore the Volunteer Handbook and/or make reductions in the hours of work for their support staff and replace that time with volunteers approved by parents.

The Local seeks assurances from this Board and administration that the CUPE Local 3550 membership will experience no reduction in positions or time worked due to the addition of volunteers to do small-group work with students during the regularly scheduled school day. At the bargaining table we all agreed this would not take place, yet it certainly appears that the Board Policy regarding volunteers is now again raising questions with the Local's membership.

### **Trustee Support for Public Education is Essential**

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 and CUPE Local 3550 members are counting on this Board to continue to 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 to CUPE Local 3550 Members**

The Local's membership is interested in which current Trustees will re-offer their services in the October 2010 Municipal elections and who any newcomers will be. In spite of the fact that there is no way to know if you will all again become members of the next Board of Trustees, the membership has an important message for you .

The membership of Local 3550 is serving notice now that the membership expects to see Trustees assigned to CUPE Local 3550 negotiations at the table every time when 2011 negotiations begin.

It has been said here before and it has not changed: CUPE Local 3550 members always place a great deal of importance on Trustee participation in the bargaining process and count on their understanding of Support Staff issues.

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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 2010-2011 Budget.

Trudy Grebenstein,  
President, CUPE Local 3550