

CANADIAN UNION OF PUBLIC EMPLOYEES
Local 3550
2007 BUDGET PRESENTATION

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

We Are the Support Staff

On behalf of the members of CUPE Local 3550, I appreciate this opportunity to outline what this staff group believes should be considered by schools, central departments and the board in reviewing and amending three year plans and the development of the 2007-2008 Proposed Budget.

My name is Trudy Grebenstein. I am the President of the Canadian Union of Public Employees Local 3550, representing approximately 1800 full and part-time permanent, and well over 500 hourly education workers that are the support staff at Edmonton Public Schools.

Public schools play a crucial role in Canadian society; they are the great equalizer, where students receive a quality education regardless of economic and ethnic background. On any given day during the school year, at least 2000 CUPE support staff education workers are on the job in the District's central office and schools. These education workers are proud to provide front -line services to the community of staff, students and parents that we refer to as Edmonton Public Schools.

Public services build strong communities and CUPE Local 3550 members, as partners in public education, are the Teacher Assistants, Administrative Assistants, Clerks, Secretaries, Food Preparers, Science and Library Technicians and Interpreters that are on the job every day, supporting teachers and students doing their best work during teaching and learning.

This partnership of all staff groups that do this very important work of teaching and learning that we call public education depends on contributions from every staff member: teachers, support staff, maintenance, custodial and exempt staff. Improving student achievement and providing high quality teaching and learning experiences depends on Edmonton Public Schools staff that are committed to high standards, whether their work is in Central Services or in our schools.

The Alberta Advantage

It is important to acknowledge the challenges that Edmonton Public Schools faces in its efforts to meet the needs of its parents, students and staff. This school district continues to be admired not only locally and provincially, but also across Canada and in the United States for its successes. Other Boards purchase resources developed by Edmonton Public Schools and some American States are already modeling the "Edmonton Experience" or more recently, as in Nevada, have immediate goals to do so.

Last year, the Alberta government announced a \$7.4 billion surplus – more than the whole budgets of some provinces, three times the projected costs of the 2010 Olympics in Vancouver. This year, Alberta has already announced that the surplus will be at least \$6.5 billion, already \$1.1 billion higher than projected in November of 2006. You would think that such good news about annual surpluses and a new provincial government leader could bring our hopes up and we could expect that public education funding will not be short-changed again in 2007-2008.

Do we dare hope that Premier Ed Stelmach's first budget will seriously consider the current needs of K-12 students receiving public education in Alberta? Lyle Oberg, Alberta's new finance minister, has already announced plans for a policy to stop the addition of funding to already provincially approved annual operating budgets.

In the opinion of the Local, such a new policy might work in principle, as long as the province gets the funding right the first time and public schools receive enough money to meet next year's operating costs, including staff salaries. As we well know from his past record, we cannot count on Mr. Oberg to adequately financially support public education.

Support Staff do not appreciate the lay-offs, delayed position reclassifications and lack of resources for teaching and learning that they face annually as a result of "not enough money" from provincial coffers. There is certainly always "enough work" in our schools and the Local is interested in receiving information about this Board's plans to keep Alberta Education tuned in to that.

Checking it Twice

It is also vital to continue to provide district staff with excellent resources to ensure that all district sites/departments/schools have the ability to easily provide that important accurate month-end/year-end reporting of site/department/school budget surpluses or deficits.

Erroneous financial reporting in the District's site-based-budgeting model has the potential to cause a lot of pain for support staff members. As you know, the province takes the Board's estimated year-end deficit right off the top of the next school year's funding. A larger than anticipated deficit often means support staff cuts at the end of the school year. Needless staff cuts, if that financial information was not accurate.

The Board's actual yearly deficit dollars are eventually confirmed by the province. If the previously estimate and reported deficit turns out to be less, those dollars are returned to the Board's budget. While this may appear to be a windfall of funding later in a school-year, when this additional funding is distributed it also comes with the reminder that it's "found" money and therefore not sustainable funding to be used to increase staffing.

This situation does not paint a pretty picture for those support staff members that had their hours of work reduced or lost their jobs because of a perceived lack of money back in June.

The Local is requesting that the Board improve the process and tools for financial reporting of expenditures at all sites/departments/schools. It is important to ensure that needless support staff reductions at the end of each school year do not take place because of erroneous expenditure estimates.

Public Private Partnerships (P3's)

The public pays and private industry profits. The Local is concerned that this Board will be tempted to participate in public/private partnerships, often referred to as P3's. Minister of Education Ron Liepert has suggested that Alberta's Public School Boards become more resourceful in finding additional funding and encourages Boards look for "partnerships" that will either directly or indirectly financially support public education.

Provincial capital budgets currently provide the dollars required to build new schools. Infrastructure dollars must continue to come from the much more cost effective public purse. This Board really cannot afford to build new schools any other way.

While public/private partnerships allow public organizations such as School Boards to move ahead with infrastructure renewal, the long-term lease costs are always much higher as borrowing and debt servicing comes at a higher cost to the private sector than to the public sector.

P3 projects always have additional costs, which are what puts profits in shareholders pockets. The sorcery of accounting practices associated with P3's has not changed. In the end, there would be a new school, but taxpayer's dollars that should have been directed into the classroom will have instead paid for the additional costs of a P3 school, such as higher borrowing rates and share-holder profits.

There continues to be 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 Canadian Union of Public Employees has gathered a great deal of this research conducted by both CUPE research staff and independent researchers. The research demonstrates that not only do public/private partnerships cost more money over the long run, but they also seriously threaten public accountability. Unlike the public sector which must be transparent in the spending of public dollars, the private partner is not held to the same rules of disclosure.

The very nature of P3 agreements mean that important decisions affecting public services and infrastructure are not disclosed because of the sensitivity of private business interests. There are also many Auditor General Reports highlighting the cost of P3 development to the taxpayer. None of these reports have brought glad tidings about P3's.

No corporation can borrow money to fund infrastructure renewal at a lower discounted rate than Alberta's debt-free government that has a reportedly huge surplus.

CUPE National Supports Public Education

Public education is facing a funding crisis unprecedented in its long and proud history. The Local has a suggestion about how this Board can be resourceful in finding additional dollars in its annual budget. The Local requests that this Board join with the Canadian Union of Public Employees to call on Federal Finance Minister Jim Flaherty to do the math on GST in the upcoming Federal Budget and eliminate this added expense to public school boards. This is a much needed

change in order to improve tax fairness and transparency. As you know, GST paid by Alberta school boards is essentially a tax on funds raised through provincial property taxes.

The Goods and Services Tax (GST) was introduced in 1991. School boards across the country pay hundreds of millions of dollars a year on GST costs, 68% of which are eligible for rebate. That is problematic for two reasons. First of all, the administrative time and resources it takes for school boards to complete the rebate process is a huge burden.

Second of all, a 68% rebate still means a lot of dollars a year, funded by provincial taxpayers for the education of their children, are being paid to the federal government as GST. Those are education dollars that are lost and cannot be spent on textbooks or equipment or anything else our schools desperately need.

Municipalities get a 100% back on their GST costs, and it is only fair and reasonable that the same rebate be extended to public school boards. This Board's partnership and support is needed to convince the Harper Conservatives to pass an amendment to the Excise Tax Act which will exclude school boards from paying the GST. Rebating the entire GST will make a significant financial difference in the budget at Edmonton Public Schools. Last year this Board spent \$2,000,000 dollars for the cost of GST. That \$2,000,000 would have been better spent in our classrooms.

Trustee Support for Public Education

The future of public education for Alberta's children depends on today's Public School Trustees. Trustees that are prepared to intensely represent the interests of parents, students and community members in the governance of our schools.

Earlier this year, this Board provided an example of how important that governance is when difficult decisions were called for. It has never been clearer that Public School Trustees continue to have a much needed role in public education.

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.

Support Staff Are Essential To Teaching & Learning

A former Superintendent always stated that Edmonton Public only hires the very best. Support staff are delighted to be considered “the very best”; a part of the quality teaching and learning that takes place every day in Edmonton Public Schools safe and well-kept facilities. Whether they are working in the classroom, a school office or at central services, all support staff have an important role to play in the education of each and every child in our District.

This District’s commitment to continued support staff development, coaching and training is what keeps support staff at their very best. The Local and the District agreed to form a joint committee to explore the needs of Support Staff Training and Development. That work continues and the information gathering to date clearly indicates there is a very big “SOS” pending due to anticipated support staff retirements.

The number of support staff able to retire within the next five (5) to ten (10) years proves the importance of support staff development and the need for additional training to fill that alarming gap of expertise and experience that is already becoming a challenge. The “hot” Alberta economy also means there is a worker shortage and it will be difficult to replace many positions. The Local is requesting continued and additional financial support for support staff training and development.

The District’s support for inclusion and integration of a variety of special needs programming make it clear that teacher assistants must continue to be “the very best” in order to support teachers and students in the classroom. Today’s teacher assistants require very diverse skills to support the teaching and learning of special needs students in our District’s very integrated classrooms.

The Local strongly believes that a Support Staff Mentor for teacher assistants could focus primarily on the district’s Teacher Assistants and would be an important and valuable resource for this District. The Local urges your consideration of this request and also encourages the District to look to the rank and file to fill such a position.

A Support Staff Mentor for teacher assistants would focus on staff development, training and coaching of the District’s teacher assistants. Good training and an on-going mentorship program is vital in creating opportunities for improvement for all support staff, either new or not-so-new to their positions. Such an opportunity to collaborate with others that have similar jobs, to share best practices, or to

mentor each other will provide this District with support staff services and resources that are priceless.

The current support staff position of Support Staff Mentor for office and clerical staff has been a huge success. The success of this position cries for more such support for the membership of CUPE Local 3550. The days when a person with secretarial experience or experience as a parent could readily perform school-related duties are long gone. Technology, customized software and the inclusion and integration of a variety of special needs programming has changed the workplace for support staff at Edmonton Public Schools

Opportunities to provide training and development for support staff are always a challenge during the school day. The local urges the Board and administration to consider offering training and professional development for support staff on co-ordinated District Professional Development days as well as on the two days of Teachers' Convention. These are fabulous opportunities to provide a large number of support staff with training and professional development at a very reasonable cost.

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

Workload & Overwork vs Balance & Wellness

The accepted culture of overwork at Edmonton Public Schools and other public school districts across not only this province but also around our globe is very similar. Overwork due to lack of funding is an accepted norm. Dedicated education employees accept this work environment because they believe our students are worth it, the funding is never enough, and our reality is that if public education is crippled or allowed to fail, private schools will soon fill the gap.

Public schools do indeed play a crucial role in our society because they are the great equalizer, where students receive a quality education regardless of their economic and ethnic background. Giving up on the excellent public school system we currently have would create an unacceptable set of social and financial realities for Alberta's parents and students.

It's clear that no matter how much the government's budget surplus is, parents already facing higher costs to educate and transport their children to school should not also face the burden of private school tuition. Support staff believe in public education, and that is one of many reasons why this Board has such dedicated support staff members.

In spite all the issues that come along with overwork, all District staff members, not just support staff, continue to do their very best. Support Staff can only get better and better when they 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”.

We cannot ignore a downside. Dedicated support staff workers, 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”.

That brings the Local back to the serious issues of overwork. Its affects are cumulative, regardless of whether or not it is done with good will. I am sure every person in this room suffers from the effects of overwork more often these days and has learned to accept that.

The Local and its membership have high expectations that Edmonton Public Schools will monitor and promote change to eliminate and manage the causes of overwork for support staff. Some examples are conflicting demands, insufficient training, too many additional responsibilities, worker isolation (no time to interact with co-workers), downloading of management responsibilities, no replacement workers, budget cut backs, missed breaks, no relief from loud or often interrupted work environments to do detailed and time sensitive work.

The Local is requesting that this Board provide additional resources for professional development and training to assist all staff to 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 they can do something about it well before these symptoms result in extended absences to recover their health.

It is a well-known fact that the results of overwork and burn-out mean that valued and trained staff members may be unable to perform their duties due to increased medical appointments, sick leave, and in extreme cases, or they are on long-term disability or WCB due to life-long health difficulties. When this takes place, it is at 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 takes to achieve that ever elusive work-life balance that we all strive to achieve.

Representation is Important

The membership of Local 3550 is very pleased that Trustee Esslinger and Trustee Gibeault participated in the Local's most recent negotiations. Local 3550 members always put a great deal of importance on Trustee participation in the bargaining process and their understanding of support staff issues.

The membership of Local 3550 also thanks Trustees that continue to give of their time to support the Local's Interpretations Committee work. Resolving issues related to the collective agreement is important work that shapes the future for support staff workers and our school district.

The Local encourages Trustees to request regular reports of all Interpretations Committee issues and resolutions. This will provide an even greater understanding of support staff issues at future negotiations.

Thank-you very much for your time and your attention this evening. The Local is optimistic that this presentation has been thought provoking and will be given serious consideration in the development of the 2007-2008 Budget.

Presented by
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