

Exempt Staff Presentation to the Board of Trustees February 26, 2008

Madam Chair, Trustees, Superintendent Schmidt, ladies and gentlemen. Good Evening and thank you for your time. My name is Kris Uusikorpi. I am a member of the Exempt Liaison Committee. It is my pleasure to speak to you this evening on behalf of Exempt staff. I would like to introduce members of the Committee who are in attendance tonight...

Our presentation this evening has two purposes. One is to provide an orientation for new trustees on the depth and breadth of our Exempt staff. The other is to provide a status update of our concerns and challenges and offer suggestions we would like you to consider for the budget process and future priorities. And we would like you to know how thrilled we are with the District Priorities mandate that was made effective on February 12, especially the third point to provide a collaborative, healthy and innovative workplace that recognizes individual contributions and supports opportunities for growth and professional development. We feel that statement acknowledges the importance of all staff groups at Edmonton Public Schools and the contributions we all make.

Although the Exempt staff is one of the smallest staff groups at Edmonton Public Schools, representing roughly 6% of the Districts employees, our jobs vary the most. We are comprised of a group of individuals with formal education and professional designations who cover a wide variety of disciplines. Our jobs take us from working directly with students in the classroom to providing technical and professional support to the schools through a wide range of services. We are Occupational Therapists, Speech Language Therapists, Physical Therapists and Psychologists who are in the classrooms assessing and working directly with children and travelling throughout the northern part of the province to other jurisdictions and aiding children there. We are Business Managers and Executive Assistants running the administrative aspects in both schools and at the Centre. We are Technical Analysts who maintain our computer technology throughout

the District. We are Accountants who keep the money flowing. We are in Planning, Facilities and Personnel. We are in the Board Office, Budget Services and Communications. We are in Consulting Services, the Distribution Centre and Teachers Book Depository, and Programs and Curriculum. And we are in Student Information, Transportation and the Superintendents office. We are a diverse group devoted to pursuing bright futures for all of our students.

Last month, the Exempt Liaison committee sent out a short survey to all Exempt staff. It was identical to the one we sent out in 2006 with the addition of asking Exempt staff to distinguish if their job had them working directly with students of which 41% said they did, or in an operational capacity which made up the remaining 59%. We were very pleased with this years' level of participation; a total of 382 out of 489 staff responded which is a third more over the last survey indicating a welcome increase in staff engagement. However, we were dismayed by the marked reduction in staff satisfaction in 4 of the 5 questions. Historically this presentation to the Board has been somewhat lighthearted in tone and nature however in light of the survey results, we as a sub-committee do not feel we would be doing our staff group justice regarding fundamental job concerns if we maintained the status quo. This is the first time we can bring you conclusive comparative data that provides a clear indication of what is going on within our staff group within the District.

The survey questions related to: satisfaction with the service of the Exempt Liaison Committee, healthy and safe work environments, professional development, workload and responsibility, and the inclusion in the decision making process regarding compensation. The survey allowed us to focus on certain aspects of our work life, to see what is working and what is not. We are now pleased to share with you the results.

From 2006 to 2008, the Exempt Liaison committee went from a 96% to a 93% approval rating. While that may not seem significant, the feedback we received

brought to our attention areas for improvement. The main concerns are the timeliness of communications from the committee and the information provided in response to questions brought forth in our meetings. We take these comments seriously and have already taken them back to our Committee to address. Our goal is to move toward expedited minutes that offer more of the discussions that take place in the meetings and not just the restatement of policy. We also would like to see more stakeholders, such as Principals, become privy to concerns of the Exempt staff. We feel this would increase awareness when making decisions that impact all of their staff.

We asked staff about their satisfaction levels for opportunities in Professional Development and observed a negligible ½ % increase. Comparing the results with the 2006 survey identified a polarization in the responses from staff; respondents are leaving the middle ground and moving to the positions of either very satisfied or not satisfied at all. It appears that in some DU's, things are starting to happen, that Principals and administrators are recognizing the connection Professional Development has in growing and retaining staff and are giving it more priority. The flip side is that in some DU's that does not seem to be the case. And it appears PD is more of an issue in a cost recovery DU. If there isn't a concerted effort to create specified dollars in their budget, staff members lose out. As well, we have heard that PD may also be a victim of the bustling economy whereby no one has time to pursue it due to current workload demands. We believe the benefit of investing in PD goes directly to our students. We believe the future growth of the District is dependent on maintaining current knowledge in our respective fields in our ever changing society. And we believe the edge PD would offer as a compensation benefit for employees will pay off tremendously in terms of the attraction and retention of quality staff. Therefore, in light of the inconsistencies from DU to DU, we would like to see a District wide PD program with a per person minimum specified dollar amount, developed and promoted to all Exempt staff.

The number of staff who view their workplace as healthy and safe environments went down by 8% since the last survey. In both Central Services and schools we received complaints of working conditions. The prevalent comments pertained to air quality and ventilation, carpet replacement concerns, desk sharing and overcrowding, extreme temperature fluctuations, overall cleanliness, mould and rodent and insect infestations. In the Centre for Education, we know there are unique funding issues because we do not have students in the building. A number of survey comments pertained specifically to the carpets in this building and although it is good that the carpet has been replaced in public areas there are very real concerns for the deteriorated conditions in working areas. At the same time, we are pleased to note that a building committee has been established with representatives from most departments to allow for specific issues to be brought forward. The positive feedback we received on the survey relates to the OHS – the Occupational Health and Safety initiatives that the District has rolled out. The overall sense is that now there may be something in place that considers all facets of the organization, brings awareness to the varied workplace issues, and hopefully addresses them. We ask that it become a priority to use the OHS initiative to pursue and eradicate the unsafe, harmful and congested situations that are faced by employees.

We asked staff to what extent they felt their workload and responsibilities were reasonable. This question suffered the biggest hit in the survey. The 15% drop in the feeling of reasonableness effectively increased the number of unhappy staff to a full third of respondents. We trust this is not news to the District. With the significant demands of a booming economy and a retiring workforce we accept that these are uncontrollable pressures the District is going through. The feedback we received from the Exempt staff is proof positive that we are feeling those pressures directly, but that feedback relates not only to the uncontrollable pressures of our current economic climate, but also to workload and responsibility issues where the District does have significant control.

The prevailing theme from Exempt staff across the District is the expectation of maintaining the same level of service despite the escalating pressures of being progressively shorter staffed. And although the expectation to get the necessary work done has always been there, the current economic climate has changed how we work. Feedback we received from the Occupational, Physical, and Speech Language Therapists and Psychologists is that the 7 hour work day is not long enough for thorough assessments of children and to ensure that the administrative portion of their job is done. Added to their vexation is working along side salaried teaching staff with comparable workload and responsibilities all the while being cognizant of the growing discrepancy in salary and the distinct impression that they will not be able to achieve the same career growth with EPSB that certificated staff can. Comments received from our Technical Analysts reflect situations where they are feeling pressured to work evenings, weekends and holidays to complete work in schools with out consideration that the choice to do so is at their own discretion. Observations were offered that when staff have faced situations that require overtime, and although the District policy is to pay for authorized overtime, there are DU's that highly discourage staff to claim it and this happens in both Central services and in schools. And now, possibly more so than the past, we are seeing increasing levels in stress, frustration and an even stronger feeling of being undervalued. We believe the District enjoys obvious loyalty from its employees; we are a committed group who are doing our very best to ensure bright futures, but when fundamental aspects of our jobs push toward breaking levels, please know that money becomes an even larger issue. We would like to see the disparity between the two staff groups, the Exempt and the ATA, eliminated.

And now finally onto the satisfaction staff have with the decision making process for determining our salary and benefit package. A full 45% of respondents are dissatisfied. The prevailing comments were "what decision making process?" and in fact there is no bargaining unit for the Exempt staff. As is our current practice, the Liaison committee puts forth recommendations based upon stakeholder

input, but ultimately the decisions are out of our hands. The general consensus of the survey points to an inherent inequality that exists whereby the non-management Exempt salaries are rolled up into one salary grid without consideration to the advanced education that many staff pursue and bring to the District, especially when in direct comparison with certificated staff. There have also been noted inconsistencies of grid placement from DU to DU with respect to the same or similar jobs. We would like to see those discrepancies investigated and if valid, eliminated. With the exception of our latest compensation package, which ended up being similar to the agreements of the three CUPE local's, the compensation for Exempt staff has usually mirrored past ATA contracts. And while that is not ideal in our point of view, it ensured a slightly higher compensation. It was our understanding from years past that the District wanted to ensure efforts were made to keep the Exempt staff compensation in line with the Teaching staff. With the latest agreement, and every passing year, the chasm between the two staff groups grows. We feel, in light of the new ATA contract, the Exempt compensation package needs to be readdressed.

The very nature of the Exempt staff's diversity presents unique challenges for the District regarding attraction and retention of a qualified and skilled workforce. I feel I speak for the entire Liaison committee when I express our gratitude in being part of the discussions Personnel has initiated to gather direct information and opinion from staff in pursuing the District as becoming an employer of choice. We are very pleased this initiative has been put into place. To that end, and in conjunction with my preceding comments, please consider these recommendations:

- Achieve a District wide PD program with a specified dollar amount per person
- Readdress the current Exempt compensation package, especially in light of the current labour market issues of attraction and the new ATA contract

- Investigate and eliminate salary discrepancies between Exempt and Certificated staff performing the same or similar job
- Investigate and eliminate grid placement discrepancies between Exempt staff from DU to DU with the same or similar job
- Ensure the District becomes an employer of choice through recognition of valued existing employees which in turn enhances the reputation of the District and ensures the attraction of the best future employees
- Reinforce the OHS priority to achieve a safe and healthy workplace

As valuable, contributing employees at Edmonton Public Schools, we are interested in raising the profile of the Exempt Staff as a whole. And while this may seem insignificant and I certainly do not mean to trivialize the matter, it would be nice to see some sort of specific recognition of our staff group. Maintenance staff, Support staff, Custodial staff and Teachers are recognized with either days or weeks and it is quite noticeable that we are not. We affect all aspects of the District and make every effort to keep things running well with a nod to the past and an eye on the future, because we believe that with students and staff alike, everyone's bright future begins here. I thank you again for your time this evening.

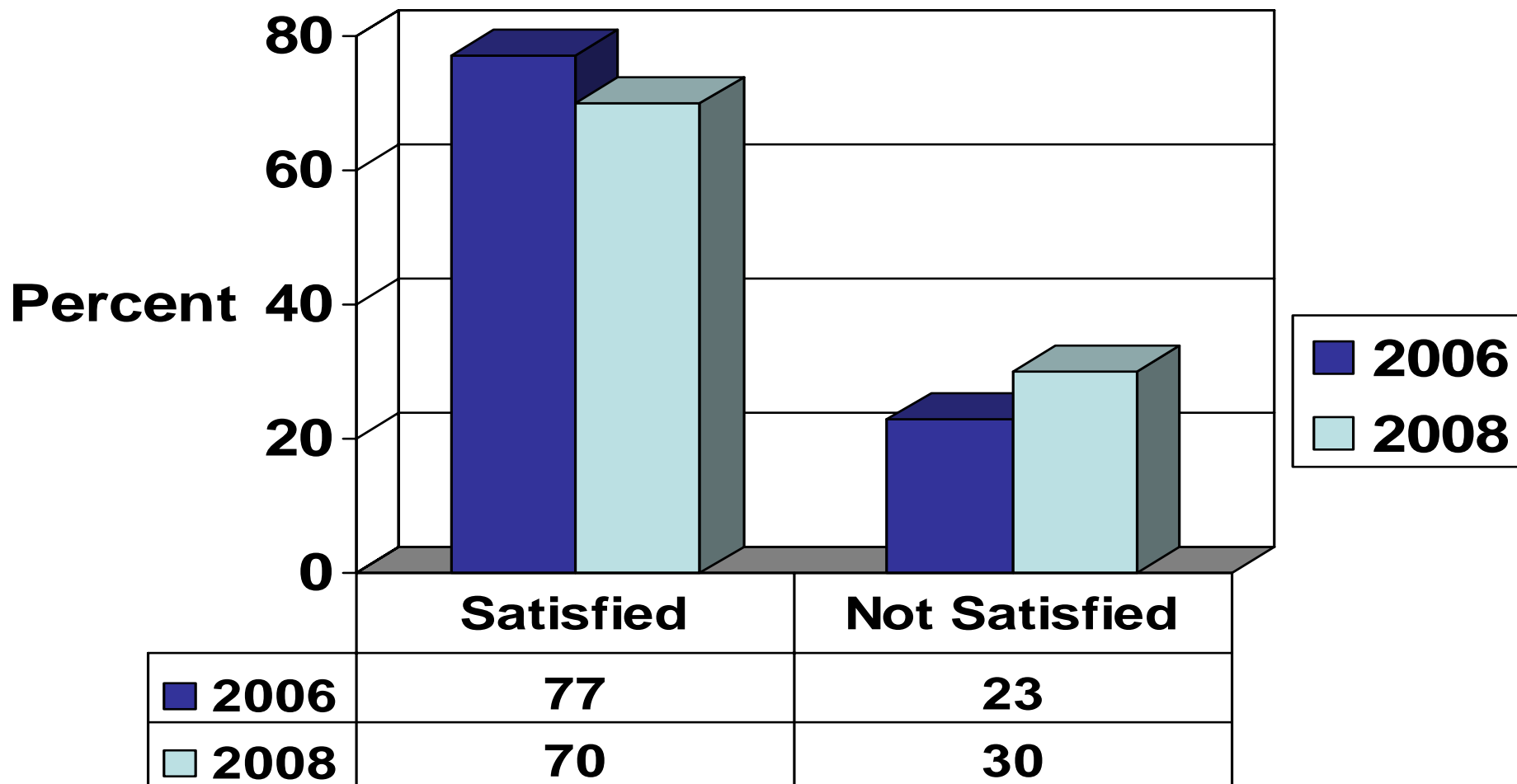
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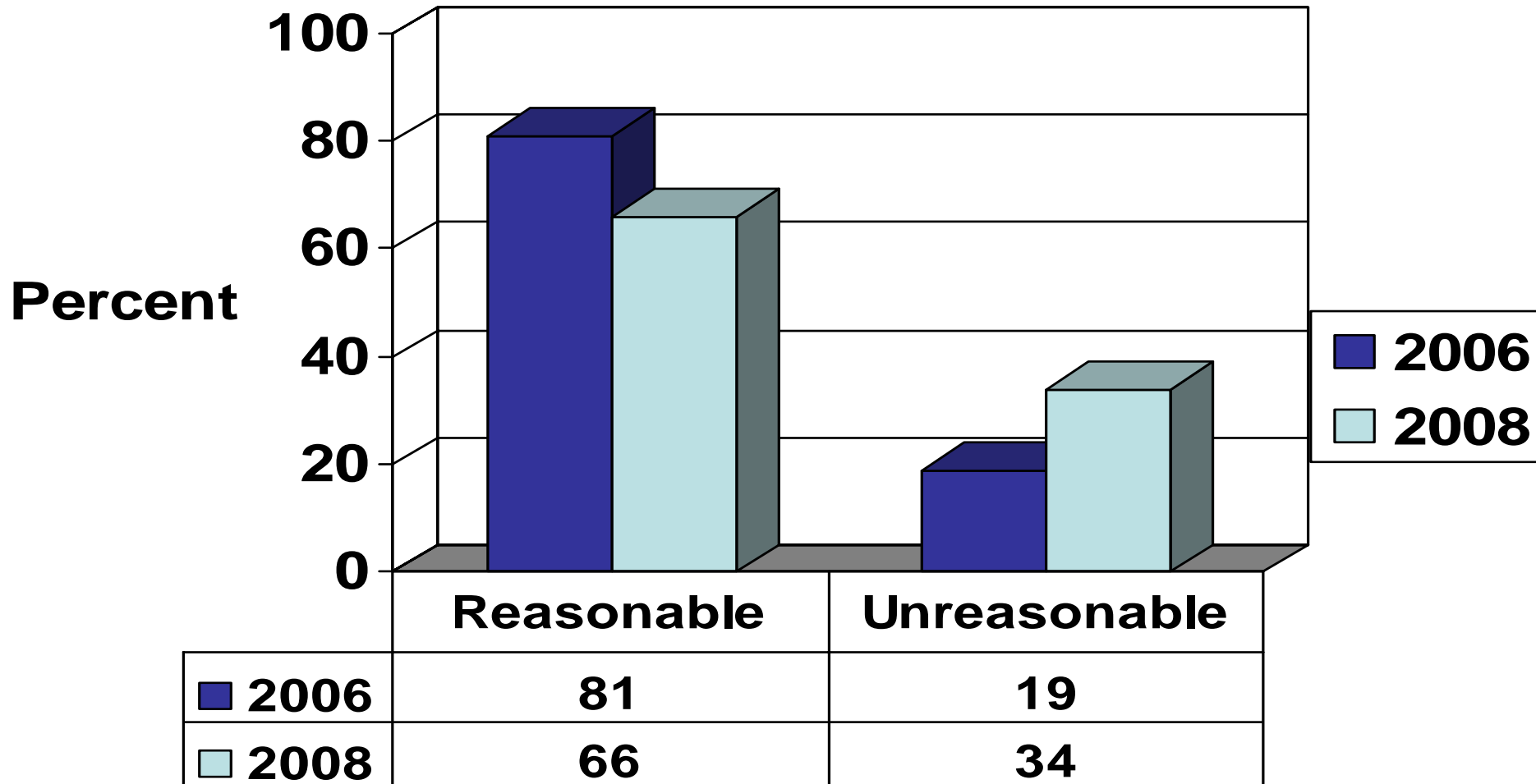
To what extent are you satisfied with the opportunities you have for professional development?



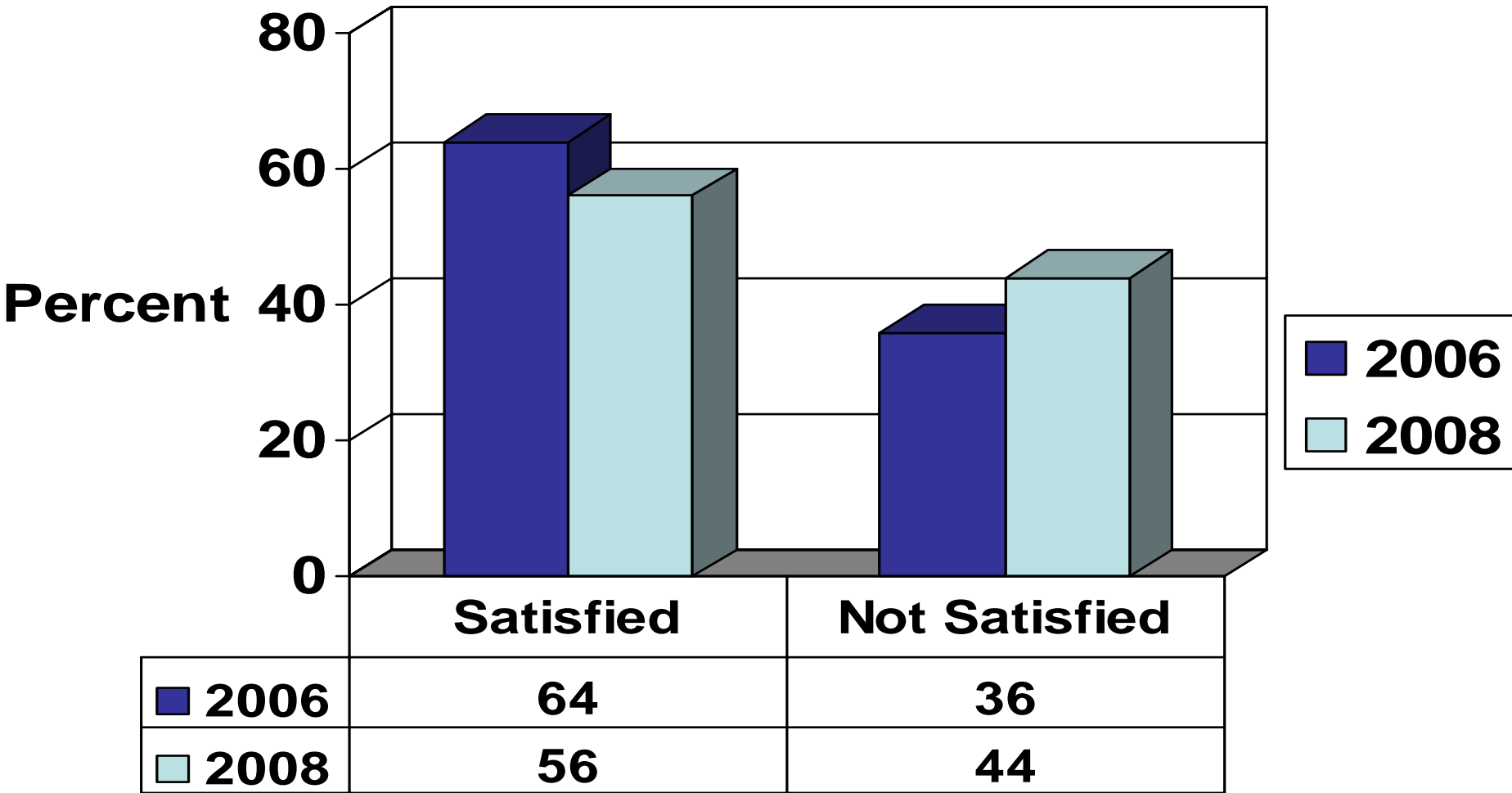
To what extent is your workplace a healthy and safe environment?



To what extent do you feel your workload and responsibilities are reasonable?



To what extent are you satisfied with the decision making process in place for determining our salary and benefit package?



Recommendations

- Achieve a District wide P.D. program with a specified dollar amount per person
- Re-address the current Exempt compensation package, especially in light of the current labour market issues of attraction and the new A.T.A. contract
- Investigate and eliminate salary discrepancies between Exempt and Certificated staff performing the same or similar job
- Investigate and eliminate grid placement discrepancies between Exempt staff from D.U. to D.U. with the same or similar job
- Ensure the District becomes an employer of choice through recognition of valued existing employees which in turn enhances the reputation of the District and ensures the attraction of the best future employees
- Reinforce the OHS priority to achieve a safe and healthy workplace