



CANADIAN UNION OF PUBLIC
EMPLOYEES LOCAL 3550

BUDGET PRESENTATION
TO EDMONTON PUBLIC
SCHOOLS TRUSTEES

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

We 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 2008-2009 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 and part-time non-teaching workers, and well over 500 hourly non-teaching workers that are also your Support Staff at Edmonton Public Schools.

Public schools play a crucial role in our society. They are the great equalizer, where each and every student has the opportunity to receive a quality education regardless of economic and ethnic background. CUPE Local 3550 members contribute to those bright futures on each and every school day.

On any given day during the school year, at least 2000 CUPE 3550 members are on the job in this District's central office and schools. 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 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.

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 standards, whether their work is in Central Services or in our school sites.

CANADIAN UNION OF PUBLIC EMPLOYEES LOCAL 3550
BUDGET PRESENTATION
TO EDMONTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS TRUSTEES
MARCH 2008

A Historic Moment for CUPE 3550 Collective Agreement

It has been said that Alberta students, teachers and parents can “celebrate” the beginning of a new era for education now that five-year collective agreements are in place between all 62 school boards and local teachers’ bargaining units.

As you are all well aware, this new era also includes challenges in attracting and retaining qualified Support Staff, Custodial and Trades & Maintenance workers, all CUPE members at Edmonton Public Schools.

Alberta’s hot economy and continued labour shortages recently led to meetings to discuss this issue with this Board’s three CUPE Locals. Those open discussions about today’s barriers to recruitment and retention of qualified support and other non-teaching staff led to this Board’s offer of a non-teaching staff wage adjustment and an extension of all three non-teaching collective agreements to the end of 2011.

Originally the collective agreements were signed to end after three years, in August 2009. Consequent CUPE membership approvals created five-year collective agreements for all three Edmonton Public Schools CUPE staff groups.

These discussions were historical in that they were a “first” for both CUPE Local 3550 and the Board. The CUPE Local 3550 collective agreement was not opened during this time and all parties were well aware that formal negotiations could not begin until the Spring of 2009. Those discussions were challenging in many ways.

On behalf of the membership of CUPE Local 3550, I would like to sincerely thank the Board for the insight of coming forward with the offer of a current wage adjustment and annual Alberta Weekly Wage Earnings increases until September 2011.

It’s a great start in recognizing the contributions of CUPE Local 3550 members, partners in public education at Edmonton Public Schools. That said, it is important this Board also understands that many CUPE Local 3550 members did not “celebrate” when they heard about the offer.

While the majority of members present at a CUPE Local 3550 Special Meeting voted in favor of this Board’s offer, it is important that this Board understand the reasons why forty-five per cent (45%) of those members present were quite frustrated with the Board’s offer and request for that 2-year extension.

Many members were lined up at the microphones to “poke their sticks in the spokes” (so to speak) of this Board’s offer. These members were clearly looking forward to 2009 Negotiations.

CANADIAN UNION OF PUBLIC EMPLOYEES LOCAL 3550
BUDGET PRESENTATION
TO EDMONTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS TRUSTEES
MARCH 2008

Their voices and votes clearly told their union's elected Negotiating Committee and elected Executive how they felt about the CUPE Local 3550 memberships past history and experiences of doing more with less: less staff, less hours, less resources, less respect for their contributions to teaching and learning as well inadequate compensation for their work in a female dominated work sector.

Support Staff Classification Manual

In addition, members are very frustrated with the lack of progress of the Joint Classification Manual Review Committee. That's work that stopped in November of 2006. This manual is now well over 10-years old, a manual that at its inception was meant to be a living document that is kept up to date.

Support Staff work has certainly changed a lot in the past five to ten years. Classification of positions and compensation go hand-in-hand. Delays in updating this manual are of great concern to CUPE Local 3550 and it's membership.

Newly hired and long-time Support Staff are often asked to update their position description. First they refer to this outdated manual. Next, in total frustration, they contact their union for assistance. That assistance is provided.

The District's Staff Performance Review process that takes place at least every three years is tied to every CUPE 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.

The Support Staff Pay Gap

Many members are frustrated that their position classifications, full-time-equivalents and compensation depends on what their site/department budgets can afford in their budgets rather than to recognize the day-to-day complexity of Support Staff jobs and their work-load. Members are realizing that their work in a female dominated work sector is not well compensated. They are looking for solutions.

Friends and family members often ask CUPE Local 3550 members this question: What is a hardworking woman/man like you, with your skills and experience doing working there in a pay gap like this?

CANADIAN UNION OF PUBLIC EMPLOYEES LOCAL 3550
BUDGET PRESENTATION
TO EDMONTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS TRUSTEES
MARCH 2008

CUPE 3550 members, as non-teaching education workers do what is considered to be public sector “women’s work”. Newspaper ads for an order picker, which commands the same salary as Teacher Assistants, include a retention bonus of \$2500. That private sector job has nowhere the responsibility of caring for a special needs student. CUPE 3550 members are feeling like the “have-nots” within the strong Alberta economy.

While the gap between men's and women's wages did narrow from the 1970s, when women earned about two-thirds of the male dollar, the wage gap has stood at around 70% since then (70.5% for full-time, full-year work). The wage gap is somewhat smaller for unionized working women, but there is still a pay gap.

Women have done everything they were supposed to do to narrow that wage gap. Today’s women are more educated, but no matter how you look at it: “Women’s work” still earns less than “men’s work” in every sector of the economy. The Canadian Labour Congress web site <http://canadianlabour.ca> provides the up to date statistics that confirm this problem does indeed still exist.

Pay equity has become an issue as CUPE 3550 members compare their experience, education, wages, work responsibilities and ability to support their families to other workers doing work of equal or lesser value in today’s Alberta economy.

As the largest union in Canada, CUPE also has the largest research capacity of any union in Canada to provide expert analysis and advice on gender neutral Job Evaluation to its members and their employers. The goal of Job Evaluation is to achieve fair and equitable wages now and in the future. Many employers across the country have worked jointly with their CUPE staff to take advantage of this cost-free expertise in order to create pay equity in their workplaces.

The Local is requesting that the Board and CUPE Local 3550 form a joint committee to open discussions regarding pay equity and that this take place well prior to 2011 negotiations.

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 here is the children and knowing that we are making a difference in their school experiences and achievement.

CANADIAN UNION OF PUBLIC EMPLOYEES LOCAL 3550
BUDGET PRESENTATION
TO EDMONTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS TRUSTEES
MARCH 2008

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 Support Staff development, coaching and training is what keeps CUPE Local 3550 members at their very best. This Local and the District agreed to form a joint committee to explore the needs of Support Staff Training and Development.

As a result of this committee's ongoing work, more Support Staff Training and Development is taking place and there are wait lists for these opportunities. This training is driven by anticipated CUPE Local 3550 Support Staff retirements and the results of an EPS survey regarding the training needs of Support Staff.

The number of CUPE Local 3550 members that will be able to retire within the next five (5) to ten (10) years proves the importance of this work. The need for additional training to fill that alarming gap of expertise and experience is already an every day challenge.

In addition, over half of the current permanent Support Staff have worked for Edmonton Public Schools for then (10) years or less. The "hot" Alberta economy means there is a continued worker shortage and it will be difficult to staff many positions in the future.

All of this compounds the need for continued and additional financial support for Support Staff Training and Development. The Local is requesting that significant financial support be allocated to relieve this situation in 2008-2009.

The Local is also requesting that consideration be given to again host an annual District wide Professional Development Conference for Support Staff. Such conferences have been successful in the past. Unfortunately the lack of financial resources in the EPS budget process put a stop this wonderful opportunity for Support Staff to learn something new and/or upgrade skills.

Teacher Assistant Mentor

The District's continued 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.

CANADIAN UNION OF PUBLIC EMPLOYEES LOCAL 3550
BUDGET PRESENTATION
TO EDMONTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS TRUSTEES
MARCH 2008

The Local strongly believes that creating at least two Support Staff Mentors for Teacher Assistants positions that could focus primarily on the district's Teacher Assistants would be an important and valuable resource for this District. The Local again urges the administration to consider 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 not only modelling the District's best practises, but also compliment the work of 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 CUPE Local 3550 members, 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 future support staff services and resources that are priceless.

The current two positions of Support Staff Mentor for Administrative Assistants have been a huge success. The success of these positions cries for more of such support for the membership of CUPE Local 3550, especially since there is no other EPS department globally collecting feed-back or overseeing the work that Support Staff contribute to teaching and learning every day.

Technology, customized software and the inclusion and integration of a variety of special needs programming has changed the workplace for CUPE Local 3550 members at Edmonton Public Schools

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 public funding is an accepted norm for public sector workers.

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.

CANADIAN UNION OF PUBLIC EMPLOYEES LOCAL 3550
BUDGET PRESENTATION
TO EDMONTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS TRUSTEES
MARCH 2008

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”.

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 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 what they can do about it 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 but also a great loss to the District. The Local believes that raising awareness will initiate a better understanding for all District staff of what it 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

CANADIAN UNION OF PUBLIC EMPLOYEES LOCAL 3550
BUDGET PRESENTATION
TO EDMONTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS TRUSTEES
MARCH 2008

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.

Stable Funding for Support Staff Collective Agreements

Since the current CUPE Local 3550 collective agreement will now be revised to resemble teacher collective agreements, the Local is requesting that the Board lobby the provincial government to fund non-teaching staff collective agreements in the same manner as the government is newly funding teacher collective agreements.

Such progressive measures would provide relief in the budget planning process that often means a decision between allocating funding for educational programming or allocating funding for the Support Staff that are partners in teaching and learning at Edmonton Public Schools.

As you can see, the recent changes on the CUPE Local 3550 Support Staff collective agreements are indeed a great start to some much needed changes, but the work has just begun. Further discussions are needed to address these serious issues.

Public Private Partnerships (P3's)

The public pays and private industry profits, nothing has changed.

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 is moving ahead with the planning and construction of new schools financed by P3's.

CANADIAN UNION OF PUBLIC EMPLOYEES LOCAL 3550
BUDGET PRESENTATION
TO EDMONTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS TRUSTEES
MARCH 2008

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 school age children are desperate for a community school.

Across Alberta School Boards are thrilled to have new schools to meet the needs of their taxpayers. The Local finds it interesting that neither School Boards or our Minister of Education are talking about the implications of all this new classroom space on existing public schools or future community school closures.

Former Minister of Education Ron Liepert is quoted as saying the government will make sure that any partnership agreements are entered into after careful consideration, and with the best interests of students and taxpayers in mind. And yet he is also quoted as refusing to read CUPE Alberta’s study that says the province's plan to finance 18 new schools through a public-private partnership will cost up to 50 per cent more than conventional public-sector financing.

CUPE Alberta hired economic consultant Hugh Mackenzie to study the costs of using a P3 model to build and pay for these schools. The study points out that the simple economics of these projects indicate that they don't make sense and that P3 financing cannot possibly be anything other than hugely more expensive than conventional financing.

Governments always get better rates than private borrowers and in Canada; Alberta's credit rating is second only to that of the federal government.

Mackenzie’s analysis of Edmonton & Calgary school districts' capital plans show Alberta Education could build the 18 schools itself for \$202 million. Adding extra costs associated with private financing would drive the price to \$305 million.

Private enterprises also face higher overhead fees in putting complex deals together and, unlike government, private enterprises need to see returns on their investments so they can pay their shareholders.

The Local has provided every Trustee and every worksite with a copy of the study “Doing the math”. It is clear that when people do the math, for every two schools financed under this P3 model, an additional school could have been built with conventional financing.

Parents and all taxpayers should take notice of this study. The study can be viewed or downloaded from the CUPE Alberta website address http://cupe.ca/updir/cupe_alberta_doing_the_math.pdf

CANADIAN UNION OF PUBLIC EMPLOYEES LOCAL 3550
BUDGET PRESENTATION
TO EDMONTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS TRUSTEES
MARCH 2008

The Local is very concerned that this Board will participate in the plan to build Edmonton's new schools with public/private partnerships without drawing the increased costs of a P3 plan to the attention of our new Minister of Education, Dave Hancock. As the new Minister of Education, we can only hope that he will do his homework and read the CUPE Alberta report before moving forward.

The membership of CUPE Local 3550 requests that this Board meet with Minister Dave Hancock to continually raise concerns on behalf of taxpayers and the Board regarding the governments misguided P3 model to build Edmonton's new schools. Future generations will thank you for your efforts in keeping public education dollars in our public schools instead of shareholder's pockets.

Trustee Support for Public Education

The future of K-12 public education for Alberta's children depends on today's Public School Trustees. Elected Trustees that are prepared to intensely represent the interests of parents, students and community members in the governance of our schools. 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.

The membership of Local 3550 also thanks Trustees that continue to give of their time to support Interpretations Committee work. Resolving issues related to collective agreements is important work that shapes the future for all Edmonton Public Schools non-teaching staff workers and our administration. The Local encourages Trustees to request regular reports of all non-teaching staff group

CANADIAN UNION OF PUBLIC EMPLOYEES LOCAL 3550
BUDGET PRESENTATION
TO EDMONTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS TRUSTEES
MARCH 2008

Interpretations Committee issues and resolutions. This will provide an even greater understanding of collective agreement issues during 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 that the Board and administration will seriously consider CUPE Local 3550's suggestions in the development of the 2008-2009 Budget.

Trudy Grebenstein,
President, CUPE Local 3550