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On the edge: thousands of CUPE education workers share stories of living on poverty wages

TORONTO, ON – A new report from the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) offers insight into the cruel impacts of low wages on the lives of thousands of school support workers in Ontario’s public education system.

[Education Workers’ Wages in Ontario: The Impact of Ten Years of Cuts](#) is based on recent survey responses from more than 16,000 CUPE education workers, who shared the often terrible choices they must make as they try to live on what they earn as the lowest paid employees in the school system.

“This report shows unmistakably that education assistants, custodians, early childhood educators, school secretaries, and other support staff are suffering true hardship, as they try to survive on low wages that haven’t kept up with the cost of living,” said Laura Walton, president of CUPE’s Ontario School Board Council of Unions (OSBCU), which represents 55,000 CUPE education workers.

“From the survey, we know that many education workers are working two and three jobs to make ends meet. Some have to choose between buying groceries and paying bills. They can’t save money for their own or their children’s future. Many shared that they dread the thought of their car breaking down, because they know can’t afford the repairs.”

CUPE/OSBCU points to years of underfunding to Ontario’s education budget as the root cause of workers’ current situation. The problems have been made worse by a decade of below-inflation pay increases and now, rising inflation.

Walton emphasized that education workers are “the backbone of our education system. They were in school and on the job throughout the COVID pandemic. They are vital to Ontario’s public education system and yet they aren’t earning enough to live on.”

The report’s findings also help to dispel the widespread misapprehension that the pay of school support staff is on par with teachers’ salaries. Rather, education workers earn an average \$39,000 per year, with women’s wages in the sector mirroring the overall gender wage gap. In part – but only in part – this is because women are overrepresented in positions in which workers are laid off during the summer and over December and March breaks.

Among other findings in the report:

- Over the past ten years, education workers’ wages have fallen more than 11% behind inflation, which equates to more than \$4,000 in lost income for the average CUPE education worker in 2021.
- By suppressing wages through legislation like Bill 115 and Bill 124 and a decade of below-inflation increases, the provincial government has saved \$1.3 billion from CUPE education workers wages.
- Education workers’ wages have, on average, gone up less than the average settlements for all other unionized workers in Ontario from 2012-2021.

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