

Wage



ALBERTA EDUCATION  
EMPLOYEES COMMITTEE  
CUPE

## SURVEY WORKPLACE EXPERIENCE REPORT – MEMBER AND PUBLIC

If I ever left my student support job it would be because of pay reasons. It just simply isn't possible to live on the income without having a second job to supplement my financial obligations. Many of us are exhausted. Student needs are increasing and not enough staff. (Member Voice, 2022)

### WAGE AND WORKPLACE EXPERIENCE

CUPE Members working in the K-12 Education sector in Alberta were invited to share their experiences with health and safety, violence in the workplace and employer policies around safety. Almost 1800 members responded from 30 school divisions and 33 CUPE locals.

Sixty-three percent of workers who completed the survey work as education assistants or provide direct student supports. The other third of members work in administrative, custodial, facility maintenance, student transportation and other school division support classifications. Most members identified that they work full-time according to their collective agreement and the majority work a 10-month year.

Eighty-three percent of respondents to the survey identify as women and more than 70% are between the ages of 40 and 60.

Frontline workers and support staff in schools are often on the front line of hiring freezes and lay-offs. During the Covid-19 pandemic shutdowns, this was apparent, and the sector has not regained all the lost positions. Further exacerbating the situation are the low wages, short working hours and working year making recruitment difficult for school district employers.

### WAGE

*Static wages do not even begin to cover the continuous increases in the cost of living. It's nearly impossible to raise and care for children on this salary. Not everyone can do this job. It is work of heart. (Member Voice, 2022)*

We asked members to open their private financial lives to us to help us combat the narrative from school divisions and the government that school support staff workers are mostly moms making a bit of extra money while their kids are at school. We have long known that school-support workers' wages are family-supporting wages.

About half of the members who responded to the survey are either the sole or equal income earners in their household.

Although many members lost paid time and were laid off periodically during the first year and a half of the Covid-19 pandemic about 20% of workers have experienced lay-offs or reductions in hours since then.

Members are almost unanimous on one subject. Their wages are not keeping pace with inflation. Even with pre-pandemic levels of inflation – education workers' wages were falling behind. It is unsurprising that members are particularly feeling the pinch as inflation rates reach 40-year highs.

Just slightly more than half of the members who responded to the survey are either already working or looking for additional employment to supplement their school division/board earnings. **Twenty-nine percent have a second job somewhere else and 4% are working three or more jobs.**

When asked why members are working a second (or third) job, 89% of members indicate that they need the income to meet their basic living expenses. Members, in their own voice, indicate that their reason for working a second or third job is:

- Almost my entire paycheck goes to paying my mortgage. Between my wife and I we work five jobs to pay the bills
- I need the change of focus and something I can do at my own pace.
- Money for daily living needs and experience
- Family business
- Farmer
- At less than \$30,000 per year it is impossible not to work another job even in a two-income household.
- I am working a second job because of the increased cost of living and the lack of increase in pay
- To survive living costs, as well as helping support my handicapped child.

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Members were asked to identify social and economic indicators common among low-wage workers. Our members are experiencing some very significant issues as a result of working for wages that have been repressed by fake austerity mandates for a decade.

Members were able to select as many of the following issues as applied to them. Six percent of the survey respondents did not select any of the choices as applying to them.

Because of my income, I have...

- Felt stress or anxiety about being able to afford everything I need 66%
- Cut back entertainment and/or hobbies 64%
- Worried that an unexpected event would cause economic hardship for me/my family 61%
- Cancelled vacation plans or avoided planning vacations 57%
- Used money from savings to meet monthly needs 56%
- Took an extra job (or jobs) 34%
- Been late in making bill payments 33%
- Been unable to afford new essentials (e.g., cell phone, highspeed internet, data plans, etc.) 31%
- Had to borrow money from family and/or friends 27%
- Suffered from poor health 16%
- Faced housing insecurity or worried about where I would live 15%
- Been unable to pay for health or dental treatments/prescriptions 15%
- None of the other answers provided are applicable to my situation 8%
- Used a food bank or other charity to get by 6%
- Used payday loans 5%
- Other 4%

Some members provided detailed comments about their experiences as a low-wage earners, some of their comments include:

- Been forced to scale back on purchases that create a more comfortable living and add value family life such as: afterschool activities, recreation, adding to savings for child with disabilities, etc.
- I can't afford any travel or hobby for my kids. Have hard time to buy grocery sometimes
- Cannot afford to buy a home. Been turned down multiple times because of my pay.
- Minimal retirement savings
- I have been unable to afford a car to drive work and forth to work, I also worry about giving my child the opportunity to go into sports or afford daycare
- Used credit cards more frequently / Using more credit that I can afford
- Been concerned about meeting the basic needs of my children. Been unable to pay school fees for my children. Have been unable to provide help to my children as they seek post-secondary education
- Been unable to afford health benefits as they are not free for part-time workers in my division
- Have to choose between paying bills each month OR buying some groceries... not enough money in my monthly pay cheque to be allowed to do both...sad situation that your job does not pay enough to survive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century
- I felt neglected, overlooked and treated like I am just a tool that is not worth maintaining
- My kids have gone without clothing and essentials needed
- Relied on family inheritance to cover household expenses
- Felt an increase of hopelessness and depression...
- Had to cut back on healthier food options

- Worried about losing my house
- Filing bankruptcy
- Unable to retire

## WORKING CONDITIONS

With the lack of money to pay for Educational Assistants, we find ourselves overworked to the point that student safety is a concern. Between not having enough staff to cover when people are away and not enough staff at school to look after students' complex or behavioural needs, we are in danger of incidents that could very well be avoided. Educational Assistants are certainly doing their jobs for the love of children and not for the money and it's because of this that we are bending over backwards to keep students safe and to get the job done every day no matter what.

We asked members a series of questions about workload and employer policies to help understand what members are facing at work. Almost all members feel like having more workers in their job classification would improve student outcomes and make their own workload more manageable. Similarly, most members (62%), feel that employer policies have increased their workload.

Almost half of the members (46%) have faced health problems because of overwork and stress but have not taken time off, and a further 14% have taken time off. Thirty-seven percent have not had issues of overwork impact their health.

Almost all members who responded to the survey (76%) regularly or sometimes do unpaid work for their employer on a usual workday. When asked a different way 22% say they always protect their personal time from exploitation by their employer. Fifty-five percent of members take their breaks every day.

Slightly less than half of members (43%) feel pressured regularly or sometimes to do unpaid work for the school division. We asked members why they felt pressured to work unpaid time and mostly they felt like they needed to complete tasks they didn't have time to do during their paid hours. Our members are very proud of the work they do and keep very high standards this is reflected in the willingness of more than half of them to work unpaid time to ensure the highest quality of work for their school community. Member responses:

• Not enough paid time to do the job properly	71%
• Pride in the school/pride in the services I provide	62%
• Requests from supervisors or principals	38%
• Student safety	38%
• Requests from teachers	36%
• Requests from coworkers	26%
• Requests from students	21%
• Co-worker safety	16%
• School board policies	12%
• Requests from parents	12%
• Other	7%

Pressure from management to serve on volunteer committees to facilitate school pride and community .ie social clubs, basketball clubs. They all meet after school hours. (Member Voice, 2022)

We are short-staffed. Not enough hours in a day to get my work done. (Member Voice, 2022)

Sometimes situations arise during the day that need to be dealt with at the end, buses are late or parents late picking up. (Member Voice, 2022)

We asked members how often they are asked to do work that is not part of their usual job description. Thankfully, 38% of members are not being asked to perform work outside their usual duties however that means most members are, at least periodically, being asked to do more in their usual work hours. For 10% of our members, this is a daily occurrence.

Most members (67%) believe that having more paid working hours in their day would reduce the number of unpaid hours they are contributing to their employer. A further 50% believe that having additional staff in other job

classifications would reduce their workload and their unpaid hours of work.

We asked members if they were able to access time off to attend cultural or religious obligations that do not fall on already covered statutory or regular holidays. This was not an issue for most of the members who responded to the survey however it was an issue for a small number (4%).

Fairly universally, most members (78%) who work as school support staff have seen an increase in workload since they started their employment.

Members who responded that their workload has increased were asked a follow-up question to help identify where growing workload pressures are coming from. For most members, increasing numbers of students, increasing number of students with complex needs and staffing cuts are the most identified pressure points. Members shared many reasons why their workload is increasing, these are a few:

- Enhanced cleaning practices, daily cleaning, increased paperwork
- Increase in the number of students
- More facilities than when I started with the district and the less staff
- Less paid time means an increased workload (organizational days, professional development time eliminated)
- Underfunding of special needs students. Students in school with severe medical needs
- Lack of sub or casual to support when someone gets sick
- I volunteer for the breakfast program. More students come to school hungry
- Budget cuts
- I've worked when sick because we have a shortage of substitute EAs

We have been hearing from members that the situation with workload and income has become unbearable and that they feel the only solution is to change to a different type of employment. We asked members who responded to the survey if they were considering a career change and 44% responded that they were looking for something different. Members who are considering a career change were asked about the type of change they are looking for. Sixty-nine percent of members looking for a change are looking to leave school support work altogether. Members shared their reasons for leaving school support work, these are some of their reasons in their own voice.

- Career change
- Another job working with neurodivergent kids
- Looking for a better paying job
- Going to a trade to make more money. Leaving my passion of kids for financial reasons. It's not sustainable
- Something with more hours
- Leaving or another district. Can't afford to work for less than \$2000 a month

At the end of this section we gave members the opportunity to write in anything else they wanted us to know about their workplace experiences as K-12 support staff workers. Overall members' comments centered around themes of:

- Low wages and the stress that causes
- Staffing shortages
- Increasing numbers of students overall and the increasing number of students with more complex needs
- Training that is relevant and paid for
- Access to breaks
- Access to hours that allow for the work to be completed properly
- Protections from violence, better management of interpersonal conflict (teacher to support staff, support staff to support staff)
- Access to paid leaves for sickness, family, personal, domestic violence