

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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## **As layoff notices are issued and training cancelled, educational assistants fear September turmoil for TVDSB students**

**LONDON, ON** – Even though there will be more children with autism enrolled in Thames Valley schools in September, layoff notices went out this month to educational assistants (EAs), the very workers who provide support for students with a wide range of special needs. And EAs who want to become certified in Autism Behaviour Analysis (ABA) are having to cancel their training because there isn't enough coverage for them in the classroom.

The union that represents educational and instructional assistants at Thames Valley District School Board (TVDSB) warns that students' education and well-being will suffer as a result of the loss of 35 educational assistant positions and the lack of trained staff to work with children with autism. It also predicts that the problems will only intensify when the effects of the government's changes to the Ontario Autism Program (OAP) hit schools next year.

"There will be fewer educational assistants in September, just as more children with autism come into the system," said Monique Greczula, an EA with TVDSB and president of Local 7575 of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE). "And EAs are being told that they can't be spared to take ABA training. The combination will have a direct and negative impact on students in our schools."

CUPE places blame for the layoffs squarely on the \$300-odd million in cuts to education grants, which were announced by the Ford government on March 15, as well as on changes to the OAP.

TVDSB superintendents told union representatives in March that the board was expecting more than 500 students with autism to enrol in Thames Valley schools because of cuts to the OAP. Even last week's announcement of a temporary rollback to program cuts – a partial backtrack by the Ford government – is not expected to make a significant difference in the number of children enrolled.

"Some children with autism have already returned full time to the school program; some who attended part time are coming full time. And we expect even more enrolments in January, because that's the end of the six-month funding extension for the Ontario Autism Program," Greczula explained. "Layoffs among EAs and a shortage of specially trained workers will only add to the stress on the system that this increased demand will bring."

CUPE's Ontario School Board Council of Unions (OSBCU) points out that EA jobs are short-staffed in almost every school across the province and that there are dangers that come with these shortages, especially when they're among those who are trained to work with children with autism.

"There are never enough EAs to support the children who need them, even when there is an overwhelming demand for these workers and their skills. These shortages put everyone in the school at risk," said Laura Walton, OSBCU president.

"The Ford government has made a bad situation worse. As education workers, we will spend the next months working with parents, teachers, and allies to raise awareness of this disaster waiting to happen. And we can take as our example the parents and families of children with autism who fought back on behalf of their children, because we will also be fighting on behalf of the children in our schools," Walton concluded.