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Canadian Union of Public Employees - Ontario School Boards Council of Unions (CUPE-OSBCU) Bargaining Platform for 2026

There is a crisis in Ontario schools. It's a crisis of underfunding, understaffing, rising violence in schools, and overworked staff feeling burnout. Students are going without the supports they need because there are too few education workers in every job classification. It's a crisis of underpaid workers with too little job security and an underfunded inadequate health benefits plan. In response to this crisis CUPE-OSBCU education workers are fighting for better schools and better jobs.

At the 2025 CUPE-OSBCU bargaining conference, leaders from across the province met to debate and vote on bargaining priorities to address the crisis head-on. CUPE-OSBCU's bargaining goals are to:

- Reverse the trend of underfunding of the education system.
- Increase staffing and supports for students
- Lower workloads and reduce violence in the workplace by increasing the number of staff in schools.
- Improve job security, so school boards won't have as much power to cut jobs that are desperately needed.
- Restore the health benefits that have been cut from plan and make improvements to benefits, so that education workers have the supports they need at work.

It will take power to win. The Doug Ford Conservative government has demonstrated repeatedly that they want to continue to underfund schools. They have used legislation in the last two rounds of central negotiations to undermine the ability of education workers to win more. They think the status quo is working for them – even though education workers know that the status quo does not work for students, parents and workers.

Winning will take the power of workers and parents together fighting for better schools and a better tomorrow. Education workers have done it before. In 2022 education workers defeated legislation that imposed a concessionary collective agreement on CUPE-OSBCU. In 2019 education workers negotiated for $78 million in additional funding to create education worker jobs – which was the last time there was a noticeable improvement in student-to-staff ratios. Building more power in 2026 with other education sector unions, parents, and communities will be necessary to win more, and win what education workers, students and parents deserve.

Index

Wages 3

Workload and Staffing 4

Job Security 5

Benefits 5

Violence in the Workplace 6

Hours of Work 6

Paid Vacation 7

Sick Notes 7

No Concessions 7

Payment of Police Record Check Costs 8

Payment of Professional Fees 8

Paid Personal Leave Days 8

Domestic or Sexual Violence Leave 8

Bargaining Priorities

Wages

The affordability crisis for all workers, including education workers, continues. Nobody should have to work two or more jobs to make ends meet. It is far too common that education workers work multiple jobs and struggle to cover rising costs of necessities. CUPE-OSBCU is committed to fighting for wage increases that are above inflation for all members.

i. Hybrid wage proposal – a combination of a flat increase or a percentage increase, whichever is better for a member

The CUPE-OSBCU wage proposal is a hybrid of a flat and percent increases, where workers either get a flat wage increase (the same dollar amount applied to all jobs) or a percent increase, whichever is better for that worker.

Flat increases (where everyone gets the same dollars-per-hour increase) are a way to make sure the lowest wage workers have an increase above inflation. Flat increases also make sure that there is not an increase in the gap between the lowest and highest wage earners. However, when there is already a very large gap between the lowest and highest wage rates, it is also necessary to have a mechanism that makes sure that members at the top end get a wage increase that is above inflation. A hybrid model (where a member gets a flat increase or a percent increase, whichever is better for them) is a way to raise wages for lowest paid workers and still make sure higher waged workers don't fall behind the cost of living.

ii. Eliminate steps in all wage grids – top rate in existing collective agreements should be the rate paid to all members

Equal pay for work of equal value is an important principle. People should be paid the same for doing the same job. Wage grids unnecessarily delay people from getting paid what the wage rate that is associated with the job, hurting their overall lifetime earning. This is not fair when employers expect everyone to do the full job, not just part of it.

This is also a gender pay equity issue. Job classifications in which men are overrepresented are more likely to have no grid, just a job rate (or a very short period from the probationary rate to the full job wage rate). Classifications in which women are overrepresented (and women make up over 70% of education workers) are more likely to have wage grids – sometimes taking 4 or 5 years to get to the full wage.

iii. Casual and temporary employees should be paid at the same rate as permanent employees

Like eliminating steps in all wage grids, this proposal is about paying workers the same for doing the same job. It is also a way to help school boards with their recruitment and retention problems, Right now, many boards struggle with having an adequate number of employees on their casual lists. The gap between casual and permanent employees' wages is often several dollars per hour.

iv. Improvements to the ability to get special wage adjustments for job classifications that are paid lower than in the local labour market

Because of many years of forced wage restraint (going back to 2012), education workers' wages are often well below what comparable jobs in local labour markets pay. CUPE-OSBCU is proposing a mechanism to make it easier for CUPE locals and school boards to make wage adjustments to address recruitment and retention problems at boards.

v. Increases to all premiums and allowances

This includes things like shift premiums, allowances for work boots, uniforms, and tools responsibility allowances, amongst a variety of other items.

vi. Cost of Living Allowance

A cost-of-living allowance (COLA) helps protect against unpredictable increases in inflation that make it more difficult to afford all of life's necessities.

Workload and Staffing

There is an understaffing crisis in Ontario schools. Funding to create more staff positions is necessary to relieve problems of overwork, workplace stress, and burnout of education workers. Independent research also shows that increasing staffing levels is a necessary part of a comprehensive strategy to reduce violence in schools.

Students' needs are going unmet because there are not enough staff in schools. Students who need one-on-one supports from Educational Assistants (EAs) do not always have that level of support. There is a growing number of kindergarten classes without a Designated Early Childhood Educator (DECE) assigned. Schools across the province have areas that are not cleaned on a daily basis because there are too few custodians. School secretaries and office staff are stretched so thin, and pushed so hard, they cannot get all of their work done in a day.

Education workers in every classification add to students' experience in schools, providing direct and indirect supports that make education possible. We need more trades workers, library workers/library technicians, professional staff, Child and Youth Workers (CYW), EAs, DECEs, custodians, school secretaries, staff at board offices – staff in every job, doing

every kind of work at school boards. All education workers make schools work for students, parents and communities. There are too few education workers. A top priority of CUPE-OSBCU is to win better staffing levels at schools across the province.

i. Increase funding to increase the number of education worker positions at all boards across the province
ii. Ensure all newly created jobs are covered by the job security language
iii. Designated Early Childhood Educator in every classroom with a kindergarten student
iv. Smaller kindergarten class sizes with a hard cap of 26 students per class
v. All kindergarten classes should have a minimum of one Educational Assistant assigned

Job Security

The understaffing crisis in Ontario schools is made worse by the fact that school boards have far too much flexibility to eliminate jobs/staff even when students' needs go unmet as a result.

Improving job security by requiring minimum staffing levels and creating stronger restrictions on school boards' ability to cut jobs, will help ensure that supports for students cannot be reduced. It also means workers feel more confident that their investment of time and care into schools will come with a corresponding commitment to their continued employment.

i. Improve language in the collective agreement to make it more difficult for school boards to cut jobs.
ii. Additional job security protections, including protection against job loss due to technological change.
iii. Expand the definition and use of casual/temporary seniority

Benefits

The government has been deliberately underfunding workers' health and dental benefit plans for years. Education workers rely on their benefits plan to stay healthy and improve their quality of life. The government must live up to its responsibility to properly fund the benefits plan so it can be sustainable into the future and restore all benefits that have been cut over the past years.

i. Increase funding to the plan so that it will be sustainable, all benefits that were cut will be brought back, and additional improvements will be made to the plan
ii. Funding for the CUPE-OSBCU benefit plan should not be less than funding for other benefits plans in the sector

iii. Members that do not currently have a Long-Term Disability plan will have access to one
iv. Reduce member costs for Long-Term Disability plans where members pay for the LTD benefit.

Violence in the Workplace

Violence in schools is a serious problem that affects all education workers and students (either directly or indirectly). Workers are reporting increasing violence in schools, a fact that is being substantiated by independent research. In no small part this is a result of the understaffing crisis and students not receiving the supports they need. Addressing violence in schools will take a lot of measures to successfully make schools safer – measures in both central and local negotiations.

One of the most effective ways to address violence is to have more caring adults in schools – more education workers who can provide the supports students need and can proactively address situations before they escalate. Additional strategies can include training supervisory personnel on their obligations to maintain safe and violence free workplaces, improved direction from the Ministry of Education, creating more effective reporting practices and stronger language in local collective agreements.

i. Mandate the Provincial Working Group on Health & Safety to develop strategies to reduce violence in the workplace
ii. Mandatory professional development training that will meaningfully reduce violence
iii. Mandatory training for all supervisory personnel about their obligations and procedures related to reducing and preventing workplace violence

Hours of Work

Currently there are no standardized hours of work for education worker positions. Workers at some boards are denied paid hours of work, leading to reduced incomes. Students are denied hours of supports each month, supports that could help them meet their education and personal needs.

Compounding this, many education workers are denied paid preparation time, even though prep time is an essential part of their job. Like airline workers, CUPE-OSBCU education workers believe that unpaid work is unacceptable and are proposing that all prep time that is required for the job be paid.

i. Minimum of 35 hours per week for all full-time Educational Assistants, Child and Youth Workers, Designated Early Childhood Educators, School Secretaries, Library Workers and other classifications

ii. Minimum of 40 hours per week for all full-time custodial, maintenance and trades staff.
iii. Any member who is working less than 1.0 full-time equivalent job should have their hours of work adjusted based on the new definition of a full-time equivalent job.
iv. Paid prep time for all classifications that require it.

Paid Vacation

Vacation entitlements vary from board to board – and sometimes workers at the same board do not have the same vacation entitlement. Some workers have had their vacation frozen at the Employment Standards Act (ESA) minimum for years. All workers deserve paid vacation leave. As a matter of fairness workers in the same education system should have equal access to paid vacation. Setting a higher minimum floor is the first step toward equality.

i. Establish a minimum standard for vacation above the Employment Standards Act minimum

Sick Notes

Currently, some boards pay for medical documentation that they demand from members, while others do not. Medical documentation is expensive, and often unnecessary. The Ontario Medical Association states that "doctor's notes are not an appropriate use of primary care resources." School boards should not be allowed to force any member to go out of pocket for any note required to access sick leave, short-term disability, or workplace accommodations. Excessive demands for medical notes put an unnecessary burden on the health care system. No worker should be forced to go out of pocket to produce a note their employers demand.

i. School boards should pay for the full cost of all medical notes, medical certificates, and visits requested from members.

No Concessions

CUPE has a policy on collective bargaining that prevents local unions and bargaining councils from accepting concessions – changes that reduce or remove existing collective agreement rights. But in each round of negotiations, school boards and the government try to take things away from education workers – including sick leave, benefits, job security. CUPE-OSBCU will reject concessionary demands. Education workers are intent on negotiating improvements to working and learning conditions while preserving all existing rights in collective agreements.

i. In keeping with the CUPE National Executive Board policy on collective bargaining, no concessions on sick leave, or any other centrally negotiated terms.
ii. All Letters of Understanding in the central terms will be renewed and updated.

Payment of Police Record Check Costs

The government recently changed the regulations regarding police record checks, requiring more frequent and more detailed checks. In most instances, the cost of these additional checks is currently being borne by education workers. The cost of these record checks varies across the province and can be substantial – a new cost that should not come at the expense of some of the lowest paid employees in school boards. CUPE-OSBCU is proposing that school boards cover the cost of all police record checks.

Payment of Professional Fees

Many education workers are required to pay professional fees, including licencing and membership in a professional or trades college, in order to maintain their jobs. Those fees can be extremely expensive. Since these are a necessary cost for employment in school boards, CUPE-OSBCU is proposing that employers pay the cost of these fees.

Paid Personal Leave Days

CUPE members at many school boards have access to paid personal leave days. However, not all members have access to this leave, which can be used to attend to personal matters that are not related to sick leave or other leaves of absence. As a matter of fairness, CUPE-OSBCU is proposing that members of all CUPE school board locals have access to paid personal leave days.

Domestic or Sexual Violence Leave

As a society, we have failed to eradicate the scourge of violence against women, including domestic and sexual violence. Domestic and sexual violence leave is already covered by the Employment Standards Act because governments have recognized that women need economic protection. We do not believe that the protections in the ESA go far enough. CUPE-OSBCU is proposing enhancements to domestic and sexual violence leave – and support extending those enhancements to everyone through improvements to protections in the ESA.

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