UNDERSTAFFING OF EDUCATION WORKERS IN ONTARIO SCHOOLS

The Case for Dedicated Investments for More Staff to Support Students



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OSBCU CSCSO

CUPE·SCFP

Note: This is a summary of the longer report on understaffing in Ontario schools. It presents the main conclusions of the report. Footnotes are not included in this short version. Please see the full report for all references and footnotes, as well as for more fulsome explanations of how conclusions were reached.

INTRODUCTION

There is a staffing crisis in Ontario schools, the evidence for which is accumulating constantly. When collected together, surveys of education workers, reports from a variety of organizations and academics, and data released by the Government of Ontario show a very clear picture: there are not enough education workers in schools and students are not receiving the supports they need to reach their potential and succeed.

Despite government claims of "historic investments" in education, all 72 school boards in Ontario were affected by worsening student-to-staff ratios for education worker classifications in the 2025-26 school year compared to 2018-19, the year the Progressive Conservative government took office. Sixty of these boards have a worse staffing ratio for 4 or more education worker classifications, and 12 have worse ratios for 10 or more education worker classifications. That means fewer staff per student, students going without the supports they need, and increasing workloads for staff across the entire system.

In 2025 CUPE-OSBCU released a series of reports on the understaffing crisis in Ontario school boards, based on a survey of over 12,000 CUPE education workers from across the province. In that survey, 92.3% of respondents said that more staff are needed in schools to improve supports for students.[1] Education workers reported increased workloads and unmet needs in schools because there are not enough staff to do the work.

This report expands on the results of the 2025 survey to provide additional evidence of the need for more staff in schools across the province. Students' needs are going unmet in the Ontario education system. A necessary step towards meeting student needs, prioritizing student achievement and ensuring schools have the resources they need is to fund schools sufficiently to hire more education workers. CUPE-OSBCU has developed proposals aimed at negotiating such improvements to help meet student needs. Increased staffing is a centrepiece of the CUPE-OSBCU bargaining proposals in the 2026 round of central negotiations with the provincial government and school boards.

OVERVIEW OF SOURCES

This report compiles data from a number of government sources, including school board financial documents (which include data on full-time equivalent permanent staff and enrolment numbers), student enrolment in special education programs, and elementary class size. This summary report presents the main conclusions of the longer report on understaffing in Ontario schools. For the full analysis and references to supporting documentation, please see the full report.

EDUCATIONAL ASSISTANTS

Educational Assistants (EAs) provide crucial supports to students in a variety of ways, most notably (although not exclusively) for students enrolled in special education. There is nearly unanimous consensus that students' special educational needs are not being met and that understaffing of EAs is a fundamental reason. In fact, there is broad recognition that funding for special education is not enough to properly fund all the supports that are needed.

- 72.7% of EAs support five or more students in a normal week. That is up from 60% in a similar survey in 2018. Only 3% of EAs provide one-on-one support to students, down from 7.4% in the 2018 survey.
- Fewer students have one-on-one support, even though student needs, and complexity of needs are increasing. 87.8% said there are students who they work with who need the one-on-one support but do not have it
- 95% said there are students at the school(s) at which they work who need the support of an EA, but who do not currently have that support.
- Principals report daily shortages of EAs

- Province-wide, formal enrolment in special education is up by 2% from 2017-18 to 2024-25, including a 51% increase of students with autism, 34% increase in students whose exceptionality is coded as "behaviour", and a 27% increase in students with multiple exceptionalities, providing evidence of increasing student need and increasing complexity of needs.
- Despite a near unanimous recognition of increased student need, fewer elementary students were formally enrolled in special education in 2024-25 than in 2018-19. Declining elementary student enrolment in special education is linked to long wait times to get assessments, insufficient numbers of staff to properly assess student needs, and insufficient numbers of staff to provide supports after assessments have been made.
- In the absence of assessments, students go without the specific supports they need, and can go without any special education supports at all.

- Up to one-third of students with special educational needs are excluded from school for part, or all, of the school week.
- The Ontario Principals' Council reports that exclusions from school due to lack of staff is on the rise.
- Community Living Ontario reports "As it stands, students with disabilities do not have access to the level of staffing and other support they need to succeed.
- There is a growing body of evidence identifying an increase in violence in schools. The single most important cause of violence is too few staff in schools to support student needs – that is, to prevent the conditions in which violent incidents can occur.
- The evidence shows that the causes of increasing violence are systematic, not individual. Understaffing in schools, leading to unmet student needs, creates the conditions for violence.

Lack of staffing, notably in this case of Educational Assistants, is excluding students with disabilities, denying them the right to full participation in school. Student success is being undermined by a systemic failure to hire enough EAs at schools to provide adequate supports for students.

DESIGNATED EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS

Designated Early Childhood Educators (DECE) are a vital part of the two-educator model of full-day kindergarten. DECEs are specialists in early childhood development and play-based learning, recognized as a leading practice in early learning. When developing Ontario's full-day kindergarten program Charles Pascal (special advisor to the Premier on early learning) recommended that full-day kindergarten classes include both a kindergarten teacher and a DECE. This two-educator team brings together different skill sets and expertise to create the best environment for students enrolled in full-day kindergarten.

- The two-educator model of full-day kindergarten, which has been proven to be highly successful when implemented properly, is being eroded.
- The number of classes without a DECE is increasing, from 1168 classes in 2018-19 (10.8% of all classes with kindergarten students) to 1559 classes (14.7% of all classes) in 2025-26.
- The number of kindergarten students in a class without a DECE increased from 13,983 in 2018-19 to 19,240 kindergarten students in 2025-26.
- The total number of kindergarten split classes (that is, classes with both kindergarten students and students from higher grades) has increased from 436 (4.0% of classes with kindergarten students in 2018-19 to 567 split classes (5.4% of all classes with kindergarten students) in 2025-26.

- In 2025-26 there were 642 Full-Time Equivalent fewer Designated Early Childhood Educators in Ontario schools than there were in 2018-19, the first year of the Ford Conservative government.
- Even though there was a reduction in the total number of kindergarten students enrolled in Ontario schools, over that same period of time, the average kindergarten student-to-DECE ratio increased. That is, the reduction in DECEs was not just because of declining kindergarten enrolment.
- 39 school boards had a reduction in Designated Early Childhood Educators
- 48 school boards have worse staffing ratios for Designated Early Childhood Educators

CUSTODIANS AND CARETAKERS

Custodians and caretakers are vital to school health and safety. Their work includes keeping schools clean, necessary to controlling the spread of germs. They also play a role in student safety. Like all other job classifications, however, custodians and caretakers are being pushed beyond their limits.

- 70% of custodian respondents say they are sometimes unable to complete all of their daily duties because there is too much work and not enough staff.
- 41% of custodians also said there are parts of their school that are not cleaned on a daily basis.
- Custodians report that understaffing means that classrooms and common areas are often spot washed only when visibly dirty, garbage is emptied less frequently, gymnasiums are not swept or mopped daily or as thoroughly, and high touch surfaces are not disinfected as frequently as needed. Schools are less clean because of reductions in custodial staffing.

- Province-wide, the student-to-custodian ratio was worse in 2025-26 than it was in 2018-19.
- 30 school boards saw a reduction in Custodians
- 42 school boards have worse staffing ratios for Custodians
- Elimination of temporary COVID-related funding led to the elimination of 391 Full-Time Equivalent custodial positions. At those boards that have seen an increase in custodial positions, the increase can be entirely attributed to the fact that CUPE-OSBCU and other unions successfully negotiated for increased funding for more staff in the 2019 round f central negotiations.

SCHOOL OFFICE STAFF (SECRETARIAL/CLERICAL)

Staffing shortages hit school offices in ways that are not always publicly reported. Understaffing of school office staff adversely affects entire school communities. School offices are the nerve centre of schools, providing supports to students, parents, other staff, and school principals. Put simply, schools cannot function without the work of office staff, including secretarial and clerical staff.

- 27 school boards (37.5% of boards) had fewer school office staff in 2025-26 than in 2018-19.
- Even more alarming, 45 boards (62.5% of boards) had worse student-to-office staff ratios in 2025-26.
- Province-wide, the ratio of students to school office staff was higher in 2025-26 than it was at the beginning of this government's time in office.
- Looking at the ratio of all school staff to school office staff we can see that, for the province as a whole, there has been a worsening of the ratio of total-school-staff to school office staff. Furthermore, total-school-staff to school-office-staff ratios have worsened at 49 of 72 school boards (68.1% of boards).

- Staff ratios only tell part of the story. Workload expands for a number of reasons. For example, 77% of school office staff surveyed said that additional duties have been downloaded to them by school board administration, including principals.
- Almost 97% of school office staff surveyed also said that they regularly have to address distractions from their work due to things like taking phone calls from parents, students needing assistance at the office, answering the door/buzzer at school entrances, and receiving deliveries.
- People for Education has reported that 18% of elementary and 28% of secondary schools face shortages in office staff, either daily or weekly.
- All of this helps explain why 95% of school office staff say they cannot get all of their assigned duties done in a day because there's too much work and not enough staff.

School office staff, including school secretaries and other clerical positions, have more and more work downloaded on them. The number of students and other staff that they support keeps increasing relative to the number of office staff in schools. Workloads are increasing beyond the limits of the workday.

TRADES/MAINTENANCE

spend years developing their skills, developing expertise in their fields to keep buildings well maintained. This Conservative government has tried to make itself out to be a friend of skilled tradespersons, promoting jobs in the trades and encouraging students to pursue careers in the trades.

- 99.6 full-time equivalent jobs in the trades were cut from Ontario school boards between 2018-19 and 2025-26.
- This has resulted in 29 school boards employing fewer tradespersons in 2025-26 than they did when the Ford government took office.
- Over 82% of tradespersons surveyed said that work they do has been contracted out by school boards, and over 92% said that work done by tradespersons in a classification other than their own has been contracted out.
- What is also troubling is that over 87% of survey respondents said they sometimes have to fix problems left by external contractors.
- 91% of tradespersons surveyed said that work orders are sometimes delayed or go undone because there are too few staff and too much work to get to everything in a reasonable time.

Trades jobs should provide permanent, full-time employment, with stable hours, pension and benefits. Cutting trades jobs from school boards and leaving work to be contracted out or undone, shows a lack of real commitment to trades jobs. It also demonstrates a disregard for the care and maintenance of schools.

PROFESSIONAL STAFF

Professional staff provide a variety of supports to students at Ontario school boards, including assessing students for special educational supports, directly providing those supports, supporting students' mental health, and a wide variety of other supports necessary for student success. Positions include psychologists and other psychological professionals, speech and language specialists, child and youth workers (CYW), social workers, attendance counsellors, and other classifications.

54 of Ontario's 72 school boards (75%) saw a cut in the number of full-time equivalent positions for at least one professional classification from 2018-19 to 2025-26. Over this period, there were cuts to permanent staff in each professional classification:

- 23 of 61 boards (37.7%) with psychological professionals cut permanent staff
- 12 of 39 boards (30.8%) with child and youth workers cut permanent staff
- 20 of 67 boards (29.9%) with speech and language professionals cut permanent staff
- 30 of 66 boards (45.5%) with staff categorized as "other professional and paraprofessional" cut permanent staff

At 62 school boards there was a worsening student-to-staff ratio for at least one professional classification, including:

- 39 of 61 boards (63.9%) with psychological professionals had worse staffing ratios
- 30 of 67 boards (44.8%) with speech and language professionals had worse staffing ratios
- 17 of 49 (34.7%) boards with attendance counselling staff had worse staffing ratios
- 29 of 66 boards (43.9%) with staff categorized as "other professional and paraprofessional" had worse staffing ratios

Even though there is widespread recognition that student needs are increasing, there are long wait lists for assessments, and even the provincial government has recognized the need to address student mental health, supports for students are being cut.

LIBRARY TECHNICIANS AND INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY STAFF

- Province-wide, there were fewer full-time equivalent permanent library technicians in 2025-26 than in 2018-19.
- Over that same period of time, 29 school boards reduced the number of library technicians they employ, and student-to-library technicians worsened at 38 school boards across the province.

- Despite the increased need, 22 school boards have actually cut the number of full-time equivalent permanent Information Technology jobs.
- When looking at student-to-IT staff ratios, 34 school boards (47.2%) had worse ratios in 2025-26 than they did in 2018-19.
- 77.9% of IT staff reported having increased workloads over the past five years.
- 59.6% of IT staff indicated that demands on their time are so great that they find it difficult or impossible to get all of their assigned duties done within a reasonable time.

CONCLUSION

There has been a long-term trend of education funding not keeping up with inflation and enrolment growth, going back to the 2012-13 school year under the previous Liberal government. That trend has continued under the current Conservative government. Accumulated shortfalls in funding have led to an understaffing crisis across the province.

Insufficiency of funding has also been reported for specific allocations within the pool of funding provided to school boards. For example, the Auditor General reported that "the majority of boards collectively spent hundreds of millions of dollars more (on special education) than they received from the government" in special education funding. The Ontario Public School Boards' Association (OPSBA, the representative body for trustees in English public boards) states that all of their member boards regularly have to spend more on special education than they receive for it from the government.

Clearly there is a need for more special education funding. Even though school boards take money from other funding allocations to spend on special education, the data provided in this report demonstrate that this still is not enough. When boards take funding away from other allocations (like for school office staff, or custodial and maintenance work), that just exacerbates the understaffing and underfunding crises in other parts of the board. In this situation, "robbing Peter to pay Paul" still means that neither Peter nor Paul get what they need.

Prior to the 2026-27 school year, hundreds of education worker job cuts were announced at school boards across the province. Cuts were defended as a means to get budgets closer to balance. Boards across the province are cutting staff at a time when more staff are needed. This puts additional pressure on education workers who remain, who have to pick up more work, adding stress and strain to themselves. It also means student needs continue to go unmet, and in fact, an increasing number of students will go without their needs being met.

A substantial investment in education is needed, specifically an investment in more staff to meet student needs. CUPE-OSBCU has several bargaining proposals that will help address the understaffing crisis, including:

- Funding dedicated to hiring new staff, including special education funding and funding for other staff
- A Designated Early Childhood Educator in every classroom with a kindergarten student
- A hard cap of 26 on classes with kindergarten students
- An Educational Assistant in every kindergarten class

The research, reports from education workers and reports from parents of students with special needs all point to the need for increased funding for staffing in the Ontario public education system to address student needs, student and worker safety, workload concerns, and to deliver a public education system capable of the kind Ontario families need.