

# Education Workers' Wages in Ontario: The Impact of Ten Years of Cuts



**CUPE**



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

CUPE education workers earn an average of just over \$39,000 per year. A decade of legislatively imposed wage restrictions and harsh bargaining positions taken by the government and school board trustees have meant that education workers' wages have not kept up with inflation and have fallen below the trends set for private sector unions and other public sector unions. Over the past 10 years increases to education workers' wages have been 8.8% while inflation in Ontario has been at least 19%.

Education workers' wages are no longer sufficient, on their own, to support a household. According to a survey of CUPE members, 51.4% of school board workers have had to take at least one additional job to make ends meet. The members most in need of additional jobs are sole income earners for their households, 64.5% of whom work at least one extra job (approximately 1/3 of CUPE education workers are the sole income earner in their household).

In addition to falling behind inflation, Ontario education workers' wages have fallen behind every other unionized sector in the province. Private sector wage settlements have averaged 20.3% (compounded) over the past decade, municipal unions have averaged 19.1%, unions in federally regulated workplaces have averaged 18.6% increase, and the Ontario Broader Public Sector (BPS) has averaged 12.2%.

Wage restraint has exacerbated the gender wage gap in Ontario. Women made up more than ¾ of respondents to a recent survey on wages of CUPE education workers. Women in the education sector are more likely to have their annual income limited by 10-months of employment (who are laid off for summers, and often December and March breaks as well). Restrictions on wage increases hit women particularly hard.

Over the past decade, wage increases that have trailed inflation have resulted in almost \$1.3 billion in cost savings just from CUPE members' incomes. In-year savings for 2021 are almost \$225 million. CUPE annual income would be \$4085 higher in 2021 if this money had been allocated equally to 55,000 members. Over time this wage gap has had profound negative effects on education workers' financial and personal wellbeing. But the issues have extended to school boards themselves who are facing significant recruitment and retention problems related to uncompetitive wages.

Education workers deserve a raise, as do all workers. It is long past time that we do something to change the existing trends towards stagnating wages and growing income inequality. There is nothing inevitable about the current state of affairs. But it will take political will, and political action, to make things better for workers.

# INTRODUCTION

CUPE education workers play a vital role in the life of schools, doing work that is necessary to providing students with a high quality publicly funded, publicly delivered education. CUPE members hold virtually every kind of job in schools and school board offices (except for teacher and management positions). CUPE members are Educational Assistants who provide supports to students with special education needs, Early Childhood Educators who are part of the kindergarten education team, Custodians and Maintenance staff who keep schools clean, safe and in a state of good repair. They are School office staff who make sure schools run effectively and library workers who help students develop learning skills and a love of books that last a lifetime. CUPE education workers are language and music instructors, and professional staff who enhance learning and provide supports to some of the most vulnerable students. In short, schools would not be able to function without CUPE education workers, who make for a safe, clean, fully supported education system.

Despite how important they are to students' success and the success of schools as a whole; education workers do not get the recognition they deserve. They have been subject to longstanding understaffing and overwork, as well as legislative attacks on their wages. As a result of the latter, school board workers' wages have eroded significantly over the past decade. Legislative restrictions on free collective bargaining like Bill 115 (under the previous Liberal government) that froze wages for two years, and Bill 124 (under the current Conservative government) that limited increases to 1% per year for three years, contributed to long-term loss of real income. Overall, education workers' wages have increased by only 8.8% (compounded) from 2012 to 2022. Over that same period of time inflation in Ontario has been 19%.<sup>1</sup> Recently, the provincial government projected inflation in 2021 is topping 3%.<sup>2</sup> Reports in November 2021 show inflation as high as 4.7%.<sup>3</sup> The imposition of 1% limit on wage increases through Bill 124 further eroded their purchasing power.

---

<sup>1</sup> Inflation was calculated using Ontario budget data (various years) and the November 2021 Economic Outlook and Fiscal Review to find an Ontario specific inflation rate. Where different inflation rates were recorded in budgets of different years, the data from the most recent budget was used. This is a relatively conservative estimate of inflation. Using inflation figures reported by Statistics Canada in November 2021, total inflation for the decade would be almost 21%. Wage increases were based on CUPE negotiated settlements for collective agreements from 2012 to 2022. Because of pattern bargaining in the education sector, all unions representing workers in school boards have the same wage increases.

<sup>2</sup> The November 2021 Ontario Economic Outlook and Fiscal Review estimates inflation for 2021 at 3.1%, and projects it will be 2.6% in 2022.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Jordan Press, "Annual inflation rate rises to 4.7% in October, Statistics Canada says", Toronto Star, November 17, 2021, <https://www.thestar.com/business/2021/11/17/statistics-canada-to-detail-october-inflation-rate-as-pace-of-price-growth-rises.html>.

"Affordability has become nearly impossible to manage. Every expenditure has increased substantially (food, gas, clothing, insurance, utilities, and taxes) but our wages have stagnated. This is not sustainable"

**Technician**

"We are an invaluable asset and the classroom could not run without us. Our pay does not reflect this in any way."

**Designated Early Childhood Educator**

"Struggle to pay rent. Rent prices have doubled in the last ten years. My 2-bedroom apartment costs \$2300 dollars a month. Food has gone up. Home prices have gone up. Car prices have gone up. Gas prices have gone up. Our wages have not gone up to compensate for this."

**Maintenance/Trades**

WE ARE the Front Line workers to make sure your kids have a safe and virus free educational environment."

**Custodian/Caretaker/Cleaner**

"We work really hard to support the special needs community. Every year they add more and more work loads onto us without any wage increases."

**Educational Assistant**

"We work hard and don't get the credit we deserve; we are running around trying to help multiple students in multiple classrooms with many different needs, we pay out of pocket for resources and work on building education resources on our own time."

**Professional/Paraprofessional**

"We are over worked and not compensated they know we will still do the work because we care about customer service."

**Secretarial/Clerical**

"I love my job but it saddens me that I can not support my family with my current income."

**Educational Assistant**

## What Do CUPE Education Workers Earn?

When CUPE/OSBCU went to the bargaining table in 2019 our members' average annual wage was \$38,000 per year.<sup>4</sup> Three years later, after wage increases of just 1% per year the average wage is just over \$39,000 per year.<sup>5</sup>

In a recent survey of CUPE education workers, 84.2% of respondents indicated that they earn less than \$50,000 per year from their school board jobs and 96.6% indicated that they earn less than \$60,000 per year as education workers. Survey responses show that 33% of CUPE education workers are sole-income earners for their household.<sup>6</sup>

Over 51% of respondents said that they work at least one other job during the year to make ends meet. The proportion of education workers working additional jobs increases as income from the school board decreases. However, the most significant factor leading members to take a second (or third) job was single-income earner status: 64.5% of education workers who are the sole income earner for their household have to work at least one additional job in order to make ends meet. This suggests that, for the majority of education workers, school board employment is simply not enough to support a household.

No matter how you look at it, CUPE education workers do not fit any reasonable definition of high-income earner. Yet CUPE members have repeatedly been caught in legislative restrictions on their wages.

A decade of wage restraint has had a profound impact on education workers and has caused problems for school boards as well. Ten years of declining real wages for education workers, the overwhelming majority of whom earn less than \$50,000 per year, has resulted in pervasive forms of economic precarity, and stress and anxiety about finances. But artificially lowered wages have led to problems of recruitment and retention at school boards leading to staffing shortages. All told, government strategies of attacking the real wages of education workers have been a policy failure and have done substantial harm.

---

<sup>4</sup> This average includes 10-month and 12-month employees, full-time, part-time, and casual employees, and includes members in a wide range of wage rates.

<sup>5</sup> The total annual wages for all CUPE Education workers equal about \$2.16 billion, spread over a total membership of 55,000.

<sup>6</sup> CUPE education workers' wages survey, conducted September 27 to October 18, 2021. 89.5% of respondents to the survey indicated that they were full-time employees (in either permanent or temporary full-time positions).

# PART ONE – EDUCATION WORKER WAGES AND ECONOMIC INDICATORS

Education workers' wages have fallen behind all relevant economic indicators. Four years of wage freezes in each year from 2012-15 and a legislated limit of 1% increases for 2019-22 have meant that education workers' wages have not kept up with inflation over the past decade. Compounded wage improvements have only added up to an 8.8% increase since 2012 (an average of less than 1% increase per year), but compounded inflation has been 19.0% for the same period. In only 1 year has inflation been less than 1% - 2020, the first year of a global pandemic that also saw a major economic recession. Essentially, in real terms education workers have faced a 10.2% wage cut over ten years.

Education workers' wages have also fallen behind economic growth. While this measure does not indicate how much wages have eroded over time, this measure does show that education workers have not shared in the benefits ten years of growth (even if that growth has been slower than in previous eras of economic activity). If workers' wages had increased by Real GDP growth (that is, economic growth factoring for inflation), wages would have increased by 18.3% in that ten-year period. Again, this compares to the 8.8% in compounded wage increases for education workers.

This is merely to illustrate that workers' wages are going down relative to economic indicators. Government revenues are related to Nominal GDP growth. All other things being equal, economic growth means more money in government coffers. It is not that as a society we cannot afford to raise workers' wages. Instead, it was political choices by successive governments that did this.



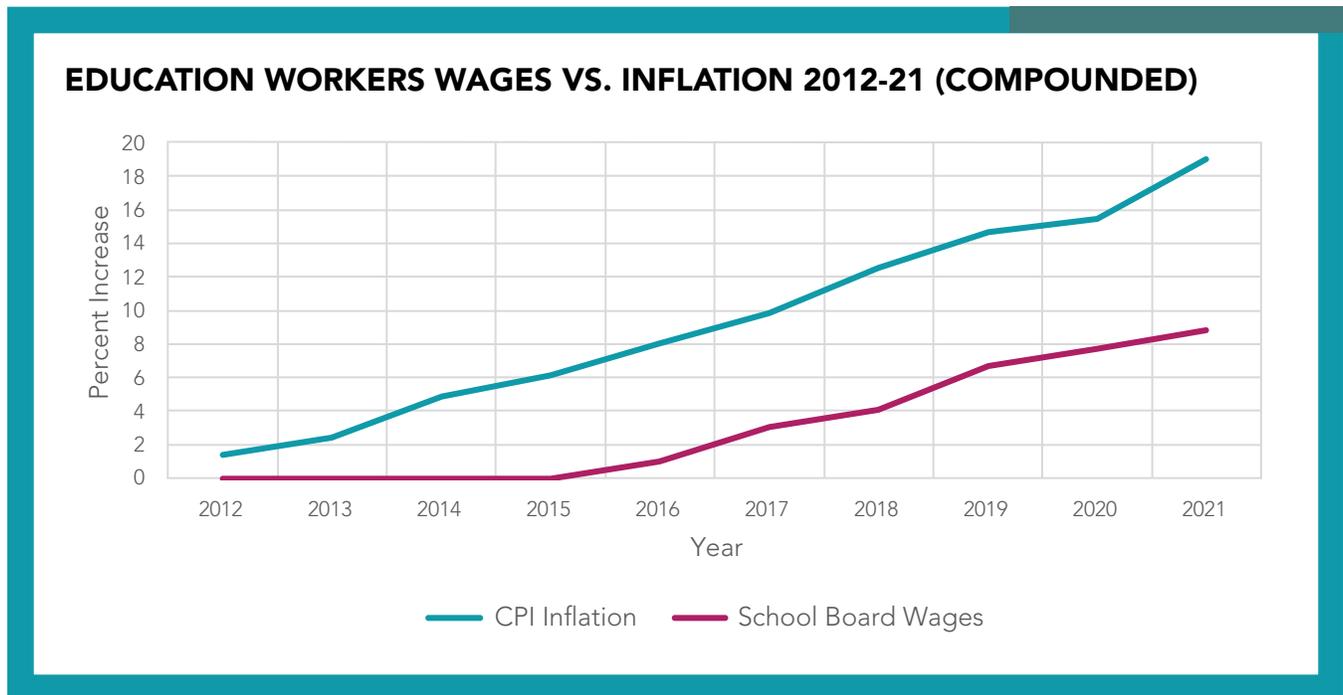
**EDUCATION WORKER WAGES COMPARED TO ECONOMIC INDICATORS:  
PERCENT INCREASES 2012-2021**

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Real GDP	1.7	1.3	2.7	2.9	2.3	2.8	2.2	2.1	-5.7	4.0
Nominal GDP	3.2	1.9	4.7	5.0	4.4	4.1	3.4	3.8	-4.8	6.2
CPI Inflation	1.4	1.0	2.4	1.2	1.8	1.7	2.4	1.9	0.7	3.1
Education Worker Wages	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.0	2.0	1.0	2.5	1.0	1.0

Education worker wages in this chart appear larger than normal in 2017 and 2019. This is because wage increases in these years were covered by 2 collective agreements. The 2014-17 agreement included a 0.5% increase in February of 2017 and the first year of the 2017-19 extension agreement included an increase of 1.5% on September 1<sup>st</sup> of that year. The 2017-19 extension agreement included a 1% increase on February 1<sup>st</sup> of 2019 and another 0.5% increase on August 31<sup>st</sup> of that year. The 2019-22 collective agreement included an increase of 1% in the first year of the agreement, which took effect on September 1, 2019. To compare wage increases to other economic indicators these separate wage increases were aggregated into the annual rate and treated as if they applied for the entire year.

**EDUCATION WORKER WAGE INCREASES BY  
COLLECTIVE AGREEMENT, 2012-2022**

0%	2012
0%	2013
0%	2014
0%	2015
1%	September 1, 2016
0.50%	February 1, 2017
1.50%	September 1, 2017
1%	September 1, 2018
1%	February 1, 2019
0.50%	August 30, 2019
1%	September 1, 2019
1%	September 1, 2020
1%	September 1, 2021



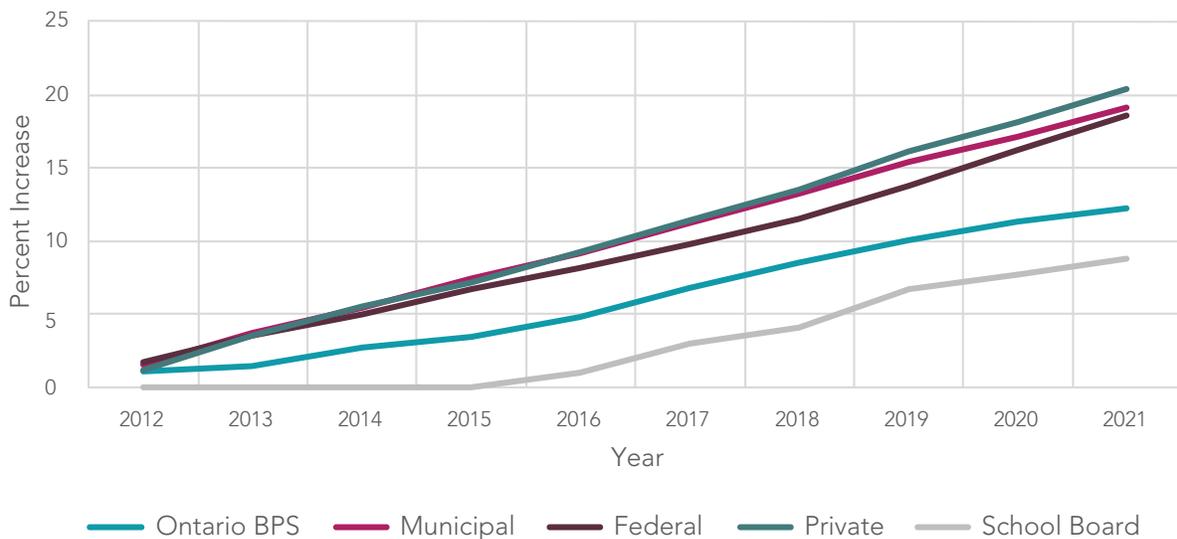
Education workers’ wages have also fallen behind the average settlements for every other unionized sector in Ontario. Compounded wage improvements for the private sector amount to 20.3% from 2012 to 2021 (slightly more than inflation) while settlements in the Ontario Broader Public Sector (BPS) have totaled a mere 12.2% (substantially below inflation) and the school board sector has seen only 8.8% improvements.

The municipal sector (which includes police and fire) has averaged approximately 19.1% wage increase for the past decade (roughly equivalent to total inflation for that period) and unions in federally regulated workplaces have averaged wage settlements that total 18.6% (slightly below total inflation for this period). All told, the education sector has had the lowest average settlements of any unionized sector in Ontario – and, at best, other sectors are trending towards wage settlements that roughly cover the costs of inflation.

### COLLECTIVE AGREEMENT SETTLEMENTS BY SECTOR: PERCENT WAGE INCREASES 2012 TO 2021<sup>7</sup>

Sector	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Private	1.2	2.3	1.9	1.6	1.9	2.0	1.9	2.3	2.0	1.9
Federal	1.7	1.8	1.4	1.6	1.4	1.5	1.6	2.0	2.1	2.1
Municipal	1.5	2.2	1.6	1.9	1.6	1.9	1.8	1.9	1.5	1.7
Ontario BPS	1.1	0.3	1.3	0.7	1.3	1.9	1.6	1.4	1.2	0.8
OSBCU	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.0	2.0	1.0	2.5	1.0	1.0

### WAGE IMPROVEMENTS BY SECTOR 2012 TO 2021 (COMPOUNDED)



### The Cost of Wage Restraint

A decade of wage restraint, keeping wage improvements below inflation, has taken a total of almost \$1.3 billion out of the pockets of CUPE education workers. According to the Financial Accountability Office, wages for all staff and administration account for roughly 78% of Grants for Student Needs

<sup>7</sup> Ontario Ministry of Labour Collective Bargaining Highlights [https://www.lrs.labour.gov.on.ca/VAVviewer/VisualAnalyticsViewer\\_guest.jsp?reportName=Collective%20Bargaining%20Highlights&reportPath=/Shared%20Data/SAS%20Visual%20Analytics/Public/LASR/](https://www.lrs.labour.gov.on.ca/VAVviewer/VisualAnalyticsViewer_guest.jsp?reportName=Collective%20Bargaining%20Highlights&reportPath=/Shared%20Data/SAS%20Visual%20Analytics/Public/LASR/) (accessed October 25, 2021).

(GSN) spending.<sup>8</sup> A large percentage of funding going to wages makes sense because education is a labour-intensive process. It takes people to perform the services that make students' education possible. Capital investments and investments in equipment cannot change that. Of the total school board wage bill, CUPE members' wages represent approximately 11% of the total cost.<sup>9</sup>

In 2012-13, the first year of Bill 115, the wage freeze cost CUPE members almost \$25.2 million. Total GSN spending was \$20.97 billion, meaning the total wage bill was approximately \$16.35 billion. CUPE members' wages accounted for 11% of that, or just under \$1.8 billion. Inflation was 1.4% that year – had CUPE members' wages increased by inflation the total CUPE wage bill would have been \$25.2 million higher.

The next year saw an inflation rate of 1.0%. But since CUPE education workers had their wages frozen again, the accumulated and compounded loss of wages due to inflation was 2.41%. Applying that to the total GSN (and to wages as a proportion of the GSN), shows that CUPE education workers lost \$42.9 million in wages in the year 2013-14. By 2021-22, the accumulated difference between inflation and CUPE education workers' wage increases was 10.23%. This results in a total in-year loss of \$224.6 million in wages. Adding all of the in-year deficits together results in a total of almost \$1.3 billion in savings the government has achieved on the backs of workers whose average annual wage is still just over \$39,000 per year – 96.6% of whom make less than \$60,000 per year. See the Appendix for the full calculation of each in-year difference between inflation and wage increases.

This is, of course, just an estimate of the in-year savings for the past decade (and the cumulative savings for the government due to a decade of wage restraint). The calculation is based on the assumption that total wages for the education sector are 78% of the total Grants for Student Needs (GSN) spending and total CUPE education worker wages are 11% of total wage costs. It is likely that these specific proportions change from year-to-year but remain close to these assumptions.

---

<sup>8</sup> The GSN represents the majority of funding for school boards. In 2021 it was almost \$25.6 billion, <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/funding/2122/GSNProjection2021-22.pdf>. Ontario Financial Accountability Office, *Expenditure Estimates 2019-20: Ministry of Education*, Fall 2019, <https://www.fao-on.org/en/Blog/Publications/expenditure-estimates-education-2019>.

<sup>9</sup> Total GSN funding in 2020-21 was approximately \$25.03 billion. The total wage cost would have been approximately \$19.53 (assuming it is 78% of total GSN). The total CUPE wage bill for that period was approximately \$2.16 billion, or approximately 11% of the total wage bill.

The point of this exercise is, however, to show that significant sums of money have been withheld from education workers leading to falling real wages. Roughly \$1.3 billion has been saved from the wage bill over a decade, just for CUPE school board members. This translates into an average of \$22,500 in lost income for each of the 55,000 CUPE education workers in those 10 years. In 2021, assuming the government saved \$224,663,192 because CUPE members' wages did not keep up with inflation, education workers' annual wages are, on average, \$4,085 lower than they would be had they kept up with inflation.

## Gender Inequality

According to Statistics Canada, in 2019 the average annual employment income for men in Ontario was \$56,200, whereas for women the average annual employment income was just \$39,900.<sup>10</sup> Based on average annual income, women earn a mere 71% of what men make. Looking instead at median annual employment income shows that men earn \$44,200 compared to \$31,600 for women, resulting in only a slight difference. By this measure women make 71.5% of men's employment income.

It is striking to note that adjusted for inflation women's average annual income in Ontario declined from 2017 to 2019 (adjusted to 2019 dollars). In 2017 women's average income was \$40,800, in 2018 it was \$40,700, and in 2019 it dropped to \$39,000 in constant dollars.<sup>11</sup>

Education workers are predominantly women. In the most recent survey of CUPE members on their wages, 79.9% of respondents identified as female. Women are more likely to be in positions with a lower annual income than men. For example, 89.9% of women earn less than \$50,000 per year, compared to 60.9% of men. Responses to CUPE's survey on education workers' wages show that 98% of women earn less than \$60,000 per year compared to 91.1% of men.

In part (but only in part) the income disparity is because women are more likely to work positions that are only paid for 10 months of the year. Survey results show that 81.7% of women are paid for 10 months of the year while only 20.1% of men are employed in 10-month positions. Only 17.2% of

---

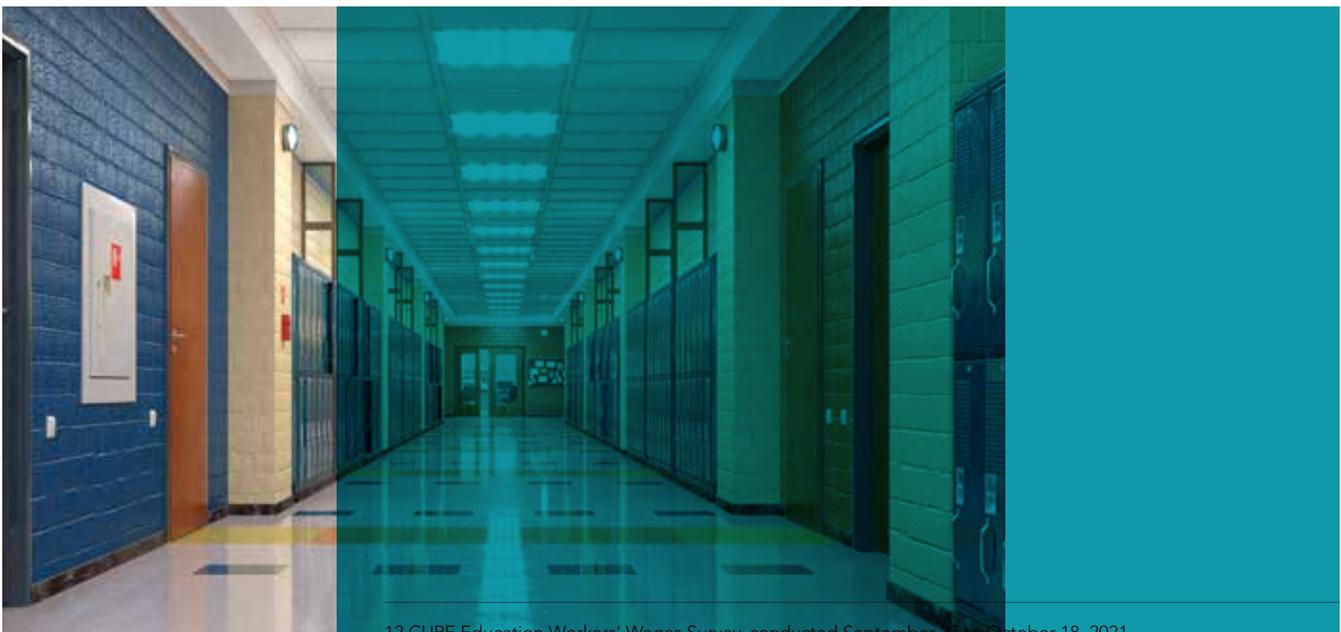
<sup>10</sup> Statistics Canada, *Distribution of employment income of individuals by sex and work activity, Canada, provinces, and selected census metropolitan areas: 2015 – 2019*, March 23, 2021, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1110024001&pickMembers%5B0%5D=1.1&pickMembers%5B1%5D=2.1&pickMembers%5B2%5D=3.1&cubeTimeFrame.startYear=2015&cubeTimeFrame.endYear=2019&referencePeriods=20150101%2C20190101>

<sup>11</sup> Statistics Canada, *Distribution of employment income of individuals by sex and work activity, Canada, provinces, and selected census metropolitan areas: 2015 – 2019*, March 23, 2021.

women are in 12-month positions compared to 79.1% of men. The remainder work something other than a 10-month or 12-month work-year (1.1% of women and 0.8% of men). Women are overrepresented in job classifications whose overall annual income is limited by a shortened work-year, reproducing features of the overall gender wage gap within school boards themselves.

The restriction of 10-months of employment (often coupled with layoffs over the December and March breaks) is an adverse working condition for work that needs to be done. The work these members do is necessary to schools functioning properly. Without Education Assistants, Designated Early Childhood Educators, school office staff, library workers, instructors and a myriad of other job classifications students would not have the supports they need to succeed. Schools would not have their administrative functions completed. Essentially, the entire system would flounder and fail. But the workers who fill these positions are penalized by receiving 2-months less pay per year, which is only worsened by wage restraint legislation and pattern bargaining that has resulted in wage trends that fall far behind inflation.

In a very real sense, the attack on education workers' wages has exacerbated the overall gender wage gap and has undermined any ostensible attempts to address the persistent gender wage gap across society as a whole. No strategy for ending gender wage inequality can ignore compensation for public sector employment, especially in sectors that are dominated by women such as education. This would include addressing wage rates, hours of work per week, and the limitations on the work year for this socially necessary, but sadly undervalued, work.



## PART TWO – MEMBERS' EXPERIENCES

In September and October 2021 CUPE surveyed school board members to find out what a decade of wage restraint has meant for them. The survey received 16,523 complete responses, or 30% of the total membership.<sup>13</sup> Permanent full-time employees made up 85.9% of respondents and 3.6% indicated they are full-time employees in a temporary contract. Permanent part-time employees represented 4.3% of respondents and temporary part-time employees represented 0.6% of respondents. 4.9% of respondents indicated they are employed as casual employees, and 0.7% indicated their employment status as “other”.

10-month employees made up 69.6% of respondents, 29.4% indicated they are 12-month employees, and 1% have a different work year (either more or less than 10 months). Of the 10-month employees, 93.4% indicate that they apply for Employment Insurance during periods of layoff from the school board, including December and March breaks and summers.

The survey shows that 84.2% of respondents have an annual income less than \$50,000 per year from their school board job, and 96.6% have an annual school board income of less than \$60,000 per year.

Results indicate that 51.4% of respondents have taken at least one additional job outside of the school board to make ends meet. The proportion of members who take additional employment increases as school board income decreases. However, the most important factor leading to members taking a second (or third) job is whether they are a sole income earner for their household. Of the sole income earners, 64.5% said they had to take additional employment to make ends meet. Educational Assistants are the job classification most likely to report having to take additional employment, 62.2% of whom work at least one job outside of the school board.

Members were given two groupings of questions to gauge the effects of wage restraint on them and their families. The first grouping of questions roughly correlates to financial difficulties, the second roughly correlates to personal impacts on members and their families, including quality of life issues.

---

<sup>13</sup> CUPE Education Workers' Wages Survey, conducted September 27 to October 18, 2021. Respondents were given the option to skip questions they did not want to answer. Most respondents answered all of the questions; however, a small percentage skipped some questions. When reporting the percentages of respondents for each question the total number of responses for that question is used (the total number of responses for each question is less than 16,523).

### **SINCE 2012 EDUCATION WORKER WAGES INCREASED AT LESS THAN INCREASES IN THE COST OF LIVING. WHAT HAS THIS MEANT FOR YOU AND YOUR FAMILY?**

I struggle to afford childcare	2399	14.52%
My children cannot participate in extra curricular activities (e.g., sports, camps, music lessons, etc.)	3502	21.19%
I have to hold off on planned household spending (e.g., clothing, renovations, new appliances, car repair, etc.)	12192	73.79%
I am not be able to put money aside for my children's post-secondary education	6927	41.92%
I struggle to pay my monthly bills (including rent/mortgage, heat, car, student debt)	7740	46.84%
I struggle to be able to afford gas/public transit	4026	24.37%
I have to cut back on food	4485	27.14%
I have had to visit a food bank	634	3.84%
I have to stop putting money aside from savings and/or drain my savings account	11359	68.75%
Other (please specify)	1012	6.12%
None of the above	1439	8.71%

Over 91% of members indicated that they faced at least one of the financial difficulties included in the survey (or a self-identified "other" hardship that allowed members to provide comments). Only 8.7% of members indicated that they have not faced any of the listed problems. When reading the written comments for the survey it became clear that a significant number of members answered "none of the above" on this question because their spouse earned significantly more than they do. Often those members indicated that they would have certainly had financial difficulties had they not been married to someone with a good income.

75.2% of respondents said that they faced two or more of these financial difficulties, 59.8% indicated that they faced 3 or more of these problems, and 42.7% face 4 or more. This suggests that the impact of wage restraint is multifaceted and is felt deeply by members and their families. Among the most common ill-effects is the inability to save, including for children's post-secondary education, and/or the drawing down of existing savings, leaving members even more vulnerable to future financial difficulties.

The second group of questions relates primarily to personal effects of below-inflation wage increases over the past decade. Granted, some of these are also directly related to financial difficulties, such as housing insecurity. But these issues also deal explicitly with well-being and quality of life. Anxiety and stress about being able to afford everything they need is felt by over 76.4% of respondents and over 81.2% are worried that an unexpected event would cause economic hardship. More than 2/3 of respondents also indicate that they have cut back on entertainment or hobbies and have canceled (or avoided making) vacation plans.

Overall, 95.1% of respondents faced at least one of these adverse personal effects of wage increases that fell below inflation – 87.0% of respondents faced two or more of these effects, 80.1% faced three or more, and 71.2% experienced four or more. Once again, we see that the effects of declining real wages are felt deeply, adversely affect members’ well-being and quality of life, and are multifaceted.

**BECAUSE OF MY INCOME I HAVE (CHECK ALL THAT APPLY):**

Felt stress or anxiety about being able to afford everything I need	12679	76.74%
Worried that an unexpected event would cause economic hardship for me and my family	13428	81.27%
Been late in making bill payments	6781	41.04%
Been unable to afford new essentials (e.g., cell phone, highspeed internet, data plans, etc.)	7458	45.14%
Had to borrow money from family and/or friends	5873	35.54%
Suffered from poor mental health	6740	40.79%
Faced housing insecurity or worried about where I would live	3439	20.81%
Used payday loans	1217	7.37%
Cut back entertainment and/or hobbies	11088	67.11%
Canceled vacation plans or avoided planning vacations	11172	67.61%
Other (please specify)	551	3.33%
None of the above	806	4.88%

CUPE education workers were also given the opportunity to provide written comments on their wages. When asked “do you have any other comments that would explain why CUPE education workers deserve better wages?” respondents provided 530 pages worth of comments, a small selection of which appear in this report.

Members provided great detail on what a decade of wage restraint has meant. Respondents reflected on housing insecurity and difficulties keeping up with rising rental prices, many saying that home ownership was out of their reach. It was not uncommon to hear of members' fear that they will have insufficient savings for retirement and that their pensions have taken a huge hit by such low wage increases. Other members discussed how living paycheque to paycheque adds to their stress and means they cannot afford vacations, hobbies, entertainment, or other things that add to the quality of life.

Education workers' take great pride in providing supports to students, love their jobs, and know how important their contributions are. However, many expressed that their own kids often have to do without because wages have fallen so far behind inflation. In some cases, members say their kids cannot enroll in sports or other activities. In other cases, they say that their kids who need additional supports (including educational supports) for their wellbeing do not get what they need. Members have said that they are having difficulty saving for their kids' post-secondary education, or their kids who are already enrolled in PSE have to take on substantial debt to be able to afford to attend university or college. The Financial Accountability Office report on income inequality speaks to the consequences of this: "When children in lower-income families have fewer opportunities and face greater challenges in acquiring skills and education, their future potential may go unrealized. This can lower their potential productivity and reduce future economic growth, which in turn lowers income gains and ultimately reinforces income inequality."<sup>14</sup>

"Being a single person, I will never be able to afford to buy a house. Sometimes I have to dip into retirement savings to make it through the summer. I am constantly worried about whether I'll have enough money saved for all 3 layoffs each school year. Will I actually be able to retire? If I have to leave a bill unpaid this month which one will it be? If my car breaks down unexpectedly will I be able to afford to fix it?"

**Professional/Paraprofessional**

"I am not able to replace my 10 year old vehicle that has 400,000km"

**Library Worker**

<sup>14</sup> Ontario Financial Accountability Office, *Income Inequality in Ontario: Growth, Distribution, Mobility*, Winter 2019, <https://6485129990.saas.quicksilk.com/web/default/files/publications/Income%20Jan%202019/Income-report.FAO.pdf>.

"I have to work two jobs to make enough money to survive. I have enough for food, savings etc but that is only with a second job."

**Secretary/Clerical**

"I have to go into debt in order to pay my bills. Especially during the summer holidays."

**Educational Assistant**

"All of my earnings go into bills, there is nothing left over at the end of the month, and I am pay cheque to pay cheque barely making ends meet."

**Educational Assistant**

"I am fortunate that I have a husband who makes better money because if I didn't, I would be checking off all of the above"

**Educational Assistant**

"As education workers we feel stressed everyday because we do not have enough time to get our work completed and to meet the needs of the schools/departments. No overtime is offered either. This overwhelming stress is then compacted by not bringing home a decent wage to support my family and my obligations. It really is deflating when you put your blood sweat and tears into a job that doesn't reward you mentally, just exhausts you. nor does it reward financially. I just make ends meet. I have considered getting a part-time job to help aid me with my expenses. But I am exhausted at the end of the day, I need to be there for my family. Thank you."

**Central Administration**

"Money has become a constant worry and source of stress for my wife and I. It affects/is part of the conversation almost all of our decisions. Our children also see and feel this stress, and feel guilty about asking for money for things like sports, extracurricular or going out for the subway with their friends once in a while."

**Other Classification**

"I've had a second part-time job for many years."

**Library Worker**

# PART THREE – EFFECTS ON SCHOOL BOARDS

## Recruitment and Retention

Wage restraint legislation has not only deeply affected CUPE education workers. School boards have also faced consequences. For example, school boards are facing serious recruitment and retention problems, in no small part due to uncompetitive wages. To be sure, some of the recent staffing shortages have been due to the global pandemic, as needs have increased, and boards were ill-equipped to increase staffing levels to meet the particular needs of the health emergency. However, the staffing problems that came into sharp focus were premised on existing staffing shortages, including short or non-existent lists of available casual and supply staff.

In a March 2021 survey of CUPE locals in the school board sector over 77% indicated that their school boards were experiencing recruitment and retention problems. Significantly, wages were identified by roughly 2/3 of those locals as one of the main contributing factors to problems with recruitment and retention.

In its annual report on the Ontario education system, People for Education reports that school principals have reported significant problems with maintaining staffing levels. “Principals reported that the demand for mental health and educational supports skyrocketed, but that there was no corresponding increase in human resources. They reported a shortage of social workers, school psychologists, child/youth counsellors, special education services, occasional teachers, educational assistants, and speech language pathologists.”<sup>15</sup> Although this was written in the context of the staffing shortages during the pandemic, the report echoes what CUPE locals have been saying for years – there is a serious recruitment and retention problem in the education sector.

Recent news reports also shed light on recruitment and retention problems. This was captured in a CBC report on Educational Assistants at the Thames Valley DSB.<sup>16</sup> The board has found it difficult to maintain a full list of casual EAs who cover staff on leave (including sick leave). The board’s response

<sup>15</sup> People for Education, *Challenges and Innovations: 2020-21 Annual Report on Ontario Schools*, October 7, 2021, 2020-21-AOSS-Final-Report-Published-110721.pdf (peopleforeducation.ca).

<sup>16</sup> Kate Dubinsky, “Amid dire shortages of educational assistants Thames Valley school board looks to hire 200”, CBC News, October 21, 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/london/amid-dire-shortage-of-educational-assistants-thames-valley-school-board-looks-to-hire-200-1.6214981>

was to lower qualifications for these positions, a decision that undermines quality of education. The problem, of course, is not that qualified EAs are unavailable. Instead, it is that wages are too low to attract qualified EAs to work in casual and supply positions.

A similar report shows the Simcoe County DSB and Simcoe Muskoka Catholic DSB both face shortages of staff that included educational assistants, early childhood educators, office and clerical staff, and custodians. The same article states that other boards are facing staffing shortages, including the Durham DSB which is “considering closing schools on days when they don’t have enough staff.”<sup>17</sup> A spokesperson for the Catholic board said, “staff shortages were a problem before COVID-19; the pandemic made it worse”. Once again, this reinforces what CUPE locals have been saying.

“the amount of knowledge required for my job is significant. The investment in the employee needs to be greater, to maintain staffing.”

**Secretary/Clerical**

“Giving CUPE employees better wages would mean less revolving door positions. I constantly consider going back to school or applying to other positions in an attempt to earn more money because as much as I love this job even at it’s highest paying rank it is not enough for me to live comfortably.”

**Secretary/Clerical**

“Currently wages are a big reason that casual employees can’t be found.”

**Educational Assistant**

“I am a trades person making 15 to 20 dollars an hour less than a tradesperson in the private sector. We (RDSB) are currently looking for tradespeople to work for the board and they aren’t even getting applicants because the wages are too low. We need to compete with the higher wages (private sector) so we can have a full service maintenance department.”

**Custodian/Caretaker/Cleaner**

<sup>17</sup> Sara Carson, “ ‘Some of these people were excellent, excellent educators’: Simcoe County school boards face staff shortage”, Simcoe.com, November 16, 2021, <https://www.simcoe.com/news-story/10514455--some-of-these-people-were-excellent-excellent-educators-simcoe-county-school-boards-face-staff-shortage/>.

"CUPE education workers often work in environments that are short-staffed or have the bare minimum staffing. As such, we all have large amounts of work and our pay should reflect that. Additionally, staffing and workload issues aside, our wages are simply not keeping up with inflation."

**Secretarial/Clerical**

"Many of us make considerably less than the industry standard for our skills/trades."

**Information Technology Staff**

## CONCLUSION

Education workers in Ontario deserve a raise. Schools cannot work without the contributions they make on a daily basis yet their wages over the past 10 years have not kept up with inflation. Wages have fallen behind economic growth. School board workers' wages have also trailed behind negotiated settlements in all other unionized sectors in the province (private sector, municipalities, federally regulated workplaces, and the rest of the Ontario broader public sector). The most significant reason for this is misguided and punitive legislation that forced wage restraint on some of the lowest paid workers in schools.

This is not sustainable. It has caused real economic and personal hardships for education workers. It has exacerbated the overall gender wage gap in Ontario and has contributed to growing economic inequality. School boards themselves have also faced significant problems with recruitment and retention related to wages.

In the 2021 Economic Outlook and Fiscal Review the Minister of Finance said **"... for too long, the workers of our province have been taken for granted... Take-home pay for many workers has not kept up with rising costs"** (emphasis added). He further stated "During the pandemic, the workers of Ontario had our back. And our government has theirs. We want Ontario workers in a race to the top, not a race to the bottom."<sup>18</sup> If the Minister is being honest, then it's time to put that sentiment into action and increase wages for Ontario's education workers.

<sup>18</sup> Ontario Ministry of Finance, *2021 Economic Outlook and Fiscal Review: Build Ontario*, November 4, 2021, <https://budget.ontario.ca/2021/fallstatement/pdf/2021-fall-statement-en.pdf>

"We put in way more hours than we are paid for because we care about the children in our school lives. It's a slap in the face that we don't get paid a decent wage, get paid over the holidays and then have to wait so long for EI to kick in...."

***Designated Early Childhood Educator***

"CUPE education workers work hard and are significantly under paid. A person working full time should be able to independently support their family. It is demoralizing having to rely on others or to have to get a second job. I am a single mother and want my children to know if you work hard you will do ok in life."

***Educational Assistant***

"Everyone deserves a living wage at the least."

***Secretary/Clerical***



# APPENDIX: ESTIMATE OF THE AMOUNT OF MONEY SAVED DUE TO WAGE ADJUSTMENTS LOWER THAN INFLATION

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Total GSN	20,967,365,758	20,768,115,379	22,316,422,767	22,619,146,780	22,957,509,950	23,926,530,938	24,629,477,931	24,715,635,972	25,034,744,736	25,595,817,417
Total Wages	16,354,545,291	16,199,129,996	17,406,809,758	17,642,934,488	17,906,857,761	18,662,694,132	19,210,992,786	19,278,196,058	19,527,100,894	19,964,737,585
CUPE Wages	1,798,999,982	1,781,904,300	1,914,749,073	1,940,722,794	1,969,754,354	2,052,896,354	2,113,209,206	2,120,601,566	2,147,981,098	2,196,121,134
Gap*	1.4%	2.41%	4.87%	6.13%	7.04%	6.86%	8.46%	8.00%	7.73%	10.23%
Savings**	25,186,000	42,943,894	93,248,280	118,966,307	138,670,707	140,828,690	178,777,499	169,648,125	166,038,939	224,663,192

\* This is the cumulative gap between compounded inflation and wage settlements in the school board sector.

\*\* This is the approximate savings to the government due to wage increases that lag behind inflation. Adding each of these in-year savings nets the government \$1,298,971,192 total savings.

This is, of course, just an estimate of the in-year savings for the past decade (and the cumulative savings for the government due to a decade of wage restraint). Total wages for the education sector are based on the assumption that staffing costs represent 78% of the total Grants for Student Needs (GSN) spending. Total CUPE education worker wages are based on the assumption that CUPE’s share of the total wage bill is 11%. It is likely that these specific proportions change from year-to-year but remain close to these assumptions. Changing the assumptions could result in any given year.

The point of this exercise is, however, to show that significant sums of money have been withheld from education workers leading to falling real wages. Roughly \$1.2 billion has been saved from the wage bill over a decade. This translates into an average of \$22,500 in lost income for 55,000 CUPE Education workers in 10 years. In 2021, assuming the government saved \$221,808,235 because CUPE members’ wages did not keep up with inflation, education workers’ annual wages are, on average, \$4,033 lower than they should be.

