



**Where is our
education
system
heading
?**

**A government plan
to cut Education Assistants
has many people worried.**

There is widespread public opposition to the Ministry of Education's plan to cut 75 per cent of the province's Education Assistants (EAs) over the next seven years.

In response to the criticism, Education Minister Ken Krawetz said the plan had been "misinterpreted."

But the government has not scrapped the plan and the cuts to EA positions are proceeding in some school divisions.

That's a concern. Here's why:

Education Assistants help students with learning disabilities and special needs. Working alongside teachers, they ensure students get the "in class support they need to succeed." But the Saskatchewan government is considering a plan that could jeopardize that success.

The government says the new plan will encourage greater independence in special needs students and make the classroom more inclusive. The plan calls for fewer Education Assistants in the classroom, but more professionals such as psychologists and social workers in the school system.

The government also is moving to restrict funding to special needs students. Under the new guidelines, special needs students only will be eligible for extra support if they are working with an outside agency such as corrections or social services.

Gwen Murphy, who has worked as an Education Assistant in Saskatoon for 12 years, says the plan "is not realistic at all." Increasing the number of professionals in the school system will not replace the need for Education Assistants, says Murphy. Education Assistants help students in the classroom and provide daily support to students with learning disabilities and special needs.

"These professionals don't and won't have the time to work one-on-one with students," she says. "They also may not have the expertise or experience working with the wide range of disabilities and special needs that we have."

Saskatoon parent Tara Klassen describes the EA working with her six-year old child as a "godsend." Noah, who has a mild form of cerebral palsy, needs help changing his shoes and zipping his jacket. He also needs help with fine motor skills such as printing and working with scissors.

Klassen doesn't agree with the government's claim that EAs create dependence in students. "Absolutely the opposite," she says. "Noah sees a physiotherapist, but it's the EA who implements the therapist's suggestion in the classroom and helps my son improve his skills so he can do more on his own."

Peggy Durant, a retired teacher in Saskatoon, shares this view. "The professionals evaluate and test children's progress and make recommendations, but it is the teachers and EAs who follow through." She worries without EAs, "the children who need extra help will fall by the wayside."

Marie Moore, the president of school support workers in Horizon School Division, worries the plan could have a devastating impact on rural school students. "In our school division, which is the size of a small country, most of our professionals could spend a lot of time on the road."

Increasing the number of professionals would improve access, but she says they are no substitute for EAs, who work with students on a daily basis in the classroom.

Lori Sutherland, an EA based in Esterhazy and the President of CUPE 4784, agrees. "I question how much face time students will get with these professionals."

Her school division of Good Spirit already has cut about 18 EA positions over the last year. Although the division wants to hire more professionals, recruitment is difficult: several job postings remain unfilled from last fall.

Ronda Lasko, a parent of an autistic child in Pelly, says the motto of the Good Spirit School Division is "students come first." She hopes it remains that way.

"My daughter was born non-verbal. After a lot of appointments and hard work, we taught her to speak." Now in grade six, her daughter works with an EA who encourages her to "use her words" and to interact in the classroom. "Without an Education Assistant — to work with her and advocate on her behalf — I worry she'll be left behind."

Cuts to Education Assistants are underway in the Regina Public School Division. Since last June, 55 EA positions have been lost and more EA cuts are coming, as the board plans to end the Learning Disability and Alternative Resource Programs.

Jackie Christianson is a Regina Education Assistant who works with students with behavioural and development needs. She's also the President of CUPE 3766, which represents EAs in the division.

She's worried the government and board are adopting this new "inclusive" model of education — one where teachers are encouraged to use students as buddies to "help" struggling and special needs students. "Who will be learning under this model?" she asks.

Without an EA, a student with behavioural needs likely will be disruptive in the regular classroom and that's not fair to any students, she says. "Behaviour in a classroom has to be addressed or every student suffers."

Verda Petry, a former teacher and Regina public school board trustee, also is concerned about the cuts to EA positions. "They are going after the most vulnerable employees and the most vulnerable students."

Petry says EAs make a huge difference in a classroom. "We have students in the regular classroom with physical needs, learning needs, behavioural needs. Without an Education Assistant to help, how is a teacher going to cope? It's an impossible situation and a potential disaster for education."

"I worry that many students with learning disabilities won't get the support they need in the classroom."

Marie Moore
CUPE 4799 President



Under the Education Ministry's plan, more than 2,700 of the province's 3,400 Education Assistants would lose their job as it moves to a new model for special needs students — one the government says will promote independence.

The government's new plan for K-12 education raises a lot of questions. Parents and educators want answers.

Education Minister Ken Krawetz recently said the government's plan to cut 75 per cent of Educational Assistant positions in the province over the next seven years has been misinterpreted. Given the concern about the cuts, why hasn't the government abandoned the controversial plan?

The government says the cuts to EA positions are just guidelines.

But some school divisions report the government is pushing them to make the cuts. They also worry what will happen to their funding if they don't adopt the new staffing ratios for EAs.

Worried? Contact your MLA, Education Minister Krawetz, your school division office and your school trustees.



CUPE



This leaflet is presented by The CUPE Education Workers Steering Committee on behalf of the 6,200 CUPE members working in K-12 education.