

PUBLIC FORUM IN REGINA

APRIL 29, 2010

By: *Jackie Christianson*

A public forum was held at the Cathedral Community Center in Regina by the Education Workers Steering Committee (EWSC) and CUPE Local 3766 regarding the concerns with the reduction of educational assistants in Saskatchewan. More than 70 people showed up to voice their opinions on this important issue. Included in the audience was Darren McKee the Assistant Deputy Minister of Education, Elaine Caswell the Executive Director of Student Support Services and Pat Atkinson the Education critic. The Regina Public School Board was represented by Greg Enion, Superintendent of Student Support Services and Garry Halbert, Education Psychologist. The EWSC and Davidson Summit Committee was also in attendance.

Jackie Christianson, president of CUPE Local 3766 presented an overview on policies the Ministry of Education has been recommending to Saskatchewan school districts over the past year. She spoke on how this has impacted educational assistants in her local, working for the Regina Public School Board. Regina Public Schools has 50% less educational assistants per capita than all other school divisions

in the province. Regina Public Schools is continuing to reduce educational assistants, close programs and replace them with counselors, psychologists and other 'professionals'. Jackie asked the audience, "Who will implement the plans set up by the professionals?" She explained that it will be the teachers and students who will be expected to replace the daily supports of 'struggling' students. Regina Public Schools is implementing inclusive classrooms, structural innovation and reduction of EA staff. She asked the public to let the students settle into one model before implementing another model.

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Jackie suggested that the public needs to voice their frustrations with the education system by contacting their school board trustees, school board directors, sign a petition, write and/or call their MLA's and Mr. Ken Krawetz, Minister of Education. She implored the concerned parents to ask questions and ensure that someone was listening to their concerns about their children's needs. Parents should be part of the decisions about what will work best

for their children's education and demand this from the government and the schools!

Jackie informed the public that there are other school divisions planning on reducing EA staff. North West will reduce by 20, Prairie Spirit by 50 and both Cornerstone and Prairie Valley have admitted to using the Ministry of Education's "ratio guidelines for determining EA's in their 2010 school year". Please remember that these are the guidelines recommending a reduction of over 70% of EA's in Saskatchewan.

Verda Petry was the first guest speaker to address the parents. Verda is a retired teacher, president of RPSTA (Regina Public School Teacher's Association), and school board trustee. Verda explained who the faces of special needs students are; FAS, ADHD, Autistic etc. Verda spoke about how valuable EA's are in the classroom, not only to special needs students but to all students. In Verda's opinion we need more EA's not less. EA's have more training in special needs than most teachers. EA's don't foster 'dependency', they help 'dependant' students become 'independent'. She spoke of a classroom with an autistic child that screamed all day. This student was so disruptive to the rest of the class, that the teacher had no option but to enlist the aid of an exceptional learning student to 'play' with the autistic student. This is unfair to both the special needs and the exceptional students and does not serve the

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needs of either. Verda explained that teachers spend as much as 80% of their day *not* teaching, but “dealing with issues” in the classroom. This leaves only 20% of their time teaching. This was before all the changes occurred at Regina Public Schools. Verda emphasized that Regina Public Schools are attacking not only the most venerable special needs students, but also the lowest paid and least valued employees, that being the Educational Assistants. Statistics have shown that the number of special needs students is increasing, especially within the urban locations. Why then, would the Ministry initiate incentives to reduce the EA to student ratio? All children deserve the same opportunities and all need to be supported to the best of their capacity. Verda feels the extra responsibilities placed on the classroom teachers will create a stressful environment and teachers will be unable to cope with the challenges.

Trish Elliott spoke to parents about “Real Renewal” and the impact that school closures has had on communities. She noted the irony in the Ministry’s implementation of ‘inclusive’ schools, shutting special programs and returning the students back to their home schools. Special needs parents must have a massive level of trust to leave their children at school everyday. Parents need to stick their necks out to go against the bureaucracy of the Ministry of Education. All the successful research papers on inclusive schools state the same; in order for inclusion to be successful there should be an



increase of services never a decrease in services. Trish resents the role of the front line workers being reduced. Our EA’s in the classroom are needs not wants. Parents are being told by the Ministry of Education that they do not have the right to feel entitled to services for their special needs child. This is wrong, all children are entitled to an education with supports if needed. Trish applauded the efforts of the Education Worker’s Steering Committee and urged the public to be informed and get involved.

A question and answer period followed. Here are some of the questions that were brought forward by parents and responses from the Ministry and Regina Public Schools.

Parent – I have a special needs child that is 11 years old and in Grade 5. Who is going to look after these kids? It will be the justice system, the police and everyone else. They raise our taxes and cut teachers. Our EA to student ratio is ridiculous.

Parent: I am speaking on behalf of my daughter. We spent months trying to get her tested for a reading disability. We finally had her tested and now it will take months to have a plan for her put in place. If the EAs are cut, I don’t think she will get the help that she needs. She is a good, quiet kid and will get lost in the class unless she gets help. I will not let this happen. Is there anyone here from the School Board who can speak to us?

Greg Enion: Certainly I commend you all for coming out. This is what public education is about. I am here to listen and to report back to the Board. For the 2009-2010 school year, 24 assistants were cut. The number for next year would be 25.6 positions. The 24 cuts from this year resulted in the hiring of 9 more teachers. For next year we are going to hire 4 more psychologists and two occupational therapists. It is not about cutting EAs. I want to assure you that we will be putting support where it is needed. 222 EA’s will be kept and there are no plans to make any more reductions.

Parent: Who is going to do the toileting, giving out the meds, etc.?

Enion: Certainly that is why we will always make sure we have EAs for these positions. There is no plan to go deeper than the 222 EAs.

Darren McKee: I would like to thank the Regina Public School Board for having someone to come out. We are interested in hearing the concerns. We want to make sure we have the right facts on the issue of the EAs. This issue is very important to the Ministry. There will always be a place for EAs. It will be up to the parents to ensure that their children get the help they need.

Pat Atkinson (NDP): The focus has been on the document sent to the school boards that contains the guidelines for the EA to student ratio. This lays out the Ministry’s expectation on funding to the Boards. The professional staff do not supply in-classroom support. They support the teachers.

McKee: This document has been misinterpreted. It was not the intention to reduce the EAs that some students deserve.

Parent: How do you determine how many EAs per school?

McKee: At the Provincial level we cannot predict what is needed. We depend on the boards to do this.

Enion: We go through a process that involves looking at the level of support needed but certainly we have a budget to stay within.

Parent: I would like to know what happens to the special needs students that are being moved to their community schools. Will teachers need to be trained so that they are on the same level?

Enion: Teachers will need to take in-services on what they require. The school board has support teams to go out to check on what is needed. Professional development is available when needed. There are 6 superintendents that are responsible for 8 to 10 schools each. 25.6 EA positions are going to be cut. But, it is not about the money.

Parent: We have a lot of administrative staff. How many of them will be cut before the EAs?

Enion: We have some of the lowest numbers of administrative staff in western Canada. For next year we are putting the consultants into the schools to provide more front line service.

Jackie: I am under the impression that there are 18 new consultants.

Enion: These are not new positions but the consultants are coming from the board office and are being placed in the schools.

Parent: When you (McKee) were on the John Gormley radio show you said the Ministry's plan was an active plan. The next day, this idea was changed. Which is the right answer? We heard the numbers and there are more children with special needs and EAs will be replaced by professionals. Is it not true that we will have fewer people in the classroom working with special needs?

McKee: There is a new model. I was not off side with the ministry. Students no longer need to be tested to receive help. We are seeing the number of children with needs leveling off.

Enion: Certainly there will be fewer actual bodies in the classrooms. But we will increase occupational therapists because we heard that is an area of need. We are trying to work closer

with social workers because we realize that we need the support of the community to work with some children. We are trying to be more pro-active to get assessments done more quickly. Yes, there may be less bodies, but we are looking for people with more and varied skills to work with the children.

Parent: There is a lot to say about professionals. They are a good support for the EAs in the schools. EAs do not always get to go to Professional Development that is necessary. They need more training and we do need more professionals. My child receives training with a consultant for 9 days.

“THERE NEEDS TO BE ENORMOUS PRESSURE PUT ON THE GOVERNMENT”

Parent: What area is this and 9 days how often?

Parent: Connaught. That is 9 days in the year.

Parent: It is not only the special needs students that are benefiting from EAs in the classroom. I have 3 children without special needs and they have benefited a lot from EAs being in their classrooms.

Parent: I was told that my son could not be helped at the school in our area so he was sent to another school that could accommodate him. Now they have to move him back to the first school. They couldn't help him before, now what? Who is going to help him now? No one has thanked the EAs for the job that they do and hopefully keep doing.

Grandparent: I have a grandson who is special needs. What's going to happen to him? Are you going to teach him? My granddaughter also needs help. I am too old

to put up with this b.s. Who is going to take care of them?

Parent: I was a special needs student that required help from an EA. My dream is to now work as an EA. If you cut EAs, you cut my dreams. Is there going to be a place for new EAs?

Enion: We normally have a turn around of about 70 EAs. I encourage you to apply.

Parent: I have a stepchild that has benefited immensely from having 3 EAs in his classroom. It is disconcerting that the people who are making decisions about our children are so far away from the classroom.

Parent: I am a retired special education teacher and I know that we need both the EAs and more professionals. We cannot lose EAs. We probably need more of them. I say this for special needs as well as regular students. I am all for inclusion but for it to work you need strong support. It is not fair to the teachers. The EAs know more about the students that they work with. There needs to be enormous pressure put on the government. We can't afford to sit back.

Parent: What is your plan to get professionals into the rural schools?

McKee: Each school division is finding unique ways to support students. Yes, it is causing challenges and we are aware of these challenges.

The meeting ended with Jackie urging all participants to sign the petition to preserve EAs in the classroom. This petition was presented to the Ministry of Education on May 7, 2010. Parents don't stop voicing your opinions. Everyone needs to stand up for the children who have no voices.



For more information please go to www.saskedworkers.cupe.ca