

Replacing front-line school workers with contractors will erode safety and security at Halton Catholic Schools, CUPE warns

Burlington, Ont. – In a closed in-camera session, Halton Catholic School Board approved a plan to replace experienced school board workers with contract cleaners. Without much notice or consultation with current workers or with the public, the Catholic board's swift move, at a board meeting last Tuesday, to adopt a poverty wages plan to replace long-time employees with inexperienced casual contractors, will affect security and safety at Halton Catholic schools, warned the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), representing over 154 front-line custodians, trade and maintenance workers in 47 schools across Halton.

“Our members are the eyes and ears of the schools,” said David Langdon, president of CUPE 2888. “These are dedicated employees who understand and care about the school and students, and can sense when trouble is brewing and what to do to mitigate some of the problems. Our members also know the students, staff and the parents and can spot strangers in schools.”

In spite of population growth in Halton and being one of the few Ontario school boards in a sound financial position, the Halton Catholic School Board trustees voted to replace existing custodians at Christ the King school in Georgetown and the recently re-built St. Peter's school in Milton with contractors. Our Lady of Fatima in Milton, set to open in September, will also be operated by contractors. The board also plans to hire 25 part-time workers to take over responsibilities currently performed by full-time experienced staff. “This board should be hiring full-time workers and not lowering the standard of employment which will affect the quality of services offered at schools,” said Patricia Webber-Callaghan, CUPE national representative for CUPE 2888. “Hiring lower paid, contract cleaners will simply erode the first hand experience and security that our well-trained members provide to create a safer school environment.”

“The timing of this decision, at the end of the school year, came out of the blue without any meaningful consultation or any explanation as to why the board would adopt a poverty wages scheme to fill schools with rotating contractors,” said Webber-Callaghan. “This is a Catholic Board – they should be showing compassion and leadership by setting standards for employment and respecting their current workers. Who will be next on their replacement list?”

The recently released ‘With Our Best Future in Mind’ report by Dr. Charles Pascal, which recommends the implementation of full-day learning for Ontario's four and five year old children at local schools, would also require enhanced security and the adoption

of cleaning requirements of the Day Nurseries Act. “Our members are fully aware of the importance of our role and presence in schools,” said Webber-Callaghan. “We respond swiftly and take appropriate actions to provide a safer and secure school environment – how can this be replaced by part-time workers and contract cleaners?”

“We will be contacting parents of children in these affected schools to make them aware of how the board’s actions will affect safety and security at their schools,” continued Webber-Callaghan. “The board has to be accountable to the residents of this community and cannot hide behind in-camera sessions to approve actions that affect schools. We will work with the parents and urge this board to do the right thing and hire full-time school board workers employed by the Catholic board.”

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For further information, please contact:

David Langdon, CUPE Local 2888 President, 905-320-6991

Patricia Webber-Callaghan, CUPE National Representative, 905-568-4664

James Chai, CUPE Communications, 416-292-3999

cope491/phw