

Staff Shortages Media Interviews January 2024

Toronto Star – A 'crisis' in GTA school staffing shortages is leading to cancelled classes, burnout and mounting pressures. Principals are sounding the alarm (January 7)

https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/a-crisis-in-gta-school-staffing-shortages-is-leading-to-cancelled-classes-burnout-and-mounting/article_3ba6c71c-9a00-11ee-9654-fb2ba9e206c4.html

Toronto Star – GTA schools are facing 'enormous' support staff shortages from EAs to lunch supervisors. It's impacting student learning and safety (January 8)

https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/gta-schools-are-facing-enormous-support-staff-shortages-from-eas-to-lunch-supervisors-its-impacting/article_3b61a8ae-a995-11ee-9b06-1f8ed0583c69.html

CBC – Substitute teacher and EA shortage hurting students learning, safety: Ontario Principals' Council (January 8)

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/gta-ontario-school-staff-shortages-1.7077530>

Metro Morning – Schools struggling with a shortage of teachers and teaching assistants, principals council says (January 10)

<https://amp.cbc.ca/listen/live-radio/1-39-metro-morning/clip/16034111-schools-struggling-shortage-teachers-teaching-assistants-principals-council>

A 'crisis' in GTA school staffing shortages is leading to cancelled classes, burnout and mounting pressures. Principals are sounding the alarm

Across Ontario, principals are sounding the alarm about daily staffing challenges in all employee groups.

By [Isabel Teotonio](#)

Education Reporter

Sunday, January 7, 2024

7 min to read

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Rachel Birenbaum's daughter has already had several teachers in her Grade 3-4 French Immersion class but is optimistic a new teacher ushers offers more stability.

Steve Russell

As we look to the second half of the school year, the Star explores how staffing levels impact classrooms in a two-part series. This part focuses on teachers and [the next part focuses on educational assistants](#), which are the categories with the most significant challenges.

Up until mid-December, Rachel Birenbaum's daughter had no permanent teacher in her Grade 3-4 French Immersion class. Instead, there was often a revolving door of English-speaking substitutes, and kids regularly played computer games such as Minecraft and Prodigy.

Now Birenbaum hopes a newly assigned teacher ushers in a fresh start for her daughter, who along with other students across the province is preparing to return to school Monday after the winter holiday.

“I can’t even think about what will happen in January if this teacher doesn’t succeed,” said the Toronto mom, whose child attends a public school in the west end. Some parents there are still a little uneasy, hoping nothing unforeseen happens in the first days back to school that sets them back again.

On top of concerns about missed curriculum and learning gaps, Birenbaum says not having a regular teacher resulted in kids with special needs falling through the cracks and not getting the necessary supports — including her daughter who requires literacy help.

“We need our basic public institutions, especially something as foundational as a school, to be staffed appropriately and to function at a reasonable standard,” she said, adding some kids in the class have had roughly 10 teachers, and a string of occasionals, in three years.

Across the province, [principals are sounding the alarm about daily staffing challenges](#) in all employee groups, including teachers and educational assistants who help students with special needs.

Last November, the [Ontario Principals’ Council](#), which represents 5,400 principals and vice-principals in public schools, issued a statement saying: “The crisis must be addressed immediately” — concerns echoed by organizations representing Catholic and [French school](#) administrators.

“Staff shortages have a negative impact on student learning, safety and engagement, and have led to an increase in mental health issues, stress, burnout and illness for staff,” it reads.

Since then, Ontario Principals' Council President Ralph Nigro says the situation has become more dire. By December school administrators were grappling with increased staff absences due to illness and thinning resources because retired teachers allowed to work 50 days without it affecting their pension were starting to hit their cap.

Easing the pressure

Staffing woes have been an issue in recent years, particularly during the pandemic, but the situation has worsened in some smaller school boards, Nigro told the Star. Shortages, he says, stem from insufficient staff allocations, vacancies that surface, and not having enough replacements to fill leaves and absences. Some boards can’t find qualified candidates, some can’t attract applicants to rural communities, and some say the pay for certain jobs is too low. When a position isn’t covered, administrators scramble. It could lead to classes being cancelled or combined; teachers and educational assistants getting reassigned; students dealing with a rotation of substitutes; and unqualified parents and community members volunteering to supervise.

The Ministry of Education is trying to ease the pressure. Last year, about 3,000 educational assistants were hired, and this year more than 2,000 teachers added. It also created a new certificate so students in teacher education programs can work as substitutes; is speeding up certification for internationally educated teachers; and is co-leading a working group with stakeholders to tackle the teacher shortage. To address the French teacher shortage it has launched a four-year plan, and the [government is training an additional 110 French-language teachers this year](#).

“Our government continues to use innovative methods to streamline the hiring of teachers across the province to support students in getting back to basics on what matters most: reading, writing and literacy skills,” said Isha Chaudhuri, spokesperson for Education Minister Stephen Lecce.

And while the recent contract between the province and the [public elementary teachers’ union includes hiring about 400 teacher specialists](#) for reading, the Ontario Principals' Council says that won't make much of a difference in the daily staffing shortages in thousands of schools, nor address the need for more educational assistants.

Taking on extra duties

An Ontario Principals' Council survey in the fall of about 1,000 administrators revealed more than half struggled with unfilled jobs multiple times per week and had more unfilled jobs than in early 2023. Nearly 80 per cent said teacher shortages, unfilled teacher absences and support staff absences, were as bad or worse than last year.

Nigro says most elementary school principals and vice-principals take on extra duties during the day, such as being a supply teacher, an educational assistant or lunchroom supervisor. That takes a toll, he says, noting long term disability claims by administrators in public boards have risen more than 500 per cent since the end of 2019. And he notes that across the province a lack of administrators may worsen since there's a "noticeable decrease" in teachers wanting to become school leaders because of the associated stress.

Among Catholic administrators there has been a 250 per cent increase in mental health claims over the last year, says Michael MacPherson, president of the Catholic Principals’ Council of Ontario, representing 2,100 members. He attributes that to “stress, shortages, workload, and principals having to take on other people’s jobs during the day.”

Cathy Abraham, president of the Ontario Public School Boards’ Association representing English public boards, says, “We’re doing as much as we can to find ways to come up with short-term and long-term solutions” to staffing challenges.

“Every administration, and teacher, recognizes the importance of having a consistent person in front of the classroom,” she said. “Continuity ... really matters.”

Cancelled classes

Rachel Chernos Lin, chair of the Toronto District School Board, the county's largest with 235,000 students, says staffing issues are a "significant concern." And a "very generous sick leave policy" means "the other challenge is that we spend an awful lot of money replacing people."

In Ontario, permanent staff – including administrators, teachers and education workers – are entitled to 11 sick days at full pay, and 120 days of short-term leave at 90 per cent of their salary. (A provincial task force will examine sick leave data and teacher absenteeism.) Unfilled positions kick-start a cascading chain of events. Students miss out on curriculum; administrators may need to supervise classes; and teachers get reassigned, losing out on preparation time, which is when they create activities, mark tests and contact parents.

Helen Victoros, president of the Elementary Teachers of Toronto, says it's "terrible" when teachers who support special education or English language learners have to cancel classes and be reassigned, because it impacts "some of our most vulnerable students." "Everybody is just scrambling to try and make do with diminishing supports and resources," says Victoros, whose local chapter represents 11,000 public-school teachers.

The TDSB says a key challenge is when supply teachers — the board has a full roster — don't pick up available jobs. This happens for various reasons, including someone who doesn't want to be at a particular school or isn't available because they're working at another board.



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Isabel Teotonio

Coverage for absent teachers between September and early November was on average 91 per cent for elementary and secondary teachers, compared with 96 and 99 per cent, respectively, during the same period in 2018. Still, it's better than the [historic lows during the pandemic](#) with percentages in the 70s, and [last spring when they were in the 80s](#), prompting the board to redeploy about 100 central staff and hire an extra 235 supply teachers.

"We're actively working on how we can increase those fill rates to ensure that jobs are covered," said a board spokesperson.

In the York Region District School Board, which has 128,000 students, average coverage in mid-December for elementary and secondary teachers was 96 and 90 per cent, respectively. It started with a full roster of supply teachers in September, but some were hired into long-term occasional and permanent positions, so it's looking for replacements.

And even though the Peel District School Board, which has 153,000 students, hired 470 substitute teachers in the past year, there's "limited supply" because many also work for other boards. There, coverage from the start of the school year to early December has ranged, at times as high as 98 and low as 83 per cent for elementary teachers, and 96 and 69 per cent for high school teachers. The board says it's making every effort to hire teachers and has participated in university hiring fairs and recruited new teacher graduates.

While teacher shortages are occurring nationally and internationally, [a report by the Ontario College of Teachers](#) attributes the shortage in the province to an increase in annual retirements, pandemic disruptions prompting some to quit, enrolment growth in some regions and fewer certifications. (After a decade-long teacher surplus, [the province in 2015 extended teacher training](#) to two years and cut enrolment. In 2022, there were about 4,500 admissions to teachers' colleges, compared with 6,300 in 2014.)

"Ontario population growth, along with teacher retirements in the years ahead, may worsen shortages in many regions of the province," it reads.

Searching for solutions

Organizations representing administrators are in talks with the province and have made recommendations. For instance, they suggest minimizing the time between hiring and onboarding staff, returning to a one-year certification program for teachers and increasing student enrolment. Also, allowing retired educators to work as substitutes for 95 days in an instructional year up from 50 — this was temporarily allowed during the pandemic, but ended in June.

Chaudhuri, the minister's spokesperson, said "extending the number of days retired educators can work is a positive intervention."

To boost the number of qualified teachers, starting Jan. 1 the Ontario College of Teachers cut application processing times for internationally educated teachers from 120 to within 60

business days. And to address short-term needs, a new [Transitional Certificate of Qualification and Registration](#) was launched in August, allowing eligible students in teacher education programs to work in schools while finishing their program. (In 2021 and 2022, the province introduced a similar certificate, but it was a temporary emergency measure.)

The province has also launched [an action plan to address the French language teacher shortage](#) and this academic year an extra 40 teacher education spaces at the Université de l'Ontario Français and 70 at the University of Ottawa were funded. (The province has added 780 French and English language teacher education spaces since 2021.)

Meanwhile, the province and the Ontario Teachers' Federation are co-leading a working group with education stakeholders on improving recruitment and retention for occasional and permanent teachers. The plan is to implement solutions this academic year.

Patrick Daly, president of the Ontario Catholic School Trustees' Association, representing English Catholic school boards, says the ministry has been "very, very open" to suggestions. "No one can just wave a wand, and this will be solved," said Daly. "These are very complex issues. But I know that everyone, for sure, is searching for solutions."

[Isabel Teotonio](#) is a Toronto-based reporter covering education for the Star. Follow her on Twitter: [@lizzy74](#).

GTA schools are facing 'enormous' support staff shortages from EAs to lunch supervisors. It's impacting student learning and safety

According to the Ontario Principals' Council, these daily staff shortages - in all job categories - stem from insufficient staff allocations, vacancies and not having replacements to cover leaves and absences.

By [Isabel Teotonio](#)

Education Reporter

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Ralph Nigro, president of the Ontario Principals' Council, says staffing shortages across the province are at "crisis" levels.

Photo supplied

As we look to the second half of the school year, the Star explores how staffing levels impact classrooms in a two-part series. This part focuses on educational assistants, and the [other part looks at teacher](#), which are the categories with the most significant challenges.

When a colleague is absent, Habiba Aden braces for a difficult day.

She's an educational assistant in the Toronto public school board, working with some of the most vulnerable students in the system who have complex needs.

The job is tough to begin with — she has been punched, kicked and head-butted — but when there's no substitute for an absent colleague, it gets tougher, says Aden, who works at a school that provides intensive special education.

When there's an unfilled position, she says educational assistants — commonly called EAs — give up their breaks and take on more responsibilities. That leads to staff burnout and

students are more likely to act out because their routines are disrupted, and they don't get the attention they need.

"There are days when you get very exhausted and mentally drained," says Aden, who works with kids who have intellectual, physical, medical and behavioural needs. "Every time someone is away sick it gets more challenging."

The Toronto District School Board says it's committed to improving coverage of unfilled jobs across the system.

"We recognize that when enough occasional staff do not pick up open jobs, other staff step up to help and we're truly appreciative of their hard work," said spokesperson Ryan Bird.

Across the province, principals are grappling with daily staff shortages in all job categories, according to the [Ontario Principals' Council](#), which represents 5,400 administrators. Shortages stem from insufficient staff allocations, vacancies, and not having replacements to cover leaves and absences.

"Support staff shortages this year are enormous, in particular at the educational assistant position," OPC president Ralph Nigro told the Star, adding this impacts student learning and safety.

He says EA wages are low — it's the lowest paid position in the classroom — so it's tough to recruit and retain staff for such a demanding job. According to [the federal government's job bank](#), EAs earn a median hourly wage of \$24 in Ontario.

On its surface, that may not seem low, but Nigro says when you consider that many positions are for about 30 hours a week, and 40 weeks a year, "That's not a lot of money for people to live on."

Provincial organizations representing public, Catholic and French administrators are in talks with the Ministry of Education on how to improve staffing levels, especially amongst teachers and EAs, which they say have the most significant shortages. To increase the number of EAs, they recommend a signing bonus, replacing the required college diploma with a quick training program, improved working conditions and better salaries.

The ministry says it values education workers and recognizes the economic challenges faced by Ontarians. Recent bargaining with unions representing education workers — the [Canadian Union of Public Employees](#), the Ontario Council of Educational Workers, and the [Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario](#) — led to negotiated wage increases of \$1-an-hour, which equates to a 4.2 per cent increase for someone making \$39,000 a year.

"The government continues to invest in the recruitment and retention of education workers who make a difference in Ontario classrooms," said Isha Chaudhuri, spokesperson for Education Minister Stephen Lecce.

She says since taking office in 2018, it has hired 7,500 additional teachers and education workers, including more than 3,500 EAs, and increased mental health funding by more than 550 per cent.

Annual funding to support the salaries and benefits for EAs is provided mostly through the Special Education Grant of the Grants for Student Needs. This year, the ministry gave boards about \$20 million for additional services that support student well-being and maintain clean schools — funding that could also go toward additional staff, such as EAs.

While the province is responsible for setting policy that governs the allocation of funds, it's up to boards to use the money based on local need. This gives them flexibility to make decisions about staffing and program delivery that best meets the needs of its students.

In Toronto, [public school principals are struggling with daily absences in all staff areas](#), and “challenges with the initial school allocations that they were given at the start of the school year,” says Rita Gallippi, who represents public school administrators.

“They continue to do their best to support students with more complex needs while managing with fewer support staff like educational assistants, special needs assistants, child and youth workers, clerical staff, and lunchroom supervisors,” said the chair of the Toronto School Administrators' Association.

Gallippi says a key challenge for elementary schools this academic year has been the [reduction of lunchroom supervisors](#). Some schools no longer have one lunchroom supervisor for each kindergarten class, which means having to sometimes combine two kindergarten classes or spread-out students to eat lunch with other kindergarten classes. She says this is problematic because these classes are staffed by a teacher and a designated early childhood educator all day, but at lunch — “the most unstructured part of the day” — classes are combined and may be overseen by one lunchroom supervisor caring for at least 40 children.

“These are our youngest students and sometimes they have exceptionalities and needs that require additional attention,” she explains.

The TDSB says the province's elimination of pandemic-related funding and a decline in enrolment has resulted in fewer staff. (As part of [this year's budget](#), the [TDSB cut 423 school-based positions that were temporarily created](#) — including about 200 lunchroom supervisors, 35 child and youth workers and 29 clerical staff — because time-limited pandemic-related funds from the ministry had expired.)

“The TDSB continues to focus on ensuring all lunchroom supervisor positions are filled to the best of our ability and is working to address the uptake of open jobs when someone is away,” said Bird, noting administrators can adjust schedules to best support student needs. Overall, the board says there isn't a staffing shortage in most job categories, but it has been a particular challenge finding replacements for absent EAs. The percentage of EA jobs filled by a substitute between September and early November was on average 72 per cent. By

comparison, it was 79 per cent for lunchroom supervisors and 93 per cent for designated early childhood educators.

Meanwhile at the Peel District School Board, the percentage of EA jobs covered from September and early December ranged, going as high as 64 and as low as 28 per cent. (Coverage for designated early childhood educators was as high as 96 and low as 70 per cent in that time.) A board spokesperson says, "ongoing recruitment initiatives are actively aimed at improving absence fill rates."

And at the York Region District School Board, the greatest need for new hires is educational assistants — there, coverage in mid-December was 84 per cent, whereas for teachers and designated early childhood educators it was in the 90s.



John Weatherup, president of the Toronto Education Workers CUPE Local 4400, at his office in Toronto, December 28, 2023.

Andrew Francis Wallace

Boards say they are working to recruit new hires and improve coverage. But fewer folks are wanting to become an EA, and more are quitting earlier, says John Weatherup, president of the Toronto Education Workers CUPE Local 4400. That's because the job involves working with students who have very complex needs, which can be physically demanding and subject to violence.

"It's one of the most difficult jobs at the board," he says. "People have no idea the severity of issues (they) deal with."

And when EAs are absent or on leave, there are few replacements, he says. Many people don't want the job because there's no guaranteed number of hours, start pay is low, and they're likely to earn more working at a coffee shop, he says. But not having enough replacements can mean there may not be enough staff to carry out safety plans or lockdown procedures. And there's an academic impact to students, who are among the most vulnerable, because they don't get the help they need.

Concerns about safety are echoed by educational assistant Aden, who believes staffing challenges are fueling an increase in violent incidents. She's part of the TDSB's joint health and safety committee and says reports by staff in all job categories about workplace violence has been on the rise. In 2022, there were 376 reports by TDSB staff in September, followed by 473 in October and 434 in November. By comparison, in 2023 there were 516, 668 and 665, respectively. True figures are higher, she says, because some occasional staff don't report incidents, fearful it could jeopardize their job.

The board, however, says the increase is because of many factors, including enrolment and in-person learning having increased year-over year and some students still struggling with pandemic-related impacts on wellbeing. (Research shows Canadian teens experiencing mental health crises rose significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic.)

"The job can be very stressful," Aden says about being an EA. "But it can also be very rewarding because you're making a change and you're helping students. We do what we do because we love the children."

[Isabel Teotonio](#) is a Toronto-based reporter covering education for the Star. Follow her on Twitter: [@lzy74](#).