



## **Addressing Staff Shortages in Ontario Schools MPP Advocacy Week 2023**

Ontario's publicly funded schools have been experiencing staff shortages, in every employee group, for many years. As with various other sectors, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the shortage, but while schools are back to in-person learning, these shortages continue.

The Ontario Principals' Council, representing 5,400 principals and vice-principals in the province's public elementary and secondary schools, is extremely concerned about the shortages and the negative impact they are having on our students and our schools. While we have expressed our concerns to the government, short-term solutions have not resolved the issue. Our schools – and the staff who work in them – are at a breaking point. If this crisis is not addressed immediately, with long-term and sustainable solutions, we believe our system is at risk of collapse.

In February 2023, we conducted a survey among public school principals and vice-principals. 1,868 of them responded. These are people who are in schools, on the front lines, trying to manage learning and safety for over 1.2 million students every day. Their experiences, recommendations and suggestions must be heeded.

Principals and vice-principals reported that

- 46% have staff shortages 5 days per week.
- 70% have up to 20% of their staff positions unfilled every day, meaning they cannot find a replacement.
- 60% use unqualified adults to fill staff vacancies.
- Most staff shortages are Educational Assistants (54%) and teachers (35%).
- To deal with staff shortages, principals are having to cancel classes, combine two or more classes, hire Teacher College students who have not yet graduated, hire unqualified adults, use parent volunteers, infringe on teacher prep time and move EAs – who should be working with students with special needs – into classrooms.
- Despite the return to in-school learning, 77% of schools have the same number of, or more than, the staff shortages that they had a year ago.

School leaders reported numerous negative repercussions due to staff shortages.

- An increase in behavioural issues, violence, fights, bullying and thefts due to fewer adults in the school, all leading to schools that are less safe
- Decreased adult supervision in and around the school, resulting in less student monitoring and fewer adults available to respond to illness, injury, accidents, emergencies, fights or unsafe behaviour
- A negative impact on learning due to inconsistency of teachers who are away/ill and cancelled/combined classes, resulting in less teaching time per student
- Less time for students with special needs to spend with their Educational Assistants (EAs), who are often re-assigned to classrooms to cover for absent teachers
- A disproportionately negative impact on some of our most marginalized, at-risk students as specialized programs are cancelled or cut back
- An increase in the number of students and the number of times that students with special needs are not able to attend school due to a lack of EAs
- An increase in mental health issues, stress, burnout and illness for staff who are trying to fill gaps without the human or financial resources to adequately do so
- Principals and vice-principals having to cover classes and supervision, taking them away from their primary school responsibilities and legislative duties.

We recently met with representatives from the Ontario Student Trustees Association. All of them identified staff shortages as an issue directly impacting students in a negative way. They shared many of the same concerns, including a lack of supply/occasional teachers, unqualified teachers, cancelled classes, larger classes, inconsistent learning, learning loss, fewer class options, stressed staff, inability to form meaningful relationships with staff, inadequate support and learning opportunities for students with special needs and a lack of specialized teachers.

It is clear that continued staff shortages are untenable, unsafe and have a negative impact on learning, behaviour and safety for all students. We have developed a list of recommendations that we urge the government to start implementing immediately.

### **Recommendations**

- Focus on attracting and retaining permanent staff instead of on trying to find supply, retired or occasional staff.
- Return to a one-year B.Ed/Teacher College degree, or make the second year a paid internship, where the students spend the entire year in a school teaching.
- Significantly reduce the time that the Ontario College of Teachers takes to grant licenses to recent graduates and to internationally trained educators.
- Keep the 95 day rule to return to education without pension penalty in place until more permanent solutions can be found.
- Allow staff to move between school boards without an impact on their seniority.

- Cut back on ministry/board initiatives that are not critical until shortage issues can be resolved.
- Encourage a more civil and respectful public discourse related to educators.
- Ensure the Parent Code of Conduct is enforced by school boards and the government, so no educator faces unsafe, disrespectful, racist behaviour (physical or verbal) from parents, guardians or advocacy groups, leading to stress leaves/illness.
- Prioritize supports to those who require sick days to manage the number of absences, including additional mental health supports for staff.