

CUPE COMMUNIQUÉ

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Paying it forward: CUPE education workers step up to support public and colleagues hard hit by COVID-19

TORONTO, ON – Education workers represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) in Ontario are gearing up to help friends and neighbours whose lives and workplaces have been upended by the COVID-19 pandemic.

CUPE school board leaders have strongly endorsed the provincial government’s “community involvement” initiative, which was announced this morning (Saturday). It paves the way for the union’s education workers to assist in long-term care homes, group homes, and other congregate care settings.

“CUPE education workers have a strong sense of community and they know there’s a critical need for staffing in health, long-term care and social services. Many of us have been looking for ways to lend our support and so we’re pleased to endorse this voluntary plan,” said Laura Walton, President of CUPE’s Ontario School Board Council of Unions (OSBCU).

She pointed out that a CUPE school board local in Kenora was already working to redeploy their custodians to help with cleaning needs in area hospitals.

Very few education workers have been laid off during Ontario’s school closures and many – including custodians, early childhood educators, and education assistants – are still on the job, maintaining schools and supporting students who are learning at home.

Walton confirmed this leaves “many CUPE members available and eager to support vulnerable residents and exhausted colleagues.” Among those coming forward for secondment to other sectors are custodians, youth workers, psychologists, maintenance staff, education assistants, social workers, paraprofessionals, special-needs teachers and food service workers.

But even as CUPE education workers roll up their sleeves to volunteer for redeployment, they are mindful that their colleagues in other sectors have either suffered mass layoffs or are exhausted or ill – all while working under orders issued under the government’s emergency powers.

“As public sector workers, we’ve called for all redeployments to be voluntary and for all laid-off workers to be re-hired,” said Walton. “But most of all, we recognize the harsh reality that the pandemic has revealed about the state of public services in the province, and what it means for workers and people who are vulnerable.”

COVID-19 has only amplified what CUPE public sector workers have been saying for years: provincial underfunding and understaffing have left Ontario’s public services diminished, dangerously overstretched and without the resilience needed to weather a pandemic.

“This virus has shown every Ontarian the catastrophic effects of starving our vital services of money and resources. The people who rely on those services deserve better and the people who deliver them do, too,” concluded Walton.

