

## CUPE urges school funding review

(Toronto Star- October 2) Ontario schools have 6,000 fewer education assistants than they need to help the province's most needy children, the physically disabled, autistic and students with extreme behavioural problems, according to a report released today by the Canadian Union of Public Employees.

Despite a \$20 million boost in August from Queen's Park to hike the salaries of education assistants, it would take \$189 million more for schools to hire the education assistants the funding formula is supposed to provide, said CUPE vice-president Fred Hahn at a press conference in Toronto this morning.

Only the New Democratic Party has pledged an immediate review of the school funding formula that is shortchanging the province's most vulnerable children, he said. The Liberals have promised a review by 2010 and the Progressive Conservatives, who designed the formula, have not set a date for an overhaul.

"The government announced a whole bunch of money for education assistants this summer, which was welcome and it sounded really good, but in reality, it's a fraction of what we need to stem the layoffs of hundreds of education assistants," said Hahn.

A report prepared for CUPE by economist Hugh Mackenzie said Premier Dalton McGuinty pledged \$20 million in August to boost the salaries of the education assistants across the province who work with often severely disabled children, as well as kindergarten students in large inner-city classrooms.

"While the funding formula suggests there should be nearly 28,000 education assistants in schools, there are barely 21,000," said Mackenzie, because the province gives school boards much less to pay the workers than the school boards actually pay, so school boards make up the difference by laying some off.

CUPE estimates up to 300 educational assistants have been laid off or had their hours reduced in the past year.

"The government claimed it was increasing salary benchmarks by 22 per cent, but it actually works out to only about 2.4 per cent more, which leaves school boards without the funding to actually hire the number they need," said McKenzie.

At Toronto's Beverly School for the disabled, education assistant Bonnie Dineen often is bitten, pinched or hit as she works to help students struggling with physical and behavioural challenges.

She doesn't blame the children for their aggression, "but they get frustrated," said Dineen. "Many are non-verbal, and our jobs are so important to helping these little kids try to learn in very different ways."

Because of funding cuts, Dineen only works half-time with a class that she used to assist each day - a cutback she says is not good for her students.

At Toronto's Sunny View School for the physically disabled, education assistant Nancy Arnott would spend half her days changing students' diapers, helping them eat lunch, helping them off the bus after the school lost three education assistants due to cutbacks last year.

"I used to be able to work with them on math and academics full-time, but now many education assistants run from class to class helping unload children from busses and juggling academic and personal care.

"We are their support - we have to be there for them," said Arnott. "But there needs to be more of us."