

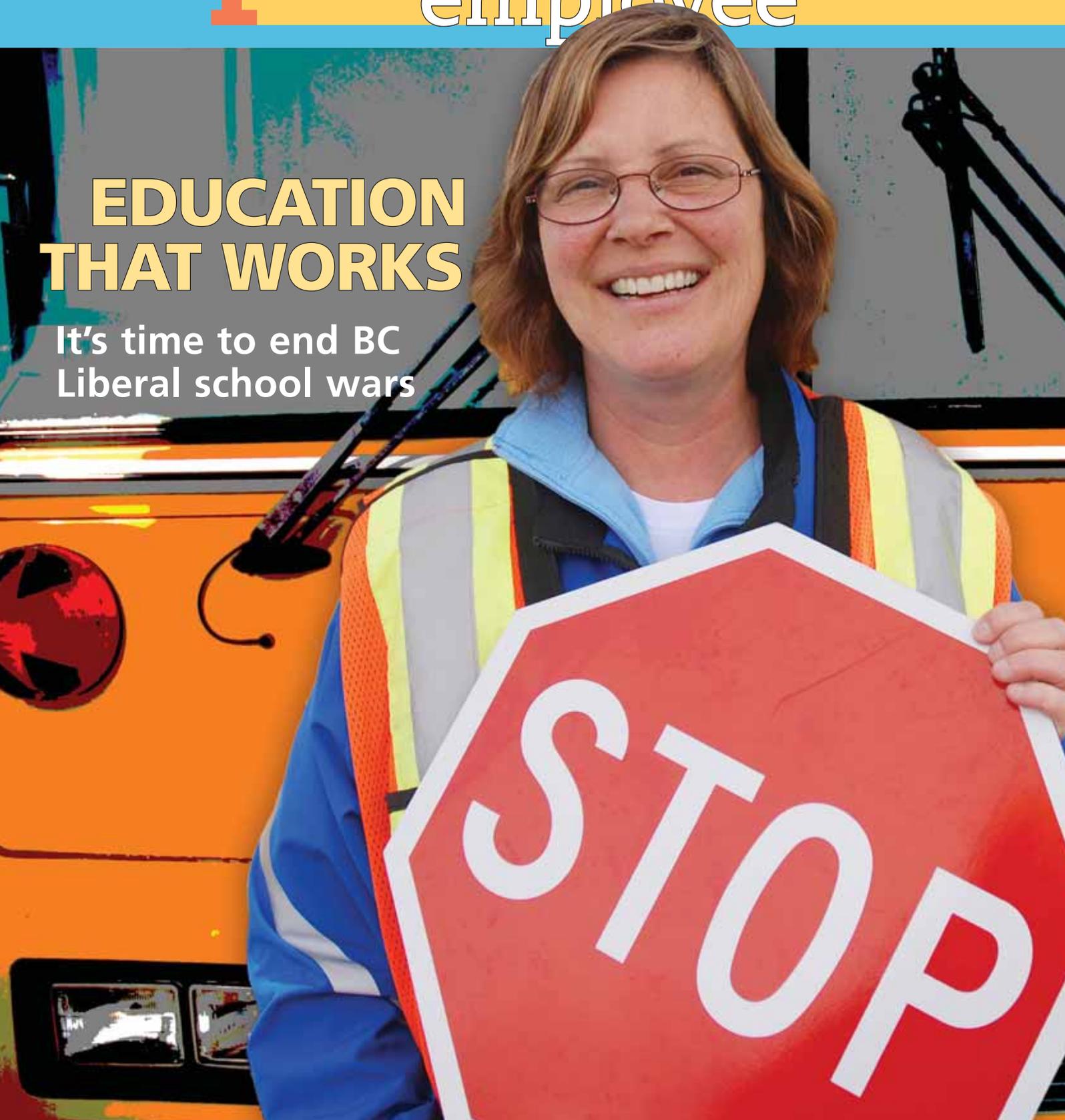
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SUPPORTING HAITI 7

## EDUCATION THAT WORKS

It's time to end BC  
Liberal school wars





# EDUCATION THAT WORKS



## IT'S TIME TO END BC LIBERAL SCHOOL WARS



**F**or the 26,000 CUPE members who work in the K-12 system, the 2010-11 school year promises to be one of great complexity. Rumours of further erosion of school trustees' roles, the impact of funding shortfalls, and new initiatives like all-day kindergarten will all be in play this year.

CUPE members have no shortage of vision when it comes to mapping the future of public education. But the path to that future can be hard to find with a provincial government that pays lip service to education while acting unilaterally and starving districts of necessary funds.

Over the years, school districts in B.C. have borne the cumulative impact of additional costs – many downloaded, but not funded, by the provincial government. The BC Association of School Business Officials estimates that, as of 2010-11, the system is short by \$300 million.

CUPE National researcher John Malcolmson says that new costs include things like special needs, literacy and arts programs, medical premiums, contract settlements, hydro increases, carbon compliance, as well as the cost of 'crisis-driven' cuts like those to the Annual Facilities Grant.

"With all the new unfunded costs and responsibilities placed on boards of education, districts now get on average at least \$500 less per student than a decade ago," says Malcolmson.

An outdated education funding formula, as well as unfunded costs, is a key factor in the financial crisis. The enrolment-driven formula has hurt



#### □ PRECIOUS CARGO

Jodi Cyron is a school bus driver in Trail and a member of CUPE 1285. Getting students to and from school safely is the job of some 1,500 CUPE members. Most rural school districts need buses driving through all weather conditions – and in many cases the trips can be an hour or more each way.

many school districts in a period of declining student populations. CUPE research indicates that even after taking into account reduced costs with fewer students, districts lose more than \$3,700 when a student is no longer enrolled.

In growing districts, the formula doesn't deliver either. Brian Ellis, a custodian in the rapidly-growing Surrey school district, says that cuts mean "schools simply aren't as clean as they used to be." His comments are echoed by Janice Meehan, president of CUPE 728 in Surrey: "This year we lose 26 clerical and 20 janitorial department positions, even though we are expecting over 1,200 more students."

#### Shared services

When Education Minister Margaret MacDiarmid appointed the provincial comptroller-general to review Vancouver's budget in April, she gave instructions that administrative expenditures and opportunities for economies of scale be considered. This was followed by a May announcement that the Ministry of Education had selected four school districts (Vancouver, North Vancouver, Surrey and Kamloops-Thompson) to provide "early leadership" on shared payroll and business administration systems. The stated goal is to "put savings back in the classroom."

Denice Bardua, president of CUPE 4990 in Quesnel schools, works in payroll and accounts receivable. She says there are questions about whether shared services would mean delays addressing local payroll-related problems. Bardua also raises concerns about whether local school districts will really benefit if there are savings. To date, comments from Minister MacDiarmid offer no assurances.

#### Education Assistants

About 12,500 Education Assistants (EAs) comprise the largest group of workers in CUPE's K-12 sector. Most work full school days, but are paid part-time hours, providing direct educational services and support to students, many of whom have special needs.

Cherryl MacLeod, a child and youth care worker and president of CUPE 1285 in the Kootenay-Columbia school district, sees the impact that she and colleagues could make with the children, given the right time and resources. "It is extremely frustrating to not be able to help all of the students in school," she says. "We know that if we could just give them the support that they need, their lives would ultimately be so much better."

In March, CUPE BC and the BC Teachers' Federation issued an updated joint paper, *Roles and Responsibilities of Teachers and Teacher Assistants/Education Assistants*. June Kaiser, co-chair of CUPE BC's K-12 committee and president of CUPE 718 in Richmond schools, says it has been a very important resource for teachers and education assistants. Kaiser brought her experience as an EA to her work on *Roles and Responsibilities*.

She describes the project as an example of the kind of constructive leadership that CUPE has shown in improving working and learning conditions in the area of special needs students. Kaiser also worked closely with her EA colleagues on *Recognition and Respect* – CUPE's groundbreaking 2008 survey of the unpaid work of EAs in the province.

#### Early learning initiatives

The BC government has emphasized new early learning initiatives than can offer potential for families and for CUPE members if properly funded and integrated into the existing education system.

To date, the StrongStart program, aimed at "school readiness" for children in the 0-5 age group, has been the government's priority. With more than 300 programs in place, StrongStart has grown rapidly in all regions of the province.



CUPE locals have worked to ensure that programs are integrated into the existing K-12 system and thus able to gain access to existing expertise and support. In many districts, the programs are viewed as part of the education system and staffed by school district employees.

CUPE 561 president Dave Ginter worked with the Coquitlam school district to ensure that StrongStart early childhood educators were part of the system. And as CUPE members they appreciate the stability and benefits of the collective agreement, including access to paid educational opportunities.

This year will see new all-day kindergarten programs for five-year-olds. More programming for 3- and 4-year-olds is planned, but given the B.C. government's penchant for privatization, there is concern that proposed "new partnerships with the private sector" could see a wave of big box private operators.

### School closures and enrolment trends

One of the most difficult issues for students, families and communities has been the massive closure of schools throughout the province. More than 200 schools have closed or will be closing across B.C., with many more under consideration by boards.

CUPE has identified inconsistencies in government's enrolment projections and an overestimation of the enrolment decline in 2010-11, leading to crisis-driven decision-making. New space needed for kindergarten – combined with the fact that enrolment declines will be replaced by annual enrolment increases beginning in 2015 – means that closures are likely very short-sighted.

### Fixing funding and relationships

The past year has been characterized by very public criticism of the provincial government's 'highest funding ever' claim. Beginning in response to the August 2009 cancellation of the Annual Facilities Grant, and continuing through the year, parents, students, trustees, unions and communities have worked very publicly, and often together, to raise the issue of under-funding.

**ON THE COVER** CUPE 459 (Sooke Schools) crossing guard Julie Brown.

Not surprisingly, the legislative committee doing province-wide consultations on the 2010 budget heard from many public education advocates. The committee's recommendations identified important priorities for K-12 education.

The B.C. government was urged to work with boards of education to conduct a comprehensive review of the education funding formula, and to work cooperatively with boards on a review of the administrative and reporting requirements for school districts and in the Ministry of Education.



Unfortunately, the B.C. government seems to have gone in the opposite direction. Instead, full funding is nowhere in sight, and the Minister of Education brought down a hammer on the Vancouver board of education for speaking out and unilaterally imposed shared services studies on four school districts.

Deb Taylor, co-chair of CUPE BC's K-12 committee and president of CUPE 723 in the Campbell River school district, says it is a matter of political priorities. She points to numbers crunched by Joan Axford, secretary-treasurer of Saanich schools, showing that education gets a much smaller share of government spending than it did 20 years ago – falling from 26 per cent of the provincial budget in 1991 to 15 per cent now.

Taylor's advice to government is to take the legislative committee's recommendations seriously, because MLAs will continue to feel the heat until education is made a higher priority.

### □ MAKING IT WORK

Gerry Whitlock is a mechanic working in Cranbrook in the Southeast Kootenay School District. He is one of 600 CUPE trades people who maintain school facilities and vehicles. Doing the work in-house, be it plumbing, electrical, painting, HVAC, carpentry or other, is more cost effective than contracting out.