UNDERSTAFFING OF EDUCATION WORKERS IN ONTARIO SCHOOLS

The Case for Dedicated Investments for More Staff to Support Students



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OSBCU CSCSO

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INTRODUCTION

There is a staffing crisis in Ontario schools, the evidence for which is accumulating constantly. When collected together, surveys of education workers, reports from a variety of organizations and academics, and data released by the Government of Ontario show a very clear picture: there are not enough education workers in schools and students are not receiving the supports they need to reach their potential and succeed.

Despite government claims of "historic investments" in education, all 72 school boards in Ontario were affected by worsening student-to-staff ratios for education worker classifications in the 2025-26 school year compared to 2018-19, the year the Progressive Conservative government took office. Sixty of these boards have a worse staffing ratio for 4 or more education worker classifications, and 12 have worse ratios for 10 or more education worker classifications. That means fewer staff per student, students going without the supports they need, and increasing workloads for staff across the entire system.

In 2025 CUPE-OSBCU released a series of reports on the understaffing crisis in Ontario school boards, based on a survey of over 12,000 CUPE education workers from across the province. In that survey, 92.3% of respondents said that more staff are needed in schools to improve supports for students.[1] Education workers reported increased workloads and unmet needs in schools because there are not enough staff to do the work.

The survey of CUPE education workers also found that almost 54% of respondents said they do unpaid work for the school board, equal to an estimated 1335 Full-Time Equivalent jobs worth of free work done by CUPE education workers.[2] The government is relying on unpaid work by a relatively low-wage predominantly female workforce to fill in the gaps of systemic underfunding and understaffing.

[1] Members were asked "Would services for students, staff, or the school community be improved with more staff in your classification?" and "Would services for students, staff, or the school community be improved with more staff in classifications other than your own?" 92.3% of respondents answered yes to one, or both, of these questions.
[2] CUPE-OSBCU, "OSBCU Services Survey : Provincial Results", March 2025, https://osbcu.ca/wp-content/uploads/sites/352/2025/03/Province-Wide-OSBCU-Services-Survey.pdf.

This report expands on the results of the 2025 survey to provide additional evidence of the need for more staff in schools across the province. Students' needs are going unmet in the Ontario education system. A necessary step towards meeting student needs, prioritizing student achievement and ensuring schools have the resources they need is to fund schools sufficiently to hire more education workers. CUPE-OSBCU has developed proposals aimed at negotiating such improvements to help meet student needs. Increased staffing is a centrepiece of the CUPE-OSBCU bargaining proposals in the 2026 round of central negotiations with the provincial government and school boards.

OVERVIEW OF SOURCES

This report compiles data from a number of government sources, including school board financial documents (which include data on Full-Time Equivalent permanent staff and enrolment numbers)[3], student enrolment in special education programs[4], and elementary class size.[5] The numbers pulled from these datasets do not tell the full story of the understaffing crisis. They provide a window into pervasive problems and help show conclusively that the myth of the "historic investment in education" purported by this government is simply not true.

This report also includes evidence supplied through a variety of reports from other organizations, including People for Education, the Ontario Autism Coalition, the Ontario Principals' Council, Community Living Ontario, and the Office of the Auditor General of Ontario. Survey data first published by CUPE-OSBCU in 2025 is also included in this report to round out the analysis, highlighting the ongoing effects of understaffing on students and education workers.

[3] Data on staffing is found in Appendix H of school boards' audited Financial Statements (and Estimates and Revised Estimates). Data on enrolment is found in Schedule 13 of these documents. Data is made publicly available by the Government of Ontario at https://data.ontario.ca/dataset/school-board-financial-reports-estimates-revised-estimates-and-financial-statements

[4] Data on special education enrolment by exceptionality is made publicly available by the Government of Ontario at https://data.ontario.ca/dataset/special-education-enrolment-by-exceptionality.

[5] Data on elementary school class size is made publicly available by the Government of Ontario at https://data.ontario.ca/dataset/elementary-class-size

CLASSIFICATIONS

Several education worker classifications are identified specifically in this report because data is readily available for those classifications. Specifically, Educational Assistants (EAs), Designated Early Childhood Educators (DECEs), school office staff, custodians, maintenance/trades workers, professional support personnel, library technicians and information technology staff will be addressed directly in this report.

Specific mention of some education worker classifications is not intended to imply that these are the only classifications that matter in a strong public school system, or that the understaffing crisis does not extend to other classifications. Inclusion of these classifications is a result of having more data available for them than for others. More staff are needed in all classifications at school boards across the province, including, but not limited to, instructors, school board central administration, student supervisors, and a host of others.

EDUCATIONAL ASSISTANTS

DESIGNATED EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS

CUSTODIANS AND CARETAKERS

SCHOOL OFFICE STAFF (SECRETARIAL/CLERICAL)

TRADES/MAINTENANCE

PROFESSIONAL STAFF

LIBRARY TECHNICIANS AND INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY STAFF

EDUCATIONAL ASSISTANTS

Educational Assistants (EAs) provide crucial supports to students in a variety of ways, most notably (although not exclusively) for students enrolled in special education. There is nearly unanimous consensus that students' special educational needs are not being met and that understaffing of EAs is a fundamental reason. In fact, there is broad recognition that funding for special education is not enough to properly fund all the supports that are needed.[6]

The following organizations have identified the problem of inadequate staffing and/or have recommended hiring more staff in special education (including Educational Assistants):

- Ontario Principals' Council[7]
- People for Education[8]
- Ontario Autism Coalition[9]
- Community Living Ontario[10]

Even the Office of the Auditor General of Ontario[11] has identified that funding for special education is insufficient to cover the existing costs.

Results of a survey conducted by CUPE-OSBCU and released in 2025 provide insights into the problems of understaffing of educational assistants.

- 72.7% of EAs support five or more students in a normal week. That is up from 60% in a similar survey in 2018.
- Only 3% of EAs provide one-on-one support to students, down from 7.4% in the 2018 survey. Given the near unanimous acknowledgement that student needs are increasing, declining one-on-one support can only mean that students' needs are going unmet.
- 87.3% said the number of students they support has increased over the past 5 years.
- 95% said there are students at the school(s) at which they work who need the support of an EA but who do not currently have that support.
- 87.8% said there are students who they work with who need the one-on-one support but do not have it.

[6] See, for example, Office of the Auditor General, "Special Education Needs: Independent Auditor's Report", Special Report 2026", https://www.auditor.on.ca/en/content/specialreports/specialreports/en26/2026_SpecEd_EN.pdf, and Ontario Public School Boards' Association, "Public education system remains under significant financial strain", June 2, 2025, https://www.opsba.org/opsba_news/public-education-system-remains-under-significant-financial-strain/

[7] See, for example, Ontario Principals' Council, "Addressing Staff Shortages in Ontario Schools", MPP Advocacy Day 2024, https://www.principals.ca/en/who-we-are/resources/Documents/Principals-Day-Queens-Park/OPC-Issue-Sheet-2024.pdf

[8] See, for example, People for Education, "Principals sound the alarm about students' mental health", 2023, https://peopleforeducation.ca/report/principals-sound-the-alarm-about-students-mental-health/,

[9] See for example, Ontario Autism Coalition, Special Education Survey, 2023-24 School Year", January 2025, "Special Education Survey, 2024-25 School Year", April 2026, https://ontarioautismcoalition.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/OAC-Special-Education-Report-2024-2025-School-Year.pdf

[10] See, for example, Community Living Ontario, "Crisis in the Classroom: Exclusion, Seclusion, and Restraint of Students with Disabilities in Ontario Schools", April 2025, https://communitylivingontario.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/FINAL-Crisis-In-The-Classroom-April-2025.pdf

[11] Office of the Auditor General, "Special Education Needs: Independent Auditor's Report", Special Report 2026", https://www.auditor.on.ca/en/content/specialreports/specialreports/en26/2026_SpecEd_EN.pdf

It is very clear that students who need supports are not getting enough time with EAs, and many who need help are not getting it. Staff are stretched beyond the breaking point, and kids are falling between the cracks.

Despite increasing student needs overall, rising student needs that go unmet, and unmanageable workloads, 15 of 72 school boards actually had worse student-to-EA ratios in 2025-26 than they did in 2018-19. In addition to the cuts to staffing ratios, ongoing staffing shortages are a significant problem. In 2024, the Ontario Principals' Council (OPC) reported that 32% of schools have shortages of staff every day, stating that "critical staff shortages lead to inconsistent learning environments".[12] Similarly, People for Education report that almost half of all schools experience EA shortages each day.[13]

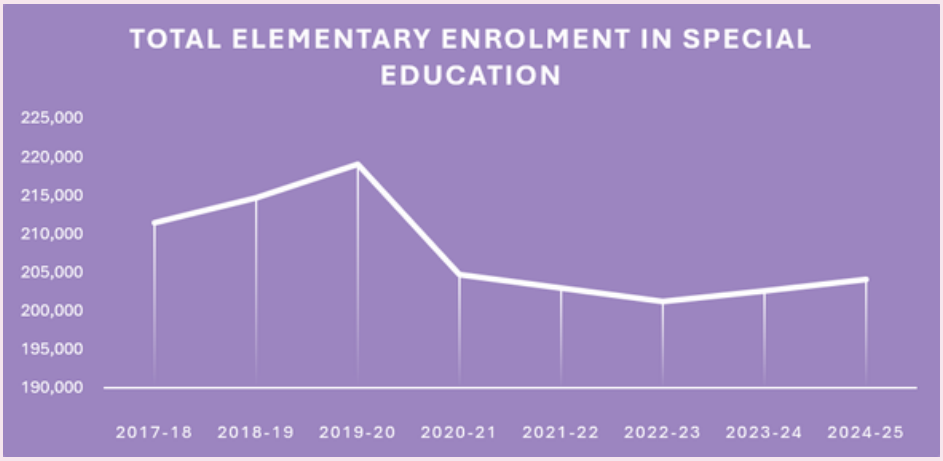
ENROLMENT IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

The Ministry of Education has published data on special education enrolment for multiple years, up to 2024-25. From 2017-18 to 2024-25, total official enrolment in special education has increased by 2%, including a 51% increase in students with autism, a 34% increase in students whose exceptionality is coded as "behaviour", and a 27% increase in students with multiple exceptionalities. The data shows that student needs are increasing, including increasing intensity and complexity of needs, demonstrating the need for increased staffing in special education. It should be noted that this increase is based on students who are formally enrolled in special education. This does not necessarily capture the increase in total student need, including students who are not formally assessed or who need special educational supports but are not receiving them.

Despite the widespread recognition of a steep increase in student needs (even beyond the statistics about formal enrolment in special education), and the growing intensity and complexity of student needs, the percentage of total student population who are enrolled in special education has declined marginally by 0.4 percentage points from 17.9% of total student enrollment in 2017-18 to 17.5% of total student enrolment in 2024-25. Proportionally, fewer students were receiving special educational supports.

[12] Ontario Principals' Council, "Addressing Staff Shortages in Ontario Schools", MPP Advocacy Day 2024, https://www.principals.ca/en/who-we-are/resources/Documents/Principals-Day-Queens-Park/OPC-Issue-Sheet-2024.pdf
[13] People for Education, "Staff shortages a daily issue for many Ontario schools", March 24, 2024, Staff shortages a daily issue for many Ontario schools - People for Education

The trend is particularly pronounced in elementary schools, where there has actually been a decline of 3.5% in the number of students formally enrolled in special education. This is the case even though there was an increase of 54% in elementary students with autism, 13% for elementary students with "behaviour", and 24% in elementary students with multiple exceptionalities. Even though there is a clear consensus that student needs are increasing (and these data show the complexity of needs is increasing), the total number of elementary students who are accessing special education supports has actually gone down under the current Conservative government.



Data compiled from Government of Ontario dataset: Special Education Enrolment by Exceptionality (multiple years), available at https://data.ontario.ca/dataset/special-education-enrolment-by-exceptionality

Declining elementary enrolment in special education (and a declining percentage of total students enrolled in special education) is directly related to insufficient numbers of staff to properly assess student needs, and insufficient numbers of staff to provide supports after assessments have been made. The Auditor General's report on special education identifies "long wait times for psychological and speech language assessments", noting 34% of students at two of the three boards in the audit had waited more than a year for an assessment.[14] People for Education reports an increasing number of children on wait lists for assessments and services, noting that wait lists are particularly long in schools in lower income neighbourhoods.[15] In the absence of assessments, students go without the specific supports they need, and can go without any special educational supports at all.

[14] Office of the Auditor General, "Special Education Needs: Independent Auditor's Report", Special Report 2026", https://www.auditor.on.ca/en/content/specialreports/specialreports/en26/2026_SpecEd_EN.pdf
[15] People for Education, "Access to special education in Ontario schools: The gaps and challenges", 2024, https://peopleforeducation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Access-to-Special-Education-In-Schools_3June.pdf

INDIVIDUAL EDUCATION PLANS

Problems persist even for students who have received an assessment and who have a formalized Individual Education Plan (IEP – the document that outlines the specific programs and supports a student requires). The Auditor General reported that 87% of teachers surveyed said they only "sometimes, rarely, or never" had the resources they needed to fully implement students' IEPs, strongly suggesting that more staff (e.g. EAs) are needed to effectively support students. "Among those teachers surveyed who said they were unable to meet most of their student's special education needs the majority of the time, 88% reported a greater need for EAs and support personnel"[16]

The Ontario Autism Coalition found that only 12.4% of parents surveyed said that all of their kids' IEP accommodations were followed consistently, and 25.5% said that most were followed. However, 39.9% of respondents indicated that only some of their child's accommodations were followed sometimes, and 10.1% said they were never followed,[17] strongly suggesting that more supports are needed (including more staff) in schools to meet student needs.

EXCLUSIONS

Lack of staff has resulted in students with disabilities being excluded from school, either by being sent home part way through the day or being told not to come to school because their needs could not be supported.

In 2025, Community Living Ontario released a report addressing the increasing use of exclusions for students with exceptionalities, based on a survey of parents and caregivers. They found that:

- 29% of respondents reported their child had been secluded in school (i.e. removed from their classroom and placed in a separate space)
- 20% of students covered under the survey were only attending part-time
- 31% of students were either sent home or told not to attend school because the school was "unable to meet their needs"

The first recommendation made in the report is to "increase access to appropriate and adequate staffing and other supports for students." The report further states **"As it stands, students with disabilities do not have access to the level of staffing and other support they need to succeed"**[18] (emphasis in the original).

[16] Office of the Auditor General, "Special Education Needs: Independent Auditor's Report", Special Report 2026", https://www.auditor.on.ca/en/content/specialreports/specialreports/en26/2026_SpecEd_EN.pdf
[17] Ontario Autism Coalition, "Special Education Survey, 2024-25 School Year", April 2026, https://ontarioautismcoalition.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/OAC-Special-Education-Report-2024-2025-School-Year.pdf
[18] Community Living Ontario, "Crisis in the Classroom: Exclusion, Seclusion, and Restraint of Students with Disabilities in Ontario Schools", April 2025, https://communitylivingontario.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/FINAL-Crisis-In-The-Classroom-April-2025.pdf

The Ontario Autism Coalition (OAC) also reports on the practices of exclusions, which deny students with disabilities access to schools, denying them their right to education and undermining their success. In the survey for the 2024-25 school year, the OAC reported:

- 25.9% of students with disabilities had daily modified attendance schedules, a significant increase over previous years of students without access to full-day attendance at school.
- 23.9% of students with disabilities did not attend school every day of the week.
- The most common reason for the modified daily or weekly schedule was lack of resources, including staffing.
- 33.4% of students experienced at least one form of exclusion, including being sent home early, denied participation in an extracurricular activity, or exclusion from a regular school activity due to lack of available support.[19]

The Ontario Principals' Council has also commented on the fact that exclusions (students being sent home or asked not to attend school) due to lack of staff (notably EAs) has been on the rise.[20]

VIOLENCE IN SCHOOLS

There is growing evidence that violence in schools is on the rise. A key underlying cause of violence is understaffing. Students are not receiving the supports they need to thrive in classrooms. Educational Assistants are supporting more students now than they were in 2018, and fewer students are receiving one-on-one support than at the beginning of the Conservative government's time in office.

An ongoing research project, conducted by Darby Mallory, Chris Bruckert, Hanya Ismail, and Darcy Santor at the University of Ottawa, provides a growing body of evidence that violent incidents are increasing in schools.[21] Their studies identify several factors that create conditions that lead to increasing workplace violence:

- Large and complex classrooms
- Inadequate EA allocations
- Insufficient material resources
- Scarce professional services in schools
- Limited assessments and interventions[22]

[19] Ontario Autism Coalition, Special Education Survey, 2024-25 School Year", April 2026, https://ontarioautismcoalition.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/OAC-Special-Education-Report-2024-2025-School-Year.pdf
[20] Ontario Principals' Council, Addressing Staff Shortages in Ontario Schools: MPP Advocacy Week 2023", https://www.principals.ca/en/who-we-are/resources/Documents/Principals-Day-Queens-Park/Staff-Shortages-2023.pdf. See also, People for Education, "Access to special education in Ontario Schools: The gaps and challenges", 2024, https://peopleforeducation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Access-to-Special-Education-In-Schools_3June.pdf
[21] Mallory, D., Bruckert, C., Ismail, H., and Santor, D. (2025). *Running on Fumes: Violence, Austerity, and Institutional Neglect in Ontario Schools*. Ottawa, ON: University of Ottawa, and Darcy Santor, Hanya Ismail, Darby Malory, and Chris Bruckert, *Canadian Schools: A Hazardous Workplace*, University of Ottawa, February 2026, https://www.educatorviolence.ca/home; see also, Isaac Callan and Colin D'Mello, "'Significant crisis': Number of violent incidents reported in Ontario schools grows", August 14, 2025, Global News, 'Significant crisis': Number of violent incidents reported in Ontario's schools grows | Globalnews.ca
[22] Mallory, D., Bruckert, C., Ismail, H., and Santor, D. (2025). *Running on Fumes: Violence, Austerity, and Institutional Neglect in Ontario Schools*. Ottawa, ON: University of Ottawa

The evidence shows that the causes of increasing workplace violence are systemic, not individual. That is, understaffing in schools, leading to unmet student needs, creates the conditions for violence. The way to address violence is therefore to address the systemic understaffing in schools. Mallory et. al. state "Not only is failure baked into Ontario's underfunded education system, but the lack of proactive interventions and unwillingness to invest in public education creates compounding effects that ultimately exacerbate the problem."

The Auditor General report on special education in Ontario provides complementary evidence: "We consistently heard that student needs had become increasingly complex. Without adequate staffing, this led to difficulty managing high-needs students in large classrooms and behavioural challenges".[23] International evidence, compiled in a survey of available research on the subject of violence in schools, concludes that "to reduce workplace violence, adequate resources are needed for staffing…".[24]

Lack of staffing, notably in this case of Educational Assistants, is excluding students with disabilities, denying them the right to full participation in school. Student success is being undermined by a systemic failure to hire enough EAs at schools to provide adequate supports for students.

DESIGNATED EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS

Designated Early Childhood Educators (DECE) are a vital part of the two-educator model of full-day kindergarten. DECEs are specialists in early childhood development and play-based learning, recognized as a leading practice in early learning. When developing Ontario's full-day kindergarten program Charles Pascal (special advisor to the Premier on early learning) recommended that full-day kindergarten classes include both a kindergarten teacher and a DECE. Early learners benefit most from the two-educator model, in which DECEs provide specialized skills in early childhood development, play based learning, and other skills, and teachers bring a specialized focus on curriculum delivery. This two-educator team brings together different skill sets and expertise to create the best environment for students enrolled in full-day kindergarten.[25] Early learners develop best when all their educational needs are provided through the DECE and teacher team.

[23] Office of the Auditor General, "Special Education Needs: Independent Auditor's Report", Special Report 2026", https://www.auditor.on.ca/en/content/specialreports/specialreports/en26/2026_SpecEd_EN.pdf
[24] Paul Landsergis, Jeanette Zoeckler, Zerin Kashem, Bianca Rivera, Darryl Alexander, and Amy Bahruth, "Organizational Policies and Programs to Reduce Job Stress and Risk of Workplace Violence Among K-12 Education Staff", *New Solutions: A Journal of Environmental and Occupational Health Policy*, Vol. 27(4), 2017.
[25] Charles E. Pascal, *With Our Best Future in Mind: Implementing Early Learning in Ontario*, Report to the Premier by the Special Advisor on Early Learning, Queen's Printer for Ontario, 2009.

Evidence shows that the two-educator model has been a success, improving student outcomes and providing a high-quality educational experience.[26] Despite the recommendations of the Pascal report, and the evidence of the success of the two-educator model, not all kindergarten students have access to both a teacher and a DECE. In fact, the number of students without a DECE in their classroom has increased over the course of the Ford Conservative government.

Regulations under the Education Act do not require schools to assign a Designated Early Childhood Educator to classrooms with fewer than 16 kindergarten students enrolled. Data on elementary classroom sizes is provided by the Government of Ontario.[27] Analysis of the data shows:

- In 2018-19 there were 1168 classes with kindergarten students without a DECE (estimated, based on kindergarten regulations), roughly 10.8% of all classes with kindergarten students. In 2025-26 there were 1559 classes with kindergarten students that did not have a DECE assigned, roughly 14.7% of all classes with kindergarten students.
- In 2018-19 there were 13,983 kindergarten students in a class without a DECE (roughly 5.4% of all kindergarten students). In 2025-26 there were 19,240 kindergarten students in a class without a DECE (roughly 7.6% of all kindergarten students).
- The total number of kindergarten split classes (that is, classes with both kindergarten students and students from higher grades) has increased from 436 (4.0% of classes with kindergarten students) in 2018-19 to 567 split classes (5.4% of all classes with kindergarten students) in 2025-26.

School boards' financial documents include data on permanent staffing in many of the major education worker classifications, including Designated Early Childhood Educators.[28] Data on school board staffing demonstrates:

- In 2025-26 there were 642 FTE fewer Designated Early Childhood Educators in Ontario schools than there were in 2018-19, the first year of the Ford Conservative government.
- Even though there was a reduction in the total number of kindergarten students enrolled in Ontario schools, over that same period of time, the average kindergarten student-to-DECE ratio increased. That is, the reduction in DECEs was not just because of declining kindergarten enrolment.

[26] See, for example, Dr. Gordon Cleveland, *Ontario's Kindergarten Program: A Success Story*, full report, commissioned by Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario, 2021, https://www.etfo.ca/public-education/student-development/ontario%E2%80%99s-kindergarten-program-a-success-story
[27] Government of Ontario, "Elementary Class Size", https://data.ontario.ca/dataset/elementary-class-size
[28] Government of Ontario, "School board financial reports (estimates, revised estimates and financial statements", https://data.ontario.ca/dataset/school-board-financial-reports-estimates-revised-estimates-and-financial-statements

Kindergarten class size regulations require boards to have an average of 26 kindergarten students, with a soft cap of 29 students (although 10% of kindergarten classes at a board can have up to 32 students). School boards only have to meet these requirements on a specified determination date in September of each year. After that, class sizes can exceed these limits, and kindergarten classes often have in excess of 32 students. Still, using data provided by school boards based on this determination date, we can see increasing class sizes for kindergarten students.

- In 2018-19 there were 176 classes that were reported to have more than 29 students (1.6% of total kindergarten classes). By 2025-26 that number had risen to 211 classes (or 2.0% of total kindergarten classes).
- In 2018-19 there were 3797 classes that were reported to have more than 26 students (34.7% of all kindergarten classes). By 2025-26 that number had risen to 3970 (37.5% of all kindergarten classes).

Early childhood education, based on the two-educator model, is being eroded. Increasing class size (not to mention increasing student needs and complexity of student needs), and a growing number of students who are deprived of the two-educator model, point to a need for change. Such change would include mandating that a DECE be in every classroom with at least one kindergarten student, putting hard caps on kindergarten class size, and tightening up regulations that allow school boards to meet class size requirements on a single day of the school year but increase class size after that.

CUSTODIANS AND CARETAKERS

Custodians and caretakers are vital to school health and safety. Their work includes keeping schools clean, necessary to controlling the spread of germs. They also play an important, albeit often unrecognized, role in student safety. Like all other job classifications, however, custodians and caretakers are being pushed beyond their limits. In the 2024 CUPE-OSBCU survey of members, 70% of custodian respondents say they are sometimes unable to complete all their daily duties because there is too much work and not enough staff. In that survey, 41% of custodians also said there are parts of their school that are not cleaned on a daily basis. Custodians report that understaffing means that classrooms and common areas are often spot washed only when visibly dirty, garbage is emptied less frequently, gymnasiums are not swept or mopped daily or as thoroughly, and high touch surfaces are not disinfected as frequently as needed.

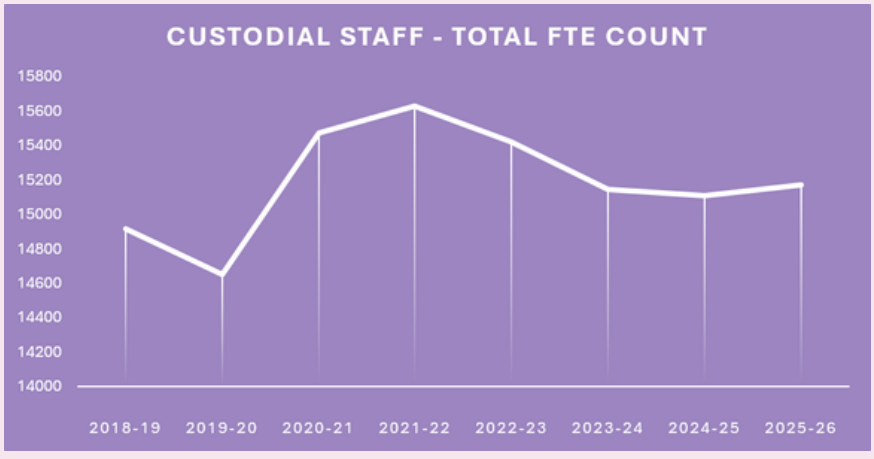
Province-wide, the student-to-custodian ratio was worse in 2025-26 than it was in 2018-19. That is, there are more students for every custodian than at the beginning of this government's time in office. Although not a perfect measure of workload, student-to-custodian ratios are an important measure of increasing workload. More students means more work.

There has been a moratorium on school closures since the previous Liberal government, which the current government has continued. Although there have been some new schools built, and some "amalgamations" of schools, there has not been a significant change in total square footage at schools. Since total floor area remains constant, student ratios are the best available measure of increasing workloads for custodians. More students per custodian means more work generated for each worker. Additionally, custodians play a crucial role in school safety (something more than 94% of custodians stated in the recent CUPE-OSBCU survey), a job made much more difficult when ratios worsen.

Although total custodial employment is higher now than when the Ford government took office, since 2018-19 there are 30 school boards (41.7% of boards) with an absolute reduction in the number of full-time permanent custodians employed. Over that same period, 42 boards (58.3% of all school boards) have seen a worsening student to custodian ratio.

It is important to note that the period in which custodial staffing increased was 2020-21 and 2021-22. Two important factors account for that increase. First, this coincides with the introduction of temporary COVID-related funding, much of it went to hiring custodians. When that funding ended, the jobs that were created with it also disappeared, as can be seen in the downward trend in employment after the 2021-22 school year.

Second, in the 2019 round of central negotiations, CUPE (and other unions) negotiated additional funding for school boards with the purpose of creating new, permanent jobs.[29] Because those jobs were not created at school boards until after the collective agreements between union locals and school boards had been ratified, the full impact of that new funding was spread over the two school years in which we see increases in staffing. The increase in total permanent custodial staff from 2018-19 to 2025-26 is due entirely to the funding negotiated by unions to create jobs.



Data from school boards' financial documents (Financial Statements, Estimates, Revised Estimates, various years)

[29] Funding for permanent jobs came in the Supports for Students Fund, which was continued in the 2022 round of negotiations (and which the Conservative government appears to have continued in 2026-27 in recognition of the fact that unions have been successful at negotiating this funding, in one form or another, going back to 2017.

Documents from the Ministry of Education show that 391 FTE custodian jobs had been created with time-limited COVID-funding. The difference between staffing levels in 2025-26 and 2018-19 can be entirely attributed to the increased staffing negotiated by CUPE-OSBCU and other unions in the 2019 round of central negotiations.

SCHOOL OFFICE STAFF (SECRETARIAL/CLERICAL)

Staffing shortages hit school offices in ways that are not always publicly reported. Understaffing of school office staff adversely affects entire school communities. School offices are the nerve centre of schools, providing supports to students, parents, other staff, and school principals. School secretaries and office staff also play an important role in school safety, including by monitoring and controlling access to schools, amongst other things. Put simply, schools cannot function without the work of office staff, including secretarial and clerical staff.

Despite the importance of school office staff, 27 school boards (37.5% of boards) had fewer school office staff in 2025-26 than in 2018-19. Even more alarming, 45 boards (62.5% of boards) had worse student-to-office staff ratios in 2025-26. Like other classifications, student-to-office staff ratios do not capture the entirety of changing workload, but they do matter. Province-wide, the ratio of students to school office staff was higher in 2025-26 than it was at the beginning of this government's time in office. Clearly the alleged "historic investment" is not being converted into increased supports in schools.

School office staff do not only provide supports to students. They also support all other staff in schools. Looking at the ratio of all school staff to school office staff we can see that, for the province as a whole, there has been a worsening of the ratio of total-school-staff to school office staff. Furthermore, total-school-staff to school-office-staff ratios have worsened at 49 of 72 school boards (68.1% of boards).

Staff ratios only tell part of the story. Workload expands for a number of reasons. For example, 77% of school office staff surveyed said that additional duties have been downloaded to them by school board administration, including principals. Almost 97% of school office staff surveyed also said that they regularly have to address distractions from their work due to things like taking phone calls from parents, students needing assistance at the office, answering the door/buzzer at school entrances, and receiving deliveries.

Other research has also identified that school offices are understaffed. People for Education has reported that 18% of elementary and 28% of secondary schools face shortages in office staff, either daily or weekly.[30] All of this helps explain why 95% of school office staff say they cannot get all their assigned duties done in a day because there's too much work and not enough staff.

School office staff, including school secretaries and other clerical positions, have more and more work downloaded on them. The number of students and other staff that they support keeps increasing relative to the number of office staff in schools. Workloads are increasing beyond the limits of the workday.

TRADES/MAINTENANCE

Skilled trades positions have traditionally been good jobs in Ontario. Workers in the trades spend years developing their skills and developing expertise in their fields to keep buildings well maintained. This Conservative government has tried to make itself out to be a friend of skilled tradespersons, promoting jobs in the trades and encouraging students to pursue careers in the trades.

The rhetoric of respect for the skilled trades and the facts on the ground about skilled trades jobs in Ontario school boards, however, do not match. Schools are places where students begin to develop an interest in the trades and start to develop their skills and abilities. But good jobs in the trades are disappearing from the very schools where students begin their journey into careers in the trades.

Between 2018-19 and 2025-26, 99.6 Full-Time Equivalent jobs in the trades were cut from Ontario school boards. This has resulted in 29 school boards employing fewer tradespersons in 2025-26 than they did when the Ford government took office.

In 2025-26 there were 9 school boards that did not employ any permanent trades/maintenance staff, and another 4 boards had 2 or fewer permanent tradespersons on staff (despite the variety of trades work that is needed). 39 of the 63 school boards that directly employ tradespersons (62% of boards) faced a worsening student-to-staff ratio. As with other classifications, student-to-tradesperson ratios are an imperfect but important measure of increased workload and the failure of funding to keep up with ongoing needs in schools.

[30] People for Education, "Staff shortages a daily issue for many Ontario schools", March 24, 2024, Staff shortages a daily issue for many Ontario schools - People for Education

Understaffing, job cuts, and contracting out combined, can help explain what tradespersons are saying about what is going on in schools. Over 82% of tradespersons surveyed said that work they do has been contracted out by school boards, and over 92% said that work done by tradespersons in a classification other than their own has been contracted out. What is also troubling is that over 87% of survey respondents said they sometimes have to fix problems left by external contractors. In the same survey, 91% said that work orders are sometimes delayed or go undone because there are too few staff and too much work to get to everything in a reasonable time.

Trades jobs should provide permanent, full-time employment, with stable hours, pension and benefits. Cutting trades jobs from school boards and leaving work to be contracted out or undone, shows a lack of real commitment to trades jobs. It also demonstrates a disregard for the care and maintenance of schools.

PROFESSIONAL STAFF

Professional staff provide a variety of supports to students at Ontario school boards, including assessing students for special educational supports, directly providing those supports, supporting students' mental health, and a wide variety of other supports necessary for student success. Positions include psychologists and other psychological professionals, speech and language specialists, child and youth workers (CYW), social workers, attendance counsellors, and other classifications.

Not all school boards employ professional staff in every possible classification. In 2025-26:

- 33 school boards did not employ any child and youth workers
- 23 boards did not employ any staff in attendance counselling
- 13 boards did not employ any staff in social services/social work
- 11 boards did not employ any staff in psychological services
- 5 boards did not employ any staff as speech and language professionals
- 6 boards did not employ any staff categorized as "other professional and paraprofessional"[31]

[31] "Student Support Staff – Other Prof and Paraprof", is a catch-all category used in school boards financial documents (where permanent staff levels are reported). Because boards have some flexibility in how they report staffing levels in Appendix H of their financial documents it is not evident which classifications are captured in this category.

54 of Ontario's 72 school boards (75%) saw a cut in the number of Full-Time Equivalent positions for at least one professional classification from 2018-19 to 2025-26. Over this period, there were cuts to permanent staff in each professional classification:

- 23 of 61 boards (37.7%) with psychological professionals cut permanent staff
- 12 of 39 boards (30.8%) with child and youth workers cut permanent staff
- 20 of 67 boards (29.9%) with speech and language professionals cut permanent staff
- 8 of 59 boards (13.6%) with social services/social work classifications cut permanent staff
- 5 of 49 boards (10.2%) with attendance counselling staff cut permanent staff
- 30 of 66 boards (45.5%) with staff categorized as "other professional and paraprofessional" cut permanent staff

At 62 school boards there was a worsening student-to-staff ratio for at least one professional classification, including:

- 39 of 61 boards (63.9%) with psychological professionals had a worse student-to-staff ratio in 2025-26 than in 2018-19
- 30 of 67 boards (44.8%) with speech and language professionals had worse staffing ratios
- 17 of 49 boards (34.7%) boards with attendance counselling staff had worse staffing ratios
- 11 of 39 boards (28.2%) with child and youth workers had worse staffing ratios
- 5 of 59 boards (8.5%) with social services/social work classifications had worse staffing ratios
- 29 of 66 boards (43.9%) with staff categorized as "other professional and paraprofessional" had worse staffing ratios

The adverse effects of staff cuts and worsening student-to-staff ratios for professional staff have been demonstrated in other reports. People for Education reports that wait times for assessments are affected by understaffing. For example, "only 26% of elementary schools reported they had regularly scheduled access to psychologists, an all-time low since we have been reporting this number."[32] The crisis is particularly bad for elementary schools in low-income areas, where parents are less likely to be able to afford assessments outside of the school system. Not only are students in lower income areas more likely to need the support of a psychologist (based on People for Education's report), but they are less likely to have access to psychological support in schools.[33]

[32] People for Education, "Access to special education in Ontario schools: The gaps and challenges", June 3, 2024, Access to special education in Ontario schools: The gaps and challenges - People for Education
[33] Ibid.

Even though there is widespread recognition that student needs are increasing, there are long wait lists for assessments, and even the provincial government has recognized the need to address student mental health, supports for students are being cut. Cuts in the number of professional staff at school boards, and worsening student-to-staff ratios across the province, demonstrate clearly that funding is insufficient to hire enough staff to meet student needs.

LIBRARY TECHNICIANS AND INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY STAFF

School libraries are spaces where students develop literacy skills, research skills, and a lifelong love of reading. However, staffing at school libraries and learning commons has been on the decline over the last 8 years. Province-wide, there were fewer Full-Time Equivalent permanent library technicians in 2025-26 than in 2018-19. Over that same period of time, 29 school boards reduced the number of library technicians they employ, and student-to-library technician ratios worsened at 38 school boards across the province.

The government has identified a need to improve student outcomes in literacy at every stage of the education system. One of the necessary supports of any meaningful campaign to improve literacy is properly staffed, accessible school libraries. Declining staffing in libraries and worsening student-to-staff ratios undermine that strategy.

Technological changes, greater reliance on technological devices for education and the daily operations of schools, increasing online teaching, and other factors have increased the need for trained, skilled information technology staff at schools. Despite the increased need, 22 school boards have actually cut the number of Full-Time Equivalent permanent IT jobs. When looking at student-to-IT staff ratios, 34 school boards (47.2%) had worse ratios in 2025-26 than they did in 2018-19.

Job cuts, coupled with increasing responsibilities and workorders, explain why 77.9% of IT staff reported having increased workloads over the past five years. Furthermore, 59.6% of IT staff indicated that demands on their time are so great that they find it difficult or impossible to get all their assigned duties done within a reasonable time.

CONCLUSION

There has been a long-term trend of education funding not keeping up with inflation and enrolment growth, going back to the 2012-13 school year under the previous Liberal government. That trend has continued under the current Conservative government. The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives calculates the accumulated shortfall in real per-pupil funding at $6.5 billion since 2018.[34] Accumulated shortfalls in funding have led to an understaffing crisis across the province. Even in 2018, when the Conservatives formed government, there were not enough staff. Data presented in this study demonstrate that things are getting even worse.

Insufficiency of funding has also been reported for specific allocations within the pool of funding provided to school boards. For example, the Auditor General reported that "the majority of boards collectively spent hundreds of millions of dollars more (on special education) than they received from the government" in special education funding.[35] The Ontario Public School Boards' Association (OPSBA, the representative body for trustees in English public boards) states that all of their member boards regularly have to spend more on special education than they receive for it from the government.[36]

Clearly there is a need for more special education funding. Even though school boards take money from other funding allocations to spend on special education, the data provided in this report demonstrate that this still is not enough. When boards take funding away from other allocations (like for school office staff, or custodial and maintenance work), that just exacerbates the understaffing and underfunding crises in other parts of the board. In this situation, "robbing Peter to pay Paul" still means that neither Peter nor Paul get what they need.

[34] Ricardo Tranjan, Ontario school funding shortfall continues to grow, reaching $6.5 billion since 2018", *Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives*, Ontario school funding shortfall continues to grow, reaching $6.5 billion since 2018 | CCPA
[35] Office of the Auditor General, "Special Education Needs: Independent Auditor's Report", Special Report 2026", https://www.auditor.on.ca/en/content/specialreports/specialreports/en26/2026_SpecEd_EN.pdf
[36] Ontario Public School Boards' Association, "Public education system remains under significant financial strain", June 2, 2025, https://www.opsba.org/opsba_news/public-education-system-remains-under-significant-financial-strain/

The underfunding crisis is partially revealed by the number of school boards that are in deficit in 2026-27, despite dramatic cuts in staffing and other cuts. School Board Estimates, made publicly available in August 2026, show that 25 school boards are projecting deficits for the 2026-27 school year, the total value of which is $186.7 million. That includes all eight of the boards put under supervision by the Minister of Education, indicating clearly that not even government appointed supervisors can balance budgets with the meagre funding provided to them. Another 16 school boards are projecting a technical balance (i.e. no surplus or deficit), often only achieved after staffing cuts. Of the boards in surplus, 81% (25 of 31) have a surplus of less than $200,000 – an exceptionally thin margin.[37]

Prior to the 2026-27 school year, hundreds of education worker jobs were cut at school boards across the province. Cuts were defended as a means to get budgets closer to balance. Boards across the province are cutting staff at a time when more staff are needed. This puts additional pressure on education workers who remain and have to pick up more work, adding stress and strain to themselves. It also means student needs continue to go unmet, and in fact, an increasing number of students will go without their needs being met.

A substantial investment in education is needed, specifically an investment in more staff to meet student needs. CUPE-OSBCU has several bargaining proposals that will help address the understaffing crisis, including:

- Funding dedicated to hiring new staff, including special education funding and funding for other staff
- A Designated Early Childhood Educator in every classroom with a kindergarten student
- A hard cap of 26 on classes with kindergarten students
- An Educational Assistant in every kindergarten class

The research, reports from education workers, and reports from parents of students with special needs all point to the need for increased funding for staffing in the Ontario public education system to address student needs, student and worker safety, workload concerns, and to deliver a public education system capable of the kind Ontario families need.

[37] See 2026-27 School Board Estimates, available at https://data.ontario.ca/dataset/school-board-financial-reports-estimates-revised-estimates-and-financial-statements/resource/91f3961e-05ce-4a20-9100-99235cb8b162

APPENDIX 1

CUTS TO PERMANENT STAFF 2018-19 TO 2025-26 (BY FULL-TIME EQUIVALENT POSITIONS)

- 28 school boards had a reduction in total classroom instruction staff (including teachers and instructors)
- 7 school boards had a reduction in Educational Assistants
- 39 school boards had a reduction in Designated Early Childhood Educators
- 8 school boards had a reduction in Social Worker positions
- 12 school boards had a reduction in Child and Youth Workers
- 20 school boards had a reduction in Speech professionals
- 23 school boards had a reduction in Psychologists
- 22 school boards had a reduction in Computer and Other Technical Services positions
- 30 school boards had a reduction in “Other Professional and Paraprofessional” classifications
- 29 school boards had a reduction in Library Technicians
- 27 school boards had a reduction in Secretarial and Clerical staff in school offices
- 30 school boards had a reduction in Custodians
- 29 school boards had a reduction in Maintenance/Trades positions
- 14 school boards had a reduction in total staff

- 69 of 72 school boards saw a reduction in at least one of the above classifications
- 46 of 72 school boards saw a reduction in 4 or more of the above classifications

APPENDIX 2

SCHOOL BOARDS WITH WORSENING STUDENT TO STAFF RATIOS FROM 2018-19 TO 2025-26

- 56 school boards have worse staffing ratios for total classroom instruction staff (which includes teachers and instructors)
- 15 school boards have worse staffing ratios for Educational Assistants
- 48 school boards have worse staffing ratios for Designated Early Childhood Educators
- 5 school boards have worse staffing ratios for Social Workers
- 11 school boards have worse staffing ratios for Child and Youth Workers
- 30 school boards have worse staffing ratios for Speech and Language professionals
- 39 school boards have worse staffing ratios for Psychologists
- 34 school boards have worse staffing ratios for Computer and Other Technical Services
- 29 school boards have worse staffing ratios for "Other Professional and Paraprofessional" classifications
- 38 school boards have worse staffing ratios for Library Technicians
- 45 school boards have worse staffing ratios for Secretarial and Clerical staff in school offices
- 42 school boards have worse staffing ratios for Custodians
- 39 school boards have worse staffing ratios for Maintenance/Trades positions
- 32 school boards have worse staffing ratios for total staff

- All 72 school boards had a worse staffing ratio in at least one of these classifications
- 60 of 72 school boards have a worse staffing ratio for 4 or more of these classifications.
- 12 of 72 school boards have a worse staffing ratio for 10 or more education worker classifications