**Slashing School Clericals and Education Assistants**

**The More the Board Cuts, The Harder the Province Squeezes**

**Janet Bojti**

 An elementary school office clerk held up two letters, one in each hand, and said, “This one,” she held it high in the air, “is from Chris Spence (former Director of Education) inviting me to a special ceremony to receive an Award of Excellence. And this one,” in her left hand, “is a letter from the Board telling me I’ll be surplus as of this June. I got them both on the same day.” She had worked in this large elementary school for over 30 years. She was now attending to the children of the children she had seen through the school when she first began her job. The parents dearly loved and valued her and had lobbied for the award. Hers was one of 200 in school clerical positions the Board had decided to cut in June 2012.

 The impact of cutting 200 school clericals was bitter. The board actually implemented the mass layoff by treating it as a slash to 400 half time positions. Nearly all schools were affected by a round robin of disruptive internal moves and an increased workload for those who remained. Every school has one senior school office administrator. Depending on the size of the school, there are a number of school office clerical assistants. A large high school will have several, including some for attendance and guidance. A small elementary school may only have one office administrator.

 For a single office administrator working in an elementary school, losing her one and only half-day assistant, if she had one, was a disaster. The lone school office secretary is the hardest working, most put upon individual in a school. The work load is punishing, especially if you’re new to the job for which there is very little training. It’s a major cause of consternation to a principal if the school’s only office administrator (it’s a predominantly female position) takes her lunch and breaks and keeps regular hours as set out in the collective agreement. In her absence, (and if there’s no V.P.) the principal will have to mind the office and answer the phone. In the principal’s absence, guess who’s minding the school.

 This huge staffing cut meant many “full time” office assistants are now working two half days in two different schools. To save their benefits and pensions, they dash from a ‘morning school’ to an ‘afternoon school,’ eating lunch on the TTC, and these are the lucky ones. The unlucky lost half their job or all of it. This year the board voted to cut another 26 in-school office clerical positions.

 Last month, the School Board voted to cut 17 Educational Assistants, all from its French Immersion Kindergarten classes, after promising not to touch these positions until 2015. Losing a kindergarten educational assistant without an Early Childhood Education worker in place is a huge blow for a kindergarten teacher. Faced with 22 five year olds, half of whom speak neither of Canada’s official languages, and are undiagnosed for vision, hearing, behavioral or learning disabilities, a Toronto kindergarten class presents a situation where an extra pair of adult eyes ears and hands are indispensable.

 Last year, in a surprise move, the Board would have severed 450 Educational Assistants from its kindergarten classes leaving many kindergarten teachers to manage to safety and well-being of their charges unaided. Only CUPE 4400, the education workers union, saved the day. Without a dime of financial support from the TDSB for their retraining, the union negotiated with Humber College for a two-year-long evening, weekend and summer program to upgrade any kindergarten education assistant who wished to participate, a chance to upgrade to an E.C.E. and be eligible to apply for Full Day Kindergarten jobs at the TDSB upon completion. The TDSB, at the 11th hour, very reluctantly, agreed to rehire these former E.A. s. engaged in the college upgrading (fully at their own expense) as “Teaching Assistants.” They would cover the remaining half-day kindergarten classes until the all the full-day kindergartens could be in place Board wide. However, especially among the older Education Assistants who had worked for the board for many years, there were dozens for whom the retraining challenge was too financially demanding and physically challenging. They were let go. Many were forced into early “retirement.” Some of them are still looking for work and their E.I. has long run out. They too had been promised their jobs would be safe until 2015.

 Trustees seem to lose little sleep over cutting these “working class” school board jobs. No public debate about their impact on the schools preceded the vote to cut support staff last year or this year. Yet cutting 248 secondary teachers, 62.5 elementary teachers, 22 vice principals from elementary, middle and secondary schools seemed to give some trustees pause. For the first time some of them showed they were beginning to realize that no matter how many positions they had to cut annually, it had made no difference to the budget deficit because year after year, the province cut money for one program or another, continually reducing net funding.

 “I have always followed the rules,” said Trustee Jerry Chadwick at the last school board meeting on March 6th, 2013. “If you told me I’d be thinking this way a year ago, I’d have said you were crazy. I’m now realizing I have to consider defying the province and refusing to pass a balanced budget.” However, he ended up voting for the cuts anyway. The vote to cut staff passed 10 to 6. Voting against were Trustees Atkinson, Chen, Glover, Kaplan, Rodrigues and (surprisingly) Tonks, who up to now had approved most staff cuts.

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