

## **RESULTS OF CUPE K-12 CUSTODIAN SURVEY** Elizabeth Blackwood, Research Representative - January 9, 2019

### **Introduction**

K-12 Support staff have been hard hit as a result of the substantial and chronic underfunding of the public K-12 system in British Columbia over the past 16 years. Staffing cuts resulting in increased workloads, increasing amounts of work conducted without pay, and chronic shortages of positions such as educational assistants are some of the most often voiced concerns we hear from our membership.

Amongst these concerns is a growing level of alarm being raised by K-12 custodians across the province about conditions affecting the cleanliness of schools and the working conditions and well-being of those tasked with the crucial work of keeping our schools clean and healthy.

In early 2017, CUPE Research met with focus groups of K-12 custodians in order to get a comprehensive picture of the extent of the issues facing custodians. From those meetings we developed an in-depth 73-question survey that was issued in the Spring of 2017 to all our custodians cleaning K-12 schools throughout the province.

We had a response rate of approximately 40 percent, which meant that we heard from more than 1 in every 3 of our approximately 3,000 K-12 custodians. The results of the survey reflect the distressing picture conveyed to us from not only CUPE custodians, but other staff and members of the public.

The following memo provides an overview of some of the startling highlights of the survey findings and focus group discussions.

### **Cleanliness and Working Conditions**

In meetings with custodians prior to issuing our survey, we repeatedly heard the same two paramount and related concerns: custodian workloads have increased substantially and as a consequence, schools are not being cleaned adequately. Despite increasingly difficult working conditions which are clearly affecting their well-being, the primary concern we heard from custodians is that they are suffering stress and mental health effects because schools are not being cleaned sufficiently to meet their expectations of a safe and healthy environment for students and staff. This was particularly the case for custodians who have been on the job for many years and have thus seen a lowering of cleanliness standards over time. We heard of difficulties with sleep stemming from the knowledge that facilities were being left not cleaned or inadequately cleaned. We also heard that many custodians engage in unpaid work because it is personally important to them to ensure clean learning and working environments.

- 36% report doing unpaid work with some regularity (11% report “often” doing so).

The main cause creating these conditions appears to be underfunding. This has resulted in either cuts to staffing levels, or an increase in work without a corresponding increase in staffing (i.e. no increases in staff in districts with increased enrollment and increases in portables or cleaning surface areas). In addition to chronic and systemic staffing shortages, we were told that it is common practice not to replace custodians on short-term leaves such as sick days or days missed for medical appointments, bereavement leave, etc. Survey results confirmed this.

- 47% said that their employers have a policy or established practice of not replacing people on short-term leaves. A further 25% were unsure if this was the case, and only 30% said that their employers did not employ such a practice.

In our meetings prior to issuing the survey we heard from many that this practice creates undue hardship on other staff told to cover absent employee’s work, or on those who returned after a short absence and found that their work had not been covered and must be made up. While this clearly presents problems for workload concerns, it also has implications on the ability to maintain consistent expectations of cleanliness.

- 84% report that when they are away from their job work piles up because no one has covered all the things they do.

Many custodians told us that the expectations of cleanliness have been greatly reduced – in some cases formally.

- 30% have been told by their employer to lower their expectations of cleanliness.

Even when an explicit acknowledgment of lowering standards has not been made, many have told us that it is simply impossible to clean adequately due to workloads and/or time constraints.

- 71% say there is cleaning that is not being done due to increased and/or unrealistic workloads.
- 49% say they are not given enough time to do the work expected by their employer.
- 59% say the area they are expected to clean has increased since they first became custodians.
- 49% are given less time to clean the same area as they were previously.

As noted, this creates considerable stress for employees engaged in this work, but these figures also raise serious concerns about the state of cleanliness in our schools.

### **Other Critical Concerns**

While the issues discussed above raise serious concerns about the working conditions of custodians generally with respect to workload, as well as the cleanliness of schools and the relationship between these two factors, there are a number of other alarming findings from our focus groups and survey results that paint a picture of detrimental working conditions beyond that of understaffing and workload. Given the crucial role of K-12 custodians in ensuring healthy and safe environments, we believe that any deleterious working conditions that threaten their ability to perform their work to the best of their ability poses a problem for all staff and students in our schools. This is in addition to the fact that, like all K-12 workers, these are dedicated employees who value their role in the education system and who, on principle, should have work that contributes to, rather than compromises, their overall well-being.

As such we believe that the following factors are critical to this discussion. We met with groups of custodians in various parts of the province and we heard that the timing of shifts often has a negative impact on custodial workers. Many who have been working as K-12 custodians for numerous years have seen the timing of their shifts changed from that of a day-custodian to an evening custodian, or to working split shifts (early in the morning with prolonged mid-day breaks and then evening shifts). New custodians had generally started with such shifts, but in both cases, the timing of these shifts resulted in difficult personal circumstances for these workers.

- Only 4.6% report working as day custodians.

Several custodians were very emotional when telling us that they felt that they had missed out on the important events in their children's lives – school concerts, swim lessons, soccer and hockey games, etc. A custodian working split shifts told us that, in addition to missing the kinds of evening activities listed here, he was unable to see his wife and children in the mornings before work and school, and only had free time during the middle of the day when none of his friends and family were available. Custodians working these shifts talked about persistent loneliness that resulted from this schedule, as well as marital strain and regrets over missed time with children.

The results of the survey confirm that this is a pervasive problem.

- 28% say that the timing of their shifts has changed since they began working as K-12 custodians; 79% of these say it was not by their own choice.
- 39% say that the timing of their shifts has a negative impact on their lives. Common examples include not being able to participate in social activities, interference with sleep (late night and early morning shifts), not being able to participate in community, social and political life, inability to take courses and

evening classes, not being able to play sports or engage in physical activities, and not being able to have meals or spend time with partners, children and grandchildren. Almost 400 respondents provided answers to the open-ended question on this aspect of shift work.

In addition to the negative impact on the lives of workers, the timing of custodial shifts appears to affect the cleanliness of schools. We have heard from numerous custodial staff, other staff and parents, that not having a day custodian means that important cleaning is often not done until the end of the day. This can include the cleaning of vomit, which we are told is either done by a principal or left for the afternoon/evening custodian when they arrive in cases where there is no day custodian.

While the timing of shifts is a detriment for many in numerous aspects of their personal lives, another very alarming finding is that 27 percent of respondents have second jobs. The overwhelming majority say this is because a secondary income is necessary for them to meet their financial requirements. It is unacceptable that over a quarter of the workforce employed in providing a crucial public service cannot make ends meet. This finding is even more disconcerting when considered in the context of the already discussed workload concerns and stress caused by night and split shifts.

Custodians are also reporting physical and health stressors that are unacceptably high.

- 60% say that they have experienced fatigue or exhaustion related to workload.
- 35% report that their work environments are often too cold because schools are often not heated when students are not present.
- 40% report that working conditions are often uncomfortably hot and difficult to work in because air conditioning is not turned on when students are not present.
- 14% of those who work when their school is empty or almost empty say that they do not feel safe (27% say they sometimes feel unsafe working in this way).
- 45% say that they have experienced anger related to workload.
- 82% say that they have experienced muscle or joint pain related to workload.
- 41% say that they have experienced sleep disruption related to workload.
- 31% say that they have experienced anxiety related to workload.
- 19% say that they have experienced depression related to workload.
- 32% say that they have experienced burnout related to workload.

- 50% say that they have experienced a workplace injury as a result of an accident while performing their work.
- 44% say that there are aspects of their work that have become more hazardous to their well-being since first becoming custodians.
- 57% say that they have experienced a workplace injury as a result of a physical strain or overuse while performing their work.

This is just a snapshot of the health-related impacts that were reported in the survey results. Even this partial list presents an unacceptable level of compromised physical and mental health due to workload and related conditions.

Relatedly, we are hearing greatly increased concerns with respect to violence in the workplace from support staff across the sector. While custodians do not face the same level of violence as some other K-12 staff, we have concerns that they too are facing growing levels of violence in the workplace.

- 12% report that they have experienced angry or violent encounters with students in the course of performing their work.
- 22% report that they have experienced angry or violent encounters with parents or community members in the course of performing their work.

### **In Summary**

All of the factors discussed above have contributed to widespread low morale. High numbers report that they do not feel that their work is recognized or respected. This is disheartening given the critical role that K-12 custodians play in keeping students and other staff safe and in providing clean and healthy learning and working environments.

Despite these findings, K-12 custodians remain dedicated to the work they do and the staff and students they do it for. They consistently name students and other staff as amongst the best things about their jobs. It is clear that they want improvements in their working conditions, but they nonetheless are dedicated workers who value the work they do.

CUPE looks forward to releasing a full report of the custodian survey and related qualitative research. We are happy to discuss our findings and answer questions. Inquiries should be directed to CUPE Research – Elizabeth Blackwood.