



Stressed Out

Increasing Pressures on Education Workers to Do More

Garry Fenn*

The teachers and support staff members of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF) face increasing pressures from government, parents, school administrators and the students they serve to quite simply do more. Many new initiatives and programs have been introduced by the provincial government and school boards to train educators in new trends in pedagogy, curriculum and student assessment. Student and community demands put greater pressure on teachers to supervise more extracurricular activities. Technological advances and greater calls for accountability have led to significant increases in educator workloads. The result is an increase in educator stress levels, declining health and a general malaise amongst the educators that work with our children.

OSSTF took these issues to the provincial and school board levels of government, which have responsibility for the publicly-funded education system in Ontario. Our lobbying efforts went largely unheard. It was decided that it was time to try to quantify the concerns by embarking on a research project to survey our membership on questions of workload, volunteerism and stress.

* Gary Fenn is an Executive Assistant in the Communications / Political Action Department of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation in Canada.

In 2013, OSSTF hired a researcher to study these issues. The centerpiece of the researcher's work, a comprehensive voluntary survey, generated an overwhelming response with over 7,800 members participating.

Results were presented to the membership at a subsequent Annual Meeting in a document called the *Workload and Volunteerism of Educators (WAVE) Report*. This report paved the way for discussions with the government in how it deals with bringing in new initiatives and overall workload issues. The findings would also be a subject at future contract negotiations.

Ministry of Education and School Board Initiatives

Educators have felt inundated with one new initiative after another from the provincial Ministry of Education and their local school boards. Changes in curriculum, assessment and evaluation strategies, pedagogical changes, student well-being programs, and many other initiatives have been introduced haphazardly and often with little training or time for implementation, and no continuous and sustainable funding.

Members were asked if they found Ministry and/or school board directed activities and initiatives to be of any benefit to their daily classroom practices and responsibilities which support student achievement. Only 8% said that these initiatives were of any use to them in their daily work.

Further analysis showed that educators found very little positive impact for their professional practices and for their students. This is often because these new initiatives or programs came with limited support or resources, and often lacked follow-up training or professional learning. Successful implementation is rarely achieved because another new initiative quickly follows and becomes the new focus of attention, while past initiatives would simply disappear.

Volunteering for Extracurricular Activities

In Ontario, coaching sports, running clubs and other extracurricular activities is strictly voluntary. There is no requirement for a teacher or support staff member to

participate. In addition, there is no extra pay for volunteering your time for extracurricular activities. Education unions in Ontario, and in most Canadian provinces, have strongly maintained that extracurricular activities remain voluntary and without additional pay. As our research discovered, 92% of teachers reported that they volunteer their time to run and support extracurricular activities. Most school boards require that a teacher be in charge of any extracurricular activity. When our survey looked deeper into just how much personal time that our members volunteer to do these activities, we discovered that three quarters of teachers ran two more extracurricular activities, and that one in six teachers were running *five* or more of these activities.

Further investigation revealed that while many educators felt that doing *one* activity was truly voluntary, they felt pressure to supervise and run more than one activity. Certain teachers also felt obligated to run extracurricular activities in areas related to their teaching subject, such as physical education teachers coaching in sports, or arts teachers participating in art and drama clubs.. There were also comments from newer and younger members expressing that they felt highly obligated to supervise extracurricular activities in order to increase their chances of either getting or maintaining their job.

Increasing Workload

For a number of years now, educators have expressed concerns that their level of responsibilities and overall workload has increased. While Ontario education unions have had great success in keeping class sizes in check, there has been a marked increase in bureaucratic and record keeping responsibilities, in addition to the increasing number of new programs and initiatives mentioned earlier. The result has been higher levels of stress and levels of illness among members.

Seventy-one percent of our members polled said that their overall workload has increased over the past five years. When asked which job responsibilities had increased, three areas stood out. Requirements for computer work, computer learning or computer and internet postings



was identified as the most significant workload increase. Administrative requests for information, forms, data and student attendance, as well as time and effort required to assess and report on student progress were the next two areas of workload increase identified.

Most educator workload increases involve bureaucratic functions and have had very little to do with teaching or supporting student learning. With increasing calls for greater government accountability, the result has been that educators have had to spend more of their personal time to complete these tasks, increasing levels of stress and illness.

Over half of our members reported spending at least 5 or more hours of extra time per week at *school* outside of their regular classroom duties to complete job requirements, and another 5 or more hours of extra time per week at *home*. These numbers did not include the time that educators spend volunteering for extracurricular activities as those are not seen as requirements of the job.

Job-Related Stress

Our research and survey looked into whether members were feeling more stressed as a result of the pressures generated by the increasing number of Ministry and local school board initiatives, the pressure to participate in extracurricular activities and the general increases in workload. Almost every member reported feeling

stressed at work at least half of the time, with almost half reporting being stress most or all of the time.

Members reported that the top three aspects of their jobs that contributed the most to their rising stress levels were increased problems with students and/or demands from students, increased demands to use technology, and increased requirements from the Ministry of Education.

Pushing for Change

As a result of this research and member survey, OSSTF has focused its government lobbying efforts and negotiations strategies to address these concerns. Armed with hard data and listening to the concerns of members regarding their workloads and stress, OSSTF has seen some success at both the bargaining table and in changes to government policies.

In a recent round of bargaining, OSSTF was able to win a one year moratorium on any new Ministry of Education or local school board initiatives or programs. In addition, the union was able to establish collective agreement language that recognized both the professional judgement of educators and the requirement to have greater professional collaboration between the union, the Ministry of Education and local school boards, giving the union a voice when it comes to new initiatives and programs. However, implementation and compliance of the professional collaboration language has proved

to be challenging as the government and school boards have been reluctant to involve the union in discussions about new initiatives.

The stresses that members have felt around meeting the increasing needs of students has led to calls for more training and support for educators in our schools. Public opinion has also shown that there is a greater demand for more help in the classroom. With an Ontario provincial election coming in June 2018, addressing this call may very well become an election issue.

Lessons Learned

Undertaking a significant research project regarding educators' workloads and resulting stress level increases has been an eye opening experience. Not only did members report that they appreciated being asked about their views on workload and volunteerism, we were also able to approach the government and school boards with strong data to support our push for changes. This translated in some initial gains at the bargaining table and drew more attention to further issues of concern to bring to the government and lobby successfully for change. However, the victories have been few and we have a long way to go. Armed with member data and solidarity, our union has great confidence in making further gains so that our members can feel healthy at work and do the best job that they can to support our students in reaching their learning goals.