

Government “reforms” will leave families affected by autism on their own and struggling for support

- CUPE joined by Ontario Autism Coalition in condemning decision that divides children with autism into “haves” and “have nots” -

The Ford government’s reckless changes to the way it supports children with autism put desperately needed services at risk and make it clear to their families that they’re on their own, say representatives of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and CUPE Ontario.

They are joined in this assessment by the Ontario Autism Coalition, which has shared its concerns with the union.

“The government hasn’t listened to frontline workers and it hasn’t listened to parents of children with autism,” said Laura Walton, an educational assistant (EA) and president of CUPE’s Ontario School Board Council of Unions (OSBCU). The council represents 55,000 education workers, including educational assistants trained in Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) to work with children with autism.

“These changes are a body blow to inclusion for children with autism and to a parent’s right to educate their child in the public education system.”

Walton described wait lists and lack of supports for children with autism as “a scandal”, but warned, “This move does nothing to train more educational assistants in ABA therapy. It doesn’t promote inclusion in classrooms for children with autism. It doesn’t provide more educational assistants, it doesn’t increase services in rural and northern areas, and we’re back to funding support based on age.

“This is not the change we need.”

CUPE has called for a system of regional, publicly run centres to assess children with autism; needs-based funding for services for children with exceptionalities; and a high-quality, inclusive and supportive public education for all children.

“That way children with special needs, including those with autism, can enrol in the local school in their community, where they and their parents can get everything they need in terms of support from qualified EAs and from specialists such as speech-language pathologists, psychologists, behavioural therapists, and child and youth workers,” said Walton.

This vision was championed in part by the Ontario Autism Coalition, which voiced its fears about the new limitations that Ford government is putting on services to children with autism.

“We are concerned about equitable access to high-quality services,” said Laura Kirby-McIntosh, President of the Ontario Autism Coalition. “Currently, some of these services are offered through some of school boards via EAs and other frontline staff.

“We are concerned that this will limit access to supports that parents need in rural and francophone areas – this will lead to a lower level of supports than families are currently receiving and more stress on parents to source these services.”

Joanne Smithers, who works with adults with developmental disabilities and who chairs CUPE's Developmental Services committee, has witnessed firsthand the failures of the Passport Program, a similar experiment with individualized funding that was introduced to cut wait lists for developmental services: "I read the news and thought yep, more privatization and direct funding. [The government] says, with this money, parents can choose to use a government-funded agency or private provider, but if they don't expand government-funded agencies then no one will really have a choice."

Fred Hahn, president of CUPE Ontario and himself a social worker who worked in developmental services, affirmed Smithers' view: "The Ford government has shown itself again and again to be completely out of touch with what happens on the ground, whether it's with children with autism, their families or workers. It simply unwilling to commit to proper funding for education and what it takes to achieve better outcomes for students, for children with autism and for their families.

Hahn noted that CUPE Ontario had other concerns about the direct funding model, including that it is open to abuse by private, for-profit operators and lacks a system of oversight for service providers.

CUPE Ontario represents over 260,000 members across the province, providing high-quality public services in social services, health care, municipalities, school boards, universities and airlines.

- 30 -

Notes to editors:

Among the top demands from the Ontario Autism Coalition in [its briefing note](#) to the Ministry of Education:

- "a focus on providing ABA training and supervision for Education Assistants to deliver ABA in the classroom";
- more funding from the Ministry of Education "to hire more EAs and to implement more extensive autism and ABA-related training for all EAs, teachers, administrators and support staff assigned to work with students with ASD"; and
- "properly funded supports [from the Ministry] for students with exceptionalities and students with mental health issues, including increased funding for special education teachers, educational assistants, psychologists, behavioural therapists, school support counsellors, child and youth workers and speech-language pathologists."

For more information, contact
Mary Unan, CUPE Communications

647-390-9839