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Press Statement on the Realities of Inclusive Education in Surrey's Public Schools

My Name is Tammy Murphy, and I am the President of CUPE Local 728, I represent over 5,000 support staff in the Surrey School District. Our members include childcare workers, educational assistants also known as IESW, clerical staff, IT, StrongStart, grounds and utility workers, caretakers, bus drivers, tradespeople, and more. Each of these roles plays a crucial part in supporting students and the education system, yet many of these positions remain unfilled.

I have been an IESW for 27 years, and I've seen firsthand how the education system has changed. When I started, our primary goal was to prepare students for their future, whether that meant academic success or teaching essential life skills. Today, much of our work is focused on behavior management and personal care, with little time or resources left to address academic challenges. The stress of underfunding and lack of adequate resources trickles down to everyone, creating environments where we are just managing to get through the day, rather than preparing students for their futures.

The job of an IESW is to support children with diverse needs. This once meant adapting lessons, teaching life skills, and providing tailored academic support. But as funding has not kept pace with the demand, the scope of our work has narrowed. Many students who struggle academically are no longer getting the support they need to succeed in school—and ultimately in life.

This lack of funding has created unsafe learning and working environments for students and staff. With too few resources and insufficient support, students often become dysregulated, leading to situations where verbal and physical aggression occur. This is not a successful environment for learning or teaching—and it certainly isn't safe for students or staff.

We often hear about the importance of the inclusion model in our schools, but in practice, we are falling short. True inclusion isn't just about placing students in their catchment schools—it's about ensuring those schools are equipped to meet the diverse needs of all students.

Right now, some students with challenges are not fully integrated with their peers. Sometimes, they spend much of their day in separate classrooms or portables with only their IESW. This isn't inclusion; it's isolation. Without adequate resources and training, schools are unable to provide the holistic, integrated support these students deserve.

I recently asked for a 'day in the life' account from our IESWs, and what I heard was heartbreaking. These workers are stretched thin, managing complex needs without the resources or support they need to do their jobs safely and effectively.

If we want to give every child a chance to succeed, we must prioritize education funding, staff recruitment, and proper training.

Our education system has become reactive instead of proactive. We're no longer giving students the tools to succeed—we're simply trying to survive each day. This is not what education should look like.

If we are serious about our commitment to students, we need to address the chronic underfunding that is failing them and our staff. We need more resources, more training, and better support for all roles within the education system. Without these changes, we risk losing not just staff, but the potential of an entire generation of students.

Our children deserve better. As a district, and as a province, you need to do better.

Tammy Murphy

President CUPE728