



## **The intensification of clerical work in B.C. schools**

**CUPE**

Report by John Malcolmson, CUPE Research, B.C. Region  
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## Executive Summary

This report looks at the work and worklife of office and clerical staff in BC's public school system. It is based on a review of relevant research literature, analysis of recent school budgeting information and an online survey of clerical workers undertaken in the spring of 2014. In the spring of 2014, a total of 1,310 office and clerical staff in 49 school districts completed this survey, a response rate of close to 30 per cent of all such workers employed in BC schools.

Primary findings of the report can be summarized as follows:

- Clerical and office work today takes place in an environment marked by relentless budgetary pressure on school district operations, programs and services. Together with a push to direct maximum resources “to the classroom”, this has brought ongoing efforts to squeeze greater economies out of school system administration.
- The result has been a compression of office/clerical hours of work throughout BC's school system and increased workload pressure and stress on those with office/clerical jobs.
- Office/clerical work remains overwhelming female-dominated within the BC system. About 98 per cent of survey participants indicate they are female.
- The average age of an office/clerical worker participating in the survey is 51 years, and that individual has more than 22 years total office/clerical work experience, roughly half of which is with her current employer.
- The largest group of office/clerical workers reports formal qualifications based on a college-level credential. A smaller group reports having university degrees.
- Most clerical work in the public school system is both permanent/continuing and full-time in nature. The average K-12 clerical worker today earns almost \$36,000 annually.
- Office/clerical staff report overall increases in the requirements of their work, in the range and complexity of things demanded of them on the job and in stress associated with these demands.
- Despite these kinds of changes, office/clerical staff report high levels of overall job satisfaction, citing the importance of personal relationships to how they feel about work.
- The survey uncovered a range of health and safety concerns. Many office/clerical staff report pain – concentrated in the neck, back and shoulder areas – and most see this pain as work-related.
- The survey also uncovered a range of ergonomic issues, chief among them the fact that many clerical staff work long hours seated at computer terminals. This raises significant concerns regarding both ergonomic sustainability and longer-term health.
- Unpaid time is an issue with office/clerical staff. On average, an office/clerical worker performs about half an hour of unpaid work per week.

- Office and clerical staff also report a significant incidence of abusive and aggressive encounters with parents, community members and students. The way they deal with these encounters differs depending on the circumstances. Encounters with students are much more likely to elicit formal reporting, follow-up and consequences as students are generally covered by codes of conduct. Parents and community members are not so clearly covered so there is less likelihood of formal follow-up in cases of abusive or aggressive encounters.

The report indicates a range of areas where workers, their unions and their public school employers need to work together to improve the work environment faced by office and clerical staff.

## Introduction

Clerical and office workers perform vital services in our public schools. They staff local school offices. They make central board operations run smoothly. They process payroll on behalf of all school district staff. They field calls and questions from parents and the public. They provide crucial liaison with the Ministry of Education in a range of areas that include data reporting. And they have daily interactions with students, helping them deal with a myriad of needs, challenges and problems.

In many respects, clerical work is what makes our public school system operate on a day-to-day basis. Yet for the most part, clerical workers perform their jobs out of the spotlight. Despite their many interactions with the public, clerical and office staff work most of the time out of public view, nonetheless providing vital supports to hold our school system together.

The purpose of this report is to cast greater light on the work done by school clerical workers and the contribution they make to BC's public education system. The information it contains is largely based on an online survey of clerical workers undertaken in the spring of 2014, organized by the BC Region of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE). Over the course of four weeks, a total of 1,310 office and clerical staff completed this survey. That represents a response rate of about 30% of the close to 4,300 clerical workers who are employed today within British Columbia's public school system.

To provide a better framework for analyzing the data collected by the survey and understanding the reality of modern-day clerical employment in our public schools, the report begins with a brief survey of recent analytical literature looking at the nature of contemporary clerical work. It proceeds with an examination of trends in school district budgeting, and their impact on support staff employment. Following this, the report moves on to a detailed analysis of how clerical workers in British Columbia public schools who took part in the survey view their work and worklife, with all that entails.

## Understanding clerical work

For much of its history, clerical work has been clearly identified and coded as women's work, so much so that two researchers recently observed "clerical work provides a lens through which to understand women's participation in the North American wage-labor market since the late nineteenth century."<sup>1</sup> The conception of "clerical work" as a distinct occupational orientation finds its origins in the Victorian era with the rise of office-centred employment geared to the administration of industrial, commercial or administrative enterprise. Through the early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, clerical work grew in scope as well as scale, gaining impetus from the extension of industrial work norms to the office.<sup>2</sup> These changes sparked a profound shift in the status accorded clerical work, largely for the worse, with the systematic

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<sup>1</sup>Kim England and Kate Boyer, "Women's Work: The Feminization and Shifting Meanings of Clerical Work," *Journal of Social History*, Volume 43, Number 2, Winter, 2009, p. 307.

<sup>2</sup>Craig Matheson, "Are clerical workers proletarian? A case study of the Australian Public Service," *The British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 58, Issue 4, December 2007, pp. 577–602.

proletarianization of clerical labour. Earlier hallmarks of Intimacy and trust gave way to more impersonal relations of subordination and discipline.<sup>3</sup> This trend coincided with a wholesale movement of women into the burgeoning clerical occupations of the modern-day office.

Starting in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and carrying over into the new millennium, clerical employment has itself fallen into the crosshairs of management efforts to bring increased efficiency to clerical work environments. In other venues similar efforts have been given heightened profile with the advent and growing popularity of “LEAN” technology. The resulting focus on cost cutting and administrative streamlining ultimately came to rest on the tasks, processes and outcomes that together comprise contemporary office work.

The term “clerical work” is descriptive in nature. It references a range of jobs occurring primarily in office and/or “white collar” settings. They share the primary purpose of assisting with the day-to-day administrative operations of employers, whether in productive enterprise, finance, services or public administration. Clerical and related office duties today can cover and include a host of discrete functions: scheduling meetings or conferences, answering phones, making copies, managing records, organizing files and electronic communications, tending to the maintenance of office equipment, purchasing, doing inventory management, creating documents and formatting presentations. Clerical work may also routinely involve direct contact with the public, providing help, advice or orientation to those who use or rely on access to needed services.

All of these functions are of major significance to the way clerical work is organized and performed within BC’s public school system. Job duties and levels of responsibility of BC’s K-12 clerical workers can vary greatly from one school or workplace to the next. Indeed there are hundreds of CUPE job descriptions that fall under the description “clerical work.” As is the case in the broader labour market, clerical jobs show real change in the nature of the work over time marked by the continued extension of new technology in areas such as computerized office systems and communications.<sup>4</sup> As the jobs themselves change so have the range, level, diversity and complexity of qualifications and skill requirements associated with a contemporary office or clerical job.

The British Columbia Public School Employers’ Association (BCPSEA) maintains an Employment Data and Analysis Systems (EDAS) that draws ongoing employment-related information from the province’s 60 district-level human resources data systems. Within EDAS, office and clerical labour is accounted for by six different categories of support staff workers, each of which is divided into positions that are either supervisory or non-supervisory in nature.<sup>5</sup> The chart below provides a listing of these categories as well as recent staffing counts for each.

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<sup>3</sup> Bob Carter, Andy Danford, Debra Howcroft, Helen Richardson, Andrew Smith and Phil Taylor, “‘All they lack is a chain’: lean and the new performance management in the British civil service,” *New Technology, Work and Employment*, Vol. 26, No. 2, 2011, p. 83

<sup>4</sup> This process is described at a broader level in Canadian Labour Congress, *Women in the Workforce: Still a Long Way from Equality*, 2008.

<sup>5</sup> The grouping used here is not officially a part of EDAS but is being deployed here to provide a statistical foundation and context for the analysis of clerical work to follow.

**Chart 1 Numbers of school system office & clerical workers by job category & level, 2013-14**

<b>Support Staff</b>	<b>Non-supervisory</b>	<b>Supervisory</b>	<b>Total</b>
Human resources	106	4	110
Payroll/benefits	137	11	148
Finance	293	12	305
Education support board office	568	9	577
Facilities (secretarial positions)	103	5	108
School administration	2,670	340	3,010
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,877</b>	<b>381</b>	<b>4,258</b>

For the categories listed above, some 91 per cent of staff falls into the non-supervisory group. And, as the data clearly indicate, office and clerical workers in the “school administration” category are the largest category, accounting for more than 70 per cent of the total, with the balance working either at central board offices or other specialized facilities. Clerical workers with supervisory functions are also heavily concentrated at local school facilities – almost 90 per cent of all supervisory staff is located within schools.

Like workers elsewhere, clerical workers in CUPE public school bargaining units have seen broad changes overtake their workplaces. Within the school system, more than a decade of non-stop funding cuts and cost downloading has also provided the impetus for a restructuring of support staff work, including that of clerical and office workers. Much the same push for efficiency evidenced in other places has, in BC schools, come into being as a byproduct of relentless budgetary pressure accompanied by efforts to direct maximum available resources “to the classroom.” From these pressures comes a push to economize on clerical work time and to render the organization of clerical labour increasingly “flexibilized.”<sup>6</sup>

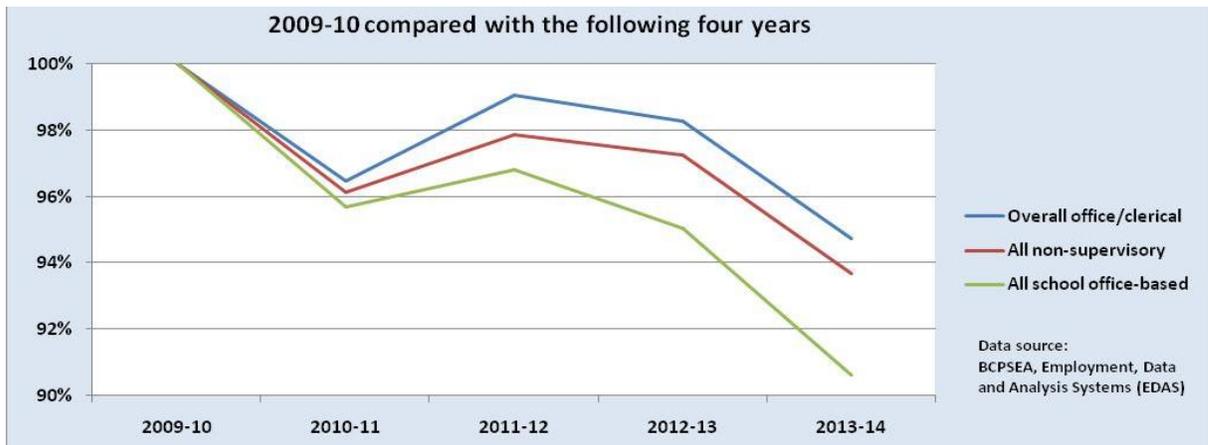
The impact has been a reduction in the deployment of office and clerical staff across the spectrum of the BC public school system. EDAS information offers clear evidence of system-wide retrenchment in clerical staffing and hours. Between 2009-10 and 2013-14, overall clerical hours for permanent and term staff dropped 5.3 per cent across BC’s public school system. The lion’s share of this reduction came with non-supervisory staff whose hourly levels were thinned by a cumulative 6.3 per cent. If one examines the largest support staff office/clerical subcomponent – school office staff– the four-year fall-off in paid clerical hours is an even more precipitous 9.4 per cent.<sup>7</sup> The chart below shows the annual and cumulative changes in each of these variables.

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<sup>6</sup> The terms “flexibility” or “flexibilization” describes management-driven efforts to have maximum ability to organize, deploy, modify or make redundant work within modern-day workplaces. Matt Vidal, “Reworking Postfordism: Labor Process Versus Employment Relations,” *Sociology Compass* 5/4, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> EDAS support staff data for non-administrative office and administrative staff, 2009-10 and 2013-14.

**Chart 2 Changes in total office & clerical hours within the BC school system**

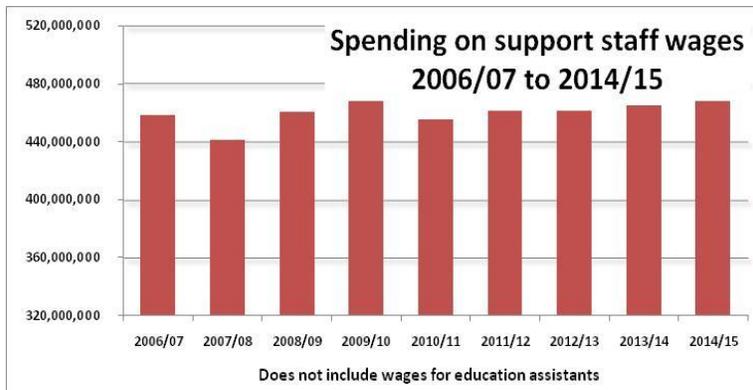


The EDAS information confirms not only a significant reduction in clerical working hours but also that the reduction is concentrated in key subset areas – at both the non-supervisory level as well as within the schools themselves where seven out of every ten clerical staff is employed. It is here that the force of provincially-imposed budget reductions has taken its full toll on office and clerical worker employment.

### School spending on office & clerical staff

Overall spending on support staff also underwent significant compression during the period after 2005. The chart below shows total actual expenditure by BC school districts over the period 2006/07 to 2014/15 on support workers’ wages, not including spending on education assistant wages.<sup>8</sup>

**Chart 3 Wage costs of non-EA support staff, 2006/07 to 2014/15**



Despite evidence of a dip in wage spending in the 2007/08 year and some volatility over the years, spending on non-EA support workers’ wages has been fairly flat over the period in question. In fact, spending was slightly higher in the 2009/10 than it was budgeted for five years later in 2014/15.

<sup>8</sup> Calculated from BC Ministry of Education, *Revenue and Expenditure information*, (various years), Tables 25 and 6 (2014/15). Downloaded at [www.bced.gov.bc.ca/accountability/district/revenue/](http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/accountability/district/revenue/). The 2014/15 year figure is projected or budgeted spending while all other years are actual (audited) spending.

However, during this same period, overall school spending rose a total of 11.9%, from \$4,488 million in 2006/07 to a budgeted level of \$5,022 million in 2014/15.<sup>9</sup> In the main, these increases went to pay the cost associated with negotiated wage and salary increases for professional, support and administrative staff within the school system. Clearly though budget increases made during this period did not land in the pockets of non-EA support staff. Indeed, as the above data confirms, non-EA support staff saw their overall staffing reduced and their collective wage remuneration held to an extremely modest level of increase, a small fraction of the overall rate of budget growth. Funds “freed up” in this manner have been made available for redeployment elsewhere in the public school system with some of the funds absorbed by efforts to triage the demand for additional special education.

What of the specifically clerical portion of support staff wages? And what are the patterns of school district spending in this sub-area over the period in question? There are five specific school budget programs where most if not all clerical and office staff are concentrated today. These program areas would contain few if any non-office/clerical support staff. They are as follows.

**Chart 4 School budget programs employing office & clerical staff**

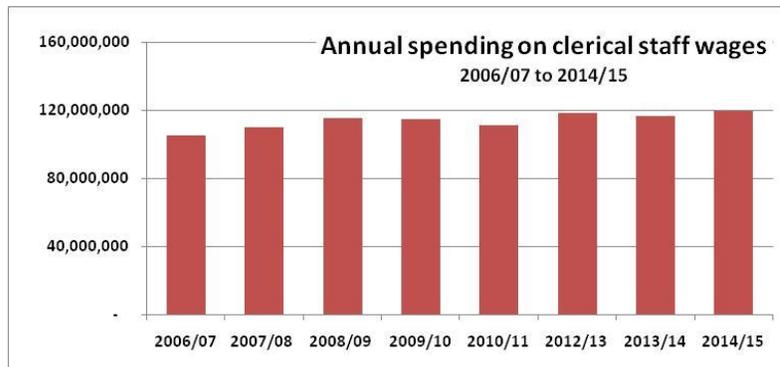
School budget programs with clerical employment	Program name
Program 1.41	School administration
Program 4.11	Educational administration
Program 4.41	Business administration
Program 5.41	Operations & maintenance administration
Program 7.41	Transportation administration

The next chart shows support staff salary spending over the 2006/07 to 2014/15 period for these five specific budget programs. These programs effectively narrow the focus to the costs of clerical and office employment within the public school system.<sup>10</sup> Restricting the view to these programs is the best method of capturing the office and clerical cost “footprint” because it filters out costs related to other categories of support staff, chiefly school aides of various types, custodians, bus drivers and transportation workers, and trades and maintenance staff. Education assistant wage costs are captured in another budget object altogether and for this reason are not reflected in these calculations.

<sup>9</sup> BC Ministry of Education, *Revenue and Expenditure Information*, (various years). Table 5.

<sup>10</sup> Data for these years are actual expenditure levels taken from Audited Financial Statement reports filed with the Ministry of Education and posted in summary form on the MOE’s Revenue and Expenditure Information website. The only exception is the 2014/15 year where the information comes from annual budget projections as audited data is not yet available. Downloaded at [www.bced.gov.bc.ca/accountability/district/revenue/](http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/accountability/district/revenue/).

**Chart 5 Total wage costs of office & clerical workers, 2006/07 to 2014/15**



Information in this chart reflects a rise in clerical wage costs over the first two years. As with support staff wages costs as a whole, from 2008/09 onwards clerical costs have also been relatively flat. Despite some annual fluctuation, salary spending rose a total of just four per

cent over the final five years in question. To put this number in perspective it should be noted that negotiated wage increases for CUPE staff over this period have risen 10.2% since the 2006/07 base year. The only way to reconcile rising wage rates and flat overall wage costs is to acknowledge a reality of cuts to office and clerical hours on a significant scale. While this is something confirmed by relevant EDAS data, the impact of these cuts emerges from perspectives offered by those participating in CUPE’s clerical survey. The latter underline workload pressure by having office and clerical workers talking directly about their work and about the changing work environment they find themselves occupying.

### **CUPE’s clerical workers survey**

CUPE clerical and office staff have long been anxious to gain a higher profile for the nature of the work they perform. Whether it be workload, work stress, ergonomic challenges or the impact of organizational restructuring, clerical workers have consistently sought to enhance recognition of the problems they face in today’s office environments and what should be done to rectify these problems. It was with this objective in mind that CUPE’s K-12 clerical survey was initiated.

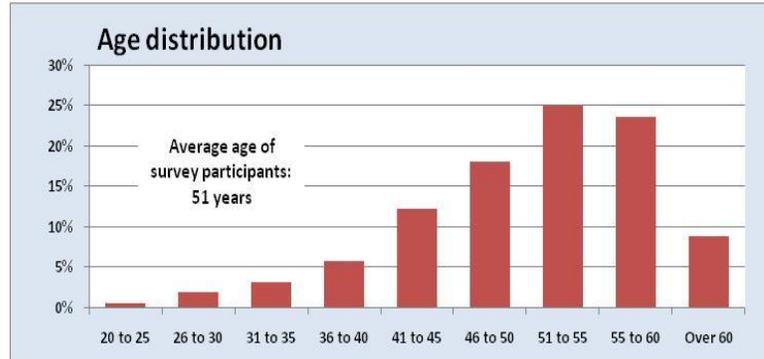
The survey was intended to gather information reflecting the reality of clerical work across a range of school districts, workplaces and work environments. As indicated previously, a total of 1,310 clerical and office staff representing more than 30 per cent of the total employed took part. These workers came from 49 of 60 school districts around the province, including one non-CUPE district.

Clerical work has traditionally been female-dominated and the gender distribution of survey participants confirms this remains the case for the BC public school system. Of the total of those participating in the survey, just under 98 per cent were female.

The survey also recorded the age of those participating. The following chart shows the age breakdown of participants.

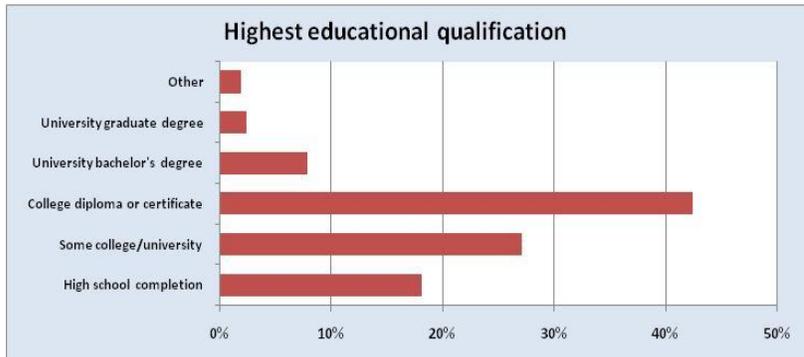
**Chart 6 Age profile of office & clerical staff**

The largest grouping is those aged 51 to 55 – accounting for a quarter of all survey respondents – followed closely by those aged 56 to 60. Together these two groups account for almost half of all survey respondents. At the other end of the age spectrum, less than 12 per cent of survey respondents listed an age of 40 or less. The average age for a clerical worker taking part in the survey was just below 51 years.<sup>11</sup>



When asked about highest level of educational qualification, the largest group of survey participants – about 42 per cent of the survey total – report having a “college diploma or certificate.” About 10 per cent said they had a completed university degree – whether at an undergraduate or graduate level.

**Chart 7 Education qualifications of office & clerical staff**

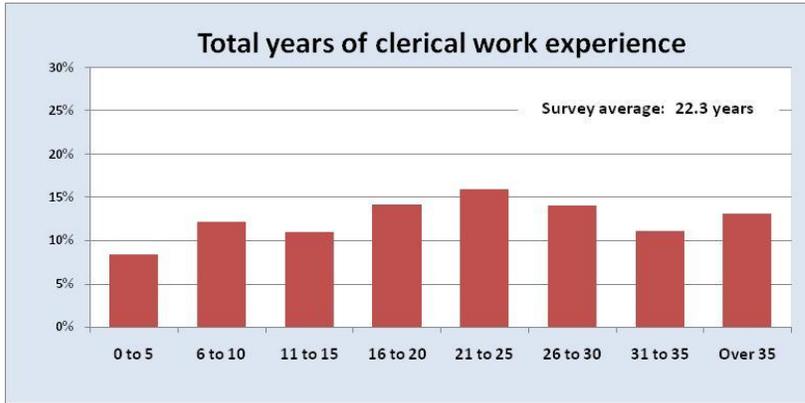


Close to 27 per cent selected some post-secondary education. Another 18 per cent selected “high school completion.” Chart 7 shows the overall pattern of responses regarding educational background.

Participants were asked two questions relating to clerical work experience: how long they had worked in a clerical capacity, and how long they had worked for their current employer. With the first measure, participants reported extensive amounts of clerical experience on average. Chart 8 on the following page shows the overall breakdown.

<sup>11</sup> Support staff data compiled by BCPSEA in EDAS suggest that the average age of a currently employed clerical/office worker in BC’s public school system in 2013-14 was even higher at 55.6 years. This could indicate that younger than average members were more inclined to take part in the survey than their older counterparts. By way of comparison, for the close to 4,000 education assistants who took part in CUPE’s *Recognition & Respect* survey in 2007, the average age was even younger at 46 years.

**Chart 8 Office & clerical work experience**



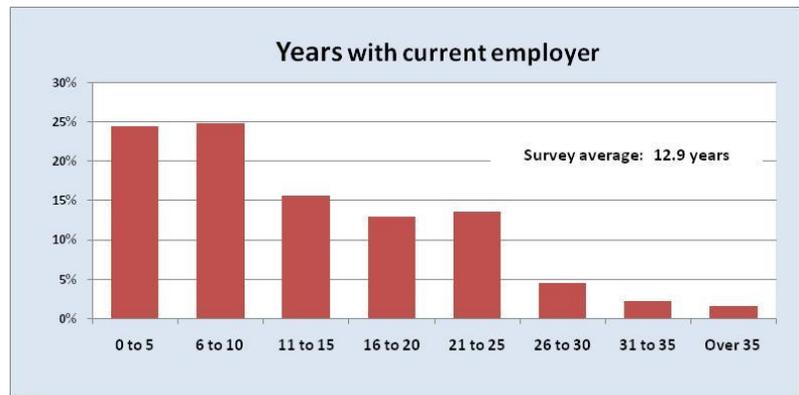
Of particular interest is the very high number of participants reporting more than 30 years of experience working in the field – almost a quarter of all those taking part in the survey. On average, CUPE K-12 office and clerical staff report 22.3 years of total clerical work experience. Among other

things, this finding underlines the strong attachment K-12 clerical workers have to their chosen area of work and their occupational field.

For the second measure – the amount of time clerical staff had been with their current employer – a somewhat different response pattern presents itself.

**Chart 9 Work experience with current employer**

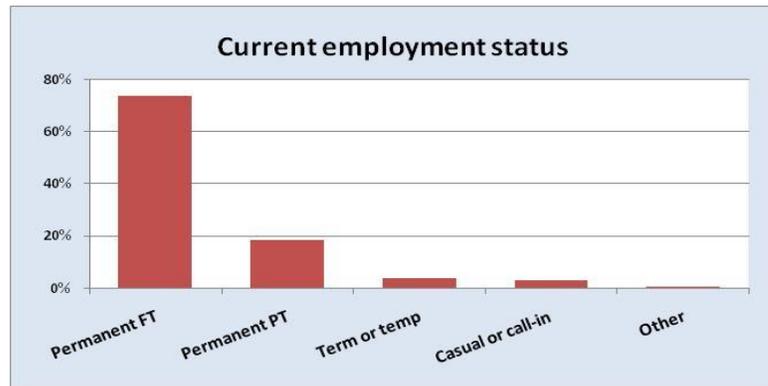
Here, the distribution of responses with respect to time worked with the current employer is more heavily concentrated at the lower end of the experience scale. Almost half of participants fell into the 0-10 years range and significantly smaller groupings reported additional amounts of time in their current employment relationship. The average for the survey as a whole was just under 13 years.



Survey data also suggest that K-12 clerical work is characterized by a high percentage of regular full-time positions. The next chart shows the employment status breakdown for survey.

**Chart 10 Current employment status**

Permanent or continuing full-time jobs predominate, accounting for 74 per cent of all survey participants. When permanent part-time positions are included, the combined percentage rises to more than 92 per cent of total staff. The remainder was primarily composed of “term” or “temporary” staff.<sup>12</sup> Clearly, full-time permanent employment is the norm for clerical and office workers within the K-12 sector.

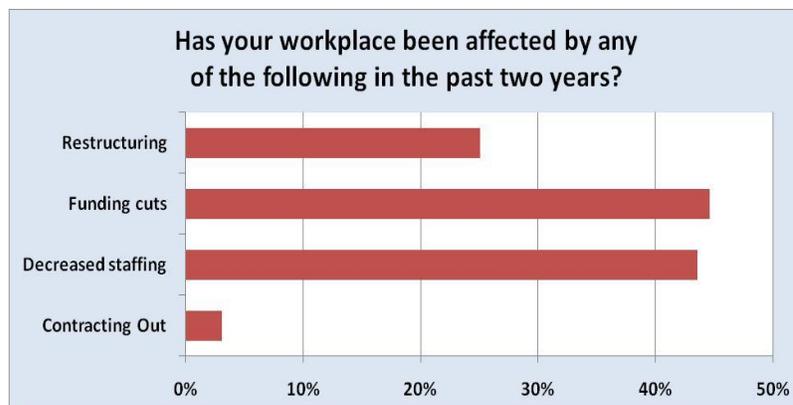


With the largest percentage of clerical workers reporting full-time permanent employment, the average level of pay for those taking part in the survey closely approximates an annualized full-time wage. The survey average came to \$35,659. Approximately 15 per cent reported annual earnings below \$25,000 while another 14 per cent reported annual incomes greater than \$40,000.

Most of those taking part in the survey reported working in urban or suburban settings. Of 1,310 survey respondents, only 265 or 20 per cent reported working in small town schools or board facilities, or in remote locations.

Participants were also asked about a number of external influences that might affect their work. Four options were suggested. The following chart summarizes the responses.

**Chart 11 Sources of change in the workplace**



Funding cuts and decreased staffing levels were cited most often. These staff perceptions are consistent with trends reflected earlier in the analysis of EDAS data and Ministry funding information. The third most common factor was “restructuring” which was cited by about a quarter of respondents. Contracting out

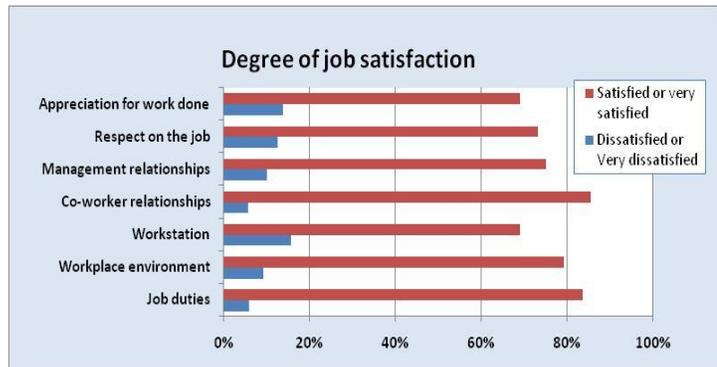
<sup>12</sup> By the nature of their employment, casual workers would have reduced access to or knowledge of the survey and this factor likely accounts for the relative lack of casual member participation. EDAS data shows the public school system making widespread use of casual workers. In 2013-14, casuals accounted numerically for close to a quarter of all support staff headcounts within the BC school system. It is not clear how many of these workers occupy clerical or other office jobs.

did not emerge as a significant issue, having been cited by only three per cent of those surveyed.

The survey also asked questions in the area of job satisfaction. Chart 12 below summarizes how staff responded.

**Chart 12 Overall job satisfaction**

Chart data tracks job satisfaction or dissatisfaction in relation to the seven variables listed down the vertical axis on the left. As is evident, clerical staff voices a high overall degree of job satisfaction in relation to each of these variables (the red or top bar in the chart) with the highest scores registered for “co-worker relationships” and “work duties.” Results of this nature confirm an identification with work in general and with individual jobs in particular that is strongly positive in nature. On the other side, the highest levels of dissatisfaction – the blue or lower bar – are found with the variables “workstation,” “appreciation for work done” and “respect on the job.” Yet for each of these variables, reported levels of dissatisfaction were still only within the 13 to 16 per cent range among survey respondents. Other sources of dissatisfaction ranked even lower in terms of percentage support.

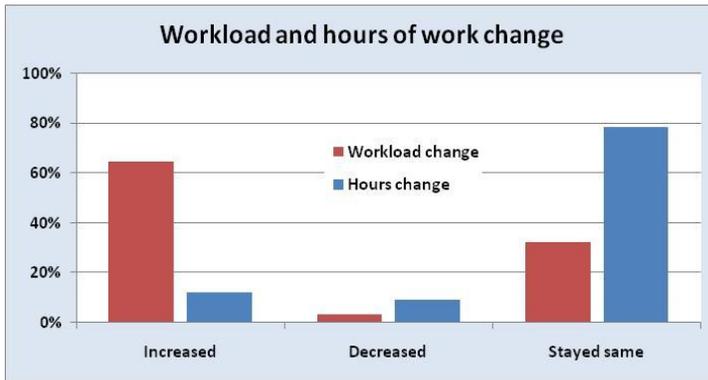


Clerical workers were asked what they thought were the sources of change in workload as well as in hours of paid work. A total of 45 per cent of survey respondents said that “funding cuts” had negatively impacted their workplaces. A like percentage said that “decreased staffing” was also a change overtaking their places of work. These perceptions again point in the direction of funding challenges and their perceived impact on workload and workplace change.

Survey respondents were also asked to comment on whether workload and hours of work changes had impacted their workplaces. For a sizeable majority – in excess of 60 per cent – workload had increased. At the same time, almost 80 per cent of survey respondents said that their hours of work had not changed. Very few office and clerical workers indicated that either their workload or paid work hours were decreasing.

The following chart provides details of this response pattern.

**Chart 13 Workload & hours of work change**

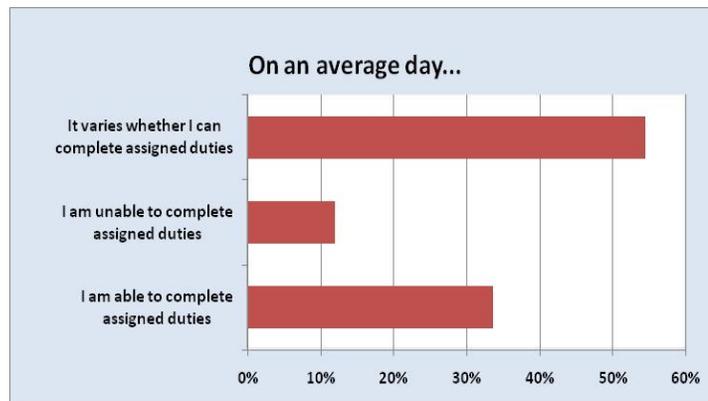


When queried more specifically about whether they had experienced changed duties or altered job descriptions, almost 70 per cent answered in the affirmative. Yet, of this sub-group, more than three-quarters reported no change to hours of work to accommodate an altered workplace environment. Only one in six of the sub-group reported

increased hours in the face of job changes.

The disconnect between these variables – changes in work environments and job demands vs. either static or possibly reduced hours – helps underscore why clerical and office workers express significant concern in the area of work intensification. It also explains what workers are inclined to say when they comment on the impact this has on their ability to complete their work. The following chart shows the pattern of answers to a survey question asking whether clerical staff see themselves as able to finish their assigned and expected duties in an average workday.

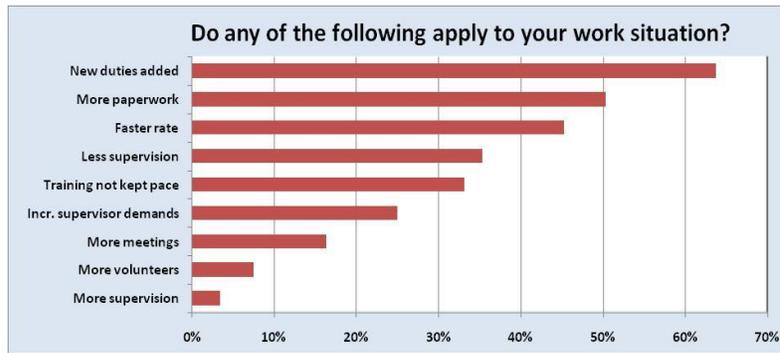
**Chart 14 Ability to complete work in a timely manner**



It is clear from the pattern of data that staff's ability to complete assigned responsibilities in a timely manner is under some pressure. While close to three in ten clerical workers cite no problem in completing assigned duties in a timely manner, the remainder report having problems meeting this requirement. As can be seen, the largest group – accounting for over half of all respondents – says that it varies whether assigned duties can be completed in a timely way, (i.e., on the same day as assigned.)

Clerical workers were also asked to comment on more specific indicators of work and workload change. This question was framed specifically in terms of changes that had occurred within the past two years.

**Chart 15 Specific indicators of workload change**



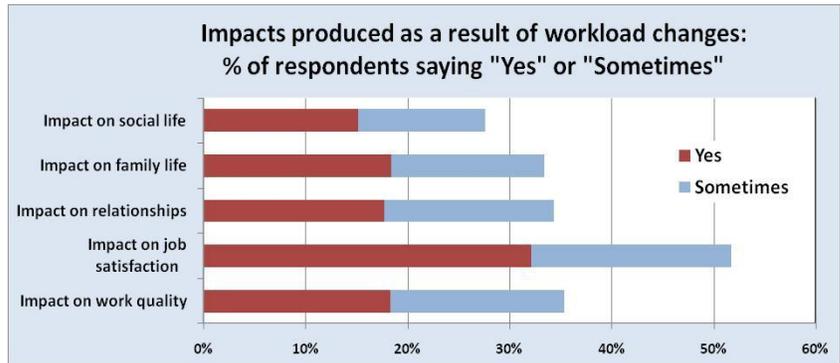
Here primary concerns relate to the imposition of “new duties,” “more paperwork,” and a “faster rate” of work in workplaces. Other specific changes included reduced supervision and training that had not kept pace with the demands of the job. The chart above shows the pattern of

responses for all of the factors suggested as possibilities within the question.

Clerical workers cited a number of impacts they felt had resulted from changes (i.e., increases) in workload. Of five different potential impacts suggested in the survey, the only one which elicited a majority response (the total of those answering “yes” or “sometimes”) was the one relating to decreased “job satisfaction.” This finding is interesting in light of earlier measures indicating high across-the-board levels of overall satisfaction with work. The following chart shows the pattern of responses for those reporting specific impacts on their work.

**Chart 16 Impacts of workload change in the past two years**

Four of the five measures reflect a similar response pattern: from 15 to 18 per cent answering “yes” while another 10 to 15 per cent answer “sometimes.” The one impact that stands out is “job satisfaction.” This suggests that the intensification of work pace

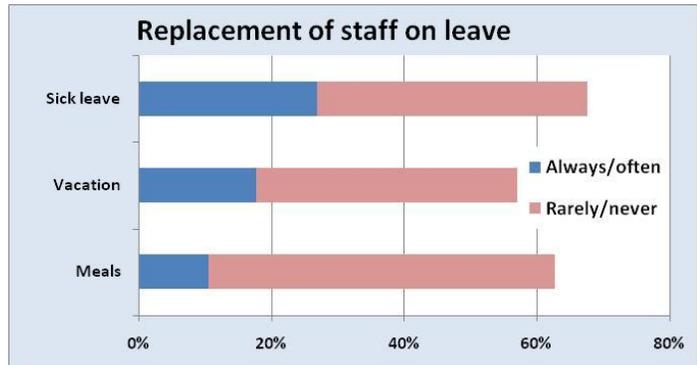


and workload reported by many is impinging on levels of satisfaction that office and clerical workers feel in regards to their work.

Issues relating to workload raised by clerical workers carry over into the areas of leave replacement. Survey responses dealing with replacement show that the practice is rare in the public school system for leaves relating to routine occurrences like sick leave, meals or vacations. The following chart shows how clerical and office staff experience replacement practice in their workplaces in these areas.

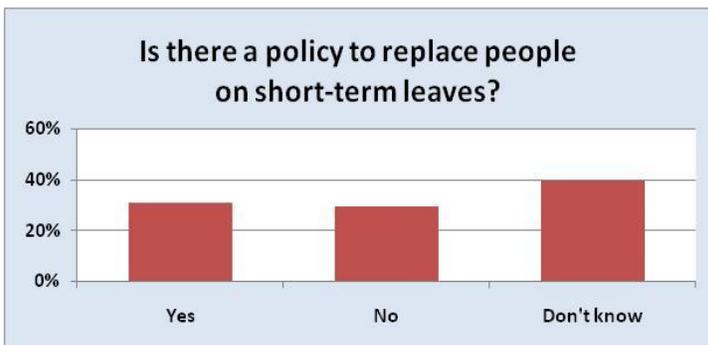
**Chart 17 Leave replacement for office & clerical staff**

As can be seen, most clerical workers see such replacements done either rarely or not at all. In most cases, small percentages report replacements being either common or the norm in their workplaces. The exception is clear “sick leave” where presumably the nature and duration of the leave would have influence over a decision to replace. In all cases, though, larger percentages report all kinds of possible replacements being either rare to non-existent.



Clerical members were also asked if they knew of management policy in regards to replacing workers who went on short-term leave. As the following chart confirms, knowledge of management policy on the issue was mixed and indeed potentially contradictory.

**Chart 18 Replacement of members on short-term leaves**

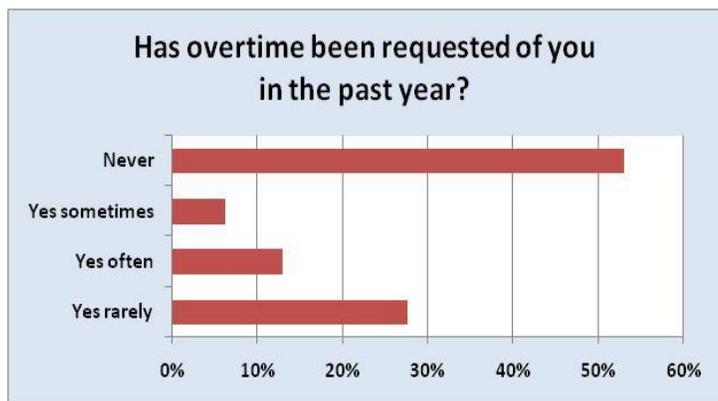


The largest volume of respondents – close to 40 per cent – did not know whether this kind of employer policy existed. “Yes” and “no” responses evenly split the remaining 60 per cent. As is evident, irrespective of whether such policies exist, there is highly uneven knowledge of the area on the employee side.

The next issue addressed in the survey was overtime. Clerical and office staff was asked whether and how often they were asked to work overtime by their employers.

**Chart 19 Overtime requests**

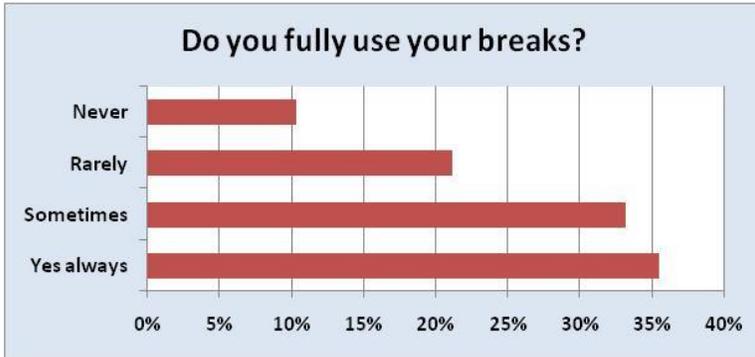
Member experience divides relatively evenly between those who are requested to work overtime and those who are not. Of the former, approximately 20 per cent are requested either “sometimes” or “often” with the balance reporting it happening rarely. Overall, however, overtime does not appear to be the norm for



most office and clerical workers in the K-12 system.

Members were also asked about whether they routinely take their fully allotted time for coffee and lunch breaks. Practices in this area can be revealing of workload pressure and/or work intensification, especially in circumstances where workers decide to forego these breaks.

**Chart 20 Use of coffee and lunch/dinner breaks**



A little over a third of participants state regularly or always using allotted coffee or meal breaks. A slightly smaller percentage reports taking the full allotment “sometimes.” The final third report either “never” or “rarely” taking all of their available break time. This pattern is indicative of workload

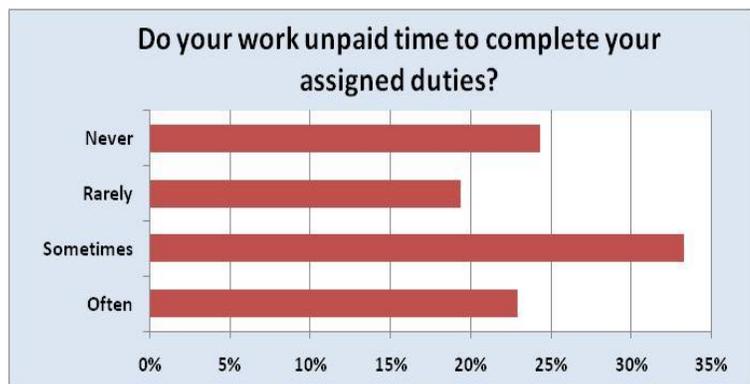
intensification, the likely product of compressed staffing at school or district worksites along with internalized pressure to complete work in a timely manner. As such, it is consistent with broad themes on the subject of work intensification documented in this report.

The next issue concerns unpaid time – time voluntarily and informally donated by clerical and office workers to their employers without remuneration. As with reluctance to use or take full break times, unpaid work time can and does occur when workers feel an implicit need to contribute extra time in order to complete a task or attend to a need arising from their work.

The following chart shows how staff answered the question. “Do you put in unpaid time over your regular hours to complete your assigned duties?”

**Chart 21 Do you perform unpaid work?**

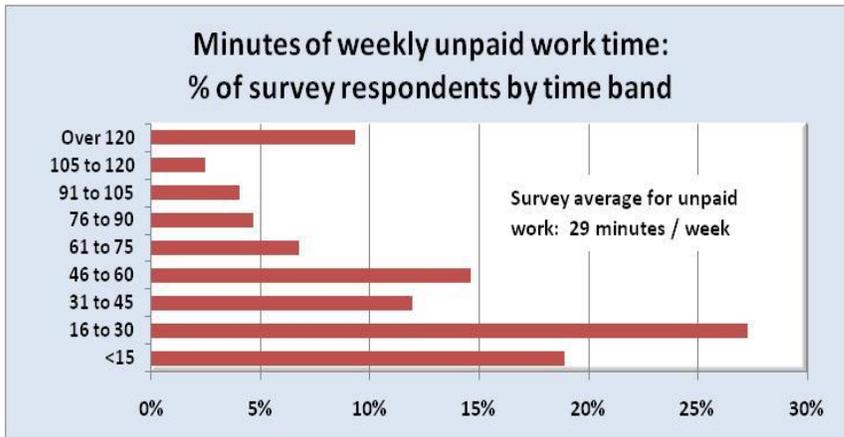
Close to a quarter of survey participants indicate never working for their employer in an unpaid capacity. Another smaller group says this rarely happens in its work. Together, these groups account for more than four out of ten participants. The largest grouping – amounting to about a third of the survey total – indicate working unpaid “sometimes”



while the remainder says that unpaid work is something they perform “often.” These last two groups account for about 57 per cent of those taking part in the survey.

Results like these indicate that unpaid work time is an issue and indeed a problem for many office and clerical support staff.

**Chart 22 Amounts of weekly unpaid work**



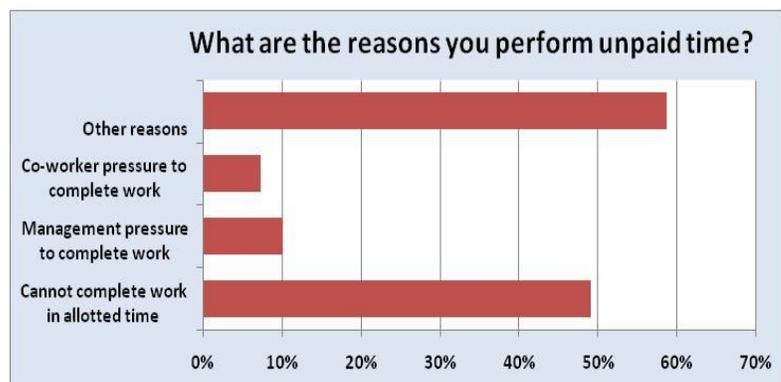
How much unpaid work is actually performed on average? To answer this question, respondents were given their choice of nine time options, ranging from “less than 15 minutes” per week to “more than 120 minutes.” The chart on the left shows how the response pattern broke down. The

largest bloc of those participating in the survey – about 27 per cent – indicate donating between 15 and 30 minutes of free time in an average week on the job. The next largest groupings include those working at or less than 15 minutes weekly, between 46 and 60 minutes weekly and finally those who donate more than 120 minutes or two hours weekly.

On average, for those who do report unpaid worktime, the average amount donated calculates out at 47 minutes per week. When all reported unpaid time is tallied and calculated across the entire survey group – including both those reporting and those not reporting unpaid time – the average amount of unpaid work for K-12 clerical and office staff comes to 29 minutes per week, approximately half an hour.

What are the reasons for unpaid work time? For this question, respondents were offered three potential reasons plus the alternative of “other reasons.” The following chart shows the breakdown of responses.

**Chart 23 Reasons for the performance of unpaid work**



The total of the percentages reflected in the above chart exceeds 100 per cent, indicating that respondents were able to select more than one option. Apart from the fact that “other reasons” emerges as the most common choice, selected by close to 60 per cent of those responding, the most common factor contributing to unpaid work would appear to be “cannot complete work in the allotted time period,” selected by just under half of survey participants. At the same time, it appears that either “management” or “co-worker” pressure does not factor largely in the decision to work unpaid hours, each having been selected by ten or fewer per cent of those taking part in the survey.

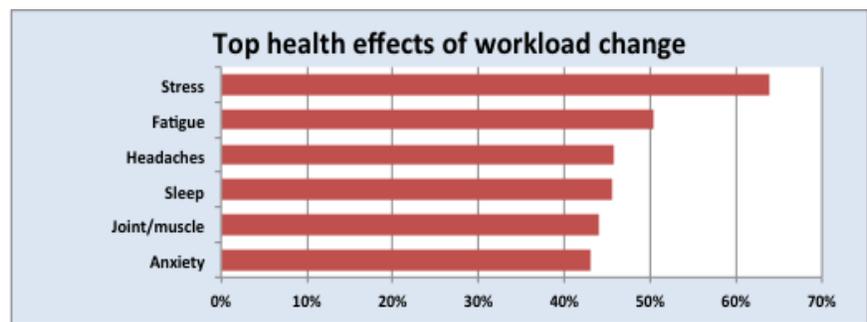
Survey results dealing with the reasons behind and the incidence of unpaid work offer further confirmation of the intensification of clerical and office work. The extent of unpaid work is less than that reflected amongst education assistants.<sup>13</sup> However, when it comes to office and clerical workers, there is clear confirmation of staff’s inability to complete work within allotted time. A reality of relentless budgetary pressure leading to reductions in available staff time provides the necessary frame of reference for understanding why this unpaid work exists today amongst K-12 clerical and office staff. As such, the presence of unpaid work offers important insight into the degree of workload pressure currently placed on office and clerical workers.

## Health and safety issues

Clerical workers also perceive negative health impacts associated with workload stress and pressure. Out of a list of 13 possible health effects, six drew more than a 40 per cent affirmative response rate. Chart 24 provides details.

**Chart 24 Health effects of increased workload: top areas**

Stress emerges as the primary health-related effect of workload changes amongst clerical and office staff. At the same time, all of the other factors offered as possibilities rate relatively highly, at



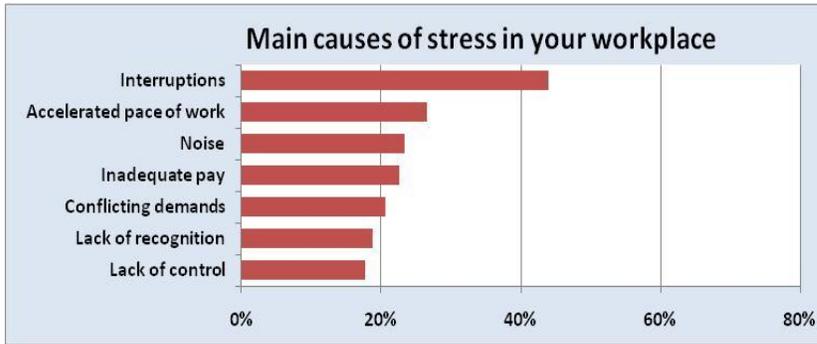
between 40 and 50 per cent. As such, the results point to a pervasive sense of negative health impacts related to work and workload.

Participants were asked to comment on what specific variables emerged as sources of stress. As the chart below indicates, “interruptions of work”, “accelerated work pace” and “workplace noise” emerge as primary sources of stress in office environments.

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<sup>13</sup> By way of comparison, unpaid work by education assistants averages close to two hours per week. John Malcolmson, *Recognition & Respect: addressing the unpaid work of education assistants in BC*, CUPE (2008). p.24.

**Chart 25 Main causes of stress in the workplace**



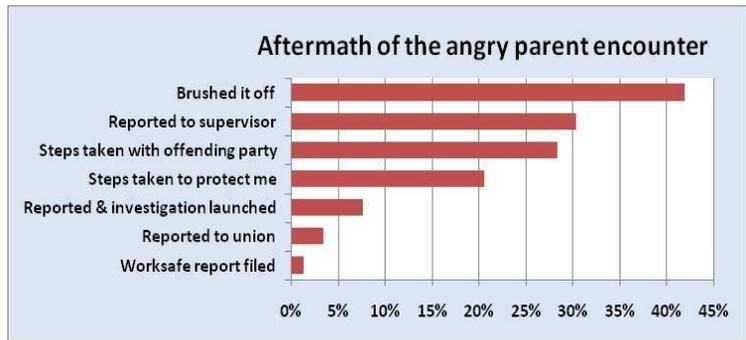
Other possible sources of stress occur with significantly less frequency with most registering at or near the 20 per cent level.

Clerical members were also asked to comment on encounters they may have had with angry and/or abusive parents and

community members. About six in ten respondents indicated they had had such encounters. Members were then asked what follow-up action they took in the wake of these encounters. The following chart shows how participants responded.

**Chart 26 Aftermath of angry parent/community member encounters**

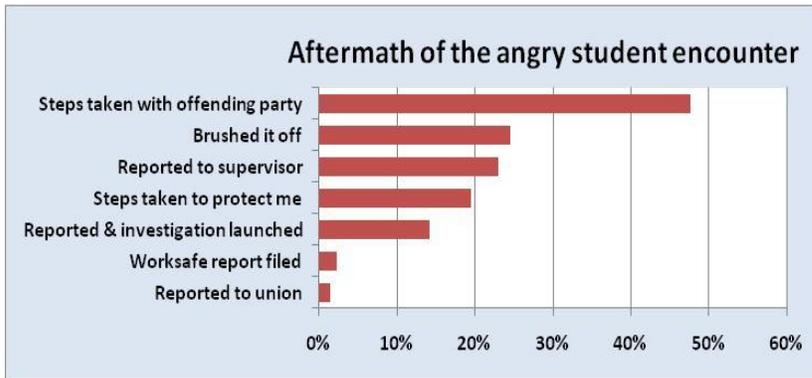
Interestingly, the largest group by a significant margin indicated they had brushed these kinds of encounters off. While some of these encounters may have warranted such a response, it is possible if not likely that many did not and that other, more appropriate steps might have been taken. The fact that the



instigators of these encounters are not formally part of the school community make indicate a lack of confidence on the part of office and clerical members that anything could be done to deal more directly with abusive or intimidating behaviour. The most common actions after this – covering close to 30 per cent of responses in each case – involved a “report to a supervisor” and “steps being taken with the offending party” without further detail as to what the latter might be.

A similar survey question was posed in relation to students. Here, an entirely different response pattern emerges. Office and clerical staff were much less likely to brush things off and correspondingly more likely to take formal steps to make offenders accountable. Almost four in five clerical participants reported having experienced such encounters with students. Chart 27 shows how they report following up.

**Chart 27 Angry or abusive encounters with students**



Almost half of participants report formal steps being taken with the offending party with smaller percentages reporting actions being limited to making reports to supervisors or investigators. These results would seem to indicate greater willingness

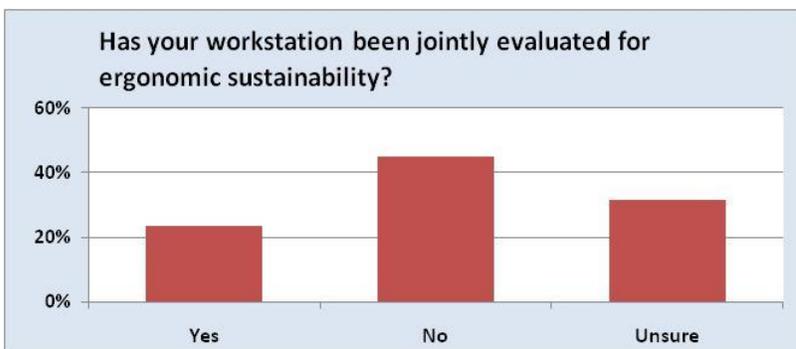
to exercise options inherent in conduct policies and procedures intended to make students like other members of the school community responsible and accountable for their behaviour.

Interestingly, both types of encounter appear to elicit little involvement of local union representatives, a fact that should be fully examined and considered to see if further action should be taken to educate members around how and when this option is best engaged.

Most survey participants also indicate levels of work-related stress have a connection to their use of sick leave. When asked about changes in this area over the past two years, about 55 per cent said that such stress had increased. On average, clerical and office staff report using three days of sick leave per year for situations related to stress-related problems. That being said, the highest number of respondents – close to 37 per cent of the total – said they used only a single day per year.

Survey participants also fielded questions relating to the ergonomic environment of their daily work. As the next chart indicates more than 30 per cent were unsure if their personal workspaces had been subject to any joint evaluation relating to ergonomic sustainability. When added to the large percentage saying no such evaluation had ever been done, more than three-quarters of all those taking part in the survey reported either no experience with or no knowledge of ergonomic evaluation.

**Chart 28 Ergonomic evaluation of office workstations**



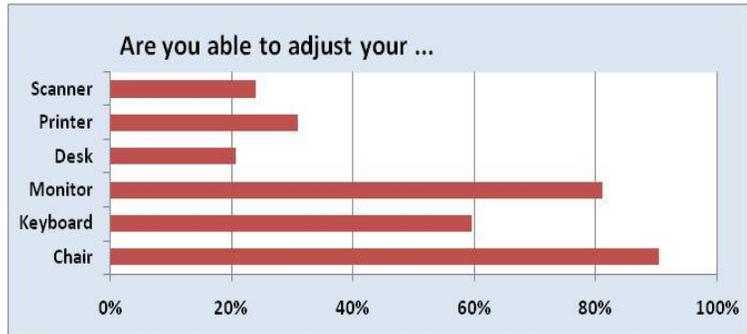
Slightly less than one in four survey respondents indicated such an evaluation had been undertaken. Clearly the issue of ergonomic sustainability has yet to feature very prominently in the way school employers are organizing their office

and clerical workplaces, and indeed in the way office and clerical workers are being engaged in this issue.

This being said, most clerical and office staff said they had the ability to make ergonomic adjustments to office equipment to suit their individual needs. In the latter connection, workers appear to be most focused on their ability to make adjustments in chairs, monitors and keyboards, something which underlines the prevalence of a sitting posture at work as well as the duration of time many spend in front of computer screens.

**Chart 29 Ability to adjust workplace office equipment**

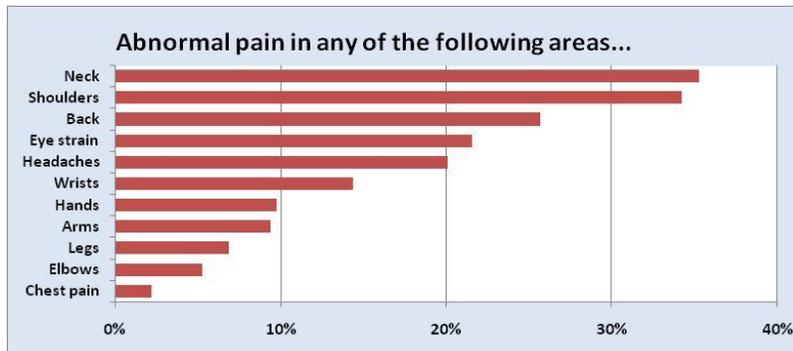
As is evident, the adjustment of other equipment – scanners, printers and desks – figures less prominently as an area of concern or priority for office and clerical staff.



The next question examines the area of pain or discomfort experienced by office and clerical workers, whether it is perceived to be abnormal, as well as whether it is seen to be caused by work.

Many clerical and office staff say they have experienced “abnormal pain”. As the next chart indicates, the largest group reports the presence of this kind of pain in the neck, shoulder and back areas and in each of these areas, a quarter to a third of respondents report abnormal pain.

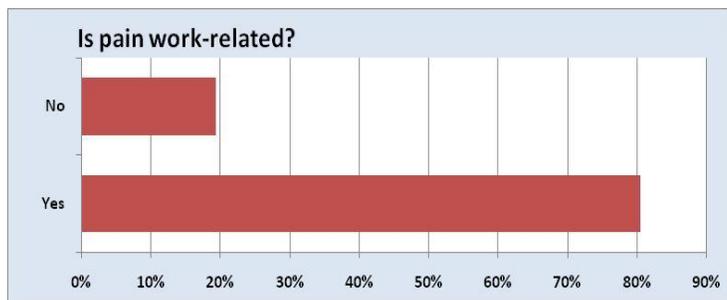
**Chart 30 Abnormal pain or discomfort**



Neck, shoulder and back pain – all potentially symptomatic of ergonomic stress and pressure – predominate amongst the list of possible areas of pain or discomfort. Other types and areas of pain and discomfort are significantly less prominent in survey participants’ answers.

Members were also asked the important question of whether they saw the pain they were experiencing as “work-related.” As the chart to the right confirms, about four in five taking part in the survey see such pain as related to the work they perform. Given

**Chart 31 Is the pain work-related?**



the high concentration of pain in the neck, shoulder and back regions, this kind of perception is not difficult to understand.

Office and clerical staff were also asked questions relating more broadly to how they organize their work time. Specifically, clerical and office staff were invited to comment on which discrete work functions comprised a normal or regular day and how much time they spent on these tasks. The following table shows the breakdown of reported time spent with discrete office-related tasks.

**Chart 32 Percentage of time spent in an average workday on discrete office/clerical tasks**

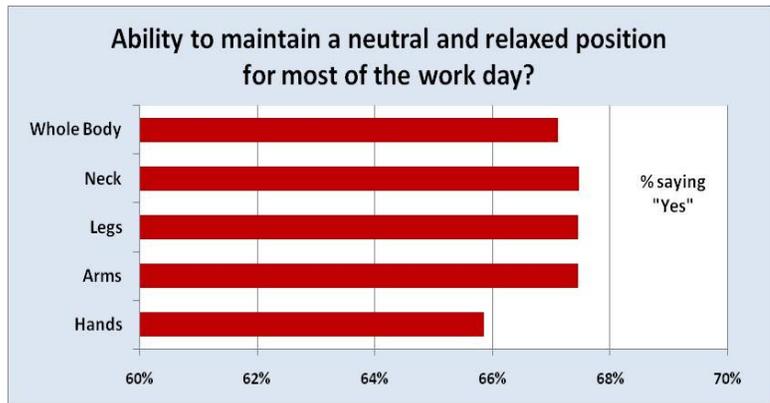
Daily hours spent performing the following activities	>5 and up to 7 hours	>3 and up to 5 hours	>0 and up to 3 hours
Sitting	59%	30%	10%
Computer	54%	36%	9%
Headset use	8%	1%	91%
Phone use	8%	6%	86%
Reaching	5%	6%	89%
Twisting	4%	7%	88%
Standing	2%	2%	96%
Light lifting	0%	2%	98%
Filing	0%	1%	99%
Heavy lifting	0%	0%	100%

The above work functions are not mutually exclusive – it is possible that clerical workers may be involved with two or more functions at the same time and, for this reason columns in the table typically do not add up to 100 per cent. The first two items – sitting and computer use – offer the clearest insight into the kinds of functions which dominate the average clerical worker’s time on the job. They appear to confirm that a high proportion of clerical work within the school system is comprised of time spent at computer workstations. All other functions rank substantially less and primarily take up from zero to three hours of daily clerical worker time.

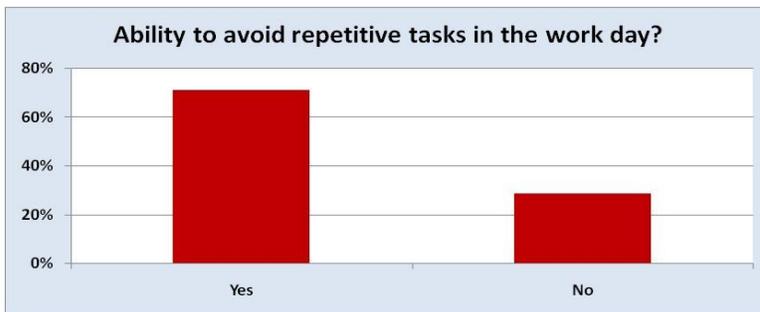
Time concentrated in particular work functions or tasks can pose health-related problems. To reduce the likelihood of these problems, it is important that workers have the ability to make adjustments in work stance or posture. The following question shows how clerical and office staff responded when asked whether they had that particular capacity or ability in their jobs.

**Chart 33 Ability to maintain a neutral & relaxed position?**

As the chart to the right indicates, close to two-thirds of clerical participants say they are able to maintain a neutral and relaxed position, with the percentage being somewhat lower in the specific case of “hands.” Most workers (about 95 per cent) go on to say they are also able to take frequent breaks – to stand, stretch or go for a walk – to gain relief from having to maintain the same work position. As the next chart shows, a somewhat smaller but still sizeable percentage — 71 per cent – say they are able to avoid spending prolonged time on a single repetitive activity.



**Chart 34 Ability to avoid repetitive tasks during the workday**



While most clerical and office staff report having no problem avoiding repetitive tasks and their negative consequences during the workday, a significant minority of about 30 per cent says it is unable to avoid such repetitive activity. As such, this offers a clear warning sign for possible

repetitive strain issues amongst that portion of K-12 office and clerical staff.

All in all, the information that emerges from this section of the survey confirms that clerical and office staff faces a host of health and ergonomic-related challenges, the latter tied directly to the ongoing effects of work, workload and work intensification.

## Conclusion

The data compiled for this report shows clerical work and those who perform this work in our schools to be under duress. While there may be many proximate factors contributing to this duress, a reality of relentless budget compression leading to a never ending push to economize on hours and on work functions not seen to deliver direct services to students has to emerge as an important underlying cause. It is the exercise of provincial fiscal control and the downloading of unfunded costs that lies at the heart of changes documented in this report, changes which are overtaking office and clerical work within our public school system. The result has been efforts to intensify the labour of office and clerical workers, to call on fewer staff to do more, and to leave workers to contend with increased workload pressure and the problems it entails.

These changes have also taken shape under the watchful indifference of a provincial government more intent on reducing taxes and cutting public services than on delivering resources of the type and scale required to meet the needs of public school students. Much has been said about the need for the school system to direct maximum resources to the delivery of services in the classroom. While this latter notion has garnered public support, it is flawed because it ignores the reality of what must occur behind the scenes and out of classroom view for our schools to operate safely, smartly and efficiently. And, as there are real limits to the degree to which office and clerical staff can be further compressed, this trend shows itself to be entirely unsustainable over the middle to longer term.

By participating in the survey, CUPE office and clerical staff in the K-12 system have broadened our understanding of what it means to work in a contemporary school office environment. We can confirm that office and clerical work in today's school system is in a state of flux marked by significant technological and organizational change, change that has had major impacts on the tasks clerical staff undertake. We also know with certainty that clerical workers bring extensive experience to the work they do. And we know they are both highly educated and highly qualified to undertake the challenges they face.

For many of these workers, new duties have been added to their work. Without a commensurate increase in work hours, increased work-related stress and internalized pressure to perform "unpaid work" to get the job done on time have been the result. Work-related stress has had different impacts, including those which affect health and well-being. In this connection, significant numbers of workers taking part in the survey report impacts from their work in areas such as fatigue, anxiety, stress, headaches and sleep disruption. Most workers also cite the stress that accompanies abusive encounters on the job with either parents, members of the public or students.

Ergonomics is another important area of workplace concern raised in this report. Comments made by office and clerical staff point to a need for substantial further work in this area, both in terms of workstation evaluation and/or remediation, as well as in terms of the necessary education of clerical workers regarding steps that must be taken to safeguard their right to an ergonomically supportive workstation and an ergonomically sustainable work environment. For these and other issues, it is time that clerical and office work is given its proper attention and respect within the overall context of our public school system.

This report underlines an urgent need for workers, CUPE and school administrators to work together to address the pressing issues and concerns affecting clerical work. We know these issues may be complex and multi-faceted in nature. So must be the ways they are addressed – whether in bargaining, in labour management discussions or ultimately in everyday workplaces. The latter is where CUPE office and clerical workers help organize and deliver the important public services our school communities have come to know and expect.

## Appendix 1: EDAS support staff positions understood as “office/clerical”

Support staff jobs considered by this report to be “office” or “clerical” in nature are listed below. These jobs have been grouped this way to facilitate the analysis contained in this report. The “clerical/office” label is not something used by EDAS system *per se*.

EDAS position name	Descriptive detail & examples	Level	EDAS position code
Human Resources		<b>Non-supervisory</b>	<b>2110</b>
Payroll/benefits			<b>2120</b>
Finance	(Reporting, A/R, A/P, Budgeting, procurement, etc.)		<b>2130</b>
Education Support Board Office	(Administrative Secretary, Communications Assistants, etc. )		<b>2140</b>
Facilities	(Administrative Secretary Facilities, Secretary Custodial Department, Secretary Maintenance Department, Rental Coordinator, etc.)		<b>2310</b>
School Administration	(office staff)		<b>2370</b>
Human Resources		<b>Supervisory</b>	<b>2112</b>
Payroll/benefits			<b>2122</b>
Finance	(Reporting, A/R, A/P, Budgeting, procurement etc.)		<b>2132</b>
Education Support Board Office	(Administrative Secretary, Communications Assistants, etc. )		<b>2142</b>
Facilities	(Administrative Secretary Facilities, Secretary Custodial Department, Secretary Maintenance Department, Rental Coordinator, etc.)		<b>2312</b>
School Administration staff)	(office staff)		<b>2372</b>

cope491\*moh