

POSITION PAPER

Standard Credentials for Education Assistants

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This position paper regarding standardizing credentials for education assistants has been compiled by CUPE Research and National staff. Developed over the past number of years, this paper has been informed with input from CUPE K-12 members across the province, committees struck through the Provincial Framework Agreement, and CUPE National Research. "Standard Credentials for Education Assistants" outlines CUPE's goals for credential standardization, asserts jurisdiction on the topic, and makes recommendations.

Introduction

Classrooms in B.C. have become increasingly complex and diverse places of learning and providing inclusive learning environments is a cornerstone of British Columbia's public K-12 education system. Working directly with students with diverse and complex needs, CUPE Education Assistants (EAs) are a critical component in ensuring inclusive education. It is imperative that they have the necessary skills to support the best possible educational outcomes for all learners. As the union representing the majority of EAs in the K-12 system, CUPE has been engaged in this subject since the 1990s.

While the number of students with inclusive education designations has remained constant over the past 10 years, the supports required by many students have become increasingly more complex and intensive. The number of classrooms with one to three students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) has increased 11% since 2006-2007, while the number of classrooms with 4 to 6 students with IEPs has increased 83%, and classrooms with 7 or more students with IEPs has increased 126%.

It is also critically important that Indigenous students receive culturally appropriate support and resources to contribute to their success in the K-12 system. Indigenous education assistants partner their lived experience with formal qualifications

to provide inclusive education to the population served. In these roles, Indigenous EAs should be respectfully and consistently recognized and compensated, without variation from one school district to another, with full consideration for the value of the lived experience and how it serves the needs of Indigenous students.

Standardized education programs and qualifications needed

Supporting diverse learners with complex challenges and needs requires adequate staffing levels, but it also requires that education workers have the appropriate education to meet these challenges. While we have concerns that the number of EAs supporting students with diverse needs and behavioural challenges is too low, we are also concerned that there is a widespread problem of insufficient education for EAs across the province. Education programs for EAs vary widely between institutes, as do the EA qualification requirements established by school districts.

Parents and caregivers should have confidence that those working with their children and youth have appropriate, recognized education, regardless of the district or classroom in which their children attend school. Similarly, education assistants should have

the confidence that their education provides them with the skills necessary to perform their work across the sector without creating indiscriminate barriers to employment between districts.

Standardized education programs and qualifications are the best way to achieve these goals. Offering this education through public post-secondary institutions is the leading way to ensure that EA education is comprehensive, accessible, transferable, and based on best practices and up-to-date research on inclusive education.

EAs need specific courses

A survey of close to 4,000 CUPE EAs taken in 2009 showed that most EAs have three or more qualifications for their job.¹ Additionally, EAs listed over 7,600 additional seminars, courses and workshops they had completed to enhance their education.² Their current competencies include: early childhood education, education assistant, child and youth care, sign language, applied behavioural analysis, special education teaching assistant, non-violent crisis prevention, and first aid.

Despite their multiple qualifications, many EAs have requested additional educational programs and training opportunities, with autism and behaviour-related training topping the chart at 31 per cent when combined.³ The list of 20 categories for additional education and training submitted by EAs reflects the wide variety of skills and knowledge needed to perform their jobs well.

Standardization addresses many issues

Qualifications and equivalencies are not standardized across the province and EAs are not equally qualified, even within the same school district. While the qualifications set by school districts does appear to generally require post-secondary training aimed

specifically at becoming an EA – such as an Educational Assistant diploma or certificate – this is not uniformly the case. Sometimes the “equivalent experience” to an EA diploma or certificate is all that is deemed necessary, and other times specific EA training is listed as “desirable” but not necessary.

We have concerns about how and who is determining what is equivalent. Are equivalencies being applied consistently or on a case-by-case basis? Are these assessments being made by qualified experts? We worry that in the context of a high demand for EAs and a shortage of qualified candidates, qualification measurements are being overlooked or adapted.

The lack of requirements makes attaining an education in an EA program challenging. Length of study, practicum hours and costs vary between programs. Some schools offer programs for as little as two weeks (a bridge program offered by School District 61 in Victoria), while those offered in the post-secondary system can take up to two years to complete. Some school districts (Delta, Surrey, Maple Ridge and Victoria) have created their own education program with no guarantee that those programs will be recognized by other school districts or a public post-secondary institution.⁵

This causes transferability issues for students in education assistance programs and for graduates who need to move between districts. The lack of standardization also creates challenges for school districts deciding what training they will and will not recognize.

It is unfair that students spend time and money on these programs only to learn that their education will not be recognized in the area of B.C. they wish to practice. It may also be concerning to school districts, staff and parents that an EA deemed unqualified to work in one district, is qualified to work in another.

In a 2018 CUPE survey for education assistants 85 per cent of respondents said their education and training should be standardized across the province.

¹ “Education assistants in British Columbia: an educational profile and agenda” John D. Malcolmson. CUPE. April, 2009.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

Public post-secondary education institutions best equipped to deliver EA programs

To create a unified system of standardized education for EAs, CUPE is recommending that only public post-secondary education institutions (PSIs) offer programs resulting in EA credentials. Public PSIs are best equipped to provide quality, comprehensive education, developed and delivered by appropriately qualified professors and instructors with high levels of expertise and a knowledge of the prevailing research, as well as an infrastructural context that allows them to continuously review and update curricula and best practices. These institutions also work closely together in the field of classroom and community support, providing a high level of confidence with respect to knowledge sharing and transparency. Additionally, structures of the B.C. post-secondary system like the BC Council on Admissions and Transfers – the body that facilitates articulation and transfer between the province’s colleges and universities – will help achieve the goal of standardization and equivalency among programs offered by different institutions.

Allowing only public PSIs to offer EA certification also ensures access to the full suite of student financial assistance programs for students. EAs are not fairly compensated for the complex set of skills, knowledge and credentials their job requires. They are often on 10-month contracts rather than an annual income, and many have only 4 to 6 hours of work a day – this totalling an annual wage of just under \$28,000. To pay for school, many prospective EAs require financial assistance and students who attend education programs at private institutions are often not eligible for public financial assistance. Accordingly, the current approach creates a great deal of inequity and limits the number of potential EAs through unnecessary financial barriers affecting a predominantly female workforce.

Public-only PSIs conferring EA credentials ensures high quality education and province-wide access with the full support of the public system of student

aid. This strategy will deliver universally recognized educational qualifications to graduates who are employment-ready upon program completion.

Course articulation

The COVID-19 pandemic has illustrated the need for versatility and adaptability in B.C.’s public education system. EAs demonstrated those qualities in providing early learning and care for children of essential workers. The work EAs performed during the pandemic highlighted the organic breadth of the profession. EAs supported a range of early learning and care programs with the skills and abilities inherent to their designation. This is due to the natural, but often unrecognized, overlap between EA education, training and experience and those of early childhood educators (ECEs). With each profession existing in its own respective silos, the opportunities provided by this relationship are rarely realized.

Course articulation compares transferability and content of courses, recognizing the overlaps and making sure that everyone gets credit for both channels of learning. With some minor curricular adjustments, standardized EA programs could recognize the common elements of ECE and EA education by conferring both the ECE assistant credential along with the EA credential upon successful completion. Further, thoughtful articulation of the EA and ECE programs would enable a laddering between the two so that individuals could acquire both an EA credential and ECE diploma without repeating common elements of each program – a savings for both students and government. Such a strategy would create a greater number of universally trained educational professionals working in the public education system.

The articulation of ECE and EA education speaks directly to a key government goal: the delivery of early care and learning within the public school system. As outlined in the CUPE research document on the Seamless Day model for before- and after-school care⁵, EAs could make a substantial contribution to the expansion of childcare seats in all parts of British Columbia with their current level of training and

⁵ “A Shift to School-Based Delivery of School-Aged Child Care: How B.C. can create the next 10,000 child care spaces.” CUPE. July 2020.

experience. Greater articulation between EA and ECE programs would strengthen this opportunity, and better laddering between the two designations would help create more ECE trained staff in the system and help offset a provincial shortage of ECE workers.

As the CUPE Seamless Day proposal highlights, expansion of childcare in the K-12 system with EAs performing a large share of the work also speaks to the ongoing challenges surrounding EA hours. Working in before and after school programs would add significant time to an otherwise shorter day and round out full-time hours for participating EAs. Work to recognize and credentialize existing ECE knowledge within EA training, and strengthen that learning under a standardized model of education for EAs, will only increase the value EAs can bring to solving B.C.'s childcare challenges with accessible, affordable, high-quality childcare delivered in an educational setting.

Regulatory framework

EAs are covered by collective agreements which must be followed. These agreements have provisions for many of the conditions relevant to the roles and responsibilities of EAs. The Provincial Framework Agreement between the BC Public School Employers' Association (BCPSEA) and the K-12 Presidents Council and support staff unions shows the coordination, cooperation, and mutual respect between these bodies.⁶

In the upcoming months, CUPE will be working with the BC Teachers Federation (BCTF) to modernize their joint *Roles and Responsibilities* document, which has not been revised since 2009. An update to this document will accurately reflect the roles, responsibilities and working relationship between teachers and education assistants. This will benefit everyone in the K-12 system. The stakeholders are also well equipped to navigate any matters that arise through the existing grievance and arbitration process for individual disputes between employer and union member. This process should remain in place, as the addition of a regulatory body for education assistants is unnecessary and disruptive.

Recommendations

1. Education assistants need standardized qualifications across the province that are used by all districts. By 2025, all new hires should have to meet the standardized provincial education requirements for the position of EA. Those already experienced and working as education assistants should be given the opportunity to participate in additional education, if desired, but this should not be made mandatory.
2. Only public post-secondary institutions should be able to grant EA credentials to create:
 - equity of access and improve affordability for EA programs through universal access to all public student financial assistance options;
 - security for current and prospective EA students knowing that they will leave the institution well prepared for the complex requirements of the EA position, possessing a credential that has universal application throughout the province;
 - an ability to have educational qualifications standardized and recognized across districts; and,
 - comfort for parents and students who will know EAs bring the education and experience required to offer needed support.
3. Standardized EA programs should be designed to include and recognize the common elements of ECE and EA learning by conferring an ECE assistant credential along with the EA credential upon successful completion. Further, future evolution of EA and ECE programs should enable a laddering between the two to create greater access to both programs.
4. As part of government's plan to deliver childcare in the K-12 system, EAs should be given an opportunity to expand their hours to full-time (7-hour days) by working in before and after school programs. Using models like the Seamless Day proposed by CUPE, the value EAs can bring to solving B.C.'s childcare challenges with accessible, affordable, high-quality childcare should be better recognized and utilized.
5. Compensation for EAs needs to be increased. The growing complexity of the job and the multiple skills required should be reflected in the salaries they earn. Better wages will also help with the retention and recruitment of EAs.

⁶ "Roles and Responsibilities of Teachers and Teacher Assistants/Education Assistants". BCTF/CUPE Joint Paper. 2009.