

# An educational assistant speaks out: We are over-worked, undervalued, underpaid, the list goes on <sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

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## EXCERPTS

I am a TA (teaching assistant) also known as an EA (educational assistant) in the Peel District School Board.

I would like to share my thoughts about how the system treats the support experts (TAs) in the public school system and help you understand what we are really feeling in the school.

As you know (or maybe you don't) but my salary tops out at just about \$40,000 per year. We are required to have a minimum of a two-year diploma in post-secondary studies relating to children to obtain this career. Many of us have three years or even a bachelor's, and most of us have spent umpteen hours in various workshops, modules, seminars and conferences on our own time to better our skills.

I can't speak for everyone, but I feel like I can speak for most. It seems the government and the board seriously undervalues our roles in students' lives, especially special needs students.

I've been working in the special needs field for 20 plus years, but only in the board for five. I also have a son with special needs and know what the general consensus of TAs is. So I'm not blowing smoke or making up stories.

People that work in this field generally love the children. And are there for the children. WE LOVE the children.

But the job, the policies and barriers have made it difficult to love the "job." We stay for the children we love to help, not the job we're forced to manage. More and more TAs are not liking the "job." Less and less post-secondary students are looking to graduate and work for the school system as a teaching assistant.

Why is that?

To start with, we are not valued and appreciated. We are not paid fairly as a contributing member to the school system. We work with a job description that comes from the 80s, and you must understand the school system is very different than the 80s. We TAs do not feel heard. We are stressed, burnt out and working beyond the maximum of our abilities. Let me share what's been going on.

The government closed institutions, most special schools and majority of the specialized classrooms that were designed for students with disabilities and their needs. These schools offered snoezelen and sensory rooms, special equipment, special busing so we could go out into the community, trained teachers, accessible programs, etc., and threw all students – no matter the disability – or need into the same box.

Whether or not you believe in the inclusion for all movement or not, the way it's been done has been horrible for many.

TAs are stretched way too thin and too many kids are left without support. Contained classes have nowhere to go but their own classroom all day long, although there are often empty, closed classrooms throughout the school.

The teachers had/have no training, nor are expected to be trained when they have a student with special needs or additional needs in that class. The exception to that rule is the few contained classes within the board, and some vocational level classes, but I've even seen untrained teachers in both those classes. Your plan of having teachers do a quick study in autism is not going to be of any affect. Their online additional qualification classes for the spec ed qualifications are also of little use. TAs spend two years in class and in the field learning about autism and the spectrum, as well as other disabilities. You can't condense our knowledge into a few short seminars.

In some classes the people with special needs made up almost half of the classes, again with untrained teachers and often with little to no TA support. Teachers are stretched thin between so many high needs students in their classrooms, many of which need one-to-one academic support for at least half of their day. So students continue to struggle and act out.

Schools were never given extra resources. In fact occupational therapists, physiotherapists, speech and language therapists, specialized itinerants and psychologist resources are less and less every single year. They too are spread so thin between multiple schools that a high school student is lucky to get one visit in a term.

It takes years to get a psycho educational assessment done and the support students need to succeed are often tied to that assessment.

Adaptive equipment, and teaching and learning strategies all come with that. The same goes personal protective devices for the staff that work with them.

Some schools have contained classes for the highly aggressive behaviours, but once again no other spaces ... so their stuck in the same class all day, often not allowed to attend music or art or gym because there's no time slot for them ... they're not a mainstream classroom, so they get whatever room, left over throughout the school. Some of the kids are welcomed to join less academic classes like art, or gym, but the space or program is not suitable for them so they have to be pulled out with nowhere else to go.

The government and board policies have spread the TAs thin, refusing to hire enough TAs. As a result, we currently can only focus on safety. There's no time for academic support, social skills support, life skills, anger management, self regulation and all the things we love to partake in. We are much too busy putting out fires and dealing with challenging behaviours.

We are required to do more and more programming simply because the teachers don't, for a variety of reasons; and if our kids are bored all day long, we are the ones left to deal with the behaviours.

There is no true accountability for teachers and them treating their students like their students and we are more and more responsible for them each and every day in all levels of school. When a student melts down (even if it's a teachers accidental doing, due to lack of training or limitations) teachers evacuate the classrooms and we TAs are left to put out the fire. Not all teachers are like this. There are some really great teachers who really welcome and work hard for our kids. But teachers do not have the training that TAs do, nor should they. That's what we should be there for.

You have cut more and more gym and exercise time over the years for kids. What happens ... increased behaviours. Our kids need exercise, our lovely escape artists need a place to go that they can be safe. Instead, kids are forced to pace hallways and walk in circles to get the movement and energy breaks they need.

Parents have more and more say where their kids go. They can refuse professionally RECOMMENDED placements (such as contained classrooms or vocational level 1 or 2) even if and when it puts an entire school at risk. The child is struggling and not understanding. What happens ... increased behaviours.

Medications that have helped students in previous times are being refused by parents. I'm not saying all medications are great, or all kids should be medicated, but medication did and has changed the dynamic of student behaviour. And therefore our jobs and the risk levels we encounter.

The school system has become just more violent in general because kids often rule the roost, more and more come from troubled or difficult backgrounds, less engaged parenting, lack of consequences and the list goes on.

Many kids in this decade have lost major skills like resiliency, and patience, and other important coping skills.

We are in an autism crisis right now, and autism is one of the disabilities with the highest incidents of aggressive behaviours, and needs the highest TA supports. You cut the autism budget for families, and leave us to manage the painful outcomes.

We are in a mental health crisis as well, particularly for our kids, and many students with special needs are also suffering from severe mental health issues. Self harm, schizophrenia, manic disorders, have become quite common. Could this be due to a link to the inclusion movement, or the lack of value and support these kids feel they have in the mainstream system? Possibly, either way, we TAs are left to try to help these students throughout their day in managing through the day.

Aggressive behaviours, hitting, kicking, biting, being sworn at, things thrown at us, hair pulled, being spit on, threatening to kill us and rooms trashed is prevalent in the school system. Most of us can say we are harmed at least monthly, some of us can say daily or I can personally say multiple times per day, all the while we persevere in trying to teach our youth self regulation and non-violent techniques.

Oh my the list goes on and on.....

So now that I said all that ... why do you think TAs are complaining? We track behaviours, share our experiences, but no one is listening.

We are burnt out and undervalued. The fact of the matter is once you leave the education world and enter the working world money talks. Good work = good pay. Hard work = decent wages. And respect. And a feeling of value. Sure we get a sense of accomplishment and pride when a student catches on or has an ah-ha moment, or when we were able to put out a fire quickly. But that still doesn't change the recognition we deserve at board level or government level. We work in the school system and we are the lowest paid and highest risk job in that school system.

Those that are fighting for fair job recognition are overworked caring about these kids, trying their best to get somewhere while the system keeps slapping them in the face.

We deserve better pay! No amount of pay would do to be hit, kicked, sworn at, spit on daily (and I suspect you do not experience this or else you would be on my side of the fence).

The salaries we receive for toughing it out because we love the kids is unfair and downright disgusting. I have to have a college degree to enter this job. You never use to. My 24-year-old son has an entry level factory job and is making more.

I feel that people with special needs have ALWAYS taken a back seat in your eyes. Those that work with the most vulnerable are no different. And the special needs advocacy and fight doesn't end once they graduate. It's just left to the parents and outside agencies.

We deserve our sick days. Other than doctors and nurses and daycare providers I can think of no other job where you are in such close contact with other's bodily fluids daily, sneezed and coughed directly on, wiping noses and vomit, taking care of toileting needs. Did I mention spit on. Or just holding the hands of a student that doesn't understand germs and proper hygiene.

We deserve good health benefits because my job is physical and every day I age and am not so agile. I must be quick on my feet and ready for the unpredictable.

We deserve to be able to attend trainings, and have useful and productive trainings to attend because the special needs world is ever evolving in a system that is running so poorly. In fact, MANY OF US have the knowledge and know-how (myself included) to teach a contained, life-skills based classroom. Offer us the opportunity to upgrade our careers to supplementary teachers of contained classrooms. We need to offer TAs who have an educational assistant diploma a chance to advance their careers, and provide students with professionals whose heart and passion lies in the disability community.

We deserve planning time because computers and working laminators are scarce and we shouldn't have to buy laminators and computers to do the work at home. The forms you fill out every time you're hit 15 minutes. Do that multiple times. Add in observations, and evaluating them, add in making visual schedules and incentive programs; busy work for when the teachers expect our kids to sit and read silently yet they can't.

We all deserve respect and some sense of value. You can't see that because you don't have to worry about who's going to hit you that day or seen the efforts we put out daily to see our guys succeed, so they can meet their potential.

Please, don't say we are greedy or don't love our kids because we are tired and angry and finally advocating for ourselves. My son and the TAs that worked with him at the time are what inspired me to work in the school system. That said, in the short five years of service in the board all I have seen is cutbacks that primarily affect the kids who need support the most, and minimal or no pay increases that force us to take second jobs despite our exhaustion from our full-time jobs.

We love our kids, some of us (including me) love our jobs too. We hate the cutbacks, red tape, and political garbage that makes our job next to impossible and puts us at great risk. We hate the insecurity of not being able to pay the bills when we put so much into our full-time careers. In comparison to teachers, we are not a big group of educators like you see with the teacher's unions, but we are a very important group and we deserve to be recognized for that.

We deserve to feel like we are important and our jobs are worthy of a survivable wage. We deserve to be noticed for the efforts we give and the risks we take daily!

We are educators for the special needs. Not in curriculum, but in every other way. We are nurses, researchers, observers, educators, human shields and body guards, social workers, escorts, adaptive equipment and technology experts, advocates and so much more all rolled into one job description.

We are experts, we are teaching and educational assistants!

After decades of advocating and supporting our students for once we are advocating for ourselves too!

**Related link:**

**Region:** Ontario <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** early childhood education and care <sup>[4]</sup>

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