

EDUCATION SUPPORT PERSONNEL MANIFESTO ON DEALING WITH THE COVID-19 CRISIS

*Offered for consideration by the Public Services International
Education, Cultural and Media Sector*

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Paraprofessionals and School-Related Personnel*

As the world comes to grips with the enormous challenges put to us by the global coronavirus pandemic, it is clear that the impact on education has been devastating, a challenge without modern precedent.

This **manifesto** is a call for recognition by a group of professionals who are among the most influential in the lives of our young people. We are our unions' education support personnel—school and university frontline workers who are office employees, custodians, maintenance workers, bus drivers, classroom paraprofessionals, food service workers, school nurses and health aides, secretaries, special education assistants, and many others strengthening the institutions where we work, and protecting the health and welfare of our students. Health, safety, hygiene in the workplace and training must be guaranteed as fundamental human rights, based on international labor standards

While the pandemic has upended much of our lives, it has reinforced the value and importance of public education. In this time of crisis, the everyday leadership, creativity and dedication of education support personnel have shone through: ***We are the school bus drivers who deliver meals to needy families; the food service workers who continue to prepare daily meals for students in need; the custodians who keep school buildings clean even while closed; the school nurses who are creating the new health protocols needed when schools reopen; and the classroom staff who, even when using distance-learning technologies, still attend to the social and emotional needs of our students.***

We need to strengthen quality public services and the public sector, with progressive budgets to avoid the gradual loss of public funding and ensure universal access to them, guaranteeing that these services have sufficient professional staff and full labor rights, inclusive of a gender perspective. And so, as our schools and communities slowly and safely move to reopen, we will continue to be relentless advocates for our professionals and our unions to be included at the decision-making table:

First, above all, we call for the **protection of our members** in every aspect of school operations—and *we must keep this as part of the collective bargaining process*. Professional development and collaboration time for education support staff will be more important than ever. Teachers and education support staff alike will need vital risk education and training for infection prevention. We must never again be in a situation where workers are short of protective gears and the training to use it.

We also demand our voices be heard as we **rethink public health** within our schools. Education support personnel will be at the heart of developing protocols for protecting students and staff. Any plan should include a school entry process and hand-washing stations.

Our frontline custodians and maintenance personnel will lead in thoroughly and safely sanitizing facilities on a daily basis.

Education support personnel will also be essential to the successful **reorganization of the school day and school operations**, including the construction and maintenance of portable facilities and smaller classrooms. We must be included when decisions are made about split scheduling, alternating days of the week or times of the day, or adding summer sessions. Our professionals will be key when we factor in that meal times and school bus transportation times will have to be staggered to maintain social distancing. We are recommitting to defending public, quality education, and to defeating inequality in education whether due to geography, income, gender, ability to access technology, or special learning needs.

Last, and simply put, we demand that **salaries, benefits and terms of conditions** of education support personnel—at all levels—should be protected at all times, during and after the crisis. We will never allow this crisis to be used as an excuse for outsourcing, outside privatization, or a reason to eliminate or weaken collective bargaining agreements fairly negotiated and in place. Instead, this crisis reinforces the importance of collective bargaining and the role it plays in supporting workers and their communities.

Safely reopening our schools—with their dual role to educate students and act as centers of the community—schools will be one of the most pivotal factors in remaking our countries, and preserving our democracies. Promoting social dialogue, freedom of association and collective bargaining are key to the struggle for free, high-quality public education, so that no one is left behind.

Education support personnel have long served, long fought, and have earned the right to be central to the new vision of what schooling will be in a post-pandemic world.

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