Developing a Living Wage Campaign in your school district

Many families are struggling to make ends meet. They are doing all the right things. They are working hard but just aren’t being paid enough to cover their expenses. In November 2011, voters in BC will go to the polls to elect new municipal councils and school board representatives. These families will be looking for solutions from prospective candidates. One concrete solution any candidate running for election should consider supporting is the implementation of a Living Wage policy.

Why should school boards be worried about this issue?
High living expenses and low wages mean that tens of thousands of working families are living in poverty in BC. For seven years running, our province has had the highest child poverty rate in Canada. Child poverty in BC is very much a low-wage story; the vast majority of BC’s poor children live in families with working parents.

Parents in low-wage jobs are trying to bring up children with one hand tied behind their backs. Families who work for low wages face impossible choices—buy food or heat the house, feed the children or pay the rent. The result can be spiraling debt, constant anxiety, and long-term health problems. Canadian researchers have reported that family income plays a significant role in influencing child development. Of 27 factors identified as having an impact on child development, up to 80% were seen to improve as family income increases. (The Chief Public Health Officer’s Report on The State of Public Health in Canada 2009.)

The frustration of working harder only to fall further behind is one many Canadians can relate to. The 2008 CCPA report Working for a Living Wage and the 2011 Update shows that most families are taking home a smaller share of the economic pie despite working longer hours. Paying families a living wage, so that they can pay for their basic living expenses, is the most just and effective way of addressing child poverty in BC.

School districts are paying a large price for the low-wage sector. When children live in poverty, or when parents are compelled to work multiple jobs to stay afloat and end up with little time with their children, all of society pays the price, and not least the teachers and school boards faced with the consequences of inadequate income for children and families.

For example, approximately 20% of Canadians aged 20 years and over have never completed secondary school. “For Canada as a whole, the aggregate tangible and intangible losses are calculated to be $24,400 per annum per early school leaver, or $43 billion for the country as a whole. (Lessons in Learning, Canadian Council on Learning, February 4, 2009.)

How can paying a Living Wage change this situation?
Living Wages are a simple and just solution. Paying a living wage would allow families with children to escape poverty and severe financial stress, ensure healthy childhood development, and permit families to participate in the social, civic, and cultural lives of our communities.
School boards have a responsibility to play a leadership role. We look to them to help raise the bar—to set a higher standard. If enough school districts become living wage employers, they will create a market for those local service contractors who, in turn, pay the living wage.

And living wages are good for business. Better pay translates directly into a healthier local economy. Low-income families spend almost all their money close to home. And businesses that have adopted the living wage report higher productivity and reduced staff turnover.

What do we mean by a Living Wage?
In contrast to a provincially legislated minimum wage that is designed to bring individuals up to the poverty line, the living wage is a social and economic benchmark whose primary purpose is to enable working families to pay their expenses and lift them out of poverty. It is calculated based on what it costs to live in a specific community, so living wage amounts will vary across the province as living expenses vary. For details on how the living wage is calculated, see www.livingwageforfamilies.ca.

How do you build a Living Wage campaign in your own school district?
There are some simple steps that your local can take to get a campaign started in your school district.

1. Calculate the living wage for your locality
The Living Wage for Families and the Canadian Council for Policy Alternatives BC Office has developed a well-thought methodology for calculating a living wage for any community in the province. They are available to give you advice as to how you can calculate your own living wage number, if it has not already been done. Calculating your own number is important in helping you present a quantifiable and locally based “ask” to your board of education. It is also an excellent tool to get potential allies and the general public thinking about living wage issues. For more details, go to www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/BC%20Office/.

2. Find out which staff in your school district are paid less than the living wage.
Most likely, these will be contract workers (cafeteria, maintenance, cleaning), but it is possible that casuals or temporary workers may be paid below the living wage. Your local can ask trustees to get this information from human resources or you can approach the administration directly. Trustees have a right to know which services are contracted out.

3. Talk to the low-paid workers
Wherever possible, have one-to-one conversations with those workers likely to be paid below the living wage. Ask them about their pay and benefits. Do they have other workplace issues? Discuss the impact that low pay has on their lives—their families, their health, and their ability to participate in the community. Encourage the workers to tell their stories. This will be the most powerful part of convincing others to support the campaign. It will also help you identify allies in the community who would have a stake in helping you win this fight.

Use this information to write a short brief arguing for the implementation of a living wage. Particularly point out the ways in which the treatment of their low paid workers might harm the reputation of the school district.

4. Build a campaign team
Pull together a diverse and representative campaign team who meet regularly to review progress, to make key decisions collectively, and to share out the work in moving the campaign forward. Encourage low-paid workers to be part of the team. Identify and develop new leaders.
5. **Do a power analysis**
   Be clear about identifying a campaign target—the person or people with the power to give you what you are after. Find out how decisions on contracting and salaries are made. What steps do you need to take to influence these decisions? What stakeholder bodies should be involved?

6. **Build allies**
   Many groups in the community share your goal of ensuring that all staff is paid a wage they can live on. As part of your power analysis, you will have identified the groups and individuals that can be called on to support you, including other local unions and labour councils, local politicians, parents, professional bodies, religious organizations, community groups, and local media. Where there is an existing broad-based community coalition, such as Metro Vancouver Alliance, consider joining it.

   Make sure that you engage allies directly. Don’t be tempted to send them a leaflet or an e-mail and expect them to get involved. It is worth putting in the time to meet with key people face-to-face. Find out as much as you can about their concerns and issues. They will be more likely to join the coalition if they feel that their issues will get support in return.

   It is also worth polling your own membership to find out what organizations they belong to (faith, community, educational, sports and leisure, charities, advocacy and political groups). Ask members to approach the leadership of these organisations to see if they would be willing to join your campaign.

7. **Meet with the trustees**
   In the first instance, ask them to do a report on the current situation regarding procurement and pay, and the feasibility of introducing a living wage policy.

8. **Take creative action**
   You may well not get what you want without applying some pressure through creative action. Remember that the point of action is to get a reaction, so always be clear what it is you want to accomplish.

9. **Negotiate with the employer**
   The aim of the campaign is to win the living wage for the workers involved. But this may take considerable discussion and negotiation, first to convince the employer of the justice and benefit of paying the living wage, and then to work out the details. The common understanding and working relationships that develop from this process can be crucial in making the new agreement stick and in promoting the living wage to other employers.

10. **Celebrate and evaluate**
    Once you’ve won, the fight is not over. Bring your campaign team together to discuss where to go next. Repeat these steps to strengthen your campaign team, build alliances, and identify new issues.

**Good luck!**

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