

Work hours and work life issues of
special education assistants
in District 36 Surrey

John D. Malcolmson, Ph.D

Research Representative,
BC Regional Office
Canadian Union of Public Employees

2006

“Most SEAs I have met go above and beyond what is expected... they do it from the heart.”

“I am coming out of the classroom and I run into a parent and that parent stops to talk... If it was my child and I was seeing an SEA at the school, I would be very put off if that person didn't stop to take the time to talk to me.”

“It is difficult to make a living when hours are being cut and we're working more time for free for the sakes of the children.”

“If the work I did was properly validated, it would put a smile on my face.”

- select comments from Special Education
Assistants participating in the survey

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A. Introduction

In the spring of 2006, CUPE Local 728 – representing over 2,700 support staff in Surrey, BC’s largest school district – undertook a survey of members working as Special Education Assistants (SEAs).¹ A particular focus of the survey was to compile data regarding the phenomenon of “undocumented” and “unpaid” work within the bargaining unit – its circumstances, extent, and overall implications for the work SEAs perform.

The following September, a group of SEAs working at both elementary and secondary schools in the District agreed to take part in a group interview. The purpose of the interview was to explore in greater detail and at a more qualitative level, issues arising from the survey and from their experiences working with special education students, teachers and administrators in the District.

This purpose of this report is to analyze contents of survey responses and the group interview. In what follows, unpaid and undocumented work is given the label of “unassigned time.” This is to underline the fact that it is work falling outside the formal assignment of paid employment with the District yet, for various reasons, is still being performed voluntarily by staff working with special education students in the District.

B. What are Special Education Assistants?

Special Education Assistants are a category of public school employee that has undergone tremendous growth in the past two decades. Much of the impetus for this growth has come from changes overtaking the field of special education, in particular the implementation of policy mandating the maximum inclusion of special education students in regular classrooms. SEAs help to manage these classrooms. Without the work they perform, integrated classrooms could not function.

Section 18 of BC’s *School Act* gives recognition to this work and the workers who perform it. The *Act* references a category of staff described as “teacher assistants.” The Ministry of Education’s *Special Education Services Manual* (August, 2005) paraphrases the content of Section 18 in the following manner:

“Section 18 of the School Act specifies that:

- (1) A board may employ persons other than teachers to assist teachers in carrying out their responsibilities and duties under this Act and the regulations.
- (2) Persons employed under subsection (1) shall work under the general supervision of a teacher or administrative officer.

Teachers are expected to design programs for students with special needs. Teacher assistants play a key role in many programs for students with special needs, performing functions, which range from personal care to assisting the teacher with instructional programs. Under the supervision of a teacher they may play a key role in implementing the program.” (p. 10)

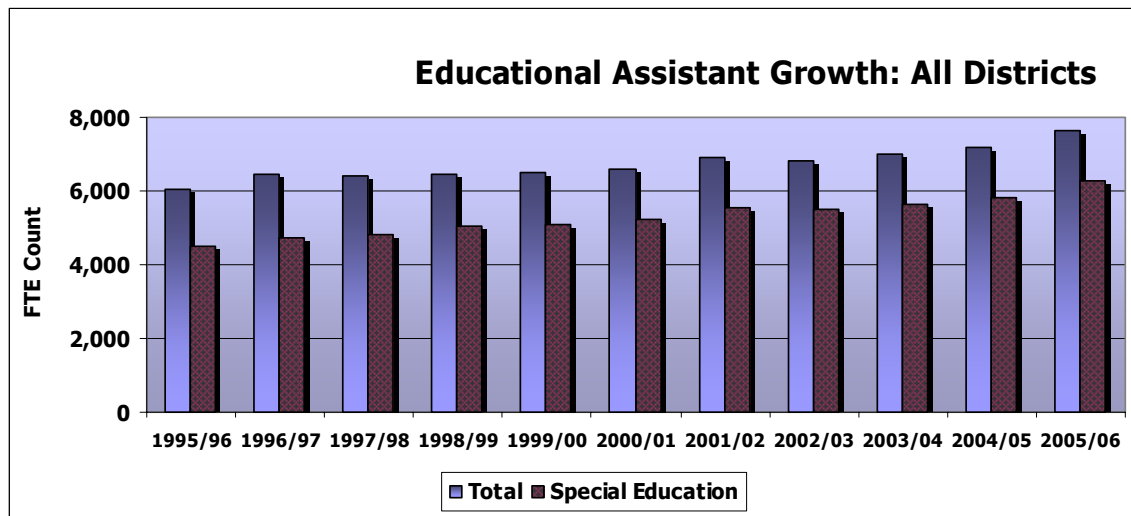
¹ The survey was developed by an organizing committee within the Local with input from research staff at the BC regional office of CUPE.

Use of the term “teacher assistants” is somewhat anachronistic as Ministry of Education data collection now relies on the more generic description “educational assistants” (EAs). The latter designation includes SEAs (as its largest sub-group) but also comprises jobs like school aides, childcare workers, cultural support workers and various other categories.

Despite this, the *School Act* reference is important for at least three reasons. First of all, it gives formal legal recognition to the position and work of assistants. Second, it underlines an expectation that assistants work under the “general supervision” of teachers who are to have overall responsibility for student programs. And thirdly, it affirms the role assistants do play in implementing these programs on an everyday frontline basis with students.

The following chart offers an indication of overall growth in the numbers of educational assistants throughout the province in the past decade.

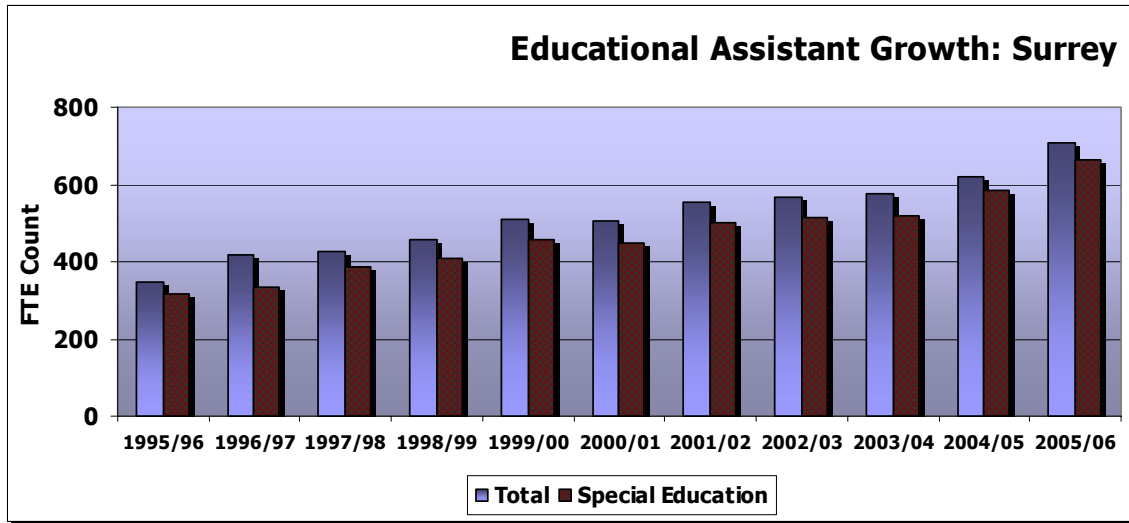
Figure 1: Growth in numbers of educational assistants and SEAs - BC



The first data series (the left column for each year) shows the total number of educational assistants employed across the province. The second series/right column shows the size of the sub-group employed in the special education field. Two things emerge at this point. First is the overall growth in this category of support staff employment – up more than 26 per cent through the ten-year period in question – at a time when overall school enrolment was in slow decline. Second, is the growing proportion of educational assistants working in the special education field? In 1995/96, less than 75 per cent of educational assistants worked in special education; ten years later this figure had grown to 82 per cent.

Comparable figures for District 36 Surrey show similar patterns and trends yet with some important differences.

Figure 2: Growth in numbers of educational assistants and SEAs - Surrey



Surrey’s educational assistant staff levels have grown at a rate faster than that for the whole province. This is largely a product of the fact that enrolment in District 36 has continued to expand and has bucked the provincial trend. Special education enrolments have also risen at a faster rate in the District as compared with the province. At the same time, the District has consistently assigned a higher proportion of its total EA complement to the special education field – upwards of 90 per cent in most years and close to 94 per cent in the most recent year.

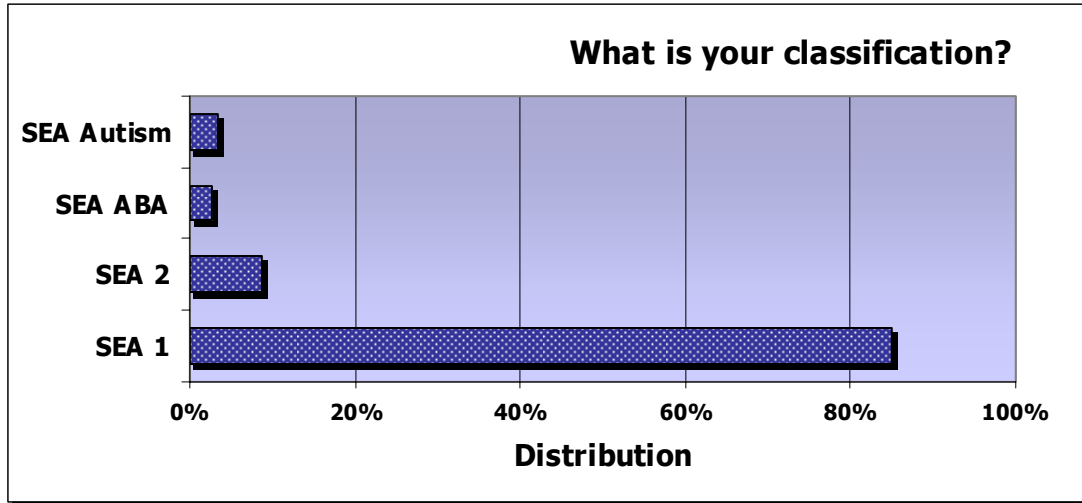
It is important to note that rising demand for special education services has come at a time not only of provincial enrolment decline but also budgetary restraint. While districts have acted to fill more SEA positions they have generally done so in ways which intensify controls on the hours SEAs are able to work. School boards throughout the province have made efforts to contain costs by stretching available staff responses to cover the maximum range of special education needs. For SEAs, these pressures have generally led to reductions in assigned and paid hours in the direction of those which directly match student contact time. They have also brought a near-universal reality of part-time employment for EAs. Ministry of Education staffing reports list close to 700 FTE educational assistants in District 36 Surrey in September 2005. Given the norm of part-time work, the above figure significantly under-states the full extent of actual headcount employment. Full time equivalent figures presuppose a standard workweek of 32 hours. Given what the survey reveals about average hours of work, this suggests there are close to 900 SEA staff working within the District.

C. SEA Classifications

A total of 272 SEAs returned completed surveys to the union.² This group accounts for roughly a quarter of all educational assistant positions within the District. The purpose of this section and the ones to follow is to summarize survey results and to provide commentary as to the meaning and significance of the data.

The following chart shows the distribution of responses by reported SEA classifications.

Figure 3: Distribution of responses by SEA classification



SEA 1 is the standard work classification. SEA 2 is a classification with enhanced training and qualification in the area of medical procedures for certain categories of students. The other two classifications relate to work with either autistic students or what is termed Applied Behavioural Analysis (ABA).

As can be seen from Figure 3, the largest group by far is the SEA 1 classification which accounted for more than 85 per cent of all survey responses. The remaining 15 per cent of responses was divided amongst the other three classifications.

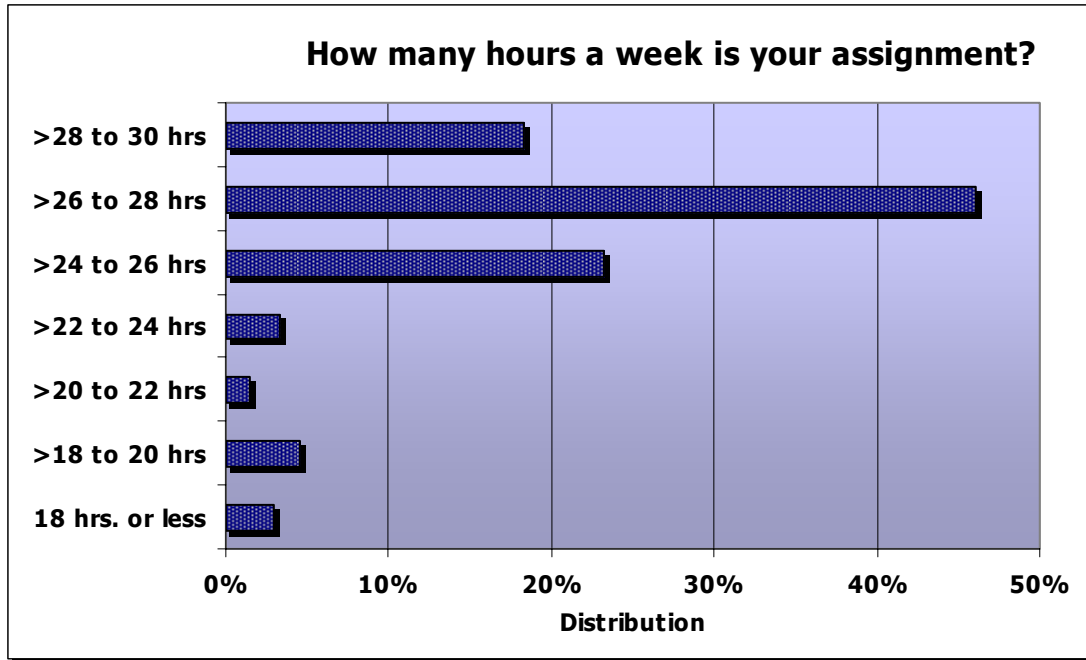
D. Hours worked: assigned & unassigned

A key focus of the survey was to gather and tabulate information related to the workweek of SEAs, including both assigned and unassigned work.

The following table shows the distribution of assigned or regular hours for SEAs participating in the survey.

² See the Appendix for details as the distribution of survey responses.

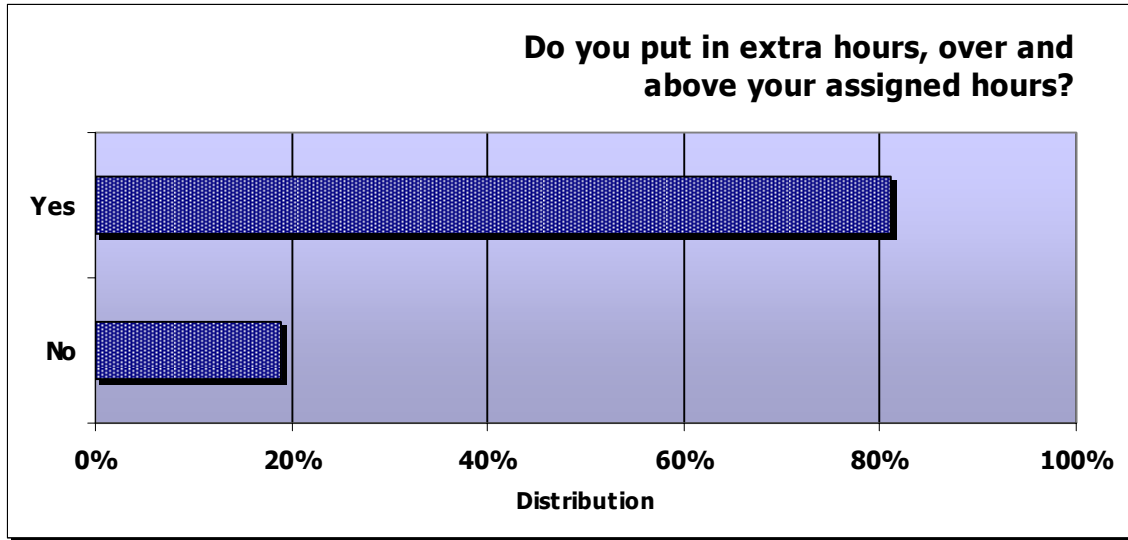
Figure 4: Assigned weekly hours



The largest group of SEAs – 30 per cent of those responding to the survey –reported a regular assigned workweek of 26.25 hours. In addition, there was a sizeable block of assistants grouped closely around this figure – almost half of those responding worked between 26 and 27 hours. And, as the chart in Figure 4 shows, seven out of every eight SEAs reported working between 24 and 30 hours a week. The largest number of reported regular weekly hours was 30 and the fewest were 5.25. Overall, for those completing the survey, the average assigned workweek came to 25.9 hours.

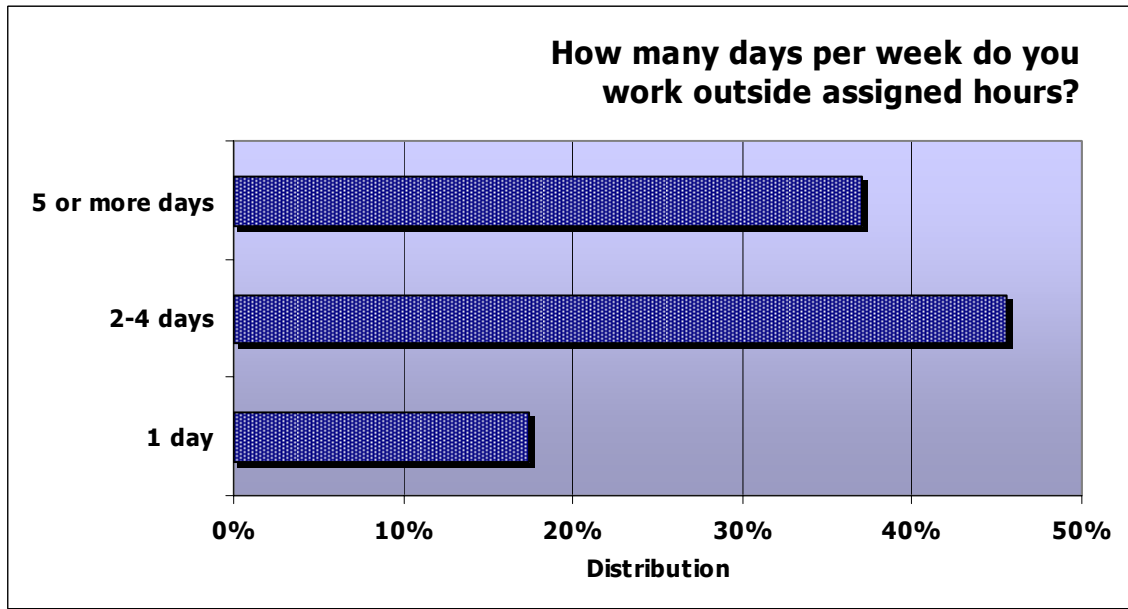
Assistants were also asked if they worked additional hours beyond those specified in their work assignments. The following chart confirms that the overwhelming majority does indeed perform unassigned work.

Figure 5: Performing unassigned work



Clearly the norm is for SEAs to devote additional, unassigned hours to their jobs. Upwards of 80 per cent of SEAs completing the survey reported they worked extra hours beyond those specified in their formal assignment. As the following table shows, for those reporting extra hours, the largest group indicated it performed unassigned work on "2 - 4 days" in an average week.

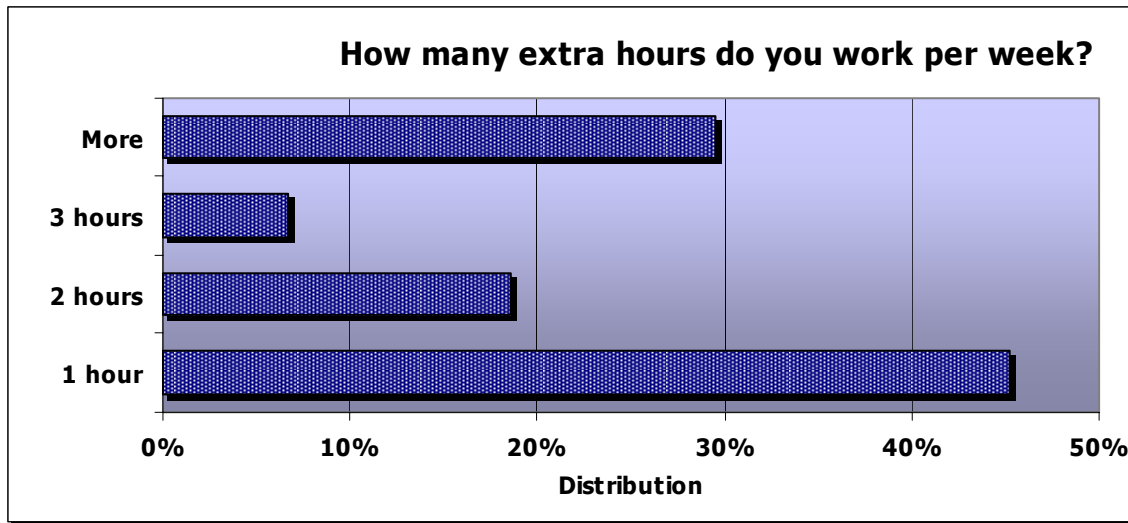
Figure 6: Number of days when unassigned work is performed



An additional 37 per cent reported working "5 or more days", while the remainder specified working a single day each week doing unassigned work.

The survey also asked how many additional unassigned hours assistants logged on a weekly basis. The following table shows the pattern of responses.

Figure 7: Unassigned hours per week



Interestingly, the largest group indicated working an extra hour per week. Smaller groups totaling roughly a quarter of those completing the survey indicated they worked either two or three hours of unassigned work each week. However, almost 30 per cent indicated they worked more than three unassigned hours in a typical week.

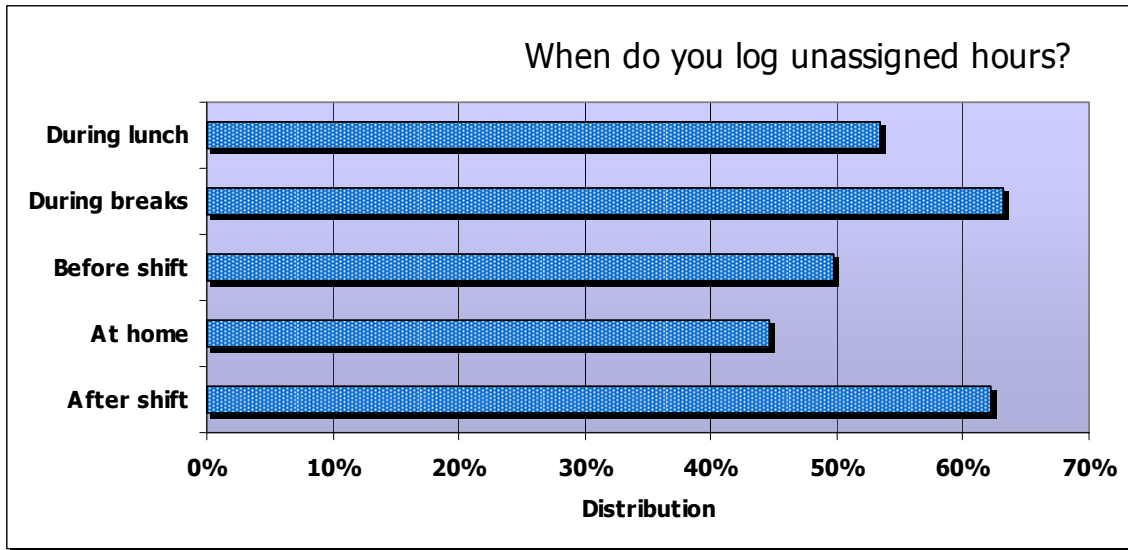
The pattern of responses in Figure 7 allows for an estimation of the overall quantity of unassigned work currently performed by SEAs in the District. If we assume that those logging in excess of three hours per week are averaging four hours, the total volume of unassigned work performed by those completing the survey calculates out at 463 hours or 1.8 hours per person.³

Given an average workweek of 25.9 hours, this means that an average SEA is contributing additional work totaling seven per cent of her formal assignment. Expressed another way, if an SEA works 10 months in the District each year, additional unassigned work contributed voluntarily by those in the bargaining unit effectively generates an extra 14 days of unassigned at the disposal of the District.

SEAs report logging additional unassigned hours at all points throughout the day. The next figure offers a breakdown of where SEAs say they are performing unassigned work.

³ This average is for all SEAs completing the survey, including those reporting they did not perform unassigned work.

Figure 8: Times when unassigned hours are logged



Percentages are of those reporting that they perform unassigned work. Multiple responses are possible.

Unassigned work occurs at all points before, during and beyond the actual workday. Indeed, the most common times reported are during breaks – largely for purposes of student supervision – and after shift when SEAs report doing preparation work to assist in getting ready for contact time with students. In each case, upwards of 60 per cent of SEAs who report unassigned work time go on to say they work during breaks or after shift. Smaller but significant percentages cite working before shift, during lunch and at home. These results indicate clearly that the performance of unassigned work at all possible times of the day either is or approaches the status of a norm within the District.

What is striking also is the volume of SEAs who report working during multiple periods. Indeed, over three quarters of those who report logging unassigned time, say they contribute this time at more than one point in the workday. More than half work at least three times and a quarter work four or more times.

Reasons given for performing unassigned work were simple. The following figure offers a breakdown.

Figure 9: Reasons for performing unassigned work

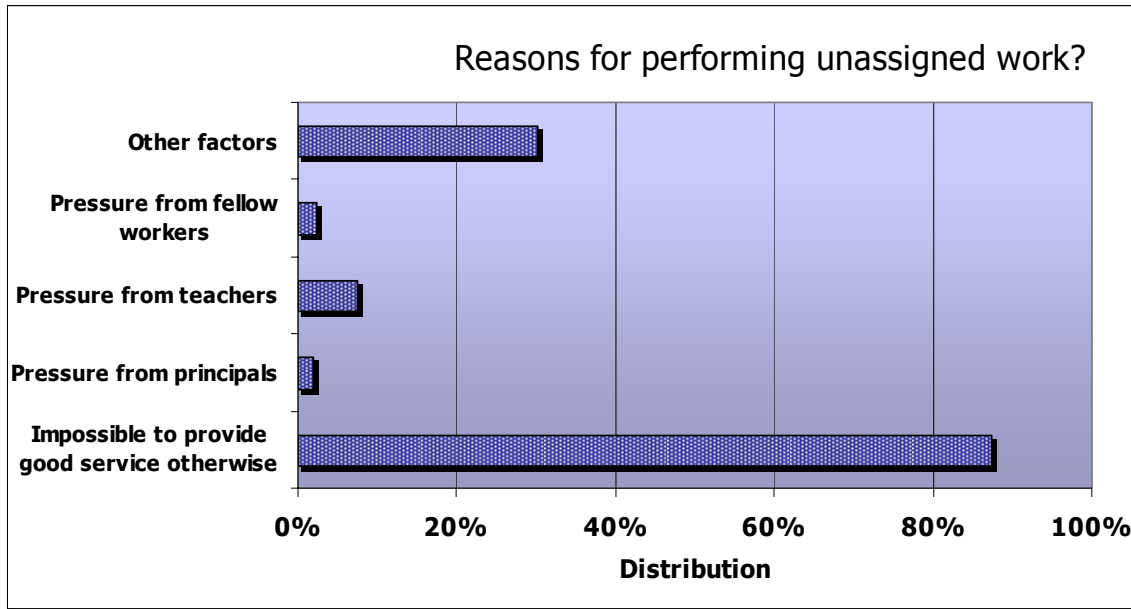


Figure 4 shows that, for close to 90 per cent of SEAs who report performing unassigned work, the principal reason or motivation for doing so stems from a belief that not to devote this time would compromise the quality of service they are able to deliver to students. While some SEAs report experiencing pressure to do unassigned work from others, this situation appears to be relatively rare.

This result underlines clearly a strong professional commitment on the part of SEAs to their work and to the welfare of the students they work with. The latter was a theme that came across in the group interview with SEAs working in the District. The following table offers a sample of SEA comments in this regard.

Figure 10: SEA comments on why they perform unassigned work

If you come in at the bell, you will look incompetent because things inevitably go off track. (Elementary level SEA)
It is very hard to work alongside someone else like a teacher and not do the same hours they do when there are students involved. (Secondary level SEA)
Sometimes I have to make phone calls to parents. Sometimes other team members may call such as a speech and language pathologist or an occupational therapist. At other times, there can be fire drills or school assemblies. You have to be there even if you are not paid for it. (Secondary level SEA)

SEAs also cite very practical reasons for the donation of unassigned time. Chief amongst these was the need to work outside the parameters of paid “bell to bell” shift time in order to make jobs manageable. Quotations in the next table illustrate this clearly.

Figure 11: SEA comments how unassigned work makes their jobs do-able

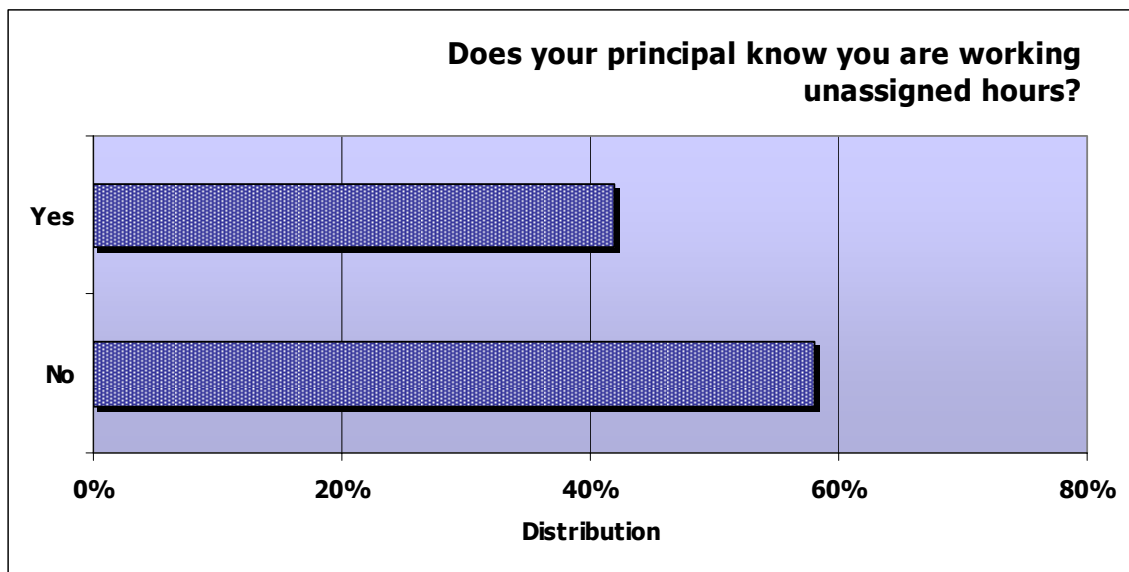
If you don't come early in the morning, you sabotage yourself for the rest of the day. (Elementary level SEA)
I think you need to come and ½ hour early every day if you want to survive. I will spend this time making notes or perhaps I have been asked by the professional team to be available. (Elementary level SEA)
If there is problem behavior on the part of the student, you have to write it down. The problem for us is the fact that everyone else on the professional team has paid or professional time to do this. We do not. (Elementary level SEA)
When you work a 25-hour week, there is no pay for startup time. If you were working with an autistic kid, they are likely to be off the wall. That will also affect the rest of your day. It can also disrupt the rest of the class. (Elementary level SEA)

One secondary-level SEA described these pressures in terms of the need for proper “setting events” capable of establishing a good context and atmosphere at the start of the day for work to proceed smoothly. “If you don’t do that properly,” she said, “the rest of the day is toast.”

E. Arrangements to log banked unassigned time

SEAs were also asked whether their principals knew of the arrangements they had made to log and use unassigned time in their work. As the following chart confirms, 42 per cent of those working unassigned time reported their principals knowing of their contributing this work. The following chart shows the percentage breakdown.

Figure 12: Principals’ knowledge of unassigned time



For the group who said their principals did know, the primary confirmation of this came from the fact that SEAs report having had conversations with school administrators about it.

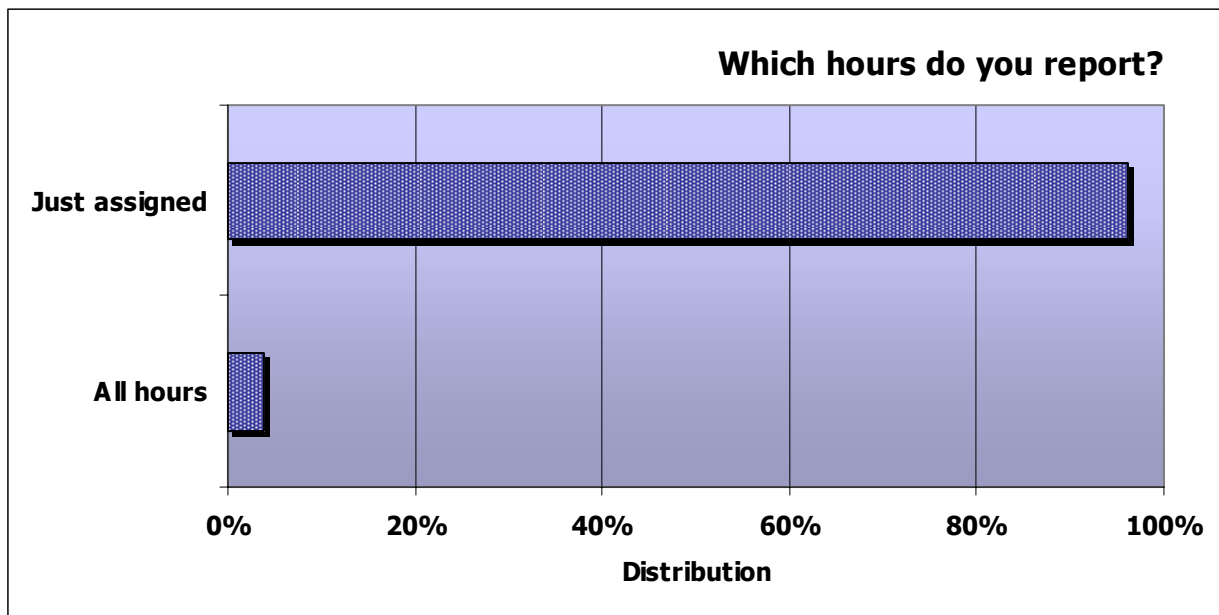
What of the close to 60 per cent of SEAs who report having no such arrangement? When asked in the group interview, both elementary and secondary SEAs expressed strong opinions as to why this might be the case. In general, the prevailing view was that many SEAs donate unassigned time and recoup very little of it because they lack the opportunity to do so. In this kind of situation there is little need to make an arrangement with school-level administrators. The following comments bear this out.

Figure 13: Why SEAs may not recoup unassigned time

When it comes to the idea of banking time, all I can say is that there's no time to take any of this time of. So a lot of it is donated to the employer. (Elementary level SEA)
I don't have any real records of the amount of unassigned time I put in. I just do it and then afterwards I resent it. (Elementary level SEA)
I don't think I retrieve any time I give to the employer. (Elementary level SEA)

Despite this situation of significant unassigned time and the existence of informal arrangements with school administrators, the overwhelming majority of SEAs say they formally report only assigned hours in the system used to track work time. The following figure shows the overall pattern of responses in this area.

Figure 14: Reporting of hours



When asked, SEAs say that the reason for this is that the District does not allow them to record unassigned hours. Effectively, the vast majority of contributions of unassigned time being made by SEAs are registered “off-book.”

If unassigned hours are being logged with the frequency this survey suggests, what becomes of this additional time? Are SEAs able to “recover” this time in some way? Of a total 272 survey responses, 88 SEAs offered further information regarding when and how their principals wanted banked unassigned time to be used. The three main requests are reported as follows:

- **Professional development days.** More than 70 per cent of SEAs reporting an arrangement with their principals around the use of banked unassigned time cite their being encouraged to take such time when teachers and school are involved in professional development activities which, by their nature, involve interruptions to regular school classes and activities.
- **Early dismissal times.** The second most commonly requested time on the part of principals was on days when students are being sent home on an early dismissal. SEAs encouraged to use these opportunities amounted to about 22 per cent of those reporting an arrangement with their principals.
- **Student sick days.** The third most common situation was for SEAs to draw down banked unassigned time on days when their students in their care are sick. This arrangement with the principal was cited 16 per cent of the time by those who had arrangements with principals. However, not all SEAs said they had an opportunity to do this; as one elementary-level SEA said in the group interview, “if the student I am working with is away, I am likely to get reassigned to other work.”

Smaller numbers of SEAs reported other arrangements including using lunch hours and school assemblies.

What all arrangements have in common is the fact that they reflect the porous nature of the school day and the organization of unassigned SEA time to meet the daily ebbs and flows of school-based service delivery. SEAs are encouraged if not expected to devote additional unpaid and unassigned time when schools or school classes are busy, and in some instances they are able to use accumulated “off-book” time when schools and classes are not busy.

What the school system gains is increased flexibility to meet demands presented by the very nature of special education student needs. These demands are clearly exacerbated by pressures on assigned work hours and the trend towards limiting it to “bell to bell” contact time. Overall, arrangement in place to deal with unassigned time appear crafted in terms of real school system needs, yet lacking the recognition and remuneration that adequate scheduling of assigned SEA time might offer.

F. Impact on special education service delivery

SEAs taking part in the group interview saw the tendency to compress paid work to “bell to bell” parameters as having negative consequences for the overall way the District delivers special education services. Much of this revolved around perceived difficulties getting time to meet with teachers who work with special education

students. In the minds of many SEAs, these difficulties have been exacerbated over time by reductions in the staffing of integration teachers working in District special education programs. The following comments bear these problems out.

Figure 15: SEAs difficulties in finding time to meet with teachers

Cuts to integration teachers are really hurting us. (Secondary level SEA)
There is also the problem of getting enough time to see the teacher. In many cases you have to talk during class time because there is no other opportunity. (Secondary level SEA)
We also need integration teachers who have more knowledge and more time. (Elementary level SEA)
We never get time or a chance to collaborate anymore. (Elementary level SEA)
Now, instead of teachers supervising of work, we often find a situation where teachers will just ask us what is it that we need. (Elementary level SEA)

The lack of opportunity for on-the-job collaboration to meet student needs also leaves many SEAs feeling isolated from the larger school environment.

Figure 16: SEA feelings of isolation

You are not seen as part of the school community. I never take real breaks. I am by myself all the time. If you do get a bit of time, it is often taken up photocopying work for students. (Elementary level SEA)
There are definite morale problems. You're not seen as part of the school team. (Secondary level SEA)
SEAs are often left alone because of those cuts... we do not have that kind of support that integration teachers used to provide. (Secondary level SEA)

The above comments underline the existence of morale problems related to difficulties finding the opportunity to collaborate with teachers. At the same time, these comments point to negative impacts on the services that special education students are able to receive.

G. Impact on students

SEAs offered many comments in the survey and interview regarding the impact their students would face if they stuck to the letter of their assigned time and refused to donate additional unassigned hours.

Assistants were asked by the survey what the impact would be they did not work unassigned hours. In their responses, assistants repeatedly made reference to the following negative consequences:

- Special education **students would be left unsupervised** at different points in the day, leading to a multitude of behavioural problems, potential for classroom disruption, flight risks and other safety issues, and substandard “end of day” warehousing in the administration office.

- **Modified and adapted materials** required for proper follow-through on student IEPs **would not get produced** given that SEAs lack recognized and funded preparation time for their work and assigned work hours are fully exhausted by contact with students.⁴
- Special needs **students would in many cases not be able to go on field trips** because necessary supervision could not be provided,
- **SEAs would lack proper contact time with teachers** to review instructional programs, to decide on courses of action for individual students, and to undertake the many corrective adjustments required to ensure that instructional programming stays closely connected to students' evolving needs.

Group interview comments underscore many of these points. The following table offers a sample of relevant remarks.

Figure 17: Concrete circumstance leading to SEAs contributing unassigned time

The problem is that we have to ask for time with the teacher. There is no preparation time. I take my lunch and coffee breaks together. That is the only way that it will work. There's a lot of stress placed on you. (Secondary level SEA)
In our school, there's not enough time to cover each other. For example, we have one autistic student who is uncovered for part of the day. That means someone has to give up their break time to provide coverage. We are spread too thin. (Elementary level SEA)
Often the integration teachers may come by very briefly or even at lunch time, and that's supposed to be time we have off. (Secondary level SEA)
You take the speech and language pathologist time when you can get it because you won't see them again for a while. (Secondary level SEA)
I worked lots of time at home on my computer doing preparations and getting materials ready. I also got a program called Boardmaker but the employer provided no time on the job for us to learn about it or to take any courses. (Elementary level SEA)
Some students arrive late for school because of the bus schedule. At the end of the day the buses sometimes come late for the students and they have to be supervised. (Elementary level SEA)

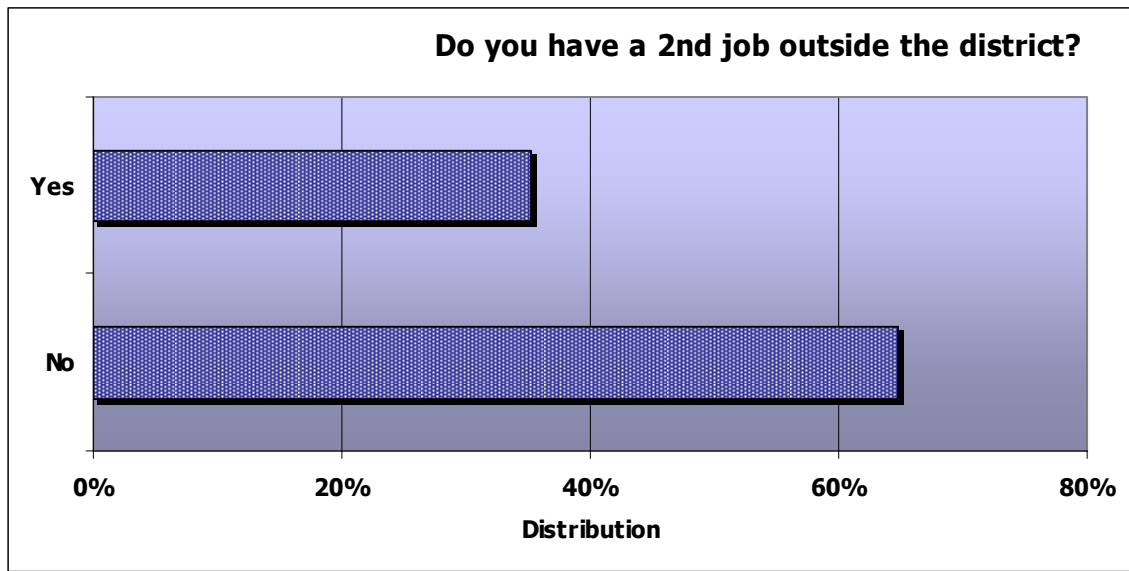
Taken together these ideas provide a powerful statement of the professional commitment SEAs have to their work and to the students they work with. At the same time, they underline how the school system routinely benefits from this commitment while failing to offer concrete recognition or remuneration for the extra time SEAs in the District regularly and voluntarily contribute.

⁴ This area is doubly interesting in that, as Section 18 of the *School Act* notes, it is the teacher's rather than the SEA's responsibility to produce such materials.

H. Second jobs

The primary intent of the survey was to document unassigned work time in the work life of SEAs. As a corollary to this and in recognition of the difficulties SEAs experience in getting sufficient assigned work time, SEAs were asked about whether they had other jobs. In order to clearly differentiate work as an SEA within District 36 from other types of employment, the question was couched clearly in terms of other jobs “outside the district. As the following chart shows, more than a third of those completing the survey reported they did have this kind of extra employment.

Figure 18: Second jobs outside the district



To put this situation in its proper context, it is important to recognize that an average SEA – earning currently about \$24 per hour, working 25.9 hours a week and 40 weeks in the year – has a gross annual salary of close to \$24,000 for an average of about \$2,000 per month. As many SEAs noted in the survey, such a level of remuneration does not make for a living wage. This fact in turn necessitates the search for additional employment.

When asked about outside employment in the group interview, SEAs offered the following comments

Figure 19: SEA comments regarding the need for outside employment

When I worked 30 hours per week, I could get by more or less alright. But now that I’m getting only 26 hours, I cannot work it for economic reasons. I have to have another job.
(Elementary level SEA)

I do work as a tutor. But I know that we have a number of our members who do jobs outside, working group homes. (Secondary level SEA)

I think people would be less willing to do other jobs if they had more hours to work on a regular basis. (Secondary level SEA)

From the survey it is possible to gain further insight into the relationship between second job employment, and EA hours and levels of income. The following chart provides a cross-tabulation of hours worked with the likelihood an EA will have a second job.

Figure 20: Second job employment and assigned SEA hours

SEA Group (by assigned hour group)	% with second jobs
23 hrs or less	46.7%
Over 23 hrs and up to 25 hrs	31.5%
Over 25 hrs and up to 27 hrs	38.0%
Over 27 hrs	26.3%

The data in the table suggest a downward trend in the percentage of SEAs reporting second jobs as hours of assigned work increase. Expressed another way, the more hours an SEA works, the less likely she is to seek outside employment. However, this being said, even for those working at or near the maximum number of assigned hours allowed within the district, the incidence of second job employment was extremely high. For the large majority of SEAs within the District who work between 25 and 27 hours, almost 4 of 10 report additional employment.

All in all, the fact that a large proportion of SEAs choose to take on additional employment suggests the real financial difficulty faced by individuals working at or near maximum assigned hours yet earning an average of just \$2,000 per month.

I. Comment

Throughout the survey and interview, assistants underlined a series of problems with the system as it currently operates. The following issues arose time and again.

- Professional commitment to work and to students is what drives the voluntary delivery of unassigned work. While SEAs can refuse to volunteer for this work, comparatively few do, recognizing that it would have a deleterious impact on the quality of their work and the services students receive.
- SEA unassigned work makes an under-resourced system of special education work. By logging and possibly drawing informally on unassigned time, SEAs contribute a flexible bank of “off-book” time that allows a system which otherwise imposes tight restrictions on assigned time to operate. In this sense, unassigned hours act like a glue providing vital but unrecognized cohesion and support to under-staffed system. SEAs observations in this report confirm this situation.
- Reported gaps in student coverage point to a system that is still chronically stressed to meet even minimum commitments, despite the flexibility that SEAs unassigned time contributes.

- With SEAs commitments of unassigned time wholly “off-book” and “in the shadows”, the contribution they make to maintaining the system of service delivery to special education students lacks validation.

The May 22nd Letter of Agreement providing a settlement template for K-12 support staff negotiations in BC confirms the overall existence of problems in this area by striking an “Education Assistants Committee” to investigate and make recommendations regarding concerns with “educational assistants working hours and not being paid.” Ironically, the full signing bonus attached to these negotiations will not be paid to any Surrey SEAs participating in the survey because of restrictions on assigned hours and the fact that the unassigned time they log is nowhere recognized.

Data compiled for and summarized in this report confirms that the public school system in District 36 benefits extensively from the unassigned time contributed by special education assistants. The school system relies implicitly upon SEAs’ sense of professional commitment to students and their needs. Within the school system there is widespread knowledge at the school administrator-level of the extent of SEAs unpaid work. There is also considerable evidence of informal arrangements that account for and manage this work. Yet, the school system typically prevents SEAs from formally reporting their unassigned time. In all of this, the District is able to maintain a system which guarantees no SEA can work enough hours to qualify for 32 hour full-time equivalent status, as defined in the collective agreement.

It is difficult within the context of this report to comment extensively on possible solutions to these problems. However, conversations with frontline SEAs underline that fact that positive steps will have to involve the budgeting and allocation of more assigned hours for SEAs, as is the norm in some other districts. More time would allow SEAs the opportunity to prepare for their work, to collaborate with teachers and specialists, to deal with students’ needs falling outside school class time, and, perhaps most importantly, to be recognized as having a valued if not essential role to play within the public school community.

Appendix: Reported school level of SEAs completing the survey

This chart shows the distribution of survey responses by reported school level.

School Level	Schools	Number of Surveys	% Total
Secondary	15	58	21.3%
Elementary	64	197	72.4%
Other (Elementary-Secondary)	1	3	1.1%
No school identified		14	5.1%