

The best way to fight child poverty

By paying living wage, school board sets responsible example

ALEX JOHNSTONE AND TOM COOPER

Work should lift us out of poverty.

It's an aspiration many of us believe in, but one that eludes far too many Canadians.

There are 1.8 million people working in Canada but not earning enough to pull themselves and their families out of poverty. This includes 540,000 people working full-time, year-round but still living on incomes below Statistic Canada's low-income cut-off. They are known as the working poor.

Provincial minimum wages aren't cutting it. They are arbitrary, politically derived figures. For years, Ontario's minimum wage rate has remained at \$10.25 an hour while the cost of living has gone up. As a result, more and more families are struggling, falling through the cracks and forced to make impossible choices such as whether to throw their child a birthday party or purchase groceries for the week.

Living wage sets a different standard that seeks to promote the social and economic well-being of everyone.

A living wage is the amount of money a worker should earn — based on a 35-hour work week — to meet a family's basic needs and to ensure inclusion in community life.

Living wage rates differ from community to community as rates reflect the costs of living in each city (Vancouver's rate is \$19.62 per hour; in Toronto, it's \$16.60 per hour; and in Hamilton, it's \$14.95 per hour).

The calculation is fiscally responsible: It includes provisions for basic needs such as rental housing, food, clothing, child care, transportation and medical expenses; but living wage also enables modest opportunities for social inclusion — such as children's recreation. It's a bare-bones budget — calculations do not include the costs of home ownership, debt repayment or savings.

Paying a living wage isn't just about meeting basic needs; it's about giving people opportunities to participate in society and shape their own lives.

Across Canada, employers are adopting living wage policies: New Westminster, B.C. became the first municipality in Canada to officially become a living wage employer in 2010. Kamloops, Calgary, Saskatoon, Kingston and dozens of other Canadian cities are actively engaged in living wage discussions supported by national organizations such as the Canada Centre for Policy Alternatives and Vibrant Communities Canada.

More than 150 jurisdictions in the United States

have adopted living wage policies and last summer London hosted the first Living Wage Olympics.

Where living wages have been implemented; studies show productivity improves and there's a significant reduction in training costs and worker absenteeism. The local economy is also helped as employees who earn more spend more in the community.

In March, the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board (HWDSB) became the first elected body in Ontario (and largest school board in Canada) to declare itself a living wage employer. It was a big step, but one that made a lot of sense.

One of the school board's greatest challenges is the city's 20-per-cent child-poverty rate. The equivalent of 370 classrooms of children use food banks every month in Hamilton.

Child poverty is linked with greater health problems, developmental delays, behavioural and mental-health problems. Children simply can't concentrate when they are hungry and won't learn as effectively if their parents are stressed out about whether they will be able to pay the rent.

HWDSB has more than 7,000 employees; most live in Hamilton. When those employees, from custodians to security guards to administrative assistants, earn a living wage, that's giving an immediate boost to the local economy and enabling 7,000 families to more fully participate in community life.

The best way to fight child poverty is to pay parents a living wage and it is one of the many approaches HWDSB has taken to address income disparity in Hamilton.

We hope the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board's direction will help encourage other progressive employers in Hamilton and across Ontario to consider the benefits of paying their employees a living wage.

It's about promoting dignity and opportunity in the workplace. It's about building stronger, healthier, motivated and innovative communities; most importantly, living wages encourage economic prosperity for everyone.

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An earlier version of this article appeared in the Canada Centre for Policy Alternatives journal Monitor. For more information on the Living Wage Hamilton campaign, please visit www.livingwagehamilton.ca