

## **Speech to the pay equity rally**

**30 June 2009**

My name is Lewellyn Sumenko-Bucknell. I am one of around 20,000 school support staff working in schools all across New Zealand.

The range of work support staff do is huge and absolutely essential to the life of the school and the education of the young people we work with. We are librarians, school secretaries, sports co-ordinators, physiotherapists and lots more. Many of us are teacher aides, working with the most vulnerable children in our communities.

We work at the frontline of education, and for these demanding roles, support staff can earn as little as \$12.94 an hour – 44cents above the minimum wage.

As if the low pay is not enough to cope with, school support staff end every school year with uncertainty of employment for the next year and a long holiday with no pay days.

It will be no surprise to you that school support staff are overwhelmingly women.

I am a teacher aide. My mornings are spent at a primary school, where I work with up to 10 children with different needs. I then have 15 minutes to drive to my second job where I work with a year 11 student who suffers from post traumatic stress syndrome.

My work is difficult and often emotionally draining and the rewards are very small, but when one comes along it is a fantastic feeling.

I am always thinking of how I can present work to my children in a more appealing way, so I end up taking my work home with me and to bed at night. But I know the work I do makes a difference to the children I help.

That's why school support staff do the work we do. Our roles are absolutely vital to our children receiving quality education.

Sadly most support staff feel undervalued and with good reason. The government says there is no money in a recession for a pay increase for school support staff. But principals

and teachers have pay increases and school cleaners and caretakers are getting a pay jolt. More power to them for winning their pay jolt. They deserve it. But school support staff deserve a fair deal too, and the recession is not an excuse to ignore low pay.

It's hard to hear government respond to our collective agreement claims with a zero percent pay increase when our pay rates are rock bottom already.

It's hard to hear the government has abandoned the pay equity investigation into special education support workers employed by the Ministry of Education and won't proceed with an investigation into school support staff like me employed directly by schools.

It's hard to say no to our own children when we can't afford the things they need and it's hard to face Christmas holidays without an income or the certainty of a job in the New Year.

I'm here today on behalf of 20,000 school support staff. Our work is hard, complex and demanding, requiring responsibility, patience and skills. Our roles are vital in the education of our children with special needs.

We are fighting to have our work valued. We are fighting for equal pay for the work we do with work of equal value. We are fighting for a fair deal. Our challenge to government is to value the work of school support staff and to reward us accordingly.

Thank you for your support today. Please keep supporting school support staff and other women who are undervalued for the work they do. We are stronger together.