

# **Langley Special Education Inquiry Report**

## **Programs and Services for Students with Special Needs**

**Report of Public Inquiry Findings  
School District #35 (Langley)**

**January 2008**

## Acknowledgements

*The panel wishes to express appreciation to all of the teachers, special education assistants, parents, and other community members who took the time and effort to express their views, either orally or in writing, throughout the course of this inquiry.*

*Thanks to all those who provided information and data for this inquiry, and to the staff of the Langley Teachers' Association who were helpful in providing office and meeting space for the panelists.*

*While the panelists have prepared this report in the light of the evidence and the themes emerging, we have in several instances used quotes from presenters which reflect the themes that we heard. We thank them for their words.*

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## Executive summary

This inquiry was begun through a co-operative effort between the Langley Teachers' Association (LTA), the District Parent Advisory Council (DPAC), and CUPE Local 1260. The board and administrators did not feel able to participate in the inquiry, although some trustees attended public sessions.

A three-person panel of inquiry was struck. Information for the panel came from several sources, including data from the Ministry of Education and the school district, information from a statistical report prepared by a contracted researcher, summaries from focus groups of parents, teachers, support staff, e-mail communications from a variety of personnel and parents, and six public inquiry sessions, two of which were held in each of Aldergrove, Fort Langley, and Langley City at which 110 presentations were heard from individuals and groups.

Although the inquiry was intended to examine issues in special education in School District #35 (Langley), it soon became evident that many of the challenges faced by parents, teachers, and special education assistants were also challenges for administrators and the board, based on decisions taken at the provincial level.

The panel reached 16 key conclusions, 10 of which relate to the district itself and 6 of which are related to decisions at the provincial level.

The inquiry concluded that there are some procedural matters as well as issues of transparency at the local level which should be addressed. The most pressing issues are the unmanageable caseloads of resource room teachers, particularly at the secondary level, and the lack of appropriate support for classroom teachers who have students with special needs integrated into their classrooms. There are also some issues of appropriate training, both for classroom teachers and for newly-assigned resource room teachers as they take on new functions. Some of these should be addressed locally, but the larger challenge is the lack of appropriate courses in teacher education programs that are focussed on students with special needs.

The key point, however, is that there has been historical underfunding of special education in the province, which was exacerbated historically by imposed settlements that were not funded, and from which the system has never recovered, despite some increases in education funding since that time. The primary victims of this shortfall have been non-enrolling personnel such as special education teachers, counsellors, and librarians. The children who have been most negatively affected are among the most vulnerable in the system. Despite the fact that Bill 33 was intended to address some of the issues for regular classroom teachers, it has had unintended negative effects, particularly at the secondary level.

Perhaps the most disturbing finding was the feeling of disillusionment expressed by traditionally optimistic professionals, and the long-term implications for special education programs and services for the children they are intended to help.

## Background and terms of reference

### Terms of reference for the inquiry:

The Langley Teachers' Association (LTA) established terms of reference for the review in consultation with the BC Teachers' Federation, which supported the inquiry. Five key tasks were identified:

1. To report on the timelines and procedures for the diagnosis and designation of students with special needs in the Langley School District.
2. To assess the adequacy of funding and services for students with special needs in the Langley School District.
3. To assess the appropriateness of caseloads and related workloads for teachers who provide support for students with special needs and for students who need additional support in the Langley School District.
4. To assess the adequacy of services for non-designated students who need additional support in the Langley School District.
5. To assess the adequacy of resources both technological and material, and in-service available for teachers of students with special needs in the Langley School District.

Three panelists were selected based on their experience in the BC education system with particular reference to special education, their reputation as notable educators and administrators, and the fact that all had left the education system and therefore could act independently.

### The panelists selected were:

*Ms. Nadene Guiltner*—writer and former classroom teacher in Cariboo-Chilcotin

*Dr. Shirley McBride*—former Director—Special Programs, BC Ministry of Education

*Mr. Mike Suddaby*—former Superintendent, SD #42 (Maple Ridge)  
—(Chair)

### Limitations of the inquiry:

The findings of the panel are being reported to a steering committee representing the LTA, the District Parent Advisory Council (DPAC), and CUPE Local 1260. Its recommendations are not binding upon any individual or group.

One of the leading stakeholders in the educational enterprise chose to decline the invitation by the steering committee to participate. This left the panel to make assumptions and draw conclusions based on the realities of the people who presented to us—parents, teachers, support staff, and community agency personnel.

The board of education and district personnel in School District #35 (Langley) may well have other realities, insights, and information to which the panel was not privy.

Despite these two limitations, we are confident our conclusions and recommendations reflect the reality of those who live and work directly with the diverse learners of School District #35 (Langley).

## **District profile:**

### **Student enrolment:**

Total student enrolment in the district was reported to be 18,514 in the final 2006-07 count. Of these, 451 were reported as being in alternate schools/programs, 298 in continuing education centres, and 214 in distributed learning programs. There were 1,685 students with special needs (excluding gifted) reported in that year. In addition, 1,374 were reported as Aboriginal students and 574 students of English-as-a-second language.

Since the 2001-02 school year, enrolment has decreased by 1,203 students compared to the 2006-07 final count. At the November 20, 2007 board meeting, it was reported that total regular enrolment in Langley School District in 2007-08 is 18,702 students. The “headcount” was up 32 from 2006-07. Using ministry data which showed the 2005-06 enrolment as being 1,929 students in Grade 12 and 1,173 students in Grade 1, it may be that over the next several years the district may experience further decreases in overall enrolment.

The ministry website quotes average class sizes in the district in 2006-07 to be:

- Kindergarten: 18.2
- Grades 1-3: 20.5
- Grades 4-7: 26.9
- Grades 8-12: 22.6

Over the years, the number of students reported to the ministry as having special needs (excluding gifted) has remained relatively stable, despite a drop in overall enrolment, although the 2004-05 figure appears to be a slight anomaly.

**Table 1**  
**Number of reported students with special needs by grade in SD #35 (Langley)**

Number of Students	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07
Total	1,692	1,778	1,553	1,661	1,685
% of Total Enrolment	8.1%	8.6%	7.7%	8.3%	8.5%
Kindergarten	18	20	21	27	25
Grade 1-3	188	181	161	156	151
Grade 4-7	579	597	598	600	578
Grade 8-12	907	980	773	878	931

Source: B.C. Ministry of Education

Virtually all research addressing the prevalence of students with special needs suggests that overall, they represent about 10% of the student population, and that a further 2-3% would represent those who are gifted/talented. There have been minor shifts in the distribution of these students relative to the types of special needs, with the greatest increase being in the number of students reported with learning disabilities, and students with autism spectrum disorder. These changes are shown in Table 2:

**Table 2**  
**Number of students with special needs**  
**(excluding gifted) by category in SD #35 (Langley)**

Number of Students	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07
Total	1,692	1,778	1,553	1,661	1,685
A - Physically Dependent	23	23	18	18	17
B - Deaf/blind	1	1	1	2	1
C - Moderate to Profound Intellectual Disability	85	81	75	75	75
D- Physically Disability/ Chronic Health Impairment	81	82	84	92	100
E - Visual Impairment	7	9	7	7	6
F - Deaf or Hard of Hearing	94	78	68	64	54
G - Autism Spectrum Disorder	58	67	76	94	118
H - Intensive Behaviour Interventions/Serious Mental Illness	185	205	195	232	199
K - Mild Intellectual Disability	75	71	71	71	66
P - Gifted	342	363	98	73	107
Q - Learning Disability	553	584	605	653	671
R - Moderate Behaviour Support/Mental Illness	188	214	255	280	271

The most significant drop over time has been the number of students reported as gifted. Historically, they represented 20% or more of the total number of students with special needs. By 2006–07, this had been reduced to 6.4% of all students with special needs. The provincial trend has shown a similar decline but without the same precipitous drop that occurred in Langley between the 2003–04 and the 2004–05 school year.

While in many respects the trends in Langley have been similar to those province-wide, one change has been the number of students identified with learning disabilities. Overall in the province, the trend has been slightly downward, while in Langley there has been an increase of almost 32% over a seven-year period.

It may well be that the changes in profile are tied to changes in the funding allocation system. Changes to the funding system for students with special needs, introduced on March 1, 2002, moved into the student-base allocation a significant portion of those resources that, in the past, had been part of the special education supplement. This included funds that were previously identified as part of the special education “core” allocation: funds for learning assistance, special health services, identification assessment/ planning and hospital/homebound services and supplementary funds for students who are identified as having severe learning disabilities, mild intellectual disabilities, students requiring moderate behaviour supports, and students who are gifted.

The province continued to provide supplementary funding to school boards to address the aspects of special education for students who met criteria as Level 1, 2, or 3 unique needs where these were defined in the ministry’s *Operating Grants Manual* (March 2007) as:

- Level 1—includes students with multiple needs who are dependent handicapped or deaf/blind
- Level 2—includes students with moderate/profound intellectual disabilities, with physical disabilities or chronic health impairments, with visual impairments, with autism spectrum disorder, or students who are deaf or hard of hearing
- Level 3—includes students requiring intensive behaviour interventions or students with serious mental illness

#### **Student achievement:**

The Dogwood completion rate for all students in the district is 79% according to the ministry website.

Because numbers are small (and therefore masked) and historical data is not always available, the researcher attached to this inquiry was unable to determine any clear patterns for students with special needs in terms of Dogwood completion rates, with two exceptions: (1) That there was a rise in completion rates, both provincially and in Langley, for students with learning disabilities and students with behavioural disabilities over time and

(2) there is no data for some categories of special needs. Reasons for the rise in completion rates in the two categories across the province and in the district are not clear, although definitional changes and greater awareness of adjudication options may be factors.

Six-year completion rates for students with special needs in Langley went from 64% to 67% (2003-04 to 2006-07), going from somewhat below the provincial average to just slightly above it. (Source: Ministry of Education 2006-07 Summary of Key Information.)

**School facilities:**

The district was comprised of 49 schools in 2006-07, as shown in Table 3. There are two alternate secondary schools. To date, the district has faced some school closures, although this is not evident from the ministry data (Table 3). There have been some grade re-configurations in some schools. During the inquiry, a major debate was raging in the community about a proposal to reconfigure the grade composition in one of the existing secondary schools.

**Table 3**  
**Number of schools in SD#35 (Langley) over 5-year period**

Number of Public Schools	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07
Total	49	49	48	48	49
Elementary	35	35	34	34	34
Elementary Junior Secondary	-	1	1	1	1
Elementary Secondary	1	1	1	2	2
Junior Secondary	1	-	1	1	-
Middle School	1	1	-	-	-
Secondary	11	11	11	10	12

Source: Ministry of Education data system

**Staffing:**

Between the 2001-02 and the 2002-03 school years, there was a decrease in the numbers of special education teachers (15.71 FTE), all teachers (100.13 FTE) , and education assistants (13.07 FTE), presumably brought on by the impact of an unfunded provincial collective agreement.

Since that time, the numbers of staff have been increasing gradually in all categories. The numbers of special education teachers and classroom teachers has never reached the former levels, but there has been a significant increase in the number of education assistants (there are now 47 more FTEs than there were before the decreases began). However, the SD Financial Statements of June 30, 2007 show a decrease in spending for EAs of \$282,389 from the previous year's audited statements. The panel was not able to reconcile these discrepancies in available data.

The aggregated ratio of students to teachers in special education has remained relatively constant over a six-year period, with the exception of the initial year's increase.

In the face of fiscal limitations, the board appears to be working to address some staffing issues for students with special needs. In its 2007-08 budget by-law, it approved FTE increases of 2.5 at the school level (0.5 being for the IB program), and 2.6 FTE at the district level for reading recovery, drug and alcohol support, and school psychology.

**Special programs:**

Staff lists provided to the panel indicate there are 12 teachers deployed either part-time or full-time in district classes/programs scattered around the district in various elementary and secondary schools in nine separate facilities. Generally, these serve students with intellectual and/or physical disabilities. Eight schools offer reading recovery programs.

Two provincial resource programs for students with severe/profound hearing loss—an elementary program at Uplands School and a secondary program located at R.E. Mountain Secondary School. Enrolment in these programs has dropped substantially over a five-year period to about half of what it was originally. (Note: provincial resource programs are above the per-pupil operating grant.)

There is an international baccalaureate program at R.E. Mountain Secondary School. Although not specifically designed for gifted students, the program is generally oriented toward those who are academically talented.

An alternate secondary school (known as APEX) is designed to serve up to 120 students from Grades 8-12 who exhibit poor performance, social avoidance/dysfunction, self-esteem, mental health and post-traumatic effects. The school website reports a staff of nine specialized teachers, youth workers, counsellors, one special education assistant, and administrators. It uses a "Metabolized Therapeutic Model" and employs wrap-around systems that involve community agencies and supports as well as educational services.

Other schools indicate a combination of learning assistance/resource rooms (some non-categorical and some specifically focussed on behaviour).

Some schools house programs which serve more than one school. They are designed for students with low-incidence special needs who are generally intellectually and/or physically challenged. Data provided indicated that there were 12 teachers deployed in these programs, in 10 different buildings.

**Professional development:**

The district offers a variety of after-school professional development opportunities across a range of content areas. The current listing of available training opportunities includes a number focussed on literacy. There is a media centre located in a secondary school which provides an online catalogue of available resources.

Five parent-focussed workshops are offered as evening sessions, for a modest registration fee (\$15.00–\$20.00).

**Financial background:**

The total operating budget for 2006–07 (final) was reported by the Ministry of Education to be \$130.8 million. The ministry reports that since 2001–02, comparable operating funds for the Langley School District had increased by almost \$14.5 M (12.5%) in real dollars. Per-pupil funding in the province had increased by \$1,326 in the same period. (Source: Ministry of Education website). Notably, as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product this amount represents a decrease, even with the infusion of labour settlement funds in 2006–07).

Between 2003–04 and 2006–07 school years, per-pupil operating grants to SD #35 changed from \$6,318 to \$7,087.

Between the 2002–03 and 2006–07 school years, the average base teacher salary went from \$58,744 to \$62,068, an increase in costs to the board of about 5.66%. During the same period, the number of teaching staff in Langley changed from 998.90 to 1038.79 FTEs.

**Trends in special education that impact services:**

The inquiry was set against a background of trends at the local and provincial levels:

1. There was an increase in the number and severity of students with special needs in a number of categories, especially learning disabilities and autism spectrum disorders.
2. A growing body of research on “best practices” for the effective teaching of students with special needs seems caught in the transition from research to practice.
3. Changes to the funding system in which significant portions of special education funding were rolled into the general per-pupil grant. The ministry website states that “Though the funding system changed, the obligations placed on school boards to address the special needs of students did not” and further that “In order to provide an inclusive education system in which students with special needs are fully

participating members of a community of learners, additional support may be required by means of additional staff, specialized learning materials, physical accommodations or equipment, and assessments to enable them to meet their educational and social needs.” In practice, however, because the funding was no longer targeted, and there were funding pressures, services to many students with special needs were reduced.

4. Whether inadvertently or intentionally, these changes to funding came about coincidentally with a new collective agreement for teachers which provided for salary increases of 2% in each of three consecutive years. Unfortunately, while funding for education has increased over time, the increases have never been such that they compensated boards for the costs of this agreement.
5. The fragmentation of resource-teacher positions came, either directly or indirectly, because of reduction in staffing resources to schools. Whereas, previously resource teachers were often one full-time equivalent with a limited caseload, now their place in the school frequently represents a patchwork of other assignments as well (e.g., librarian, administration, etc.).
6. Changes to the provincial examination system placed new demands for adjudication on the assessment services at both school and district levels.
7. Bill 33 provisions.

### **Inquiry processes:**

#### **1. Review of available data**

Prior to and during the hearing process and beyond, the panel reviewed a number of key documents, including data on the ministry and school district websites, and a research report prepared by a contracted researcher outlining trends for students with special needs in Langley using the ministry data bank.

The panel also reviewed Class-Size and Composition reports of October 6, 2006, April 12, 2007 and October 9, 2007 prepared by the superintendent, audited district financial statement of June 30, 2007, and the special education update prepared by the district and dated May 9, 2007.

#### **2. Meeting with steering committee**

Panelists met with the steering committee prior to the public hearings. They were apprised of how the steering committee came to be and the processes that they followed in planning the inquiry.

#### **3. Review of current research on education for students with special needs**

In preparation for the inquiry, the panelists reviewed a set of 15

research papers prepared by senior and graduate students at Simon Fraser University related to current issues in the education of students with special needs, and met with the professor who supervised their research.

#### **4. Review of transcripts from focus groups**

Prior to the public hearings, seven focus groups were held, involving 89 individuals. Participation in focus groups was through a random selection process. Standard focus group procedures were followed, with focus group leaders having been trained in advance on the methodology.

#### **5. Review of relevant legislation and ministerial orders**

Relevant sections of the *School Act*, the IEP order, and Bill 33 were among the documents reviewed.

#### **6. Public hearings:**

During the public section of the inquiry, presenters were not required to identify themselves publicly, although all did so on a confidential sheet which was provided to the panelists. Most, however, did state their names and the school with which they were affiliated.

Over the course of six hearings in a three-day period, the panel received both oral and written or multimedia submissions from parents, teachers, school support staff, and members of the community. Hearings took place in Aldergrove (2), Fort Langley (2), and Langley City (2).

While each hearing was scheduled to be two hours in length, all of them went overtime as a result of the number of presentations and the detail to which presenters sometimes went to ensure that the panel understood their particular circumstances. Where statements were not clear, panelists were free to query presenters, to ask clarifying questions, or on occasion, to make observations about the content of the presentation.

During the course of these hearings, the panel heard 110 presentations from individuals and groups, representing 48 work sites. These could be categorized as:

- parent organizations: 2 (Learning Disabilities Association, South Fraser Valley Branch, and Families for Early Autism)
- individual parents: 26
- CUPE 1260: 1
- individual/group special education assistants: 9
- individuals or groups of teachers: 66

These were frequently a group of teachers from a school staff, each of whom had a different role in the school. In some cases they were entire school staffs. Elementary and secondary personnel were

equally represented. One presentation dealt with Aboriginal students with special needs, another spoke from the perspective of teachers on call. There was one presentation from a school psychologist, two from teachers currently on leave, several from individual regular class or special class teachers or resource teachers.

- teacher organizations: 4  
These included the LTA, the LTA Health & Safety Committee, the Learning Assistance Teachers Association of BC, and the Special Education Association of BC.
- professionals from other community agencies: 1
- private tutoring facility: 1

An additional four written submissions were tabled with the panel. These were because presenters were unable to attend the sessions or because they were unable to make a presentation at the public hearings due to time constraints.

## Findings

### Assessment and identification:

There were several issues which arose as they relate to this area of service.

1. Each school identifies its priorities for assessment annually. These priorities are set in different ways by different schools, so parents are never sure what the rules are in terms of “getting to the front of the line”—and neither, in many cases, are teachers. It is obvious that the priority-setting process needs to be more transparent, equitable, and predictable across schools. (There was no district-wide data on wait times available to the panel.)
2. Because they do not generate additional funds, students with learning disabilities or other high-incidence groups have greater difficulty in obtaining assessments which could help their teachers in their instructional planning. There is a suspicion among staff and parents that the district does not wish these students to be assessed because if they qualify for services, these must then be provided.
3. It was reported in several presentations that the district does not accept assessment data that was generated in other school districts. The panel found this difficult to reconcile, since presumably those performing the assessments are as equally trained and qualified as the staff in Langley, either as members of BCASP or as registered psychologists. The panel questions why such a practice exists.

4. The panel did not have access to data regarding average wait times for assessment. However, we did hear examples where parents had waited two or more years for assessment of their child, and in several presentations parents indicated they had, at some considerable financial burden, arranged for private assessments in order that their children could become eligible for the services to which they were entitled.

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*“Our family decided that if an assessment is what is needed to get our child some services, then that’s what we would do. We couldn’t really afford it, but we scraped together the money.”*

*—Parent of elementary child with special needs*

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5. Additional pressures have been placed on school psychology services by changes in graduation requirements and provincial examination schedules. Previously, only those students writing Grade 12 provincial exams required current assessments for adjudication. With the new program requirements, there are also students in Grades 10 and 11 who need these for adjudication.

Of concern to the panel is that because some students do not generate additional funding, the assessment of their needs has become a low priority. It appears that a basic tenet of assessment is being lost with

the focus on funding and whether or not a student has an IEP: The purpose of assessment is to improve instruction.

### **Adequacy of funding and services for students with special needs:**

Information regarding the amount of funding available to support students with special needs in Langley is difficult to come by for three reasons:

1. Information from the board level was not especially forthcoming with regard to allocations to the school level.
2. Although funds are allocated to the school level through a Decentralized Decision Making (DDM) system, the disposition of those funds is at the discretion of the school and not necessarily trackable.
3. Because the province does not target funding for learning assistance or high-incidence students with special needs, the provincial reporting system does not require any specific tracking of these funds since they are no longer targeted.

The panel was, however, provided with lists of personnel deployed in programs for students with special needs at each school, although their FTE allocation to special education services was not always entirely clear. According to the data provided, there are 85.6 special education teachers in schools, and a further 43.94 attached to District Special Services. (This

includes psychologists, speech and language pathologists, occupational therapists and physiotherapists, reading recovery personnel as well as other services, but not administrative staff.)

Despite the limitations in data, evidence from those most directly impacted overwhelmingly suggests that many students with special needs (largely although not exclusively in the “high incidence” categories such as learning disabilities and moderate behaviour disorders, and those who are at risk but not yet diagnosed) are not receiving the educational programs designed to meet their learning needs. Indeed, we also heard from many parents and teachers of “low-incidence” students who provided multiple examples of these children being in classes which are too large, or with insufficient support, to provide an appropriate educational program for them. There are clearly resource shortfalls, but it is not entirely clear how much of this is because the allocations to the district are insufficient to provide them, and how much is due to decisions made at the school level that have directed the resources elsewhere to meet overall pressures in the system.

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*“The teachers have spoken  
with their hearts to get  
more support in some way  
for our school.”*

*—Parent of elementary child  
with a learning disability.*

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We also heard that at the secondary level, because of the interaction between Bill 33 provisions and lack of sufficient resource allocation to special education to provide support, many students with special needs were unable to be enrolled in elective courses which would be appropriate for them, and in the worst case scenarios they had “free” periods in which they were in effect “wandering the halls” because the resource teacher was deployed elsewhere and there was

no class into which they could be scheduled. These are the very courses that would be of most benefit to many students with special needs and it is important that they have the opportunity to enrol in them, just as any other student would.

### **Workload of resource teachers:**

A number of resource teachers provided concrete examples of their current caseloads. Generally, these were well over a manageable number for any meaningful instruction and in the most extreme case, one resource teacher had 70 students on the caseload in a secondary school.

A complicating factor has been the “rolling together” of the former learning assistance and the resource teacher roles in Langley. These are clearly different in terms of historical orientation and function. As a result, former learning assistance teachers do not necessarily have the expertise that is needed to perform resource teacher functions, nor do former resource teachers necessarily have the expertise needed for learning assistance teacher functions.

Another issue is that in a totally non-categorical program, the needs of the students for remedial or compensatory instruction can be very different and the job of tailoring programs to this array of needs is a difficult, if not impossible, task. In some cases, it requires differing sets of specialized skills. Many resource teachers feel overwhelmed by these demands. Although the challenges appear to exist across the system, they appear particularly acute at the secondary level.

Often mentioned by presenters, teachers and non-teachers alike, was the increasing paperwork demands of the job. Obviously, the preparation of a meaningful IEP is an important task, as is the writing of progress reports. This assumes, however, that they can be prepared in a meaningful way, with parent input into the planning process, and be used as communication devices to improve home-school collaboration and understanding as well as to track student progress. However, when these requirements are exacerbated by large caseloads, these tasks can become overwhelming and excessively time-consuming.

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*“The IEP was a tool for meeting with parents and planning with parent and student. Now the IEP is another piece of bureaucratic paperwork that has to be done in order to satisfy the Ministry of Education but which is rarely referred to once written—the workload is simply too large to have time to review it or use it as a guide.”*

—Secondary resource teacher

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Most resource teachers also have the responsibility of working with, and supervising, special education assistants. While the SEAs are there to help with the children, particularly at times when they are integrated into regular classes, their presence requires that there be time for co-ordination, planning, and debriefing. There is virtually no time in either the resource room teacher’s schedule or the SEA’s hours of work to allow for these important functions, nor is there time for briefing with classroom teachers prior to the lesson. The result is a less-than-co-ordinated approach to providing the SEA support services.

It is clear that unless these issues are addressed in a meaningful way by the school district, the

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*“I’m writing down things that I know I can’t do because I won’t have the time.”*

—Resource teacher speaking about IEP preparation

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*“If I were not on medical leave because of stress and burnout, I wouldn’t have the time to prepare a presentation for the panel.”*

—Resource teacher on stress leave

most experienced and well-trained resource teachers will be either transferring to regular class assignments, leaving the school district, or experiencing severe burnout; in any case, it will be costly to the district, which will find itself having to replace them with new, inexperienced graduates (assuming they are available in a time of labour shortages).

**Adequacy of services for non-designated students who need additional support**

In addition to the 10% of students with significant special needs, there are also a number of students

(likely in the order of 10-15% of the student population) who, for whatever reason, may require short-term compensatory or remedial instruction periodically throughout their school lives. (Teachers sometimes think of these as the “grey-area” children). These are the ones who would formerly have been served by learning assistance teachers.

A significant number of presenters, with various roles including parents, recognized that this is a group of students who are now underserved or not served at all, and classroom teachers recognize that they need help both for these students and for themselves in providing appropriate programming for them.

*“We, as teachers, are trained to make it work. It has taken a great toll... But most of all I regret losing my joy in teaching. A burned-out teacher is not a good teacher.”*

—Elementary teacher

**Overall resource adequacy:**

While some presenters seemed to believe that the board should simply put more money into special education, what is clear when one looks at the provincial picture is that many of the issues raised are not unique to Langley, but relate to a broader provincial scenario of underfunding of special education that has gone on for a number of years and that was exacerbated in the 2002-03 school year due to an overall funding shortfall following the mandated three-year teacher collective agreement. This caused a major reduction in personnel, particularly non-enrolling staff. The system has never recovered from this, and the issues have been further complicated by the provisions of Bill 33.

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*“I was a classroom teacher when ‘integration’ began and I believe it worked as the special students had access to lots of support. Gradually, over the years, that support has been eroded.”*

*—Elementary classroom teacher*

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In theory, limitations of three students with special needs to a classroom where the maximum enrolment is 30 should adequately accommodate the generally accepted proportion of 10% of the student population as having special needs (not including gifted). However, these students are not always equally distributed either in age or in geography. At the secondary level, the situation is exacerbated by the fact that there are some courses that are more appropriate for many students with special needs, and the classroom composition is not reflected in the support provided in these situations. There are other situations in which the facility itself (for example, laboratory or workshop) does not have the number of

work stations to allow for 30 students. Decisions then need to be made about whether it is the child with special needs or another student who has first claim on a space.

Resource shortfalls are also evident in the inability of the system to provide time for collaborative efforts among teachers in planning and implementing IEPs and in providing planning and debriefing time for SEAs and the teachers with whom they work. There is a shortage of SEAs to cover the range of students and classes to facilitate integration; teachers report that there are instances when an SEA is absent due to illness and no substitute is available. Inadequate support in regular and special education classrooms has negative implications, not only for education, but also in some instances for the safety of the child with special needs, other children in the class, and staff.

At the same time, there are sometimes parental expectations which go beyond the scope of the intended resources. For example, parents whose children generate additional funding sometimes believe that SEAs should be assigned solely to their child, and do not understand that these funds and personnel are not exclusively tied to their child, but may be used to assist teachers, sometimes by taking on other duties in the classroom, in ways which facilitate integration. Panelists are of the view that there are instances when one-to-one is critical, other instances where “piggybacking” by serving other children as well is valid. Each situation is unique and must be individually determined, not by diagnostic category alone, but also by the needs of the child and the classroom.

Children with behavioural issues integrated into regular classrooms are the most challenging for teachers, because time spent dealing with behavioural issues reduces the time for actual instruction. For this reason, teachers feel particularly strongly about the need for additional support for these students.

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*“Integration is great when it’s supported.”*

*—Experienced classroom teacher*

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The panel did not hear issues raised regarding teaching materials for classroom or resource room use except for the fact that some of the technology available is too old to run some of the programs. However, the teacher-librarian’s group indicated that they did not have the resources to provide an appropriate array of materials for children across the spectrum of special needs because resources for school libraries and librarian time have decreased.

### **Community impact:**

An insightful presentation by a mental health worker outlined the impact, not only on children but on the community, when schools do not have the necessary resources to address children’s needs. When teachers do not have the time to spend with vulnerable children who have emotional or behavioural difficulties, these students are less likely to become grounded in their relationships within the school. Without the resources to help, schools are more likely to suspend or expel students. These youth then seek attachments elsewhere—on the street—where they may become a ready supply of candidates for gangs. Obviously, this has implications for the entire community.

A teacher from the APEX program also commented on the importance of education as attachment and the need for a paradigm shift in terms of how the system sees the child and responds.

Data showing that there is an increase in the number of students with moderate behavioural issues or mental illness suggests that the system needs to examine the resources which are placed at the school level to address these. While there are a number of alternate programs for these students and those with more severe difficulties, it appears that at the same time there has been a reduction in the resources available at the school level to address these at earlier stages and with a more preventative focus.

### **What is going well?**

Despite the many challenges being faced in special education in Langley, the panel was impressed with the dedication and care of those presenting. Many took time to say how much they appreciated the teamwork in their schools, the dedication of the staff, and their commitment to the children. There were more isolated instances in which teachers said they felt they had a school-level administrator who “gets it” and works hard to provide the resources required for their programs.

In comments from focus groups, some mentioned the helpfulness of district special education staff once they managed to get there, access to SET-BC services, and the usefulness of assessment reports that pinpoint student needs.

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*“In our school, the filing cabinets can look beaten up but the principal does everything possible to make sure that we have what we need for the kids.”*

—Elementary special class teacher

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The district appears to be making good efforts at early intervention at the primary level with programs such as Reading Recovery, and with the emphasis on additional support for some low-incidence programs from K-3.

**Additional panel observations:**

It was clear that presenters put considerable thought and effort into their presentations. For some, this was done at considerable emotional

cost as they provided not only information about the current situation, but also expressed their personal feelings.

The panel was concerned with the feelings of disillusionment of traditionally optimistic professionals. This is most alarming and distressing. Teachers who are obviously concerned about their students expressed their sense of frustration, exhaustion, and frequently a sense of inadequacy in not being able to provide what their students need.

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*“I believe that teachers are tired, and that is impacting day-to-day operations. The face of teaching has changed. We need to find a way to change with it.”*

—School counsellor

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*“I feel that these children are being punished, whether it is by ignoring, dismissing, or isolating or a lack of resources, for something that came with birth. Why do we make the uphill battle even more difficult for them?”*

—Parent

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SEAs often felt that they needed to be in two places at one time, and there were not enough hours in the day to do it

all. Parents expressed frustration with not understanding the system and being able to navigate it, and of having to constantly fight for what is their child’s right to an appropriate education.

Personnel need to be emotionally strong in order to bring out the best in vulnerable children. The demoralization of so many dedicated people may be the most disturbing finding from this inquiry.

## Conclusions and recommendations

The panel's conclusions and recommendations can be viewed in two parts:

1. those which are within the control of the board
2. those which are not unique to Langley but represent a broader provincial problem.

### I. District-controlled issues:

- a. For some aspects of special education services, a decentralized decision-making model has significant limitations, particularly for smaller schools which generally cannot, within their staffing allocation, provide the range of expertise needed to serve students with special needs.
- b. Students with special needs are, by definition, a minority. When resource decisions at the school level are made with the majority in mind, whether these decisions are taken collectively by staff or individually by school administrators, minority groups will be at a disadvantage. This is complicated by provincial decisions which target funding for Aboriginal students but not for some significant portion of students with special needs. The allocation of teaching and other resources to individual schools needs to be made far more transparent, as does the rationale for it.
- c. In several submissions, teachers indicated that the training which they believe they need to serve students with special needs (particularly those with autism) is offered during the day, when they are unable to leave their assignment without a TOC. The schools are reported to not have the resources for such release, and the teachers must either pay for the training and substitute costs themselves or forgo the opportunity. The district should examine ways in which in-service training can be made more available to teachers.
- d. The district should address the training needs of learning assistance teachers who have additionally taken on the resource assignment, so that they have the necessary background to fulfil that function.
- e. The district should review the caseloads of resource teachers in collaboration with them, and develop standards which would ensure a reasonable, manageable workload for them.
- f. In-service opportunities for classroom teachers, focussed on the accommodation of students with special needs, should be made more readily available.
- g. In an inclusive system (which is the case in British Columbia and elsewhere), it is important that all teachers have a basic orientation to students with special needs. Unfortunately, teacher-training programs have not all recognized this. The district should therefore make an effort to:
  - i. give preference to new hires who do have this background, all other factors being equal.

- ii. work with the universities to create opportunities for teachers to acquire this knowledge and skills through in-service and for-credit options.
- iii. encourage revision of teacher-training programs to incorporate this knowledge and the related skills.
- h. Given the issues raised around paperwork, the district should investigate whether there are ways to simplify the IEP process and other paperwork requirements.
- i. A mechanism needs to be put in place to ensure results-based, full and frank discussion takes place between the board of education and other stakeholders around issues involving special education in the district.
- j. A parent-information brochure should be prepared which outlines parental rights and responsibilities, as an aid to navigate the system. It should include the appropriate processes to be followed should they have a concern about their child's education.

## 2. Broader provincial issues:

- a. It is unlikely that important support services formerly provided by non-enrolling staff can be fully re-instated by boards of education unless the province addresses the historical funding shortfall, the effects of which were particularly felt in the 2002–2003 school year.
- b. Intentionally or otherwise, the province has minimized the importance of programs and services to students in high-incidence areas and gifted students by changes to the funding formula which have rolled these into the general per-pupil grant. This does not mask the fact that these areas have been chronically underfunded for some time.
- c. The ministry's policy of inclusion is being undermined by the lack of resources to support regular classroom teachers.
- d. The ministry may not have considered the cost and workload implications for increased assessment generated by changes to the secondary examination process.
- e. Bill 33 has had negative, unintended consequences for access by students with special needs to courses that are appropriate for them, and this is most evident at the secondary level.
- f. The government finance committee has recently supported a move

to address time delays in the assessment of students with special needs. This would be an important first step, but unless appropriate services follow that assessment, it would be a waste of time and money.

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*“We need to become agents  
of our own change, not  
just opponents of changes  
imposed by others.”*

—Andy Hargreaves, professor, Boston College

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## Appendix

### **School District Policy on Special Education**

(Source: B.C. School Trustees Association website)

**School District:** 35 Langley

**Policy Subject:** SPECIAL EDUCATION

**Date Passed:** September 24, 2002

**Date Amended:** No Date Available

**Policy:** SPECIAL EDUCATION

Policy No. 5018

Date Approved: September 24, 2002

Date Amended:

The Board of School Trustees recognizes and accepts the unique needs of each individual within our community of learners and is committed to providing quality education for all students.

To enable students who have special needs to develop to their full potential, the Board believes in the delivery of special education services that value the practice of inclusion and provide opportunities for all students to pursue district and personal goals in all aspects of their education.

The Board supports early identification and intervention, promotes equitable access to appropriate educational assessments, programs and resources, and recognizes that some students benefit from differentiated, adapted and modified programs.

The Board acknowledges the important role of parents/guardians in their child's education and will provide information and opportunities for ongoing consultation regarding their child's educational program.

### **Regulations—special education**

5018R

#### **Definitions**

Students with special needs have disabilities of an intellectual, physical, sensory, emotional or behavioural nature, or have a learning disability or have exceptional gifts or talents.

The principle of inclusion adopted in British Columbia schools supports equitable access to learning by all students and the opportunity for all students to pursue their goals in all aspects of their education. The practice of inclusion transcends the idea of physical location and incorporates basic values that promote participation, friendship and interactions.

**Services/supports**

The district provides a range of services and programs in a variety of settings which reflect the diversity of special needs. All students with special needs will have equitable access to support services and programs.

Special education services are primarily delivered at the school level. Schools can access specialized support services and programs available at the district level when necessary.

**Assessment**

The purpose of an assessment, conducted by school or district personnel, is to determine the student's strengths and needs and to assist in the development of an educational program.

Schools shall carry out assessment for the purpose of screening students whose achievement and/or performance may suggest the need for special services. Assessment by District Special Services personnel will only be completed with the consent of the parents/guardians. Results of the assessments will be communicated and interpreted to the parents/guardians and the findings will be outlined in a written report. It is the responsibility of Special Services to determine whether the student meets Ministry of Education criteria in order to be formally identified as having a special need.

**Individual Education Plans (I.E.P.)**

Schools will develop Individual Education Plans for all students identified as having special needs in accordance with the Individual Education Plan Order (MO 638/95). The school will collaborate with parents and, where appropriate, students to develop an I.E.P. The I.E.P. will identify goals and objectives relevant to the specific identified needs of the student.

**Reporting student progress**

Parents/guardians of students with special needs will receive progress reports in accordance with the regularly scheduled reporting periods. For students who are expected to achieve or surpass the learning outcomes set out in the provincial curriculum regular letter-grading and report procedures will be followed. Adaptations must be documented and included in the progress report. Progress in curricular areas that have been modified will be described in an anecdotal report in place of letter grades and will reflect achievement made towards the goals and objectives stated in the I.E.P.

**Placement in special programs**

Students with special needs may be placed in special programs or classes offered at the school or district level. Appropriateness of placement in a program or class will be determined by the school and district personnel in consultation with parents and, where appropriate, the student. Placement in specialized programs or classes is dependent on space and resources available.

The placement of students in special programs or classes shall be made with the knowledge, understanding and consent of parents/guardians.

**Transition planning**

Schools will develop transition plans for students with special needs moving from preschool to elementary school, elementary to secondary school and secondary to post secondary programs. Transition plans will also be developed for students with special needs transferring between programs, schools or districts.

**Collaboration with other ministries and community agencies**

Where appropriate, schools will consult and collaborate with other ministries and/or community agencies to develop a cohesive, consistent plan that supports the student and the family.

**Accountability**

The school district is accountable for providing opportunities for student achievement and success. The school district will monitor and review expenditures, services and programs which support students with special needs.

**Appeal Process**

A student or a parent/guardian of the student has a right of appeal as per School District #35 Policy #1205.

(Last Revision—September 24, 2002)

## Biographies



**Nadene Guiltner** is a recently retired public school teacher. She completed a bachelor of arts degree at the University of Calgary. Changing careers mid-life, she then entered the faculty of education at UBC, obtaining a professional certificate in 1986.

During her 20-year teaching career her main assignment was with a multi-grade class of five to nine year old students. As often happens in small rural schools, she also wore other hats. Over the years she developed programs for gifted students from K to 10. She also worked with children who had a variety of learning disabilities. As it was her feeling that families play a crucial role in their children's education, she developed a series of workshops for parents.

As part of a research project in children's art, she travelled several times to Reggio Emilia, in Italy, to study their world famous early education programs. She was able to adapt many of the ideas used in the Italian schools to her own practice. In particular, she was interested in the role the environment plays in learning.

Nadene has presented many workshops for teachers in her own district as well as for those in other parts of the province. She has also been a guest lecturer at SFU and the University of Calgary. She was invited by the Alberta Teachers' Association to present a workshop on her Reggio experiences at their annual Teachers' Convention.

Writing has always played an important part of Nadene's life and she has written articles and book reviews for the *Journal of Early Education*, a column for the *Raven*, and has made regular contributions to The Drawing Network at UBC. She has written segments for two books written by Bob Steele (UBC). The first book, *Draw Me A Story*, featured examples of artwork from Nadene's students along with comments about classroom life. The second book, *The Drawing Path for Children*, was based on the reflections of Nadene and four other teachers. Nadene is married and has two children and three granddaughters.



**Dr. Shirley McBride** received her M.Ed. in Educational Psychology at the University of Saskatchewan, and her Ph.D. in Special Education at the University of Illinois. During her career she has been a teacher, school psychologist, and administrator at the school, school district, and provincial levels. She has taught courses in special education as adjunct professor at the University of Saskatchewan, Simon Fraser University, and the University of British Columbia.

In 2000, Dr. McBride retired from her position as Director, Special Programs for the British Columbia Ministry of Education, to enter the private sector. In that capacity, she has provided consulting services to government across Western Canada, the government of Canada, school districts, Aboriginal bands, and non-government agencies. Internationally, she has headed a UNESCO project in Lebanon, and provided consultation and training for the Ministries of Education in Brunei and Jordan.

The author of several publications, she has been a speaker at conferences in Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and across North America.

Dr. McBride is the recipient of several awards for her work, including the Hazel Davie Award from the BC Special Education Association, Harrie M. Selznick Distinguished Service award presented by the Council of Administrators of Special Education (International), the DISES International Lifetime Achievement Award, and the Council for Exceptional Children (International) award for Outstanding Public Service.



**Mike Suddaby** is a former superintendent of schools for SD 42 (Maple Ridge), secondary school principal, and classroom teacher. He has extensive background in school accreditation and the district review process.

Among other initiatives during his superintendency, District 42 developed the “Full Service Neighborhood School” model of service delivery, and piloted a “Special Education Accreditation” process for the Ministry of Education.

Suddaby has been an adjunct professor/sessional instructor at UBC on several occasions, teaching in the fields of “supervision,” “school administration, and “educational finance.” Prior to the legislated separation of administrators from teachers, he had extensive experience in mediation as a member and chair of the BCTF Professional Relation Advisors’ Committee, and continued assisting in the design and implementation of “Program For Quality Teaching,” a program of peer supervision and reflection offered jointly by the BCTF and participating districts.

He has a B.Ed, and an M.A., both from the University of British Columbia.