

# BETTER SCHOOLS FOR BC

**A Plan for  
Quality  
Public  
Education**



British Columbia  
Teachers' Federation

**Kids matter Teachers care**

# Better Schools for BC: A Plan for Quality Public Education

A strong public education system that provides equal opportunities for all is fundamental to democracy.

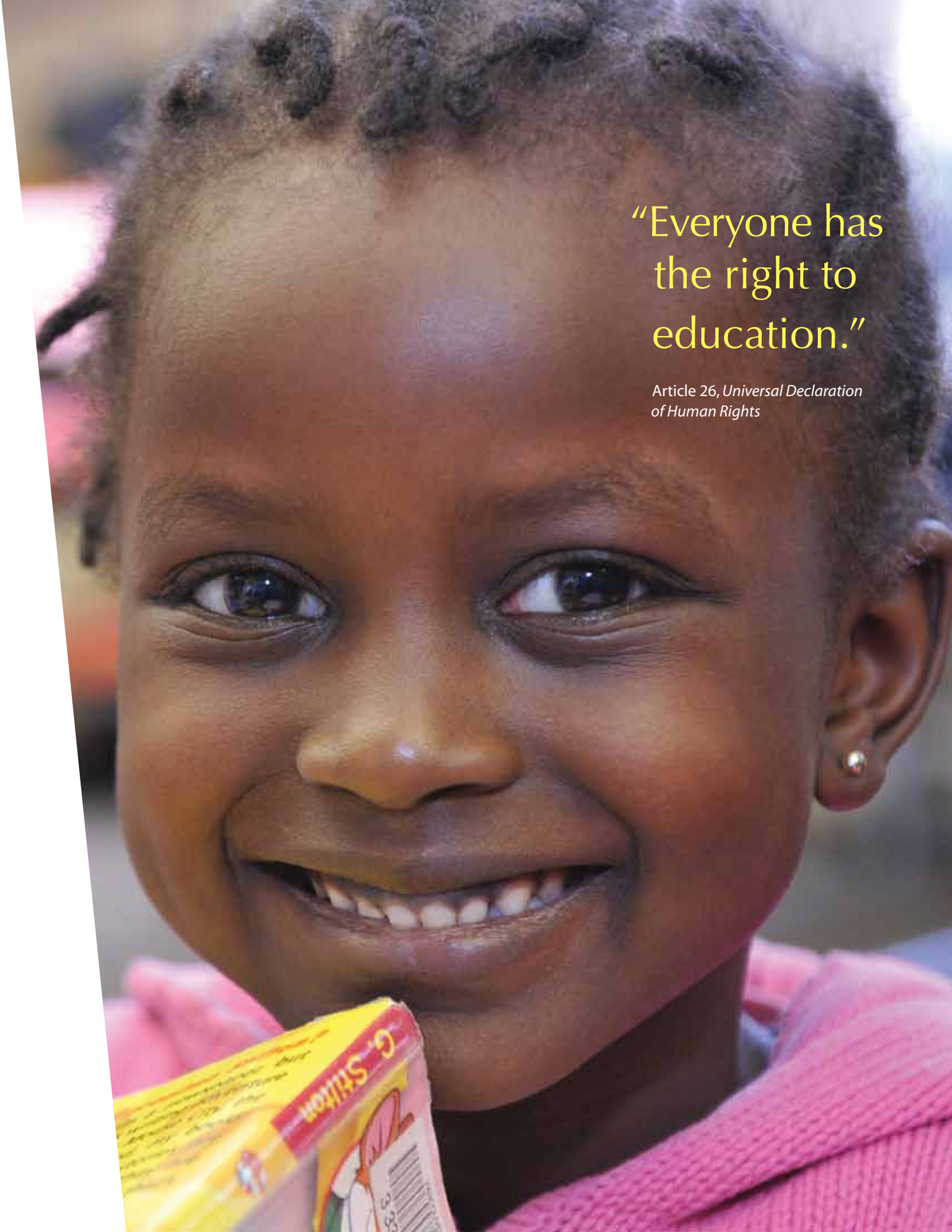
Over decades, British Columbians have built a strong and stable public education system, one of the finest in the world. Teachers are proud of the role we have played in shaping and defending our world-class system. But public education is never static, and is always evolving to meet social change. As we confront the accelerating pace of change in the 21st century, we must continue to strive to improve our system. The 41,000 members of the BC Teachers' Federation are committed to doing our part in this important work.

With almost 600,000 BC children and youth enrolled in our schools and eager to learn, we face enormous challenges in meeting their various intellectual, physical, social, and cultural needs. Our student population is rich in diversity, ready to seize every opportunity. Our teaching force is highly trained and deeply committed. Working with parents, principals, trustees, and other partners across the education community, we can all contribute to ensuring that our children and grandchildren receive the kind of education they need to play their part in building a better future.

## Building blocks for positive change

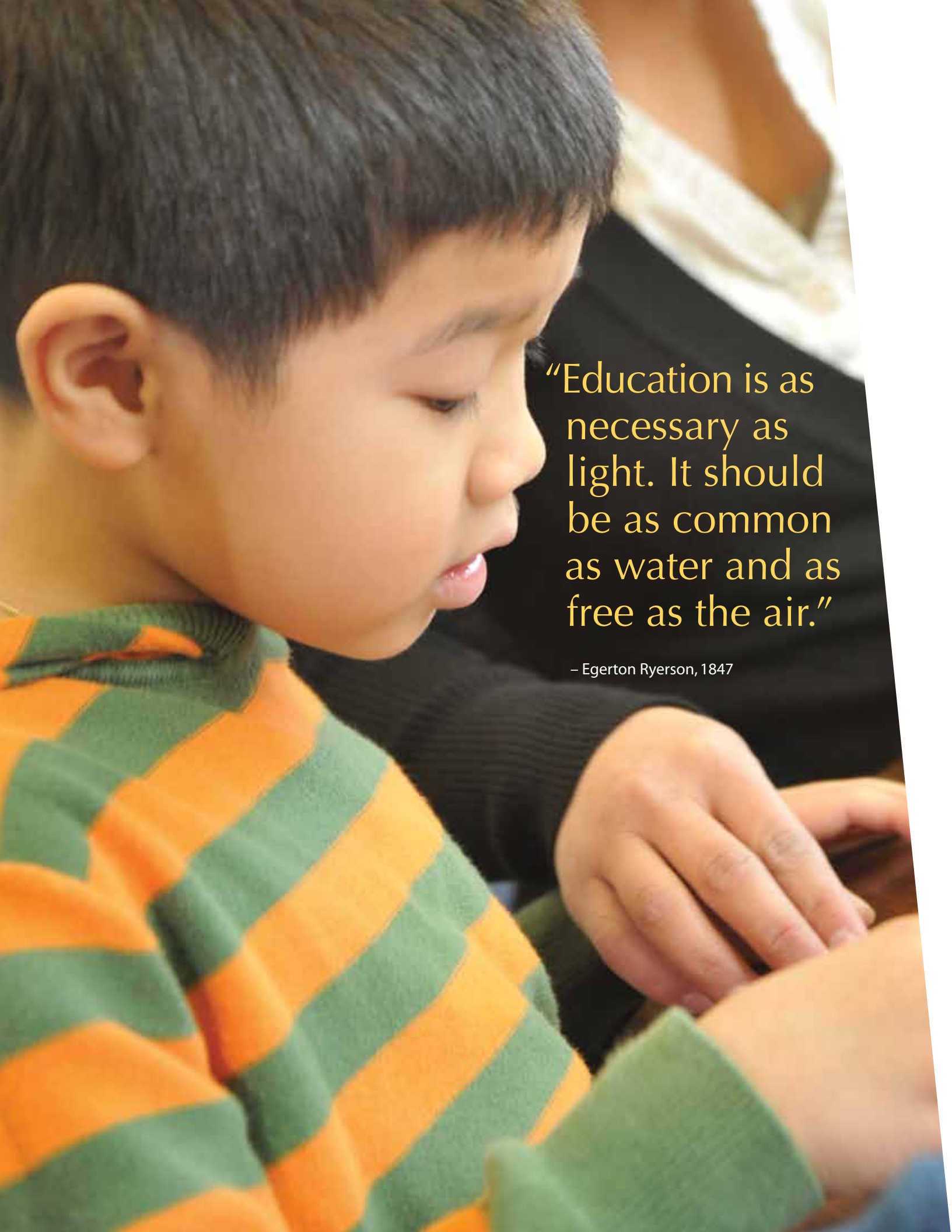
- Class-size and composition guarantees
- A child poverty reduction plan
- Specialist teachers in every school
- Authentic student assessment
- Respect for diversity and equal opportunities for all
- Increased investment in public education
- Full-scope collective bargaining rights

**Kids matter Teachers care**



“Everyone has  
the right to  
education.”

*Article 26, Universal Declaration  
of Human Rights*

A close-up, profile view of a young boy with dark hair, looking down with a focused expression. He is wearing a green and orange horizontally striped sweater. His hands are visible at the bottom of the frame, appearing to be working on something. The background is softly blurred, showing a person in a white shirt and a dark jacket.

“Education is as  
necessary as  
light. It should  
be as common  
as water and as  
free as the air.”

– Egerton Ryerson, 1847

# Foreword

By BCTF President Susan Lambert

Equity is a keystone of our democratic tradition, and teachers believe passionately that it is our professional duty to advocate for the equal right of every student to learn to her or his fullest ability.

This means we need to build schools where everyone feels welcomed and respected. Children must feel safe and secure, nourished and challenged, healthy and confident so they can take their place as active citizens in a modern democratic society.

As British Columbians, we are in a period of political and social transition. As teachers, we care deeply about our students and are committed to our communities. That's why teachers are encouraging citizens to join in positive dialogue and come together to articulate a new vision for the future of public education in our province.

We have prepared this *Plan for Quality Public Education* to contribute to the public discourse about how to make our great public school system even better.

*The broad aim of the public education system should be to foster the growth and development of every individual, to the end that she or he will become and be a self-reliant, self-disciplined, participating member with a sense of social and environmental responsibility within a democratic, pluralistic society.*

*Members' Guide to the BCTF, Policy 9.A.01—The Mandate, 1994 AGM*

# Class size and composition:

## Smaller classes for all students and better support for kids with special needs

Common sense and educational research tell us that students thrive in small classes where they can all get their fair share of individual attention and care. In smaller classes, teachers can better meet the needs of their students through a greater variety of instructional strategies. Smaller classes also foster better behaviour among students and improved peer relationships. In the early grades it all adds up to improved student engagement and learning. Here are some of the additional benefits of smaller classes:

- more personal attention for each child
- more time spent on instruction and learning
- fewer discipline problems
- greater access to teachers, both during class and after school hours
- an increased share of overall education resources for each student
- more physical space for movement.

Class size and class composition are inextricably interwoven, support for students with special needs must also be factored into the equation. At present, tens of thousands of BC students are struggling to learn in oversized classes. To remedy these untenable

teaching and learning conditions, we need to ensure that every child can reap the benefits of smaller class sizes.

In BC schools, we are proud to open our doors wide to welcome every child. Our inclusive philosophy enriches everyone's educational experience. It is a fundamental democratic principle that all children, no matter their abilities or disabilities, have the right to receive an education that meets their unique needs.

Providing appropriate programs for all students with special needs is a constant challenge, given current funding levels. By not providing services in childhood, we run the risk of marginalizing these students later in life. It often means increased economic costs in terms of health care, criminal justice, or other social services. Beyond that is the incalculable personal cost to students who are not able to reach their full potential in adulthood because of the lack of the assistance they needed as children.

The lack of optimal support for students with special needs affects not only those students, but their classmates as well. Surely success for all our students, no matter their gifts or challenges, should be a goal in which we are prepared to invest the necessary resources.



## Recommendations

1. **Ensure smaller classes, with defined limits, across all grade levels, including multigrade classes and distributed learning programs.**
2. **Ensure students get sufficient attention from specialist teachers.**
3. **Support successful inclusion of students with special needs.**
4. **Provide more preparation time for teachers to prepare lessons, assess student progress, and adapt and modify materials to support all students' learning needs.**
5. **Fully fund the services and resources for all students with special needs.**



## Recommendations

1. **Launch a comprehensive and accountable poverty reduction plan, with targets and timelines, aimed at eliminating child poverty in our province.**
2. **Launch a comprehensive and accountable homelessness action plan, with targets and timelines, aimed at eliminating homelessness in our province.**



# A child poverty reduction plan

Every day teachers across BC see the effects of poverty on students; we worry about how their lives will unfold.

We know that a child's performance in school is strongly related to socio-economic status and that a good education is often the only means of breaking the cycle of poverty for poor children.

We cannot discuss poor children in isolation from their families. Poor children live in poor families. Child poverty rates will never come down unless the government pays attention to the needs of poor families.

BC is home to the highest average wealth in Canada and has the largest gap between the wealthiest and poorest households. BC continues to have the highest child poverty rate in Canada. BC also has the lowest corporate tax rate, not only in Canada, but in the entire G7.

There is nothing inevitable about child poverty. Across Canada, seven provinces and territories are already taking action to make a difference in the fight against poverty. The jurisdictions that have official poverty-reduction plans in place or in development are: Quebec, Newfoundland and Labrador, Ontario, New Brunswick, Manitoba, Nova Scotia, and Yukon.

In BC, a comprehensive approach is needed, not only to boost the income of adults living in poverty, but also to build the social infrastructure, public services, and assets that are vital to providing a path out of poverty and improving quality of life—particularly for children living in poverty.

# Learning specialist teachers in every school

BC teachers are among the most qualified in the world, and many have undertaken further specialized training in areas such as learning assistance, teacher-librarianship, counselling, and English as an additional language.

Specialist teachers bring additional expertise to the school community and support colleagues and students alike.

Now, more than ever, our schools need the skills that specialist teachers bring to the educational team. In the information age, we need more teacher-librarians, not fewer, to support information literacy initiatives in the broadest sense and to engage children in the joy of reading and learning. In our diverse multicultural society, we need more ESL specialists, not fewer, to enable immigrant and refugee students to fully integrate into school and their new homeland. In our fast-paced stressed-out society, we need more counsellors, not fewer, to support a safe school environment and help students cope with life's many ups and downs. We need more learning assistance teachers, not fewer, to support students who require additional help to be successful in school.

In the last decade, the number of learning specialist teachers in BC schools has declined drastically. In a time of severe underfunding, learning specialist teaching positions are particularly vulnerable. Indeed, more than half of all teaching positions cut between 2001 and 2005 were learning specialist teachers. These cuts were far disproportionate to the decline in student enrolment of the early 2000s—a decline that is now on the upswing.

The lack of learning specialist teachers is particularly acute in smaller communities and remote schools. Thus, these cuts have further contributed to growing inequities between urban and rural schools across BC.

In order to provide equal opportunities for all BC students to enjoy an enriched and engaging program of instruction, government should restore the full complement of learning specialist teachers to our schools.

## Recommendations

1. **Restore the learning specialist teacher positions lost over the last decade.**
2. **Ensure that every school has a minimum standard of learning specialist teacher service, including the service of teacher-librarians, ESL teachers, learning assistance teachers, counsellors, special education teachers, and other teachers providing specialized curriculum and instruction.**





## Recommendations

- 1. Adopt a scientific, structured sample approach to the administration of the FSAs.**
- 2. Support teachers' authentic assessment practices.**
- 3. Work with the BCTF to address ministry, teacher, and parent concerns related to both student and system-wide assessment.**

# Authentic student assessment

The most effective assessment of student progress is the assessment that teachers do every day in the classroom.

Teachers balance their instruction with assessment that provides students with immediate feedback about their progress and helps them to learn more productively on their own and with others. Teachers use this process of ongoing assessment to respond to individual student needs, to reflect on their teaching, and improve their teaching strategies.

However, this is undermined by the emphasis on standardized testing. Across BC, teachers, principals, and school-district staff spend ever-increasing amounts of time on data collection to meet accountability requirements, teaching to the test to boost achievement scores, and explaining to parents of stressed 9-year-olds that the testing must proceed. This takes the focus away from the ongoing classroom assessment that actually helps students learn. Additionally, it takes time and attention away from the many elements, beyond academics, that are essential to a rich educational experience—music, visual arts, physical education, leadership, and social responsibility that simply cannot be quantified.

Foundation Skills Assessment (FSA) tests are not effective ways to measure individual student achievement. Students learn in different ways and at different rates. Students cannot be standardized. Unfortunately, students and teachers face intensified pressures and public stigma when standardized test scores are perceived by some as the only measure of their accomplishments and skills. Foundation Skills Assessment (FSA) scores are a better indicator of the socio-economic status of surrounding homes than they are a real measure of how schools are performing.

BC should adopt a random-sample approach instead of census testing of every student, and thus avoid subjecting students to the controversial and statistically meaningless FSA tests. Such an approach can provide a rigorous analysis of system-wide strengths and challenges without facilitating school rankings.

Over emphasis on standardized testing reduces our capacity to create programs for individual student needs. As we look for ways to modernize our education system in BC, we should be looking not at standardized practices, but ones that allow us to design and implement individualized programs for our students.

# Respect for diversity and equal opportunities for all

Teachers work hard to provide real equity of opportunity for all, but historical factors and systemic barriers mean equity remains a distant goal.

Profound social injustice and deeper economic disparities mean that children in care, Aboriginal children, and those with special needs are often first to fall through the gaps in our social-safety net. A top priority must be increasing support for these students at risk. When children are hungry, when their families are fractured, when a parent is ill, when home is scary and not secure, then it's next to impossible for children to learn. Schools must be free from sexism, racism, homophobia, and any other forms of bullying, harassment, and discrimination. They must be safe places where all children are free to learn and grow.

The needs of Aboriginal students continue to go unmet. The devastating legacy of residential schools must be acknowledged and understood in order to move forward together. Having more Aboriginal teachers in classrooms to provide strong role models for all students is vitally important. The BCTF is encouraging locals and school districts to reach employment equity agreements so that Aboriginal teachers can assume the important role they need to play within our school system. More Aboriginal students need to be encouraged and supported to go into teaching to be role models for all students.

Furthermore, the needs of immigrant and refugee students must also be addressed before learning and integration can take place. Immigrant children who struggle to communicate in English find great friends in their ESL teachers, who continue to lobby for an end to the arbitrary cap of five years of ESL instruction. Refugee children may come from war-torn countries where they experienced terrible trauma and loss. They, too, find trusted adult allies in their teachers at school.

Keeping youth in schools to graduation must be a priority. Secondary schools should offer a wide variety of curriculum choices that are both relevant and engaging—trades and technical programs, for example. Such courses must be adequately funded and accessible to students in all communities.

## Recommendations

1. Ensure access to a broad variety of educational opportunities in all schools that make learning relevant and keep students in school.
2. Support employment equity initiatives for Aboriginal teachers, including recruitment and retention strategies.
3. Ensure that all school districts adopt and implement codes of conduct that address racism, sexism, homophobia, and other forms of harassment and discrimination in schools.
4. Develop and provide learning resources and curriculum that reflect students' diverse identities and those of their families and communities.





## Recommendations

- 1. Reverse the trend that has resulted in a steady decline in K–12 spending as a percentage of the total provincial budget and as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product, and develop a plan to restore education funding to 1991 levels.**
- 2. Fully fund the implementation of new curriculum and all new ministry initiatives.**
- 3. Fully fund mentoring and professional development programs requested by teachers to assist in supporting all students.**



# Increase investment in public education

In the past 20 years, education funding as a percentage of the provincial budget has declined from 26% to 15%.

BC's per-pupil funding has also fallen dramatically behind that of other provinces. At the same time, costs of running the public education system have continued to rise and expectations of schools have increased significantly.

As a result, British Columbians have seen severe staffing cuts in schools including almost 1,300 learning specialist teachers. These cuts are disproportionate to the decline in student enrolment over the same period. As well, we've seen shorter school weeks and longer days, inadequate and outdated textbooks, and a real scarcity of learning resources. The closure of almost 200 public schools has cut the heart out of many communities, especially in rural regions.

The reality is that every year in the last decade, the costs of providing quality educational services have grown faster than funding increases. Since 2001, education funding in constant dollars has not kept up with inflation or costs downloaded to school boards.

An additional \$1.5 billion would now be available for public education if funding were restored to the 2001–02 percentage of the provincial budget. If restored to 1991–92 ratios, an additional \$3.7 billion would be available to meet the needs of students and address the deteriorating learning conditions in our schools.

That is why in 2010, the BCTF urged the Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services to reverse the downward trend in support for public education, and recommend funding increases in the second decade of the 21st century to restore educational services that were cut in the first decade.

# Full-scope collective bargaining rights

Collective bargaining has been an important tool in building our excellent public education system.

The BCTF and its locals are proud of the role we have played at the bargaining table in negotiating improvements for students' learning conditions and teachers' working conditions alike.

However, beginning in 2002, the provincial government used legislation to severely limit teachers' bargaining rights. It also stripped important provisions from the collective agreement, including class-size and composition clauses and guaranteed levels of support from specialist teachers. These provisions, negotiated over two decades, improved the quality of public education by ensuring smaller classes and expert attention to children with special needs. Teachers sacrificed salary increases and better benefits in order to obtain these improvements for students.

In 2011, the BC Supreme Court ruled that the 2002 legislation stripping class size, class composition, and staffing ratio language from the collective agreement was unconstitutional. The government promises to repeal this legislation July 1, 2013, but refuses to reinstate the stripped provisions.

The stripping of these provisions allowed government to dramatically reduce education funding over the decade. We calculate approximately \$3.3 billion has been taken from the public education system. The result has been increased class sizes, fewer supports for students with special needs, and the loss of over 1,400 learning specialist teachers.

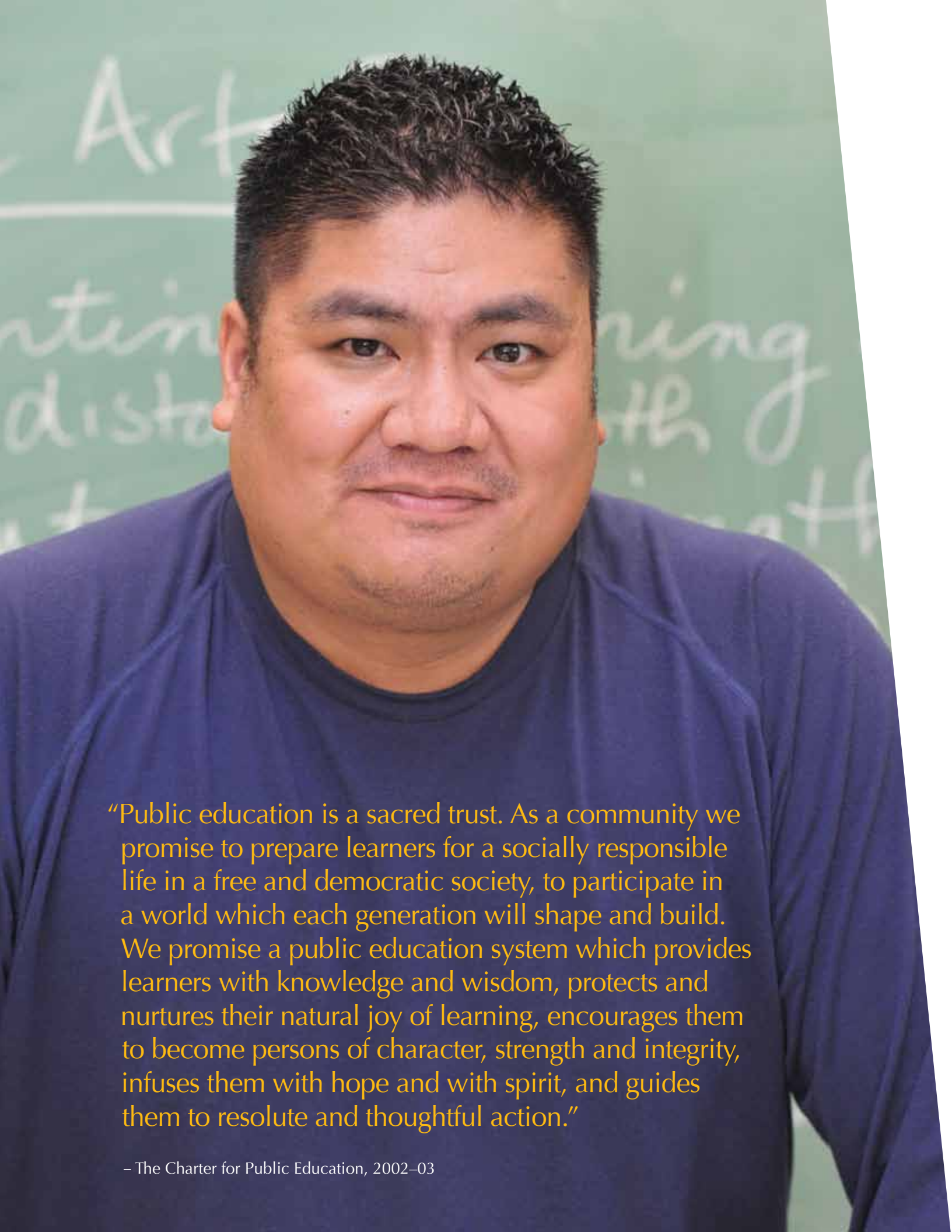
Teachers remain determined to advocate for high-quality public education and improved teaching and learning conditions. Teachers believe that a combination of provincial and local bargaining is the best way, at this point, to find local solutions to community issues and to make a difference for kids.



# BARGAINING FOR OUR FUTURE

## Recommendations

1. Encourage, support, and fund school boards to enable them to work with teachers to successfully bargain a collective agreement and resolve issues locally.
2. Restore full, free collective bargaining rights for teachers.



“Public education is a sacred trust. As a community we promise to prepare learners for a socially responsible life in a free and democratic society, to participate in a world which each generation will shape and build. We promise a public education system which provides learners with knowledge and wisdom, protects and nurtures their natural joy of learning, encourages them to become persons of character, strength and integrity, infuses them with hope and with spirit, and guides them to resolute and thoughtful action.”

– The Charter for Public Education, 2002–03

# It's time for action

The BC Teachers' Federation has almost a century of history advocating for the welfare of the teaching profession and the well-being of students in this province.

Now, more than ever, it is crucial that public schools give students the knowledge and skills to enable them to participate fully in the global community.

BC teachers have many creative ideas about the kind of engaged and rigorous public school system we need for the thriving democracy we want. We are publishing this *Plan for Quality Public Education* in an effort to encourage dialogue, to spark collaboration, and to articulate teachers' heartfelt wishes for an approach to education that will empower them to do the very best for the youngsters in their classrooms.

Some of our suggestions will save money in the Ministry of Education. Others will be cost-neutral. Most will involve a significant re-investment in public education. All public expenditure is a question of social priorities, and we know that British Columbians value education very highly. We believe education funding is the best possible investment in our society and our future.

We encourage teachers, students, parents, concerned citizens, and community leaders, whether at the local or provincial level, to engage with these suggestions and to contact us to continue the conversation. Please write to BCTF President Susan Lambert at: [susan@bctf.ca](mailto:susan@bctf.ca)

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