



CHAPTER 8:

Inclusive education: The work of learning specialist teachers, and the perspectives of all teachers

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This report is one of a series documenting the findings of the *Worklife of BC Teachers: 2009* survey.
For additional information, see www.bctf.ca/TeacherWorklife.aspx.



**WORKLIFE OF
BC TEACHERS
2009**

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Introduction

This report, based on data collected from the [Worklife of BC Teachers: 2009 survey](#), addresses two areas of focus relating to Special Education, Learning Assistance, and inclusive education issues: one involves consideration of the work and perspectives of respondents who work in Special Education and Learning Assistance, and the other considers the perspectives of all respondents in terms of issues related to inclusive education.

The work and perspectives of learning specialist teachers¹ who teach in Special Education and/or Learning Assistance

A total of 54 respondents (out of 111 learning specialist teachers, and 563 total respondents), identified as working in Special Education or Learning Assistance, or a combination of the two. 90.2% of these respondents are female, compared to 76.5% female respondents in the overall survey returns. Among them there is a slightly lower proportion who have taught for less than 10 years than in the overall sample (21.2% vs. 23.6%), and a higher proportion who have taught for 10 to 19 years (42.3% Special Ed/LA teachers, compared to 35% overall). This likely reflects an under-representation in the survey returns of newer teachers in Special Education assignments, as there is evidence that many Special Education and Learning Assistance positions are filled by new teachers². It may be worth considering undertaking research in the future which focuses on those who are both new to teaching and in Special Education roles, as anecdotal evidence suggests that for many, Special Education is seen as a temporary post until a classroom teaching position can be obtained. The placing of new teachers in Special Ed/LA roles is problematic for two reasons. The first is that such teachers lack the experience of teaching in classrooms. This makes it difficult for them to support inclusion in classes when they have little experience in classrooms. The second reason is that while it is possible that some teachers remain in Special Education/Learning Assistance, if others leave the role as soon as a classroom position is available, then the Special Ed/LA position may be filled by another inexperienced teacher. This “cycle of inexperience” is not conducive to building more inclusionary classrooms.

The average full-time equivalent (FTE) assignment for those respondents working in Special Education roles is 0.54 FTE. For those working in Learning Assistance, it is 0.42 FTE, and for those in combined Special Ed/LA roles, their time allocation in the roles averages 0.75 FTE. Of the 54 Special Ed/LA respondents, 63% also have work assignments as enrolling teachers, with an average of 0.4 FTE in the classroom.

These data reflect the fragmentation of the Special Ed/LA teacher’s role, which has been evident as a trend and pattern since provincial government actions in 2002 that resulted in major cuts to Special Education staffing numbers. These were documented in a PSA/BCTF Research

¹ “Learning Specialist Teachers” were formerly known as “non-enrolling teachers” (i.e., they do not have a homeroom class). These include teachers who work in Special Education, Learning Assistance, ESL, Aboriginal Education, and those who are teacher-librarians or counsellors.

² *The challenge of specialist support teachers – Learning Assistance, ESL, and Special Education – in multiple roles: A PSA/BCTF Research discussion paper.* <http://bctf.ca/IssuesInEducation.aspx?id=5770>

discussion paper (2003)³, which showed that the cuts made to Special Education staffing were more than double the level of cuts to overall teacher staffing numbers. More recently, a BCTF brief to the Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services (2010)⁴ reported that, based on Ministry of Education data, the loss of FTE positions in Special Education between 2001–02 and 2009–10 totalled 648.10 FTE.

This stunning and disproportionate reduction juxtaposes the government’s policy mandating inclusion, on the one hand, with government actions, on the other, that leave school districts little option but to make cuts to Special Education and Learning Assistance services, and to the staffing which supports inclusion. Thus, school districts take the brunt of criticisms for cuts when in fact these are precipitated by provincial government funding and policy decisions.

As mentioned above, when the BC government stripped ratios of Special Education teachers from contract language and discontinued targeted funding for students with high incidence special needs in 2002, school districts slashed staffing in Special Education and Learning Assistance by over 18%. As a result, teachers in remaining Special Ed and LA positions faced increased workload and job fragmentation, with reduced time allocation being the new norm. Many experienced Special Ed/LA teachers opted for a classroom assignment rather than continuing in a role which some described as being “between a rock and a hard place,” in that they found it increasingly difficult either to meet students’ needs or to adequately support classroom teachers.

To get a better understanding of whether aspects of teachers’ work lives have changed over time, for whatever reason, the worklife survey asked about job satisfaction, workload, and stress level compared to five years, and data for specific groups of respondents were compared. The groups examined here are Special Education and Learning Assistance teachers, other specialist teachers (including ESL and Aboriginal Education teachers, teacher-librarians, and counsellors), all specialist teachers combined, and the overall sample who responded to each question (both learning specialist and classroom teachers).

In terms of job satisfaction at the time of the survey compared to five years earlier, there are some minor differences between categories of specialists, but there are more significant differences between all specialist teachers and all respondents in terms of job satisfaction, as shown in Table 1. These data show that a higher proportion of specialist teachers feel their job satisfaction has increased compared to five years ago than the sample as a whole (29.9% vs. 16.8%). Of the specialist teachers, those in Special Education/Learning Assistance have less increase in job satisfaction (26.1%) than other specialists do (33.3%). It can be inferred from the data that those teaching in Special Ed/LA assignments may have lower levels of job satisfaction than other specialist teachers. While barely one in four Special Education teachers stated that their job satisfaction has increased, this is significantly higher than the overall teacher response to this question, where an alarmingly low 16.8% of respondents indicated higher job satisfaction now than five years ago. Many more teachers reported decreased job satisfaction than reported increased job satisfaction (43.1% vs. 16.8%).

³ <http://bctf.ca/IssuesInEducation.aspx?id=5770>

⁴ <http://www.bctf.ca/uploadedFiles/Public/Publications/Briefs/2010EdFundingBrief.pdf>

Table 1: Job satisfaction compared to 5 years ago

	Special Ed/LA teachers	Other specialist teachers	All specialist teachers	All respondents to the question (n=483)
Increased	26.1%	33.3%	29.9%	16.8%
Decreased	39.1%	37.3%	38.1%	43.1%
Stayed the same	10.9%	15.7%	13.4%	19.0%
Changed, but not necessarily increased or decreased	23.9%	13.7%	18.6%	21.1%
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Table 2 shows that almost three-quarters (73.9%) of responding Special Education/Learning Assistance teachers reported increased workload compared to five years ago, while about two-thirds (67.4%) of the overall sample indicated increased workload. Slightly more Special Ed/LA than other specialist teachers reported a workload increase. Data from a BCTF study with teachers in Nanaimo and Coquitlam school districts in 2003⁵ (Naylor, 2004) provide an interesting perspective: for the two districts, 34% and 46% of Special Education teachers reported an increase in caseloads when comparing 2002–03 to the previous school year of 2001–02. While these numbers are significant, they are only half of what is being experienced now.

Table 2: Workload compared to 5 years ago

	Special Ed/LA teachers	Other specialist teachers	All specialist teachers	All respondents to the question (n=485)
Increased	73.9%	69.2%	71.4%	67.4%
Decreased	8.7%	3.8%	6.1%	4.5%
Stayed the same	6.5%	9.6%	8.2%	15.5%
Changed, but not necessarily increased or decreased	10.9%	17.3%	14.3%	12.6%
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

The fact that such large proportions of respondents in the current survey reported an increase in workload is a cause of concern, and may suggest that it is the impact of reduced numbers of Special Ed/LA teachers that is seriously impacting specialist teachers' workloads.

In terms of stress levels, Table 3, below, shows that almost two-thirds (65.2%) of Special Ed/LA teachers reported increased stress now compared to five years ago, a figure slightly higher than that reported by all respondents (63%).

Table 3: Stress level compared to 5 years ago

	Special Ed/LA teachers	Other specialist teachers	All specialist teachers	All respondents to the question (n=484)
Increased	65.2%	63.5%	64.3%	63.0%
Decreased	8.7%	15.4%	12.2%	9.9%
Stayed the same	15.2%	9.6%	12.2%	17.1%
Changed, but not necessarily increased or decreased	10.9%	11.5%	11.2%	9.9%
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

⁵ *Teaching in 2003: Survey report – How teachers in Coquitlam and Nanaimo view Special Education and ESL services.* <http://bctf.ca/issues/research.aspx?id=5842>

The worklife survey provided a list of 47 possible factors within 7 areas of work which may cause stress for teachers. Nine of those factors were selected for analysis because of their connection to the work of Special Education/Learning Assistance teachers. Table 4 presents the percentages of Special Education/LA teachers and of all respondents who rated the listed potential stress factors as causing *high* or *very high* levels of stress.

Three factors prompted an indication of *high* or *very high* stress levels from a similar proportion of both Special Ed/LA respondents and all respondents: class composition issues, level of support for “grey area” students, and level of support for inclusion. These were also the top three factors in terms of response rate. Slightly more Special Ed/LA teachers than all respondents (50% vs. 43.7%) indicated that inadequate access to other specialists was a high stress factor. However, there were major differences between Special Ed/LA teachers and all respondents in terms of Individual Education Plans (IEPs)—a stressor for a greater proportion of Special Ed/LA teachers than classroom teachers, especially in terms of online IEPs (44.4% vs. 24.1%). A lesser proportion of Special Ed/LA teachers reported *high* or *very high* levels of stress from lack of control over work environment (30.3% vs. 41.5%) and job insecurity (27.3% vs. 38.8%) than did all respondents.

While not among the highest stress indicators, Special Ed/LA teachers’ professional relationships with non-teaching professionals reflected almost double the rating of stress indicated by all respondents.

Table 4: Potential stress factors

Potential stress factor	Percentage reporting <i>high/very high</i> level of stress	
	Special Ed/LA teachers	All respondents
Class composition issues	69.0%	67.6%
Level of support for non-designated, “grey area” students	67.3%	64.2%
Level of support for inclusion of students with special needs	53.8%	52.3%
Inadequate access to specialist teachers (ESL, Special Ed, LA)	50.0%	43.7%
IEPs – online	44.4%	24.1%
IEPs – paper	38.8%	21.9%
Lack of control over work environment	30.3%	41.5%
Job insecurity/concerns about employment	27.3%	38.8%
Professional relationships with non-teaching professionals (e.g., Speech Language Pathologists, etc.)	22.7%	11.8%

Four of the nine stress factors generated indications of *high* or *very high* levels of stress from 50% or more of Special Education/Learning Assistance teacher respondents. The one perhaps surprising finding in terms of the issue becoming a greater stressor at this time is the high level of stress indicated over level of support for “grey area” students—students who are not designated in terms of special needs, but who need additional help to succeed. Now that many Learning Assistance roles have been amalgamated into Special Education/Learning Assistance combinations, the levels of concern indicate that many of these students may not be able to access the help they need, and the inability of specialist teachers to provide support because of increased caseloads and reduced time may be a stress factor. One respondent stated:

“I’m finding it increasingly difficult to help students that are in the grey area. They are not low enough (intellectually or behaviourally) to have full support (from educational assistants or LA teacher) but they require a huge amount of support in the classroom. These students require 80% of my time, effort, and energy and are not succeeding because of a variety of factors (home-life, attitude, laziness)... The intermediate class in elementary now has so many students at a variety of levels that it is almost impossible to provide them with the education they deserve (i.e., a Grade 4 class with math levels from 1–6 or reading levels from 1–8).”

Similarly to other respondents, Special Ed/LA teachers reported various components of job satisfaction, the first and most dominant of which is the satisfaction derived from working with students and seeing some observable progress in student learning that they have supported:

“I have always enjoyed my work as a teacher and taken great pride in my growth as a professional. I still enjoy working with students, helping them learn about learning and about themselves. It took a few years to gain a balance between discipline and being able to enjoy the students, but it worked out over the years. My growth as a professional has been steady since my first days as a teacher. Whenever my students weren’t learning I would search for a better way to teach. Over the years I have gained many methods and strategies. I have discarded some, retained some and modified many. I feel tremendously blessed to have had a career as a teacher.”

“The smiles in my students’ faces when the light goes on....watching my struggling students leave after a successful lesson or session....being invited to my former students’ graduation, year after year and watching them cross the stage with tremendous pride....knowing that I have made a difference in many young lives.”

“Seeing the look on a child’s face, a child who thinks he is stupid, or can’t learn school things, when that child realizes they clearly understand an idea, concept or skill. When you can see the light bulb go on when they have learned something, when they know they can learn and understand.”

However, some respondents also stated that there are significant issues that make their work difficult and stressful. For some, the high number of meetings and extensive paperwork impact negatively on time they have available to students:

“It goes from crazy to insane. I’m at every meeting for every student and I type and distribute minutes. I rarely have a day where there is not a meeting after school or an IEP to write. I wish my energy could go into prepping lessons that help children!”

For others, provincial government decisions—perceived as downloading responsibility and withholding resources—directly and negatively affect work, time, and stress levels:

“I consider the downloading of responsibility from the provincial government without adequate resources to be incredibly frustrating and stressful. I want to be the best and most effective teacher I can be yet I am constantly bombarded by demands that I take on jobs/tasks/responsibilities that take me away from teaching or eat into my private time. We need to get back to a place where schools are

places run by professionals who make decisions based on the best interests of teachers and learners not the image of the government du jour.”

One respondent captured the sense of stress in almost the same way as it has been analyzed in the BCTF worklife report dealing with responses to job satisfaction and stress⁶. The respondent argued that stress is created because of the constant multi-tasking and juggling of demands, so that when one issue causes stress, other demanding work areas are still present and requiring attention:

“When you try to break down the elements of stress in the profession of teaching it actually does a disservice to teachers. It’s not the individual items that cause stress, it’s the combination of things which actually causes stress. When we have our most stressful times, during report card preparation, we also have all the other items to contend with at the same time. We can’t put the kids on automatic and the meetings don’t stop; there’s still marking and planning; we still need to deal with behaviour issues and call parents, we still have the administration to deal with and the very real problems of kids not getting what they need at school and at home. This is when our stress levels are at their highest, and still we can’t use PD for writing report cards. Some districts have report card writing days where TOCs cover classes for the teacher.”

For others working in Special Education/Learning Assistance, finding work/life balance is difficult, and in some cases teachers choose to work part-time, as fuller employment is too stressful:

“I’ve chosen to work three days a week, because I found working full-time ate into every moment of my life. I watch full-time teachers who are on the verge of having to take stress leave and wonder why they don’t work part-time. But it’s because a full-time job should be only a full-time job. And some districts don’t allow people to work part-time. I’d like to add more, but my doctor said I need to de-stress my life and part of that is considering leaving teaching. Don’t get me wrong, I really love teaching, but the class composition is too draining on my time and energy. I have a family at home that needs my time and energy, and after a work day I feel like I’m not able to give them that.”

There is evidence from a BCTF study of secondary English teachers (Naylor and Malcolmson, 2001)⁷ that some teachers, more likely to be female than male, opt to work part-time in order to reduce stress, a finding that appears to be confirmed by the above quote. Data from a more recent report (Naylor and Vint, 2009)⁸ which examined the prevalence of stress among BC teachers, also identified women aged between 35 and 44 as being at higher risk of stress-related illness. These data add to the case being developed from a range of data in this study that the BCTF should consider refocusing some attention on gender issues when addressing teachers’ working conditions.

⁶ See [Chapter 5, BC teachers talk about satisfaction and stress in their work: A qualitative study.](#)

⁷ *"I love teaching English, but..." A study of the workload of English teachers in BC secondary grades.*
http://www.bctf.ca/uploadedfiles/publications/research_reports/2001wlc02.pdf

⁸ *The prevalence of stress-related disorders in BC school districts,*
http://www.bctf.ca/uploadedFiles/Publications/Research_reports/2009WLC01.pdf

Work/life balance, where one is able to meet both career and family commitments to one's satisfaction, is distressingly absent for many people in modern society, whether or not they are teachers:

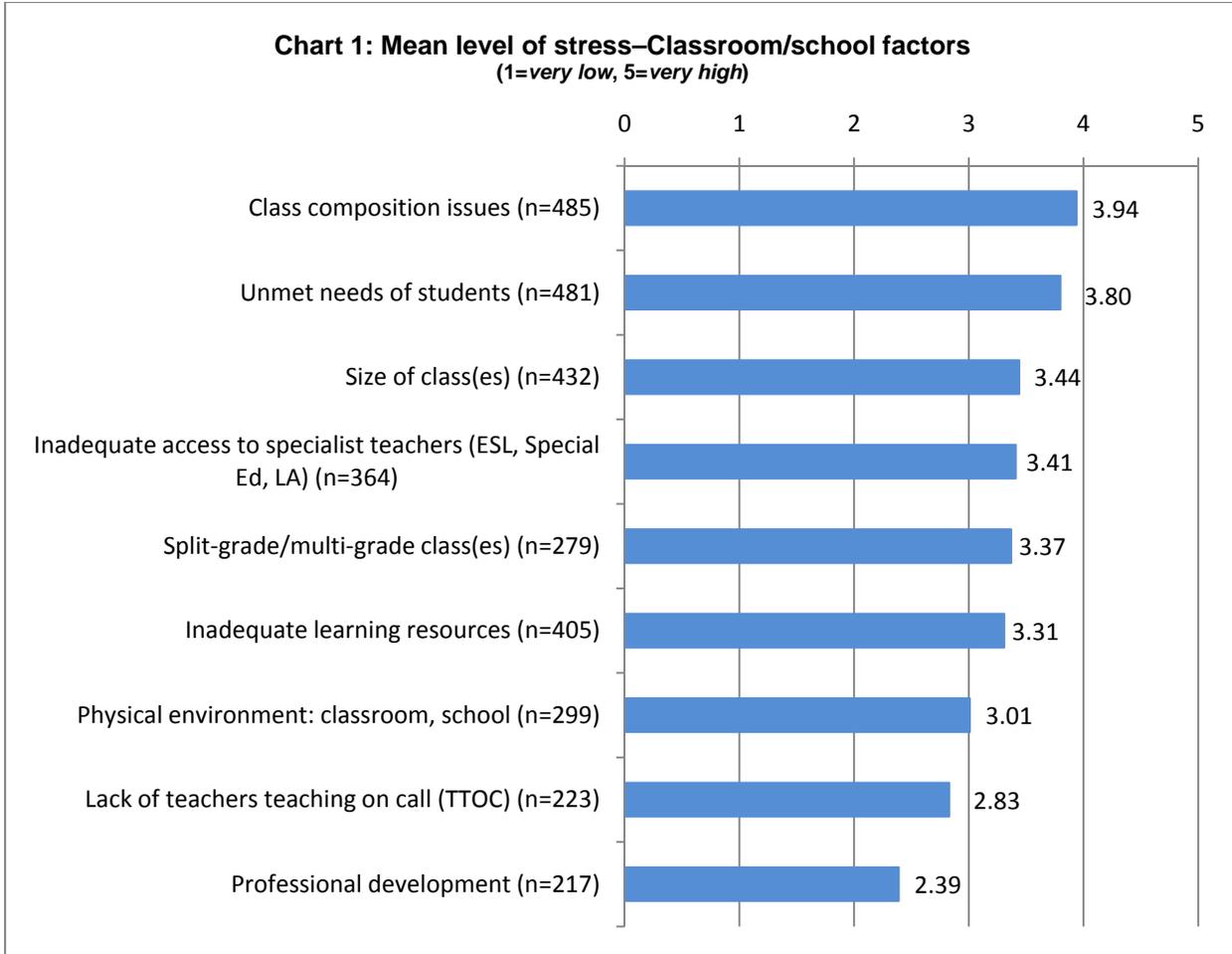
Stress and work/life conflict are intertwined, and the latter has been documented as both a cause and an outcome of job stress. Stress is one of the more commonly documented outcomes of demanding work. Job stress is increasingly recognized as a determinant of employee health and productivity. (Lowe, 2006, p. 6)

The issue of teachers' work/life balance arguably requires a new focus by union, employers, and government; and evidence from this study suggests that the work of those with teaching roles in Special Education should be a consideration within such a focus.

The perspectives of all respondents on issues related to inclusive education

This section of the report moves away from the work and perspectives of Special Education and Learning Assistance teachers to consider data from all respondents in terms of areas linked to inclusive education.

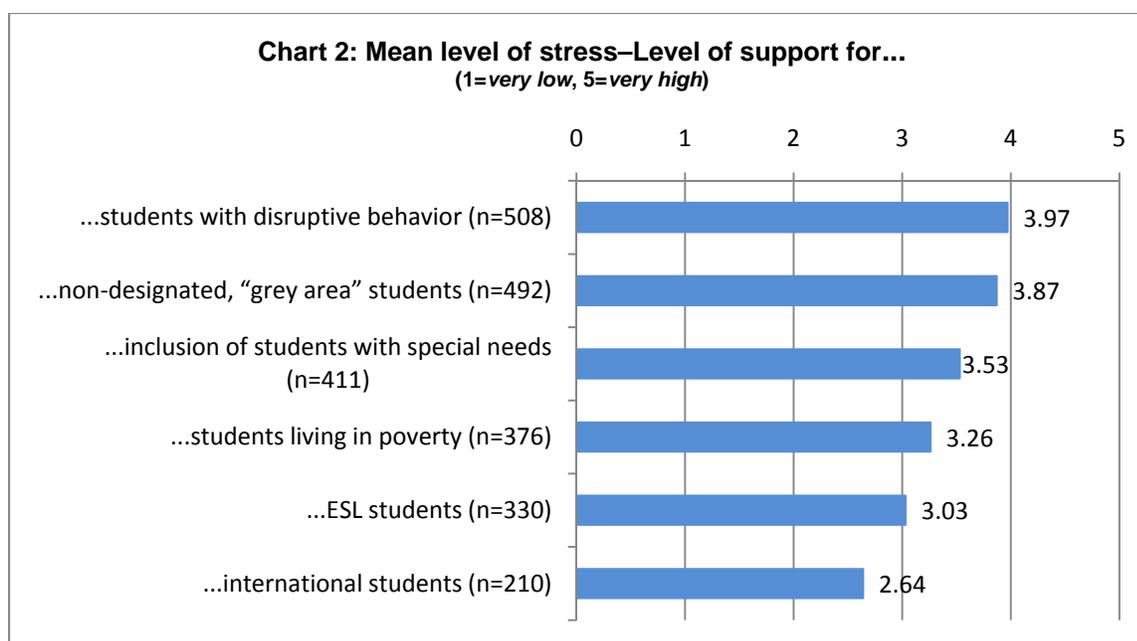
As described above, 47 factors were presented in the worklife survey as potential sources of work-related stress. In the classroom/school grouping (Chart 1), the factor that respondents identified as the highest single cause of stress in their work is class composition issues, with a mean rating of 3.94 (1=*very low* stress, 5=*very high* stress). Barely 8% of all respondents indicated that class composition is a source of a *low* or *very low* level of stress for them. Another high-stress area here that is linked to inclusive education is inadequate access to specialist teachers. Several other factors may link to special needs—in particular the unmet needs of students and possibly class size. There is a clear connection between several of the stress factors listed in Charts 1 and 2 and inclusive education, yet it is also clear that respondents are reacting to what they see as unresolved issues in terms of class composition and lack of support to meet the needs of students that cause stress, rather than either the concept of inclusion or the students themselves.



When asked more specifically about teacher stress induced by perceived level of support for students (Chart 2), it is clear from the data that teachers identified the level of support for students with behavioural problems to be the most significant stress factor, with 508 respondents indicating that this is linked to their experiencing stress, and that the stress level is *high*, with a mean of 3.97. A close second (3.87), and mirroring data from the specialist teachers (Table 4), is level of support for non-designated, “grey area” students, with a high number of respondents (492) indicating this area of unmet student need was a source of high teacher stress.

The factor ranked third in terms stress is concern with the level of support for inclusion of students with special needs, with 411 respondents indicating this issue to be a source of high stress, and with a mean rating of 3.53 on the 1 to 5 scale.

These three results reflect considerably higher levels of teacher stress associated with the level of support for unmet student needs than with issues such as job security (Table 4).



Just as respondents have indicated that their greatest source of satisfaction is their work and relationships with students⁹, so, too, they indicate that their higher levels of stress are related to working with students whose needs are not being met. The high level of stress attributed by respondents to the unmet needs of undesignated students may be linked to the de-targeting of funding for such students, and the major reductions in Learning Assistance services, since 2002. In the 2002 BCTF study of Special Education issues in two school districts¹⁰, one of the key findings was that:

substantially fewer students are being designated in high incidence categories (8% fewer across the province), with corresponding reduction in services in many instances. (Key findings, box 12)

These findings are confirmed by Ministry of Education data reported by the BCTF (2009)¹¹ that show substantial declines in the numbers of students designated in the following categories between 2004–05 and 2008–09:

Gifted:	4,748 fewer students designated
Moderate behavior support or mental illness:	2,673 fewer students designated
Mild intellectual disability:	574 fewer students designated

Years after teachers identified reduced high-incidence designations, such reductions are confirmed by ministry data. It is important to note that while designations may have decreased, the prevalence of students with specific abilities/disabilities has not. Many districts simply choose not to identify students in categories when no funding support is available. Through the data collected by this survey, teachers are reporting major concerns linked to the failure to meet the needs of students either designated in high incidence categories, or not designated but having observable needs. It is hard to escape the conclusion that the initial government actions, and the cuts since 2002, have resulted in reduced designations in a number of categories, and that these

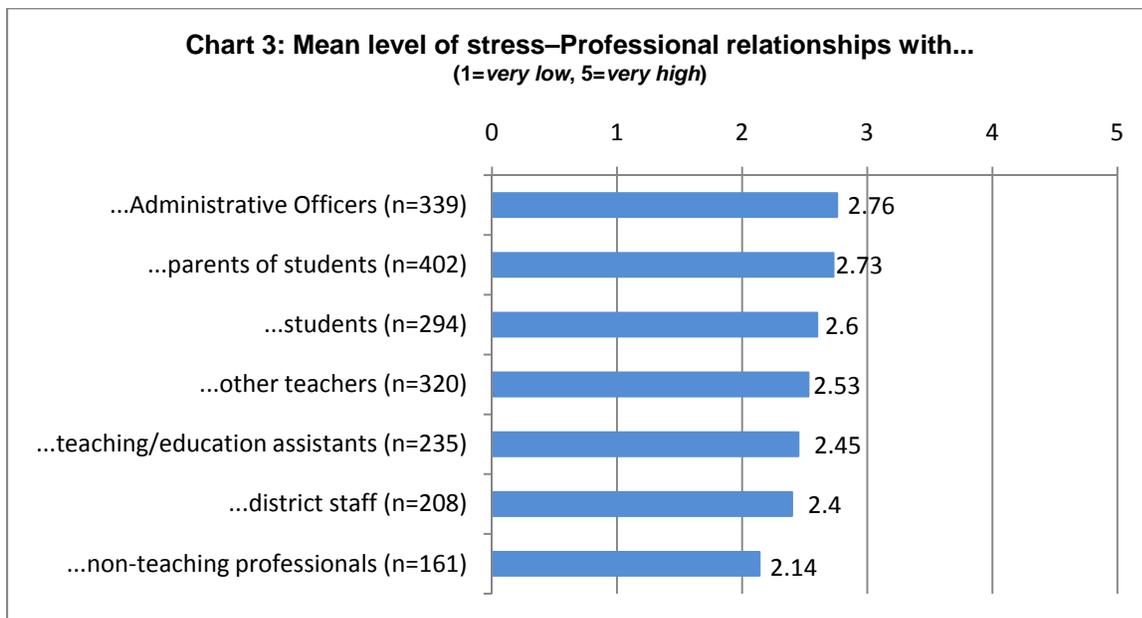
⁹ See [Chapter 5, BC teachers talk about satisfaction and stress in their work: A qualitative study](#).

¹⁰ *Key findings from the 2002–03 BCTF Research Project: Special Education and ESL in two BC school districts, #43, Coquitlam, and #68, Nanaimo-Ladysmith*. <http://bctf.ca/issues/research.aspx?id=5796>

¹¹ BCTF (2009). *BC Education Fact Sheet*. <http://bctf.ca/uploadedFiles/public/Publications/2009EdFactSheet.pdf>

reductions, along with Learning Assistance staffing cuts have subsequently reduced services to a significant number of students who were once more likely to have received them when both designations and staffing levels were higher.

Chart 3 shows levels of stress from professional relationships in schools. While these levels appear low, they can also be somewhat deceptive. As an example, one area which may be worth further exploration concerns professional relationships between teachers and education assistants (EAs). While 55.4% of respondents indicated *low* or *very low* stress from such relationships, 17% reported such relationships as resulting in *high* or *very high* stress, with another 27.7% reporting *moderate* stress. Thus almost 45% of respondents are experiencing *moderate* or higher stress because of their interaction with education assistants. However, such stress in professional relationships is not limited to teachers and EAs, and as seen in Chart 3, teacher-EA relationships may be better than those between teachers and Administrative Officers, parents, students, and other teachers.



While these mean scores do not indicate high stress levels generally, the data, once broken down, indicate that there may be sizeable minorities who identify *high* or *very high* stress levels linked to professional relationships. The BCTF and CUPE have recently updated the publication *Roles and Responsibilities of Teachers and Teacher Assistants/Education Assistants* (2009)¹², which is one way that both unions are taking a pro-active approach to building good professional relationships between teachers and education assistants.

Conclusion

The data from this survey provide information on the work and perspectives of responding teachers who are in Special Education and Learning Assistance roles. The data also express all respondents' perspectives on issues linked to inclusion in BC's public schools. While it's a mixed picture, the data offer little support for any claim that inclusion in the public schools of BC has advanced in the last decade. Class composition and the unmet needs of students dominate

¹² <http://bctf.ca/uploadedFiles/Public/Issues/InclusiveEd/RolesAndResponsibilitiesTeachersTAs.pdf>

as stress factors for teachers. Compared to five years ago, job satisfaction is lower and stress is higher for more teachers. The specific issues that cause teachers concern have barely shifted since the BCTF studies of 2001-03. Since that time, significantly reduced designations in many Special Education categories, and major cuts in Special Ed staffing, suggest less systemic support for a policy of inclusion.

While some teachers report considerable satisfaction from their work with students, others report high stress from trying to meet students' needs with fewer specialist staff, reduced time allocation, and fragmented job descriptions. One concern about the data is the under-representation of responses from newer teachers in Special Education/Learning Assistance roles. Based on many discussions with such teachers in recent years, one might expect even more negative reactions had they been better represented in the survey returns.

There is also the likelihood that Special Education and Learning Assistance will face a new round of major cuts in the 2010–11 school year, as indicated in the following quote from the “Moms on the Move”¹³ web page, posted January 28, 2010:

And at a meeting of parents of students with special needs this week, the [Vancouver] Board Chair acknowledged that Special Education was particularly vulnerable to cuts, since staff costs are protected via contracts and class size is now protected by legislation, leaving unprotected services like Special Education as one of the few areas they can cut.

Virtually every school board in the province is confronting similar choices, given the limited number of unprotected programs, like Special Ed, that they can cut to make up for unfunded provincial costs, since all boards are required by law to balance their budgets regardless of provincial funding shortfalls.

With looming teacher layoffs a near certainty in most school districts, the possibility of Special Education/Learning Assistance once more being the prime target for cuts appears likely in the 2010–11 school year. If further cuts occur in terms of services for Special Education and Learning Assistance, they will further reduce support for inclusion, with fewer students' needs being met. With a continuing provincial emphasis on accountability linked to narrowly defined achievement, a systemic focus on meeting the needs of all students through inclusive educational approaches has received less attention in recent years. The provincial policy of inclusion co-exists with severe and disproportionate cuts to Special Education and Learning Assistance staffing that reduce the likelihood of effective and sustainable inclusion.

This report has provided data from both learning specialists and classroom teachers which indicate considerable concerns with the levels of support for inclusion. Our analysis of their perspectives in the context of other data, including reduced specialist support, argues that both funding and systemic supports for effective inclusion are inadequate. As teachers' desire and capacity to effectively include all students in meaningful learning is constrained by limited resources and deteriorating levels of support, it may be reasonable to question why an inclusionary policy can be mandated without either the means or the will to implement such policy effectively.

¹³ <http://momsnetwork.ca/2010/01/28/boards-warn-of-looming-cuts-targetting-special-ed/>

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