

EDUCATION FUNDING

A Brief to the

Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services

from the

British Columbia Teachers' Federation

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President

Executive Director

British Columbia has an excellent education system by any measure. Despite that, we are going to talk about a number of areas today that are problems—and many of those problems are very much in the mandate of the Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services. In their essence they come down to a call for more resources to be put into public education.

The call for more resources is not because we think that the many people who contribute to public education are not working hard enough or are not producing world-class education. On the contrary, it is because we have very high aspirations for our students and the system that supports them that we bring forward these issues of concern to us. We want to serve every child, and particularly those with special challenges, who require more assistance to do well. With more resources, we know that we could do even better for all our students.

We will outline here some of the areas where more resources are particularly needed. We will also make the case that there is room to increase education funding when one looks at the trends in how it relates to the full economic activity of the province.

In summary, the BC Teachers' Federation recommends the following actions in preparing the next provincial budget:

1. Fully fund Bill 33
2. Provide more funding for students with special needs
3. Fund English as a Second Language support for seven years
4. Provide funding to ensure that specialist supports, including counsellors and teacher-librarians, are provided
5. Provide funding to support children who live in families in poverty.
6. Fully fund the real costs of BCeSIS—or eliminate it
7. Provide sustainable education funding now and into the future.

Recommendation 1—Fully fund Bill 33

The public school system has a history of new mandates from government that are not fully funded. Consequently, when the new policies are followed, as they must be, then some other part of the system pays a price. The resources required for the new mandate end up reducing other services.

Underfunding over an extended period has resulted in the reduction of many programs and an erosion of services to students. Multicultural support workers, language translators, library technicians, and a host of other program providers have been lost to the system. These positions have been eliminated as school districts, year after year, had to cut the cloth smaller and smaller to cover the bare necessities.

This leads us to the current situation. Bill 33 introduced class size limits of 30 for Grades 4 to 12 and a limit of three students with an IEP for special needs. We applaud the recognition in the bill that there is a relationship between the working conditions of

teachers and the learning conditions of students. However, the caps and limits enacted through Bill 33 are a very small step toward creating classroom conditions that optimize learning. The limits are still much higher than we believe are best for education, but at least most classes will be kept under the limits.

While it is true that classes can go over the limit if agreed to by elementary teachers or after consultation with secondary teachers, this should seldom happen. The legislation requires that the principal and superintendent give assurances publicly that there are adequate learning conditions for the students in a class larger than 30. Administrators who really look in classrooms will not honestly be able to say to parents and the public that large classes provide adequate learning conditions, particularly in the diverse classrooms that characterize our school system today.

The Ministry of Education assures us that there is adequate funding in the system to cover these provisions of Bill 33. The minister points to the decline in student enrolment as the key factor in this. We are skeptical. However, while there has been an overall decline in enrolment this year, a decline in itself does not produce an equivalent reduction in required expenditures.

The most recent report from the Canadian Council for Learning gives a good explanation of these problems:

When fewer students enrol, schools receive less funding but they do not incur proportionately lower costs. Rideout and his colleagues calculated that the cost of running a school with fewer than 100 students is 29% higher on a per student basis than the cost of running a school with more than 300 students. This often occurs because school boards are unable to reduce their costs in proportion to the decline in student numbers. For example, the cost of heating and lighting a school with fewer students remains the same as it was when there were more students. Instructional and administrative costs can also remain constant or even increase in the face of declining enrolment because the reductions in student numbers may not be sufficient to justify cancelling classes or eliminating the need for administrative or support staff.

While on the surface it appears that there will be more funding per student, as the Canadian Council for Learning indicates, this increased per capita funding does not translate into more services available.

In addition, the \$20 million that was added part way through the year last year produces fewer teachers now than it did then. Because the \$20 million covered the cost of more teachers for only half a school year, when the same expenditure is made over a full school year, it pays for only half as many teachers.

Last year there were many classes in schools with more than 30 students and a large number with more than three students with special needs that require an Individual Education Plan (IEP). Bill 33 should reduce large classes and those with more than three

students with an IEP. However, early reports from districts indicate that by no means do all classes meet the new guidelines, although more do this year than last year.

That is the good news. The bad news is that without extra funding, the smaller classes are coming at the cost of other services in the school.

Some of the specialist teacher positions, already reduced in number by the budget restrictions of past years, are being used in regular classes. This cuts into the additional services these positions should be providing to support the teachers with students with special needs in their classes. In one district, for example, the specialist service has been reduced in time. However, classroom teachers are being told that they will get more specialist support for students in classes that exceed the special needs limits in Bill 33. Fewer special needs specialist staff, but more demands for service, is a recipe for burnout and use of sick leave by the special needs specialists, already facing heavy demands.

We need more funding to meet the requirements for class size and class composition set out in Bill 33. Shortly, when all the class size and staffing data are available, we will be able to identify just how much additional funding will be required to fully fund Bill 33. We urge you in setting the budget for education for the next school year to fully fund Bill 33 provisions.

Recommendation 2—Provide more funding for students with special needs

British Columbia has been a leader in the inclusion of students with special needs within our neighbourhood schools. This has been a process under way for the last two decades. Teachers have supported these policies, even though they make the work of teaching more complex. Teachers have long made the point that inclusion only works when you have the classroom and support resources to be able to meet the needs of students with special needs as well as all the other students in the class.

One aspect of creating a workable classroom is an appropriate number of students with special needs. That is what Bill 33 has tried to do by limiting the number of students with IEPs to a maximum of three per class.

In some schools that has been possible without much difficulty. In other schools, there are far too many students with special needs to make it possible. Some districts have tried to cope with this situation by setting up segregated classes for students with special needs. This is an unfortunate backward step, one that is not philosophically sound, nor supported by the BCTF, but reflects an administrative way of addressing the problem of not enough resources. The other way, the one we support, is to invest enough resources so these retrograde steps are not even considered, let alone attempted.

Two other techniques are being used to meet the letter of the law, but not the spirit: delisting and the creation of wait-lists. Delisting is, in essence, saying that a student with identified special needs in the past no longer has those special needs. In reality, it's very

seldom that special needs disappear. Rather, delisting is a bureaucratic way of getting out of the obligation to provide the extra assistance that the student needs.

A related approach is the wait-list. This is a way of rationing access to special needs support by limiting the number of student assessments that are carried out. Students must go through a process of determining if they have a severe enough special need to require an IEP and the extra services specified in that IEP. These assessments must be done by people who have special qualifications. As an example, at least one district has given a quota to each school of the number of students who can be assessed, thus limiting the extra service to be provided to students.

These wait-lists have a real consequence. Research shows that early intervention is the key to maximizing student potential. Intervention is provided when assessment determines the necessity. Currently children in many districts must wait for three or more years for an assessment or diagnosis. If students need special supports to succeed, but they cannot get them because of a limit on the assessments, then those children face a very real loss that it is difficult to ever make up. These waitlists also encourage a two-tier access to service. A parent who can afford it can get an assessment done by a psychologist in private practice and bring that to the school, ensuring their child gets access to the service. A parent without those resources can only watch their child get more and more frustrated with the barriers that they need help to get over.

In addition to these issues, a major problem in special needs is not addressed at all in Bill 33: the “gray area” students. These are students who do not have a special need severe enough to require a provincial designation, but who nevertheless have significant learning difficulties of a sort and require some extra support. For many years, learning assistance teachers as their main mandate served this group of students. Given the other pressures in the system to provide full service to students with special needs designations combined with reduced specialist staffing, the more severe needs take precedence and the gray area students struggle without that pullout support they formerly had. The consequence of this is that these students receive less than they need to be fully successful. Nearly all of these students could complete the requirements for a Dogwood graduation certificate, but some of them do not because of the lack of adequate assistance.

We urge you to improve the funding for public schools by putting additional funding into special education, including specified funding directed so that learning assistance teachers can support the gray area students.

Recommendation 3—Fund English as a Second Language support for seven years

Many ESL students do well in our schools. However, as a number of recent academic studies indicate, too many students learning English have difficulties, get lost in the system, and miss the chance to fully participate in our society.

With the demographic changes that have become obvious to everyone, we are likely to require significant numbers of immigrants for our economy to function with an aging

work force. It is essential that, as a society, we do our best to help all immigrants succeed, both for their sake and for the sake of the society as a whole.

A policy change in the late 1990s reduced the number of years from seven to five that a student can be funded for ESL service. That was a mistake. Extensive research indicates that it takes seven years on average for students to gain full academic fluency in a second language. Most achieve fluency for day-to-day participation in society in a shorter time, but academic fluency is the key to success in school, particularly at the secondary level. Because of the five-year limit, ESL support at the secondary level is much less than at the elementary level.

Another group has a significant need for ESL support—the international students who come to study in our elementary and secondary schools and pay a significant tuition. The aggregate tuition paid to public schools in the 2005-06 school year was about \$100 million. Each international student pays approximately \$12,000 tuition, twice the amount that the province provides school districts for a student resident in Canada.

We urge the provincial government to extend the time that ESL is funded for a student from five years to seven.

Recommendation 4—Provide funding for specialist supports, including counsellors and teacher-librarians

Children learn best when they are emotionally and socially healthy. School counsellors work to help students whose emotional and social needs interfere with their ability to learn. With the reductions in school staffing since 2002, the ability of counsellors to provide this support has been compromised. In secondary schools, the work of counsellors is central to making the school work. It is counsellors who attempt to get students into the classes they desire and are best able to meet their needs. The Bill 33 provisions add a complication to this task, as counsellors work to balance the needs of individual students and the overall needs and resources of the school. The increased demands related to Bill 33 and the reductions in assigned counselling time will only exacerbate already existing limitations of the support that counsellors can provide to students.

School libraries are another area that has felt the effects of budget limits over the past few years. School libraries have a central role in improving literacy and helping students develop the lifelong reading habits necessary to maintain high levels of literacy. Studies show that well stocked libraries staffed by qualified teacher-librarians are a key indicator, second only to socio-economic status of the school community, of student achievement. Also, contrary to many expectations, the Internet has not replaced the key role that teacher-librarians play. Students need the skills of the teacher-librarian to help them become critical users of online information, learning how to make judgments about what they see on the web.

Significant reductions in teacher-librarians since 2002 produced a situation where more and more school libraries have severely restricted hours of operation. In some schools, the library is run by a library technician, not trained in supporting the learning program of students. Additionally, collection-development budgets have shrunk as the cost of books and resources (both virtual and text based) has risen. Teacher-librarians have expressed concern as the quality of school library collections is threatened.

For the 2005-06 school year, the Ministry of Education told school districts that some of the additional funding put into the budget that year should go toward restoring library service. Twelve districts reported to the ministry that they had done this. This was reflected in the staffing information on a provincial level, indicating that there had been a slight increase in teacher-librarians that year over the previous year.

However, with districts this year needing staff to implement Bill 33, indications are that last year's improvement will be a blip, and that we will again have fewer teacher-librarians in the current school year.

Counsellors and teacher-librarians are key staff in the school. The province should recognize this by providing funding on the basis of a formula that sends a message to districts and schools that these positions are needed. Additional funding should be added, specifically to ensure that counselling and library supports are there for students.

Recommendation 5—Provide funding to support children who live in families in poverty

Recent statistics indicate that about 18% of children in BC are in families that are living in poverty. Despite the current low rates of unemployment, we have not seen an end to poverty. According to a recent report from Human Resources and Social Development Canada, British Columbia had the highest rate of working poor in the country at 10.2%. The working poor and families on welfare cannot provide adequately for their children. Consistent evidence says that socio-economic status correlates closely with the performance of children in school.

This should not be a surprise. A student who is hungry cannot pay attention in class. The supports at home to help the student are fewer. Not having what the other kids have can lead to avoiding participation in activities. Not having the funds to pay for necessary supplies can lead to opting not to take courses.

The *School Act* says that a public school education is free of charge. The courts have just recently declared that schools cannot charge fees for materials for classes. This is a good policy in eliminating the pressure on families that cannot afford the fees and in reducing the inequities in the schools. It is a decision, though, that will require the province to increase funding in order to maintain activities that are important to the various programs.

While the elimination of fees is helpful in supporting the principle of equity, much more is required to change the life circumstances of about a fifth of our students and give them more of a chance for success. The BCTF agrees with the proposals made by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives in their brief calling for an antipoverty strategy

for the next provincial budget. Several of their recommendations would be of direct assistance to the children living in poverty who are attending our schools:

- *A 50% increase in welfare rates
- *2,000 new social housing units per year starting with the next budget
- *Implementing a comprehensive Early Learning and Childcare program
- *Enhanced family supports through the Ministry of Children and Family Development

Adopting these recommendations would provide more support to children in their homes. Programs specific to the schools should be expanded as well, including the funding for school meals and for community school programs.

If we are interested in improving the achievement and the life chances for students living in poverty, it is essential to undertake a comprehensive program to support them in their homes and their community, as well as in school.

Recommendation 6—Fully fund the real costs of BCeSIS—or eliminate it

BCeSIS is the bureaucratic and centralized computer-based student information system being implemented in BC. The Ministry of Education convinced all school boards to agree to introduce this system for maintaining and mining data on students.

The implementation of BCeSIS has had significant problems and has been very expensive. Some of the teachers most critical of BCeSIS are those who are committed to the use of technology in education and believe that BCeSIS is a bad product. The time, money and training to implement BCeSIS has taken away from other, better uses of the resources of the schools.

The aim of this system is to have every teacher entering all their attendance and marks every day into the central database over the Internet. Some of the problems are a result of the capacity required to transfer data over the Internet and hold all data centrally. Others are the result of buying software that was not designed for a province-sized system and not designed for the BC school system.

The demands on the network and the central software will be tremendous if more than 30,000 people are trying to enter data, often at the same time. Already with only about half the districts using the system, it became so overloaded that it collapsed at the end of September when class size and staffing data was being entered and processed to meet ministry data reporting requirements.

Before agreeing to join BCeSIS, school districts were told that the cost of the system would be \$10 per year per student. In fact, the costs are much higher. Implementation of this system requires a computer on every teacher's desk, Internet access, and the technical support staff to ensure that both of these are operating at all times. Costs also include training time for teachers and a department to maintain ongoing training. Some

districts have appointed district principals and other administrative and support staff to implement and maintain the system, as well as staff to maintain the security of the system.

A cost that cannot have a price put on it is the frustration and stress of many of the teachers and support staff who have been required to use the system and found it to be slow, inflexible, and less useful than other systems.

One of our locals in a district that is an early adopter of BCeSIS estimates that the system will use about 1.5% of the school district budget—including the real costs of all the staffing, training and the hardware and networking. About half the school districts in the province are in the early phases of adoption. The 1.5% of the district budgets on a provincial basis is about \$60 million and if half of school districts are fully into this degree of implementation, then about \$30 million would be expended this year on BCeSIS. If this amount were to be spent on more teachers for direct service to students it would add about 500 full-time equivalent teachers.

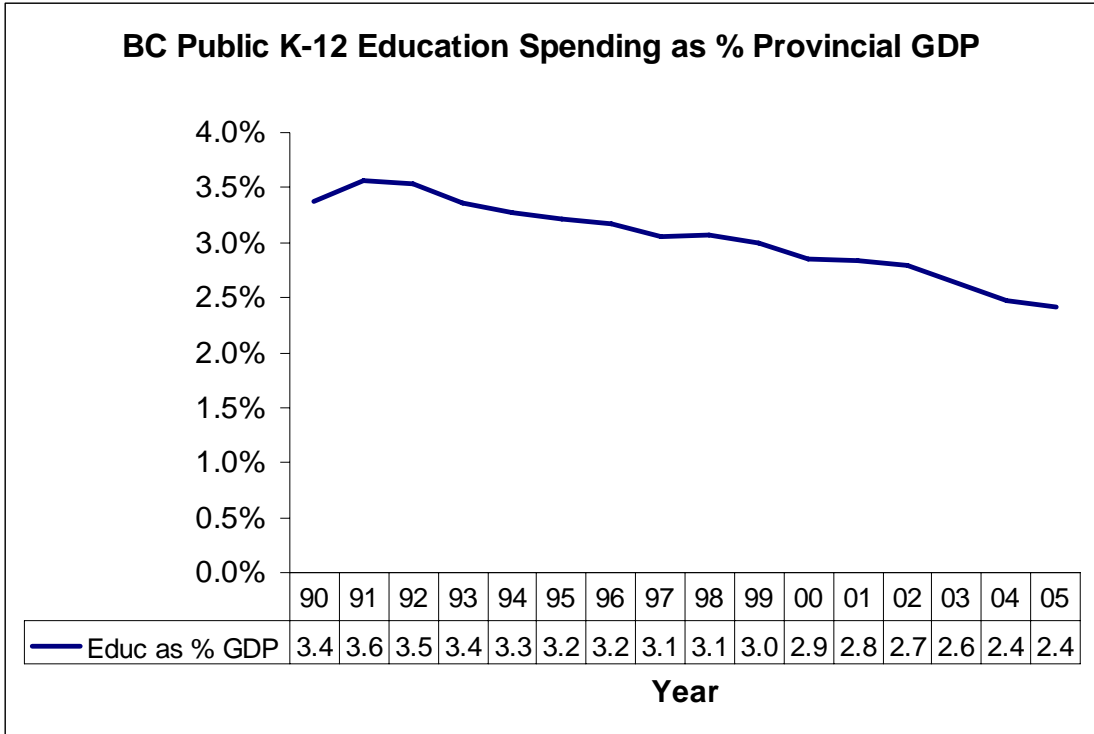
The Ministry of Education should do an assessment of all the real costs provincially and locally for the implementation of this system, including hardware, networks, administration, training, security, technical support, and any other costs. When this is done, a cost-benefit assessment—by someone other than those staff totally committed to BCeSIS—should be carried out, comparing it to more distributed and less bureaucratically centralized systems of maintaining and reporting educational data.

If a decision is made to continue with BCeSIS, the full total cost of ownership should be added to school district budgets so that this system does not continue to suck resources from the delivery of service to students.

Recommendation 7—Maintain education funding on a sustainable basis

The major factor in determining the levels of spending on a public service obviously should be based on what our students need to prepare them to be active citizens who can take part effectively in the economy.

An additional factor being talked about in relationship to other public services is sustainability. Education spending has been declining in British Columbia relative to the gross domestic product (GDP), as shown in the accompanying chart.



The decline in enrolment is projected to continue. That does not mean that we should reduce spending on education. In fact, it is even more important that our declining number of young people are well educated and able to take over the places being left by those leaving the work force. More funding for education at all levels is sustainable—it would only require that this pattern of decline of expenditures relative to the BC gross domestic product stop. A stable percentage of the GDP is sustainable and would allow for funding that would make possible the other recommendations made in this brief.

Thank you for considering these recommendations for ways that additional funding could contribute to making a good public education system even better.