

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

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Education Funding Brief to the Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services

http://www.bctf.ca/uploadedFiles/Publications/Briefs_Position_papers/EducationFunding2007.pdf

Education is a “green” activity

The Standing Committee has asked one specific question for its consultation this year: What choices would you make for a greener future?

For us, one key part of the answer is to provide more resources for public education. Education itself is a relatively green activity. It consumes fewer resources from the natural environment than many other kinds of activities. Most of the expenditures in education involve people working with other people, not with material resources.

Education is also the way in which individual behaviours are most likely to be changed in ways that are less demanding of the environment. It is the young people of today who have to build their lives on different expectations, and school is one of the places that can support the changes required.

Many good things are happening in our public schools, including many teachers who are consciously working toward the future by developing an ethic of responsibility to the community and to the future. However, the reality in our classrooms and schools does not reflect all that education could be.

Improving what we are able to do in schools with more resources for the support of students is a green expenditure toward a greener future.

Bill 33—Fix a broken promise

We had high hopes when Bill 33 became law in 2006 that we would achieve adequate conditions for teaching and learning in our schools. Unfortunately, this has not been the case.

The promise has been broken in two regards:

1. We were told that this was a first step, and that improvements could be made after we evaluated whether Bill 33 had solved the problems with class size and class composition. It is clear from the experience of the first year that it has not solved the problems, and we have been told that there will be no improvements made.
2. Adequate funding has not been provided to make even the existing provisions work effectively. Our central request of you today is to provide the funding necessary to meet the promise of Bill 33.

Bill 33, as you will remember, set out an expectation of smaller classes with a maximum of 30 students in a class. It also identified a maximum of 3 students in a class who have special needs and who have an Individual Education Plan (IEP).

Bill 33 also defined a process of consultation with teachers if the principal wanted to assign more than 30 students to a class in Grades 8 to 12, or more than 3 students with an IEP in any class from Kindergarten through Grade 12.

Although the numbers still seemed large, teachers hoped that the legislation was serious in placing an expectation on boards that they achieve the limits set out in the law.

The first year of the application of the legislation shows that the expectations are not being fulfilled. When administrators came around to consult with teachers, they generally did not have the extra resources to fix the problems that were identified. Without extra resources to actually solve problems, the administrators and the teachers found consultation often became a meaningless process. Consultation with no real hope of improvements only discourages and engenders cynicism.

When the September 30, 2006 statistics were finally reported, they confirmed a reality that classroom teachers already knew from their front-line experience:

- Most classes in elementary school did meet class-size requirements—very few classes had more than 30 students because teachers had to give consent if any students over 30 were proposed for the class.
- In contrast, the total number of classes with 4 or more students with special needs was 9,559. The legislation said the standard was that no more than 3 students with an Individual Education Plan should be in a class, but without enforcement or resources, the class composition in nearly 10,000 classes exceeded that figure.
- In secondary schools there were 3,157 classes that had more than 30 students, because secondary teachers could have extra students in Grades 8 to 12 assigned to their class after the administrator consulted with the teacher. The lack of resources, and the lack of a requirement for teachers to consent to the higher numbers, meant that at least 97,867 students were in classes over the limit set out in the *School Act*.
- No improvements were achieved in specialist positions. These positions support the students with special needs. Counselling is an essential form of support for those with special needs—and other students as well—but that support did not increase. Teacher-librarian positions finally stopped falling, but these positions that support the development of a literate populace were already down substantially over the first years of this decade.

The figures in some areas for 2006–07 were slightly better than the year before, but only slightly, except for Grades 4 through 7 class sizes. This slight improvement in some areas and none in many others is not what teachers expected from Bill 33. Nor is it good enough to provide the quality of education that we know can be provided with more resources.

Preliminary reports coming to the BCTF so far this year indicate that there is not significant improvement over last year. This is for one reason—Boards of Education do not have the extra resources required to make the promise of Bill 33 a reality in the classroom.

Crisis in special education

The most significant issue, and the area where the public schools have the most difficulties right now, is special education. We believe that it has become a crisis that must have a response from government and should be a priority for increased government expenditure in education.

Teachers have been strong supporters of inclusion policies. Inclusion is the best situation for most students with special needs, and for the other students in the class, if the conditions are adequate to make it work for all students.

Unfortunately, many classrooms do not have the necessary conditions for success.

This is a situation that has been getting worse, not better, and Bill 33 did not fix the problem at all. This is the strongest message we get from our members about the situation in their classrooms. It is also the message we are getting from parents who are strong advocates for their children with special needs.

The crisis has many manifestations:

- Students with severe needs (low incidence, high cost) are only getting a portion of the supports they need. The level of funding for students with severe needs does not reflect the full costs of a special education assistant and support from teacher specialists.
- In order to provide more service for students with severe needs, the students with less-severe needs sometimes receive only token support or no support. This is particularly true of “grey area” students—students who do not have extreme needs, but who are not succeeding because they cannot get the limited extra help they need because learning assistance teachers have their time consumed with students with more serious difficulties.
- Districts and schools do not identify all of the students in high-incidence categories, such as learning disabilities. In these categories, no extra funding comes with identification, but extra services still have to be provided to those students. Formally identifying students with less-severe needs brings an obligation for the district to provide service, but not extra funding to provide the extra service.
- Special-education support teachers report that the ever-increasing level of paperwork means that they cannot actually provide additional services to students or consultation with teachers until into November. The paperwork is driven by increased audit requirements that do not produce any extra value for students and, in fact, take away from student support.
- Specialist teachers have increased caseloads, at the same time as the time to deal with students is diminished by the paperwork. Many experienced specialist teachers have chosen to go back to a regular classroom. Consequently, many of the specialist positions are filled by beginning teachers without either classroom experience or a specialist background.

- District specialist teams to support special needs have disappeared from most districts.
- Meeting the class-size requirements in the *School Act* for elementary classrooms makes it impossible to staff appropriately for special-needs support because of lack of resources to do both.
- Teachers who have supported the inclusion of students with special needs are questioning whether we can continue these policies if more resources are not provided. This reaction is from the stress of knowing that more can be done, but not having the conditions to provide what the range of students in their classrooms need.
- Some parents of students with special needs are considering whether a return to segregated classrooms will be necessary—not because this is better than an adequate, integrated classroom, but because their children are lost in classrooms with too many students and no specialized assistance. This is clearly an indication of desperation, not a direction that most want to go.

The crisis comes from a number of sources:

- Costs to boards to maintain service levels have increased more than additional resources provided by government. Additional demands are downloaded onto Boards of Education without providing adequate funding to carry out all the responsibilities.
- Targeted funding for high-incidence special needs such as learning disabilities was eliminated, leaving support for these students competing with many other important aspects of educational service.
- The increased bureaucratic demands have sucked away the resources that should be going to direct services for students. This is frustrating for teachers, and is driving away the most qualified and experienced specialists.

What is to be done?

The BC Teachers' Federation believes that the following priorities should be reflected in the provincial budget:

1. Provide more funding to Boards of Education so they can actually meet the class-size and class-composition figures set out in legislation.
2. Increase funding for the low-incidence, high-needs students so that it actually reflects the cost of providing adequate service for students within the fastest-growing category—autism—as well as other high-needs students.
3. Provide targeted funding for the students with less-severe, but still significant special needs.
4. Reduce the paperwork that is required by the Ministry of Education so that more of the resources actually go into direct support for students with special needs.

5. Restore the funding for students with English as a Second Language to seven years. Research suggests that it often takes this long for a student to reach proficiency for academic purposes. The current funding is for only five years—not adequate for many students.
6. Provide extra funding to schools that have high numbers of students who have come to Canada as refugees. The federal government has increased the number of refugees admitted and they are often settled together in communities. Many of these students have never even attended school before. The province should provide some of the settlement funds from the federal government to schools that have high numbers of newly settled refugees.
7. Provide funding to cover the impact of the court decision prohibiting the charging of school fees. With some 25% of our students living in families in poverty, the only equitable position that can be taken is to eliminate school fees, and we agree with that. However, many enriching experiences for students will be eliminated if the province does not provide the funding that will allow these activities to continue to be offered in the school program.
8. Provide funding to ensure the safety of students. The class-size provisions of the *School Act* do not take into account that the shops and laboratories in our secondary schools were designed for a maximum of 24 students in a class. Many classes are larger than 24, a situation that presents a danger to the health and safety of students.
9. Provide the recalculation funding to school districts. Most of the funding for districts is provided on the basis of the expected number of students. If additional students show up, in the past a recalculation has been made to reflect the increased cost of these additional students and additional funding provided part way through the year to those districts. This last year the ministry did not provide that funding to the boards that should have received it, creating budget problems because expectations were not fulfilled.
10. In the longer term, the government should strike a commission on education funding to do a detailed study of the actual costs of the services that the province expects boards to deliver.

All of the parties with a direct interest should be involved in this process. The parents should be a part of the assessment, including not just the advisory committees, but also parents of students with special needs, parents of Aboriginal students, and others who are not often engaged in the existing structures.

The Boards of Education should be there. They should identify what they understand to be the demands placed on them by the ministry, as well as by their community, and the resources that are actually required to meet those demands.

The people who work in the system should be there as well—the teachers, the administrators, and the support staff.

A thorough examination of the education financing system in the province is long overdue.

Can we afford these proposals?

Yes, the province of British Columbia can afford to provide more resources to public education.

The economy of BC continues to be healthy, with low unemployment rates. The provincial budget has seen significant surplus amounts for several years. The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives earlier presented a brief to this committee, which indicated an expectation of multi-billion-dollar surplus amounts for the next several years.

A recent report from Statistics Canada (Summary Public School Indicators for the Provinces and Territories, 1998–99 to 2004–05) shows that British Columbia has been going in the opposite direction of other provinces in funding of public education. Even though enrolments are declining in other provinces, provincial governments are continuing to add more resources to their education budgets. As a result, student/educator ratios have improved in other provinces while those in BC have worsened, to the point where BC reports the highest ratio of any province—17.5—with the lowest at 13.6 and the next-highest-to-BC at 16.9, all significantly better than BC.

The same Statistics Canada report also points out that in BC, the total expenditures for elementary and secondary schools as a percentage of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) declined from 3.8% to 3.2% between 1998–99 to 2004–05.

If the same percentage of the GDP had been spent in the latter year than the previous year, there would be about \$980 million more in expenditures on public education.

If BC wants to have the best education system in North America, it should be prepared to provide at least as many resources for public education as other provinces. This is affordable and should be provided.

Conclusion

The BCTF agrees with the goal of government to “make British Columbia the best-educated, most literate jurisdiction on the continent.” In fact, we take great pride in our role in building arguably the best public education system here in BC. However, it is creaking under the weight of increasing demands, unsupported by the resources required to do all that it is asked to do.

“Best-educated” means highly literate, but it also means a great deal more than that. It requires that we provide resources to help those students most in need of support. It also means that we not focus only on narrow goals of literacy, but also focus on preparing our students to be responsible and critical citizens in a democratic society.

We need the resources to do all these things—ensure high standards for literacy and numeracy, provide extra support for those with greater needs or for those who have been marginalized, and prepare students for responsible citizenship. We need “green” perspectives that support change in individual and community practices that are harmful to the environment.

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Distribution: Executive Committee, Local Presidents, Local Representatives, BCTF Staff Reps, BCTF Admin, Board of Education Chairpersons, Education Partner Groups, Minister of Education, MLAs