



BCTF

British Columbia Teachers' Federation A Union of Professionals

100-550 West 6th Avenue, Vancouver, BC V5Z 4P2 bctf.ca

604-871-2283 1-800-663-9163  

Executive Office fax: 604-871-2290

Supporting Children and Youth with Neuro-Diverse Special Needs

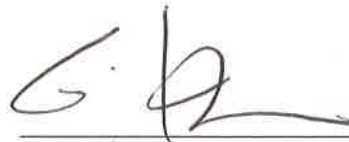
A Brief to the

**Select Standing Committee on
Children and Youth**

from the

British Columbia Teachers' Federation

June 2019



President



Executive Director

Submission to the Select Standing Committee on Children and Youth on Special Project on Children and Youth with Neuro-diverse Special Needs

The British Columbia Teachers' Federation (BCTF) represents 43,000 teachers and associated professionals in public schools across BC. We are committed to the inclusion of all students in BC's public schools, believing that every student can learn, and every student is entitled to an appropriate education and full range of education services in their community. Every day, teachers bring this commitment into their classrooms, using their professional judgement to meet the needs of all students, including children and youth with neuro-diverse special needs.

Unfortunately, there are many barriers and obstacles to identifying and providing accessible and appropriate supports to all students who need them. Over the past year, the BCTF has engaged intensively with our membership and other education stakeholders to better understand the barriers facing children and youth with exceptionalities and special needs in our education system. This has included research sessions, focus groups, workshops, teacher interviews, surveys, and participation on sector committees. Below are three key improvements that could be made to services and supports for children and youth with neuro-diverse special needs and their families.

1. Identification and referral for all who need it

Students with special needs deserve—and are legally entitled to—appropriate and consistent care that is tailored to their specific needs. Identification is the best means to determine these needs.

Formal identification helps children and youth, their parents, and school staff. This information should be available at the beginning of a child's educational journey. It is not only essential to determine and address a child's strengths and needs, but also provides information to teachers that is useful in the teaching process. Beyond the school and school years, identification is the gateway to lifelong services that provide necessary supports into adulthood.

BC's K–12 education system plays an important role in identifying special needs. However, the experience of the past two decades shows that the elimination of funding for particular needs can lead to a substantial decline in the identification of those needs. The elimination of funding allocations for a number of high incidence categories of special needs has led to a substantial decline in the number of students formally identified. For example, the share of BC students identified as gifted has dropped from 2.5% in 2002 (15,771 students) to just 0.9% today (5,204 students). The bottom line is that students whose needs have not been assessed receive less support.

Identification is also crucial for equity within the public education system in BC—ensuring that children and youth with neuro-diverse special needs receive comparable services regardless of where they live in the province. Proposed changes to K–12 education funding (the prevalence model) that delink funding from formal identification would decrease incentives for formal identification of students with neuro-diverse special needs, in line with what we saw with high incidence needs over the past 15 years. Who then would determine what services are available in a school district and which students are entitled to those services? How would the resources be allocated both among schools and within each school?

Assessments and designations provide an objective basis for getting services to particular students—rather than the inequitable method of basing access to services on the capacity and means of individual parents or teachers to champion the need for resources. Furthermore, assessments and the related documentation are part of an accountability mechanism for district funding for students with special needs.

It is widely recognized that the current system for identifying students with special needs has multiple challenges, including long waitlists for assessments both within and outside the education system, time-consuming requirements for paperwork, and lack of support for unidentified students. These challenges must be addressed, but the solution is not to eliminate or limit identification under the guise of administrative efficiency. Instead, additional financial resources and staffing must be invested to clear the current assessment backlog and ensure BC students and families waiting for necessary supports receive them without further delay.

Teacher voices

- “It is difficult to find the balance to meet the needs of the children in the classroom when there is so little support for teachers in a K/1 classroom...Without the designations there is no extra support so the children make limited progress in the classroom in what are the most crucial years of learning.”
- “One of the most challenging things for me, as a Kindergarten teacher, was having children come into the system, and they weren’t identified on paper as being special needs, but they had significant needs. And then, often what would happen is that those needs weren’t supported because they weren’t on paper.”

2. Ensuring the link between assessment and services in classrooms

The identification and assessment of children and youth with neuro-diverse special needs enables school administration to properly resource targeted services and allows teachers to tailor services to these students. Teacher collective agreements support this process. The role of class-composition language, which exists in some district collective agreements, is to drive resources into the classroom to provide the extra support that is of assistance to students with special needs. Collective agreement language provides a floor, not a ceiling, for staffing and supports.

Service inequities among districts are in part the result of a decision by the Ministry to fund additional services only in those districts where the collective agreement contains class-composition language—rather than levelling up and expanding additional services across the province.

A false narrative about assessments and the resulting designations claims that designations are discriminatory. To be clear, some students with special needs, and people with disabilities in general, do face discrimination. It is wrong and it should not happen. However, the designation itself is not the source of discriminatory practices. Discrimination occurs where there is a denial of a service, or some sort of adverse impact, as per the test of discrimination under the *BC Human Rights Code*. The *Moore v. North Vancouver School District* is a notable BC example involving a student with special needs in our K–12 system and showed how necessary it is to know when and where to provide accommodations so that all students have meaningful access to a full education.

Teachers have long argued for adequate funding for public education in BC that allows for the full range of services. Adequate funding that meets the mandate of the education system would allow for timely assessment, including of children and youth with neuro-diverse special needs. Adequate resources and timely assessment combined with collective agreement protections should drive services to support children and youth with neuro-diverse needs as fully and as early as possible.

3. Adequate and equitable education funding

Teachers have long advocated for improved funding and funding mechanisms for public education. Most recently, we welcomed discussion as to how an alternative funding model could improve front-line services across all 60 school districts. Unfortunately, the government’s current funding reform proposals include several recommendations related to inclusive education that will take services for students backward, not forward. They risk cementing incentives for ongoing underfunding.

Across the province, there is a persistent gap between what school districts across BC receive in special education funding allocations and what they spend on services. The average gap between funding and spending from 2007 to 2017 was 47%—that is, during this decade, districts only received on average 53% in special education funding of what they ended up spending on special education. This sizable and persistent province-wide gap conceals some significant variation and inequity between school districts. While no school district was allocated special education funding to cover its total special education spending in 2016–17, 16 districts received less than half of what they spent on special education, and 4 received under 40%. Most of these 16 are among the less populous, more rural and remote of BC’s school districts, where prevalence rates of special needs tend to be higher. Closing this gap is crucial to ensure that children and youth

with neuro-diverse special needs are identified and receive the supports to which they are entitled.

In BC, the education funding model that existed before the last major reform in 2002, while far from perfect, still adhered to the principle that funding be linked to the actual costs of providing services. That changed in 2002, when four-fifths of operating funds that flow to districts became based on a per-pupil amount that is equal for every student in the province, with only the remainder varying according to “unique student” and “unique district” characteristics. While all of these funds are merely allocative (in other words, they are not targeted and districts are free to use them how they wish), today’s formula still provides some tenuous link between funding and services or costs.

The recommendations proposed by the ongoing Funding Model Review would almost entirely sever the already-limited link between funding and services. Rather than funding based on the identified needs of individual children, the proposal to move to a prevalence model would distribute funding for special education services based on best estimates of local prevalence rates from health and socio-economic data. The amount of funding for special education, including for children and youth with neuro-diverse needs, would be fully delinked from services and the costs of providing them. In other words, a school district would receive a pot of money based on a mix of demographic indicators rather than on data about specific needs (for example, the number of students on the autism spectrum actually in the district) or the cost of the services required (for example, supports for students on the autism spectrum or those with learning disabilities). This obscures the actual needs of children, needs that teachers see every day.

The existing mix of services and approaches across districts makes it likely that students with the same needs, but in different districts, will have access to very different levels and types of services, contrary to the claim that the new approach would improve equity. And this is before any additional funding pressures caused by removing many of the remaining links between funding and services. Children and youth with neuro-diverse needs are entitled to the same rights to an education as all children. We need to ensure that the resources are there to actualize these rights.

Teacher voices

- “Students know what the adults in their society think of the importance of their education by looking at the resources they are given for their schooling.”
- “Underfunding incentivizes school boards to re-allocate special needs targeted funding away from where they were intended.”
- “There needs to be more funding for early learning.”

Recommendations

Recommendation 1

Maintain the special education designations that are crucial in allowing governments and school districts to identify students with neuro-diverse special needs and to accordingly drive funding and supports into the public school system and classrooms for students and their teachers.

Recommendation 2

Provide additional funding and supports to improve assessment and diagnostic services across BC. This includes funding for hiring teacher psychologists to reduce lengthy psycho-educational assessment wait times, and funding and supports for health and social services to reduce wait times and improve access to assessment, diagnostic, and treatment services for children and youth with neuro-diverse special needs.

Recommendation 3

Fund high-incidence categories of special needs with a view toward enhancing and improving the alignment between student educational needs and funding.

Recommendation 4

Adequately fund the public K–12 education system to ensure that resources, wrap-around services, and personnel match the actual levels of student need.

Recommendation 5

Anchor funding for special needs in identified needs and include dedicated funding for early identification.

Recommendation 6

Align funding with neuro-diverse special education needs by closing the current gap between what school districts receive in funding and the much greater amount spent.

Recommendation 7

Regularly review special needs designations through comprehensive consultation processes that reflect evolving scientific community standards related to neuro-diversity (i.e., DSM V).

GH/mrpl:tfu