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INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC EDUCATION/BC SUBMISSION TO BUDGET CONSULTATIONS 2021

SUBMISSION TO THE SELECT STANDING COMMITTEE ON FINANCE AND
GOVERNMENT SERVICES OF THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF BC

RENEWING OUR COMMITMENT TO PUBLIC EDUCATION FOR ALL IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

We are pleased to offer this submission to the 2021 Budget Consultation. This submission highlights five areas for consideration for the 2021 provincial budget:

1. Recognizing that public education is in the public interest and a critical element of our democratic society.
2. Focusing funding initiatives to support the most vulnerable students.
3. Avoiding a return to austerity to be able to recover from the damage of previous austerity measures.
4. Defunding private/independent schools.
5. Planning to incorporate remedies for the climate crisis in all areas of public education.

About the Institute for Public Education/ BC

The Institute for Public Education BC, an independent non-profit organization, provides high quality information and leadership to build a strong public education system for British Columbia's children, families, and communities. Through our network of Fellows, we offer analysis of current educational issues, support public education, and share current research findings to enrich dialogue on educational issues in British Columbia.

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IPE/BC SUBMISSION TO BUDGET CONSULTATIONS 2021

1 PUBLIC EDUCATION IS A PUBLIC INTEREST

The current pandemic and public health crisis show British Columbia's politicians and citizens are fully capable of recognizing and acting in the public good, setting aside special interests for the good of all. This gives us hope the same can be done for public education.

Globally, the right to a free, inclusive and quality public education is recognized and has been endorsed in many declarations of human rights, from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 to the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989. We believe this right to a public education is essential to a strong democracy. John Ralston Saul wrote, "Any weakening of universal public education can only be a weakening of democracy..." Too often confidence in our public schools is undermined—politicians and policy makers must be defenders and advocates for excellent public education, the bedrock of a democratic society.

Within a democracy, public schools are in the public interest and welcome each and every possible learner. This means public schools are open to everyone—rich and poor; urban and rural; Aboriginal, native born and immigrant; those with special needs; and regardless of religious background or no religious background. Public education is about equity, about the potential for schooling to be an equalising force in society.

An education that privileges one child over another is giving the privileged child a corrupted education, even as it gives him or her a social or economic advantage. (Connell, 1993, p. 15)

Just as every British Columbian deserves the very best advice, protection and health resources during the current pandemic, so does every British Columbian deserve the best leadership and educational resources to support high quality public education. This is a public education system that strengthens our democracy and encourages active citizenship to support the well-being of all. The benefit of public education spreads across all aspects of life in BC enhancing health and well-being; creating social cohesion and tolerance for difference; and fostering economic prosperity.

Public goods must be high quality though. Quality public education is concerned with a broad-based education that includes aesthetic, cultural, emotional, social, physical and vocational development, as well as intellectual and academic engagement. A quality public education system should strive to insure every child develops their abilities to the fullest extent possible and that no child is excluded. This is a promise that currently rings hollow for too many BC families with children who have special needs... for lack of resources in public schools, all too often these students are

sent home or receive inadequate learning opportunities. Quality public education creates opportunities to celebrate and learn from diversity. Quality public education is welcoming and inclusive, a safe and secure place for students and everyone working in public schools.

The current pandemic has thrust parents and families into roles as teachers, a job for which they may not be prepared, and their personal circumstances make difficult. At this moment, we see public education is a crucial part of our social safety net, providing not only education but also meals, childcare, and emotional support for children and families. This is a role public schools ought to play in a democracy. We hope a new found respect for schools and educators will manifest in increased financial and political support for public schools.

The Institute for Public Education has assumed stewardship of the *Charter for Public Education*, a statement prepared some 18 years ago about what British Columbians want from public education. It rings as true today as it did when it was created. In the *Charter*, British Columbians say that everyone has a right to a free quality public education. The *Charter* belongs to the people of British Columbia who have made this promise:

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. (Charter for Public Education, 2003, para. 1)

Even though we have not yet lived up to this expectation, this remains a promise we need to keep.

2 FOCUSING FUNDING ON VULNERABLE STUDENTS

The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated and made obvious that some students are more vulnerable than others as a result of the already existing pandemic of inequality. The public schools attempt to overcome inequalities with our promise of equity in education, but the schools can under normal circumstances only partially succeed. The current conditions limit those efforts. During the continuing crisis, and going forward beyond the crisis, more focus must be placed on funding the mandate for educational equity.

Some of the additional funding should go to the public schools, while other funding should go to families directly and to other public services that contribute to equity. Four areas, in particular, require additional funds to address the issues of vulnerable students: inclusion of students with special needs; access to adequate, nutritious food; health and safety; and equitable access to technology.

More funding for inclusion of students with special needs. Support for inclusion was inadequate before the pandemic. Even with provincial direction that school districts should place a priority on vulnerable students, the limitations became obvious as some parents found it difficult to access services and students missed essential social connections. Many students with special needs require significant social as well as academic supports and it was, at best, difficult to maintain these.

Additional resources to support students with special needs are required for teachers and support staff. Education assistants play a particularly important role in supporting inclusion. More education assistants are required, but also an increase in their status with salaries and numbers of hours of employment that are adequate to support a family and allow for career development.

Students ready to learn because they are not hungry.

Even before families were hit with job losses and cuts to hours, about 20% of students have consistently been from families living in poverty. This has many effects on their opportunities in education—the most basic of which is hunger if they are not getting adequate meals. The most effective response to this would be to ensure that every family has sufficient income to adequately care for their children. In the absence of this, schools have tried to fill in with meal programs. Funding should be expanded and guaranteed to meet the school-based meal programs through provincial initiatives rather than a patchwork of philanthropic programs. Plans to address the underlying problem through a universal basic income and/or other programs to eliminate poverty are also necessary.

Better provisions for health and safety. The past two decades of austerity have produced conditions in our schools that are less than ideal for health and safety. This should always be a concern, but again made obvious

by the pandemic and issues to be attended to for an uncertain future. Some of the limitations are in the school facilities, including the many portables in some districts, with inadequate space for social distancing or places for students to be able to wash hands. While it may be difficult to reconfigure our physical facilities, new facilities should be designed with these concerns incorporated.

One glaring casualty of austerity has been the cleanliness of schools. Daytime cleaning and disinfecting of schools disappeared as school districts cut back on custodian time and primarily assigned them to after-hours cleaning and schedules that resulted in inadequate cleaning. Even when pandemic level cleaning is not required, schools require the higher level of custodial service that existed in the past and school districts should be funded with this expectation.

Equity in access to technology. Access to high speed internet and the tools to use it have become essential. This is obvious as students have been forced to learn at a distance. Even when students return to physical classrooms, the use of technology will be an important element of education.

The internet should be considered a basic utility with affordable access for everyone. This will require public funding and regulation to ensure that it is available, regardless of where one lives in the province and level of income. If educational activities require access to technology outside the classroom, the school must have the resources to ensure that every student has this access.

3 RECOVERING FROM AUSTERITY AND NOT CHOOSING AUSTERITY IN THE FUTURE

The temptation to choose austerity to deal with looming economic challenges is real. IPE believes, however, that this would be an error, both for public education and for British Columbia at large.

Why? Austerity isn't necessary and doesn't work. In fact, the opposite is the case. Dramatically increased public spending will be necessary to deal with the harsh new economic conditions. Economist Jim Stanford argues:

Canada's economy will need to rely on public service, public investment, and public entrepreneurship as its main 'engines' of growth, to recover from the coming downturn, prepare for future health and environmental crises, and improve conditions in our communities. (Stanford, 2020, para. 23)

Stanford's point is amplified by Nobel winning economist Joseph Stiglitz' point that austerity has had the opposite of the intended effect:

Austerity has not only damaged the European economies, including the UK, but actually threatens future growth. For instance, when you have young people not learning, or in jobs inappropriate to their skills, they are not increasing their human

capital in a way they could be. Without that human capital, future economic growth will be lower than it could have been. It is remarkable that there are still governments, including here in the UK, that still believe in austerity. (Stiglitz, 2017, para. 10)

And, BC economist Alex Hemingway agrees that debt to support public goods, like public education, is manageable because borrowing costs are currently very low, governments can take a long view, there are untapped revenue available through taxation of the super-rich, and as we have already said, BC needs to move forward out of rather than retreating back into untenable austerity measures.

Large-scale public spending to support people and invest in long-term public goods is prudent not only on a human level, but also in economic terms. The size of government debt compared to our economy (our debt-to-GDP ratio) will rise substantially through this crisis, but that's not something to be concerned about. (Hemingway, 2020, para. 2)

Even Globe and Mail editorial writers agree. Writing about the national economy, with identical characteristics to the BC economy, they contend:

... national finance isn't household finance. A person's lifespan is constrained, as is their capacity for income growth; a country is a very different creature... At no time in history has Canada been able to borrow so much for so little. (How is Ottawa going to pay off its COVID-19 debt? With any luck, it won't have to, 2020)

BC's public education system has already dealt with significant real financial resource shortfalls over the last two decades. The British Columbia Teachers' Federation estimates annual funding per student in BC is currently \$1,800 lower than the Canadian average (BCTF, 2020). Students should not have to bear the brunt, once again, of reduced funding.

Significant student needs are unmet. For example, students with special needs and their families have for a number of years been articulating clearly the obstacles they face. Additionally, thousands of BC students still come to school hungry—a situation that inhibits learning and could be improved with a provincially mandated food program.

Inadequate funding has induced school districts to adopt market-based mechanisms that, while they may

seem attractive in the short run, are not sustainable. The obvious example is the selling of student enrolment spaces in BC schools to wealthy families in foreign countries. While a few BC school districts became dependent on this revenue in the past two decades, others didn't, leading to regional inequities in resource availability (BCTF, 2019).

Moreover, critics of this strategy have warned for years that any financial disruption in these students' home countries would have disastrous effects on the budgets of participating school boards in BC. This has now come to pass. The announcement of hundreds of layoffs in Coquitlam is only the tip on the iceberg (Hernandez, 2020). With this failed market strategy the wider community stands to lose as well with the potential reduction in the tens of millions of dollars in spending when these international students disappear.

In Canada and in BC we have seen how public funding can be marshalled when needed, and we encourage the government to reject the language of austerity and to adopt the language of investment in all sectors, including public education. The cupboard is not bare and public spending on public education is sorely needed.

4 DEFUNDING PRIVATE SCHOOLS

As the NDP Government makes budgetary plans it is time to put discontinuing public subsidies to British Columbia's independent/private schools at the top of the list.

Since 2013, the provincial government has subsidized private schools to the tune of \$2.6 billion. The subsidies for 2018- 2019 alone are \$426 million and projections for 2019-20 school year were \$436 million. These subsidies to private schools have increased at an astronomical rate: funding increases (adjusted for inflation) to private schools have increased by 122.8% since 2000-01, compared to a 15.9% increase in funding to public schools in this same period (Institute for Public Education/BC, Public Subsidies to Private Schools in BC: 2019, n.d.).

According to recent surveys by the Institute for Public Education/BC, CUPE BC and the BC Humanist Association, most British Columbians believe public funding of private schools needs to end. In a May 2019 poll Insights West conducted for IPE, four-in-five British Columbians (78%) oppose providing taxpayer funds for elite private schools. 69% of British Columbians oppose funding to faith based

schools (full survey results are available on our website) (Institute for Public Education/BC, Most British Columbians Do Not Support Public Funding for Private Schools, n.d.).

Private schools cost taxpayers by direct taxpayer supported subsidies, but also by exemptions from paying property taxes, numerous personal tax benefits for individuals like defining a portion of tuition as a childcare deduction and/or as charitable donations, and other tax-deductible donations. These tax exemptions significantly diminish revenue that could support public education and this needs to change (Garossino, 2016).

Private schools also cost British Columbia in non-economic ways. Faith-based schools are allowed to ignore human-rights laws and discriminate against employees based on marital status or sexual orientation. Our poll shows that few BCers are aware that faith based schools are exempted from the BC Human Rights Code, but once they were aware of this 81% did not believe they should be allowed this exemption. Even if private schools exist in BC, they must not infringe on British Columbia's obligation

to provide free, equitable and inclusive education for all, nor the rights of children and staff to non-discrimination and equality.

Private school admission processes segregate students by class and/or beliefs, rejecting students who don't 'fit' their values. De facto, private schools isolate students from peers who are not like them. Many BC taxpayers' children would not be admitted to these private schools: because they can't afford them, do not have the 'right' academic credentials, or they are not suitable given the school's philosophy. Private schools reject the idea that schools ought to be about equity, about providing an education for all students regardless of their individual attributes.

If the BC Ministry of Education needs a plan, we suggest immediately ending subsidies to elite Group 2 schools, those spending more per student than public schools and charging significant tuition fees.

Then, we suggest phasing out subsidies to faith based schools over a short period of time, say 2 years.

The Ministry should review private schools that serve needs not currently well met by the public schools (for example, online private schools for students with special needs) and work toward integrating those schools/programs into the public education system. The government should insure there is sufficient funding provided to public schools to meet the needs of all students, and the current lack of adequate funding for special needs students is at a crisis level.

We see First Nations schools as public schools, albeit public schools working alongside other governmental authorities and with a potentially different funding model. We would like to see these schools recognized as public, not independent, schools.

With a public school system still reeling from more than 15 years of cuts by the previous government, and students with special needs bearing the brunt of the underfunding, there is no excuse for funnelling billions of dollars to private schools. That money should be allocated to the public school system where it can help every child achieve their fullest potential.

5 CLIMATE CHANGE IS A PUBLIC EDUCATION ISSUE

The global climate emergency demands that we examine every aspect of social and community life through the lens of the absolute necessity to reduce carbon emissions. Below are some fundamental examples of the many ways our schools can contribute to this end.

First, British Columbia should place a renewed emphasis on neighbourhood schools and schooling. Open school district boundaries have created the phenomenon in recent decades of families "shopping" for schools across a district. For example, during the 2018 school year Vancouver school district cross boundary enrollment was 11% in elementary schools and 17% in secondary schools.

This is problematic in many ways. It encourages inequity by removing from school catchments privileged and mobile students, leaving poorer and more marginalized students and their families to schools in less affluent neighbourhoods. This is especially true for secondary schools. With privilege comes the experience, time and means to lobby and advocate for resources and programs. So, students in poorer areas are once again relatively underserved.

"Shopping" for schools also reinforces the notion of schools competing for students on the basis of perceived (and often real) resource advantages, rather than the much fairer and more equitable response—wider community advocacy for adequate programs and resources for all students. Surely the goal must be to provide excellence in every school in all neighbourhoods, rich or poor, so that every student has the opportunity to reach their potential.

With respect to the environment, local students simply attending local schools would eliminate literally millions of automobile trips each year and significantly reduce the carbon footprint of the education system and the province as a whole.

Additionally, again to reduce emissions, after school care needs to be provided on site rather than transporting students to alternate venues. As Minister Fleming has already said, "Having childcare on school grounds is a win for everyone—children remain in familiar surroundings throughout their day, parents save time and money, and it keeps costs down by using facilities already enriched for

learning and play.” The recent amendment of the School Act to facilitate local districts providing licensed childcare at the school building level is an important first step, and we hope the government remains vigilant in supporting local school districts in moving all before and after school care to local community schools.

A provincial food program, with locally grown produce at every school, would make a significant contribution both to the nutritional needs of students (a significant number of whom come to school hungry) but to the environment as well. Such a provincial food program should replace the patchwork philanthropic programs that create uneven benefits for BC children.

CONCLUSION

We have outlined key issues for consideration in fully and adequately funding public schools in the 2021 BC budget. We urge the current government to tackle the need to strengthen K- 12 education by serving all students, by bringing pay and resources in line with the national averages, supporting education that tackles issues of poverty and inequality, recognizing the complex

On the side of capital investments, BC already has a program of seismic mitigation. To this should be added a plan for all new school construction to be net zero buildings and to retrofit all existing schools to operationally reduce emissions.

There is also a curricular implication to the climate emergency. George Monbiot argues,

I’m not talking about teaching ecology as an isolated subject, but about something more fundamental: placing ecology and Earth systems at the heart of learning, just as they are at the heart of life. (Monbiot, 2020, para. 8)

role schools play in a democratic society, and addressing the climate crisis. Now is the time to recover from years of misguided austerity. Now is the time to work together to make education in BC the very best it can be for all British Columbians.

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