



Placing a Priority on Funding Initiatives to Support the Most Vulnerable Students

Institute for Public Education/BC

**Submission to the Select Standing
Committee on Finance and
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Budget Consultation 2022

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The Institute for Public Education/BC is pleased to offer this submission to the 2022 Budget Consultation.

A basic principle that should inform all decisions of government is that public education is both a public interest and a critical element supportive of our democratic society. This approach supports a call for adequate funding for all of the many elements of public education, including pay and resources in line with the national averages. In the current context, it also highlights the need to prioritize the provision of funding to support our most vulnerable students.

About The Institute for Public Education/BC

IPE/BC, an independent non-profit organization, provides high quality information and leadership to build support for 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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Placing a priority on funding initiatives to support the most vulnerable students.

Focusing Funding on Vulnerable Students.

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

Some additional funding should go to the public school system, while additional funding support 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 place a priority on vulnerable students, limitations of this policy have been obvious. Some parents found it difficult to access services and many students missed out on 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.

Access to timely assessments of student special needs has long been a problem and the system has fallen behind even further in the current context. Parents with the resources often pay several thousand dollars for private assessments to get the education supports their child needs and deserves. Students whose parents are without the resources are on expanding waitlists, often for several years, missing supports needed at crucial times in their development. Achieving equity therefore demands that more funding be put into access to assessments.

Additional resources to support students with special needs are required for teachers and support staff so that when the needs are identified that the school is able to meet the needs. Education assistants play a particularly important role in supporting inclusion. More education assistants are required, but what is also required is 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 ability to benefit from educational opportunities, the most basic of which is hunger when and if they are not getting adequate nutrition. 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 it has been made obvious by the pandemic. Some of the limitations are in school facilities, including the many portables in some districts, with inadequate space for social distancing. While it may be difficult to reconfigure existing school facilities, new facilities should be designed with these concerns incorporated.

While daytime cleaning and disinfecting of schools was increased in the past school year, it is essential that not be returned to the inadequate level of daytime cleaning that existed before the pandemic. School districts should be funded to meet this higher expectation.



Equity in access to technology.

Access to high-speed internet and the tools to use it have become essential. This became even more obvious as students were forced to learn at a distance. Even when students are in 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.

Conclusion

Increasing overall funding of public schools to the average amount per pupil spent in Canada as a whole would provide the resources to improve the situation of vulnerable students. As such it would enhance the capacity of the system to serve all students effectively and equitably.

