

IPE/BC Comment on Budget 2022



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IPE/BC highlighted four areas of priority concern in its submission to government as part of pre-budget consultation this year. These areas highlighted the needs of vulnerable students and the need for equity within the system. They were as follows:

“Four areas, in particular, require additional funds to address the issues of vulnerable students:

1. Inclusion of students with special needs.
2. Access to adequate, nutritious food.
3. Health and safety, and
4. Equitable access to technology.”

How did the provincial budget address these areas? Before moving to this, a few comments are in order regarding the overall level of funding support for the K-12 system.

Overall levels of K-12 funding support

While the coming year will see the K-12 school system receive extra funding, how much of this is new money and how much of it is funding intended to compensate for existing cost increases faced by boards of education? Here’s how the Budget describes the announced increase:

Budget 2022 invests more than \$664 million over the fiscal plan to respond to growing K-12 enrolment in British Columbia’s public and independent school systems. This funding will help students acquire the foundations that support a strong economy into the future. It will also continue supplements to school districts for children and youth in care, Indigenous learners, rural school districts, and students with support needs. This funding includes \$105 million for the Classroom Enhancement Fund which supports nearly 4,500 teachers, including over 700 special education teachers, and more than 200 teacher psychologists and counsellors. These investments will bring the total annual funding for K-12 education to over \$7.3 billion by 2024/25 as indicated in Chart 1.1.3.

In addition, the Province’s capital plan includes \$3.1 billion over the next three years to build new schools to respond to enrolment growth, and to maintain and seismically upgrade schools throughout the province.¹

By way of general comment, it is important to state that the reference to supporting “a strong economy” reflects a limited and instrumentalized view of public school education that is not in keeping with the broader role we expect of our schools.

More specifically, the above figures describe planned increases over the next three years in total. To gain a sense of what is in store for the 2022/23 year alone requires a review of figures contained in the Ministry of Education and Childcare Service Plan. The following table is taken from the Service Plan document.²

¹ Budget and Fiscal Plan, p. 15. All Budget documents can be downloaded from <https://www.bcbudget.gov.bc.ca/2022/downloads.htm#gotoStrategicPlan>

² Ministry of Education and Child Care 2022/23 to 2024/25 Service Plan, p. 15.

	Restated estimate	Estimate	Plan	Plan
	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
Core Business Area	Operating Expenses (\$000)			
Public Schools	6,514,291	6,764,001	6,765,851	6,766,151
Independent Schools	473,312	490,795	490,795	490,795
Transfers to Other Partners	56,718	56,718	56,718	56,718
Child Care	710,192	815,884	825,030	859,930
Executive and Support Services	51,576	51,187	51,209	51,224
British Columbia	30,001	30,001	30,001	30,001
<i>Teachers Act</i>	8,540	8,863	6,791	6,791
Total	7,844,630	8,217,449	8,226,395	8,261,610
Ministry Capital Expenditures				
Executive and Support Services	2	3	3	3
Capital Plan				
Public Schools	1,033,349	930,347	919,060	796,053

The top line in this table shows an intended increase of about \$250 million for K-12 operating expenditures, an increase of 3.8%. The second line offers a first glimpse of funding subsidies in support of independent or private school education – these funds are set to rise by about \$17 million or 3.7% in 2022/23.

The lines that follow offer a picture of funding intended to fulfill other areas of the Ministry’s mandate over the coming three years. Of particular note here is the \$105 million (or 14.9%) jump in funding support for childcare, an area that has received substantial media attention.

Apart from the welcome and long-anticipated boost to childcare programming, the other components are extremely modest in nature. Indeed, the bottom line of the table shows capital spending falling \$73 million in the upcoming year following by a continued drop-off in projections for the two years to follow. The latter is intriguing in light of the attention the Budget gives to plans to restore and expand the school system’s “bricks and mortar” facilities.

Returning to area of K-12 operations, the planned level of increase also needs to be scrutinized in relation to trends in enrolment and planned unit costs within the funding formula. While details in this area will have to await release of detailed Operating Grants changes later in March, the Budget does contain a list of “Material Assumptions” which offer some guidance as to what expectations are in the area of student enrolment, the primary driver of costs within the funding system.³

³ B.C. Budget and Fiscal Plan, p. 168

Material assumptions	Updated forecast	Budget Estimate	Plan	Plan
Assumptions	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
Public School Enrolment (# of FTEs)	574,434	584,227	592,074	597,870
School age (K–12)	547,296	558,717	566,459	572,176
Continuing Education	812	1,062	1,062	1,062
Distributed Learning (online)	16,975	14,607	14,714	14,793
Summer	7,279	7,279	7,279	7,279
Adults	2,071	2,562	2,559	2,559

School aged enrolment is expected to rise by 11,421 students in 2022/23, an increase of 2.1 per cent. What this means is that the real increase in funding to be directed to anticipated cost increases is only 1.7% (3.8% total increase minus 2.1% enrolment growth). This is what is intended to cover cost associated with inflation (chiefly teacher and other staff salaries, as well as price increases affecting other things the school system needs to buy). And, as the earlier reference to the Classroom Enhancement Fund plans shows, much of this commitment is already earmarked for redressing costs stemming from earlier court challenges.

All in all, the financial plan for BC public schooling reflects a meagre anticipated increase and one not capable of supporting much in the way of new initiatives.

What those initiatives might have been takes us back to IPE/BC’s pre-budget submission, a document which highlighted four areas.

1. Inclusion of students with special needs

Additional money has likely been allocated special needs programs and students although details are not yet publicly available. In all likelihood and given past experience, the Ministry of Education will probably include small increases in per capita student allocations for special needs categories but nothing which would signal any significant change in programming or special needs support. And, as noted before, further details in this area will have to await release of detailed operating grant estimates for the 2022/23 school year later this spring.

2. Access to adequate, nutritious food

There is nothing specific in the budget to address this priority area. At the same time, television ads continually signal private charitable initiatives intended to combat student hunger. The ads rightly draw attention to how widespread hunger undermines the capacity for learning. But hunger should not be a matter for corporate or individual charity, however laudable the latter may be. Public school students in BC need access to adequate and nutritious food not only to support learning but also so they can lead lives that are both safe and secure. And that is a public and not a private responsibility.

3. Health and safety

This is an area highlighted by the pandemic and its impact on all social institutions including public schools. Earlier this year, the province gave districts an additional week prior to the re-opening of schools ostensibly to undertake preparedness measure aimed at securing the safety of student, staff and others. A January 18 report published online by the Burnaby Beacon reports how this much vaunted exercise in “school preparedness” actually played out at one of the district’s high schools.⁴

“The cafeteria was still open, cafeteria was full. Bleachers were still open, bleachers were full. The gym was full for lunchtime, for open gym. And there was nobody in there doing half capacity or anything like that. Games are still on between schools. I had three kids leave class early to go to a game...

As for crowding between classes, she said that the hallways at her school are just as busy as they have ever been in high schools, ‘with haphazard masking and full density’. There were no staggered start times or recesses at her school...

The teacher called the plans that have been laid out ‘reactive’—not aimed at reducing the spread of COVID, but rather focused on reacting to spread once it happens...

The teacher said instead, BC could work to implement measures to reduce the spread of COVID—by handing out N95 masks and rapid tests, prioritizing school staff and students for booster vaccinations, and improving ventilation systems. That would make educators feel safer and help to ensure that schools could actually stay open.”

As this report confirms, what schools need is a concrete plan to bring them in line with what current research confirms as the best way to safeguard health and safety. This needs to include retrofitting to ensure proper ventilation and quality air supply. Health and safety is obviously not a new issue, having gained prominence in recent years with heightened concern regarding issues such as earthquake preparedness and mould occasioned by increased reliance on portable classrooms. If these issues can be seen as priorities deserving of long-term financial commitments, why not ensuring our schools provide maximum protection against pandemic contamination?

4. Equitable access to technology.

IPE/BC’s pre-budget submission earlier this spring stated,

“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.”

⁴ https://burnabybeacon.com/article/enhanced-measures-schools-burnaby-teacher/?vgo_ee=Y6hocGFYwRTHHV%2B5wbMDsy%2FZD%2BmsUFpJrc5fHf6IoVE%3D

Budget 2022 does have things to say about this issue. The Budget press release includes,

“Connecting more than 280 remote, rural and Indigenous communities to high-speed internet, improving access to digital health-care services, education, employment and business opportunities.”⁵

And the Budget and Fiscal Plan document expands,

“More than \$289 million in new funding over the next five years will be provided to expand high-speed internet access throughout the province, bringing total investments to expand connectivity to remote, rural, and Indigenous communities to over \$509 million by 2026/27. Through this investment, more than 280 communities will be connected to high-speed internet, improving access to education and health care, and expanding the ability for local businesses to reach the international marketplace.”⁶

Details of this investment are sparse. Is it just backbone infrastructure or does it include resources that make high speed access a reality for end users, such as the K-12 students who have not yet been able to benefit from high-speed internet and who were at a profound educational disadvantage when COVID resulted in the closure of school facilities and a forced transition to online education?

The Ministry of Education’s Service Plan for the coming year, released at the same time as the provincial budget, commits government to “analyze the effects of COVID-19 on learning and develop strategies to address gaps” but nothing beyond this.⁷

Clearly, support that takes connectivity up to include student and family end users is required if we are not to see the same situation repeated when and if a new public health emergency results in schools again being shuttered.

⁵ Budget News Release, p. 2.

⁶ B.C. Budget and Fiscal Plan, p. 2

⁷ Ministry of Education and Child Care Service Plan, p. 9.