

## BC Budget 2024: What is in store for public schools and the K-12 system as a whole?

---

Thursday’s budget reveals a stay-the-course focus when it comes to public school funding. As with last year, the budget’s primary policy thrust lies with meeting spending commitments that have already been made, along with the steering of new allocations to meet significant growth in student enrolments that is expected to persist for at least the next few years.

Education partners’ comments on the K-12 portion of the budget confirm this. The BCTF said it was heartened to see public education receive priority but went on to lament lost opportunity to make specific commitments addressing “recruitment and retention” challenges as they pertain specifically to teachers. The BCSTA echoed similar views, adding that the Budget also failed to address a continued lag in addressing costs associated with aging school infrastructure.

That being said, a major area of spending initiative this year lies with new school construction which sees a 21 per cent jump in added commitments, geared to addressing continued growth in student numbers anticipated for the period ahead. Next year an additional 30 per cent increase is expected on top of this year’s increase. These funds effectively acknowledge cost pressures that rising enrolment is already “pricing in” to the school system.

Broader funding estimates for big ticket items are reflected below in a table taken from the Ministry of Education’s new Service Plan.

<b>Summary (\$ millions)</b>	<b>2023/24 Revised Est.</b>	<b>2024/24 Estimate</b>	<b>2025/26 Plan</b>	<b>2026/27 Plan</b>
Public Schools	7,391,494	8,023,617	8,071,422	8,071,322
Independent Schools	498,977	571,217	575,523	575,523
Child Care	827,377	865,255	865,255	865,255
Special Account	30,001	30,001	30,001	30,001
New Capital	864,898	1,046,194	1,362,769	1,343,357

There is \$632 million more for school operations in 2024/25. Most of that will be consumed by pre-existing commitments for negotiated wage and salary increases arising out of contract negotiations for teachers and support staff concluded in 2022. Much of the balance will be directed to planned funding increases to the Classroom Enhancement Fund to continue work rectifying historic damage done to public schooling by the previous Liberal government and to continue improvements to working and learning conditions. Details on the latter will have to await new school funding allocations announced in the weeks ahead.

As is evident, Independent (private) Schools continue to be big winners with new funding up \$72 million or 14.5 per cent to more than \$570 million. Funding to this area increases in tandem with levels of per student spending in the public system with added stimulus provided by enrolment growth. The latter is of special importance in that, as resources to address challenges in the public system have been held in check, parents are incentivized to migrate their children into private sector alternatives that benefit from de facto indexation to larger system spending.

Child Care, as expected, sees a modest increase of 4.6 per cent as the province continues the rollout of earlier programming initiatives which, for some years now, have been situated within the public school system's overall funding envelope. Special account monies are new funding intended to address early literacy screening and dyslexia initiatives and should be recognized and credited as such.

And, as mentioned before, new Capital Spending sees a marked increase as BC scrambles to deal with the impact of rising student enrolments. Yet, as the BCSTA comment indicated, this is for new school construction only and does not cover refurbishment costs of existing facilities.

Indeed, the budgetary approach favoured by the current government centres on an explicit targeting of new monies to a small set of defined needs like contract costs and monies for more students. Yet our schools are complex and expansive institutions that face inflationary pressure affecting not just wages and salaries but benefit costs, and those related to learning materials, utilities, specialized services, professional development, recruitment, transportation, IT and a host of other factors. While the annual Funding Allocation System is intended to capture these demands when budgetary allocations are set, there has not been a clear or consistent recognition of budgetary pressures in these areas and how they impinge upon school system mandates in the instructional arena.

And then what about system innovation? Surely support for the latter is needed for our public schools to meet the complex and evolving needs of students, thereby reducing both the attractiveness of private sector alternatives and the ongoing pressure to fund them.

John Malcolmson, IPE/BC Board member