



Budget 2024

What's in Store for Public Education?

The provincial budget has been released. Let's take a look at what's in store for public education in BC for the coming year.

Increases for Capital Construction - A major area of spending this year is new school construction with a 21 per cent jump geared to addressing continued growth in student enrollment. Next year an additional 30 per cent increase is expected. These increases acknowledge cost pressures that rising enrollment is already "pricing in" to the school system.

New Buildings, but where are the Teachers? - There is an ironic downside to these critically important capital funding increases. That is, without a robust recruitment and retention strategy the best that can be hoped for is a continuation of the dramatic shortage of Teachers and Education Assistants. The worst case scenario is more schools and classrooms but a further erosion of the relative number of teachers and EAs.

Small Increases in Operations Funding - 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 for teachers and support staff and administrator compensation. Much of the balance will be directed to planned funding increases to the Classroom Enhancement Fund to continue work rectifying historic damage done 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.

Private Schools are the big winners - Independent (private) Schools will get \$72 million more or a 14.5 per cent increase to more than \$570 million. This amounts to a publicly funded subsidy of more than half a billion dollars to private schools. As resources to address challenges in the public system have been held in check, parents are incentivized to send their children to private sector alternatives that benefit from de facto indexation to larger system spending.

Child Care Increases - 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.

Trades Training - Given the tremendous shortage of skilled workers in BC and elsewhere, it is becoming increasingly important for government to invest in future-ready trades training, equipment and facilities at the K-12 and post secondary levels. Training subsidies, better wages, and improved working conditions for unionized workers will help attract and build a strong workforce for the future. But the budget does not sufficiently reflect these critical needs.

Budgetary Pressures- As was the case with previous governments, Budget 2024 centres on targeting of new monies to a small set of defined needs like contract costs and resources for more students. Yet our schools are complex 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 captures these demands when budgetary allocations are set, allocation processes do not speak to the overall size of the pie. There has not been a clear or consistent recognition of budgetary pressures in these areas and how they impinge on schools' core mandate - providing instruction to students.

Complex needs in education- And what about system innovation? Surely, this is needed for our public schools to meet the complex and evolving needs of students, reducing both the attractiveness of private sector alternatives and the ongoing pressure to fund them.

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