

## A “Crisis in ESL Education” in BC Schools

Canada is one of the top countries in the world in terms of numbers of immigrants and refugees accepted annually. BC and, in particular Vancouver and the urban areas that surround it, receive the second highest numbers of such “new Canadians” in Canada. One direct result of this is that English as a Second Language [ESL] learners in BC public schools are rapidly increasing. ESL learners now constitute the majority in the larger urban school districts, and are rapidly increasing in numbers in all other jurisdictions of the province. It is, therefore, critical that we support these new learners, our future citizens and tax payers, as effectively as possible. This mandate has become increasingly challenging for a variety of reasons.

This document first summarizes the core issues, makes some recommendations for action, then explores the underlying complexity that has helped to create what we are calling a “crisis in ESL education” – a crisis for the students and their teachers.

### A. Executive Summary:

#### 1. Funding Cap:

The funding cap for additional support, currently set at a maximum of five years, is flawed. ESL learners represent a much wider range of learning readiness.

- ESL learners are as varied, in terms of need, as their English-speaking counterparts, yet no limits on support for English learners with additional needs exist. [e.g. Learning Assistance, Gifted, etc.]
- French Immersion constitutes a similar process to learning English as a Second/Additional Language yet French has no “time limit” for provision of support.

RECOMMENDATION: Dismiss the funding cap. In addition, if funding is specifically targeted, optimal support for designated ESL learners is assured.

#### 2. Audit Process:

The current audit process used to assess school district use of ESL funding is flawed due to the variable interpretation of the criteria that have been set out.

- Variability in the judgment of what constitutes compliance with criteria listed is common.
- Ministry documents state that an ESL specialist should be working with these learners yet this is neither mandated nor funded.

RECOMMENDATION: Ensure that the audit process is fair and equitable by training auditors at length and giving preference to those who understand and have experience with the complexities of the issues in both urban and rural contexts.

### 3. Caseloads:

Limits on the number of students that one full time teacher supports, how many learners are considered optimal per group, and the frequency of support provided are not in place. This is problematic in all areas of the province, though for different reasons.

- Optimal group size and composition is as critical here as it is for class size and composition in general.
- What constitutes one year of service? Currently no minimum level of support per week has been mandated for ESL learners.

RECOMMENDATION: Specify frequency of support based on linguistic level of the learner, with an overall minimum per week for any ESL learner. Targeted funding would also assist with manageable caseloads.

### 4. Graduation Credits:

Secondary ESL Learners cannot receive credit for "sheltered" ESL Courses because these are considered as "service" rather than "curriculum".

- The mandate of ESL teachers is to support learners in their efforts \*to access age/grade content knowledge and make appropriate academic progress along with their age peers. While done in a "language adapted" fashion it is nonetheless as "outcomes focused" as any content course. In fact, the Ministry allows "regular" content courses to be "language adapted" for up to 20%. Such sheltered courses carry full core credit.
- Foreign language study receives credit yet the content is, for all intents and purposes, the same – namely gaining oral and print fluency in the target language together with some understandings about the target culture.

RECOMMENDATION: It is vital that we explore a framework for creating a credit basis for all ESL Courses.

## **B. Four Factors in the “Crisis in ESL Education”**

### **1. Funding Cap**

Currently school districts receive \$1100.00 per Ministry designated ESL student on top of the base amount per student. The purpose of this additional funding is to provide the additional support required to meet the goal for these learners as outlined in the Ministry ESL Policy:

*The goal of English as a Second Language education is to assist students to become proficient in English, to develop intellectually and as citizens, and to enable them to achieve the expected learning outcomes of the provincial curriculum.*

<http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/esl/policy/definition.htm#goals>

Unfortunately **funding for ESL services is not targeted**; this means that school districts are not required to show how ESL funds are spent. The allocation of funds is dependent upon the knowledge base and attitudes of senior administrators and principals toward ESL learning and programs. Funds can be easily redirected to other programs with the rationale that ultimately they will benefit ESL students. In addition, the per student funding level has not changed since the inception of this Ministry policy. There have been increases in the per capita costs for education and in the Special Needs funding categories, but this increase has not been reflected in ESL student funding. As a result, there is not enough support for many ESL students to enable them to reach their potential as learners and as productive members of our society.

Since 1997 the Ministry of Education has placed a **5-year maximum allotment for funding support** for non-English speaking students. This has come to be known as the 5-year Cap. At the same time the Ministry’s ESL Policy and Guidelines state our obligations toward these learners.

Much research has been done on the number of years it takes to become competent in a second language; numbers vary. It is commonly accepted that people acquire two different types of English: **social English**, which is used in everyday interactions, and **academic English**, which is more complex, but necessary for the tasks of academic learning. A person learns social English

much more quickly than academic English and often is competent within two or three years at that level. Academic English, on the other hand, may take many more years to learn.

Other factors enter here as well. How much schooling has the learner already had – and was it of a similar type? How similar is the home language to the language of instruction? How old is the learner when starting the study of English? How good a risk-taker is the learner? How well does the learner understand “schooling”? [see also the outline below.] Therefore, for many students, for a variety of reasons, five years is simply not enough time to acquire both the social and academic English required of them in our school system. [The concurrent goal of acquainting students with Canadian culture is often entirely overlooked.]

In a recent longitudinal study of ESL students in the Vancouver School District, a study that examined the number of ESL students who remained in academic courses throughout secondary school, Dr. Lee Gunderson of the Language and Literacy Education Department of the University of British Columbia found that there was a **65% disappearance rate of ESL students from provincially examinable academic courses between Grade 8 and Grade 12**. In other words, of the ESL students who took academic courses in Grade 8, 65% were no longer registered in academic courses by Grade 12. A further study is attempting to expand our understanding of this distressing phenomenon. In addition, many secondary aged ESL students are not able to graduate by the time they are 19; they either drop out of school and take unskilled, low-paying jobs or they go into Adult Education programs, if they can afford them.

In summary, there are a number of reasons why the 5 Year Cap on funding is problematic and needs to be removed.

- Immigrant learners vary in the same way all populations do. As noted in Ministry documents, learners learn in different ways and at different rates. ESL learners also have varied learning needs and different rates of acquiring the English Language. Treating them all the same in terms of time allotted for support is, therefore, problematic.
- The range of learners includes immigrants who have been to school since age 3 and refugees who have never had opportunities for something as “normal” as going to school. In addition, since they arrive at different ages and stages of schooling development (or lack thereof), the amount of support and the time frame given can be quite critical. The current system creates a one-size-fits-all frame that does not support each individual to achieve to her/his potential.

- Immigrant learners arrive all year but teacher allocation is decided at the start of the year – no room for flex. It is not appropriate for recently arrived ESL learners to be “taking time” from equally deserving but somewhat less needy ESL learners at the elementary and middle school levels, simply because they arrive later in the school year. At the secondary level, students arriving part way through the year may not be able to get into the courses they need/want. With its complications of graduation requirements, losing a semester or more because the “schedule” is full, is not acceptable treatment for any learner, ESL or not. This again relates to how funding allotments are counted. If learners are arriving later in the year, not only is sufficient support fragmented or not available, they have “missed” some of their funded time allotment.
  
- While it is helpful to have flexibility in the design of ESL programs in order to meet the needs of different types of ESL learners, lacking clarity and a firm definition as to what constitutes a year of service is problematic. Children in school districts with low numbers of ESL students, or rural districts may receive as little as 1 period every 2 weeks, while those in districts with high ESL populations may receive 2 or 3 periods of support per day.
  
- While Ministry ESL Policy (1999) states that students who still require ESL services after they have reached the 5 year cap, should have access to these services, due to funding constraints, this policy, as it is not mandated, tends to be disregarded.

## **2. Audit Process**

Due to the “accountability” orientation of the current government, teachers – specifically specialist support teachers - have been required to produce an enormously increased quantity of print documentation of support service given. All teachers document and track student learning in a variety of ways as part of their professional obligations to students and their parents. ESL specialists are no different. However, it appears that much of the detail of documentation required now is over and above what every teacher already does, seems somewhat Orwellian in its focus on detail, and puts teachers in a position of sacrificing time with students in order to complete the “required” paperwork.

This past year the Ministry has been working with ESL teachers to improve the audit process. However, beyond the open-ended outline the ministry has provided, what is examined and what is judged to be acceptable or not is left to the discretion and interpretation of individual auditors. Auditors have admitted to knowing little about ESL support and have even conceded that they are “simply bean counters” whose mandate is to find money not being used “optimally”. This has led to much confusion, not to mention raised stress levels on everyone’s

part, regarding what is necessary and sufficient. In an effort to second-guess what an auditor may require, teachers tend to overcompensate in terms of creating a paper trail, all they desire is to ensure that support for their learners is not reduced even further or, worse yet, cut completely.

### 3. Caseloads

The number of ESL students one teacher supports continues to rise and the groups have become ever more complex [see notes above about the variations]. In the urban setting in particular, teachers report an increase over the last five years, ranging from 30-45%. This has implications for optimal teaching and learning environments for these, our future citizens. The implications vary depending on the context:

- Current best practice and research in the field makes it clear that class size and composition are directly related to ability to learn efficiently and effectively. In the urban setting group size tends to be too large or too heterogeneous for optimal learning. Reasons for this have to do with the issues noted above.
- In the rural school districts and those with small numbers of ESL students having too few students in need of support creates less than ideal learning situations as well. If caseload is the only criterion of relevance in assigning teachers, students scattered across a large district often do not receive optimal amounts of support for their learning simply because of the travel distances involved for their ESL support teacher to reach them. Additionally, teachers often have no choice but to clump all ESL learners together for support, regardless of these learners' differing needs for that support.
- At the elementary level, some districts with high ESL populations have created "full day" kindergarten classes for students speaking a language other than English at home, to help them develop English fluency and become familiar with Canadian culture. Other districts do not provide kindergarten ESL students with any extra support, believing it is better to save the support until children are attending school fulltime. [Both are counted as one year of service.]  
With the strong emphasis on developing early literacy some districts have used ESL funding to create Reading Recovery programs for elementary ESL students, even before they have acquired the oral English skills they need to access such specialized reading support – another reason to target ESL funding.

#### 4. Graduation Credits

Secondary ESL students, like their elementary counterparts vary greatly in the type and amount of additional support given and/or required. In the Lower Mainland's "high ESL" school districts, ESL learners are provided with "sheltered" instruction before they enter grade level content classes. This means that students are grouped together for instruction – usually by linguistic level in English. [the Ministry's ESL Standards outline 4 levels of linguistic competence] How much of this type of support is provided is based on the assessed linguistic levels of these learners.

A point of great concern for ESL students and their parents is that such ESL Courses are not awarded credit towards graduation. This is because ESL is considered a service given to students rather than a subject with a specified curriculum. It is thus viewed by many as a "hurdle to get through" rather than a set of skills and knowledge that is of value. It is ironic that students taking a beginner course in French, German, Mandarin or several other languages, receive credit while students learning English do not.

Often ESL students, with the strong encouragement of their families, take the minimum amount of ESL support a school may demand and then opt for "regular" courses. This creates challenges for the secondary subject teachers because they are now delivering content to an ever-widening range of student linguistic ability, let alone taking into consideration that these learners often do not have the appropriate background knowledge and experiences to access the content of the course.

While secondary ESL students report spending countless additional hours trying to keep up and cope with reading and homework, their attempt to compress language learning due to the external constraints of the system [time limit, credit requirements, etc.] are certainly contributing factors in the high "dropout" rate noted in the Gunderson study. On the other hand, a longitudinal study recently completed in Calgary, conducted by Dr. Hetty Roessingh, highlights the value of specific sheltered ESL instruction. It demonstrated quite dramatically how a specifically constructed sheltered content-based ESL program increased not only the graduation rate but also the ability of these learners to effectively and successfully continue their studies at a post-secondary level.

A contingent issue here is what is known as B/AA Courses [Board Authority/Authorized]. Such courses are credit-bearing and can count as elective credits toward graduation. They are generally created to meet local needs and can address a wide range of specialized student and teacher interests. Recently ESL specialists have begun to create several of these courses. While this is a boon to ESL students who can take them and acquire elective credits toward graduation, they do not count for the critical core credits needed.

It does not need to be that difficult for ESL students with appropriate background knowledge and skills to access core credits. If, for example, an ESL Social Studies Course were to be given credit, albeit not the full four credits given to the “regular” course, ESL students could move forward in a sheltered program that still provides the language support needed while acquiring the content. In such a scenario, both students and parents can feel that progress toward graduation continues rather than the current climate of “being on hold” while acquiring enough English fluency to be allowed to take the credit-bearing courses.

It is noteworthy that such a scenario also has obvious implications for teacher training for the content specialist now teaching a language-adapted course or, conversely, the ESL specialist now teaching a content-based language course.

### **C The Domino Principle or How the “Crisis in ESL Education” Came to Be**

Teaching English as a Second or Additional Language is recognized as a specialist field around the world; it includes a wide range of understandings, strategies, skills and techniques pertaining to the teaching and learning of language, content and culture. These understandings have a different orientation – a different base of “assumed” knowledge on the part of the learner - than other specialist fields that support learners with additional learning needs such as Learning Assistance, Special Education, Gifted Education, and Aboriginal Education. On the one hand, the BC Ministry of Education’s ESL Policy Framework and Guidelines [both published in 1999] state clearly that programs for non-English speaking students are to be under the direction of an ESL specialist teacher. On the other hand, current reality includes a constellation of factors and a lack of implementation of that policy.

With the restructuring of educational funding that has occurred over the past four years and the “downloading” of costs onto school districts, school boards have had to make some difficult funding decisions, including cutbacks in programs and support structures that focus on student support. They have been careful to protect “classrooms”; however, they have reduced funding for many of the support programs that provide additional help to students who are not “within the normal expectations for their grade level”. One result has been that the number of specialist teacher positions has been reduced, including support for ESL, Learning Assistance, Special Education teachers, teachers of the Gifted, Teacher-Librarians, School Psychologists, and Speech and Language Pathologists.

A common approach that has been used by school districts to cope with the reductions in funding at the elementary and middle school levels has been the

creation of a service delivery model for support called a Resource Team or Learning Services Team, or some variation on that title. A Resource Team [RT] is comprised of a number of “specialist teachers”, each of whom is assigned to support a given number of classrooms and is responsible for meeting the needs of *all* the students in those classrooms who have been designated as having additional learning needs. Thus, an ESL specialist might be supporting students who have a learning difficulty and need Learning Assistance, students who have severe physical and/or intellectual challenges, as well as ESL students. Likewise, Learning Assistance specialists or Special Education specialists will find themselves supporting a wide range of learner needs, far beyond their specific specialist training.

It should be noted that in the elementary system and middle school systems, ESL students are simply registered in a class at their age/grade level, regardless of linguistic capacity in English. The classroom teacher must do what s/he can to support the language, content and cultural learning of these students and the RT teachers provide additional instruction for these learners - and their teachers - as everyone struggles to cope with grade level learning.

The number of these ‘specialists’ in a given school is determined by the school district administrative staff in response to the levels of support authorized [funded] by the Ministry of Education. Based on estimates given in June and revised before the end of September, schools are informed at the beginning of each school year how many “FTE’s of support staff” they will receive for the year. [FTE means “full time equivalent” so that 1.0 FTE is one full time teacher.] This number of support staff usually does not change in a given school year even though students arrive at schools throughout the year. In the larger Lower Mainland school districts it is not uncommon for a school to receive upward of 20 new students after the September 30<sup>th</sup> funding deadline. In the Vancouver School District there has been an average of over 300 new ESL students arriving each month for the current school year. Individual schools are expected to cope with the new students with the staffing they have already been allotted for the year. [See below how this affects secondary schools]

The number of specialists per school is determined in the following ways:

- for Learning Assistance, by a straight percentage of the school population or a district-determined funding formula.
- for Special Education, via a lengthy assessment and evaluation process conducted by licensed school psychologists
- for ESL students, via assessment and placement by an ESL specialist teacher [Should an ESL learner have learning needs in addition to language learning this process is stalled as there is no common language with which to assess these needs. Currently only one school district has access to a bilingual psychologist who is able to conduct home language assessments – and that only in two languages.]

An additional factor to consider is not just whether additional support is required, but also how much is available given all the above determinations. Because of the uncertainty of how much support staff will be required from year to year, in a given school, specialist support positions have become tenuous at best. One year a school may be allotted .6 FTE for Learning Assistance, .2 for Special Education and 1.2 for ESL support; the next year it may be .8 for Learning Assistance, .2 for Special Education and .4 for ESL. As a result, many well qualified and highly experienced specialist teachers in all areas of specialization have left these positions because of a climate of “uncertainty” - can they stay at a particular school; will they end up with a “piecemeal” job that combines FTE pieces in order to remain full time, and most importantly, will they have the opportunity to use their specialist skills to support those learners they have been specifically trained to support? The sad reality is that these experts in their chosen specializations feel they cannot do an adequate job of teaching when they are required to work outside of their specialty in the RT service delivery model. In addition, they feel that they have too many students to support and not enough time to work with them.

Further, with growing teacher shortages overall and the flight of trained specialists into other teaching positions, many brand new teachers are pressed into service in the RT model without the basic qualification in even one specialist area. The energy and enthusiasm of a new teacher is a great bonus to any school but combined with minimal classroom experience, having them suddenly thrust into such a complex role is not optimal for them or for the learners they are attempting to support. Some school districts, in conjunction with their local unions have even agreed to call teachers who have worked with ESL students for one year ESL ‘specialists’ because of their accumulated experience. This does not begin to recognize the unique body of knowledge and language-focussed orientation that a trained ESL specialist has acquired.

At the secondary level, in the Lower Mainland’s high ESL school districts, ESL learners are provided with “sheltered” instruction before they can enter grade level content classes. This means that students are grouped together for instruction – when feasible, by linguistic level in English. [the Ministry’s ESL Standards, published in 2001, outline 4 levels of linguistic competence] How much of this type of support is provided is based on the linguistic level of these learners and, of course, the funding cap. Considering also the severely shortened timeline for graduation, optimal support to prepare these learners is doubly critical. Therefore, a trained specialist is the obvious choice to optimize instruction for these learners.

However, with growing class sizes (ESL blocks used to have a cap of 20 students per block] students are not making the rapid progress they could. In addition, many teachers are finding themselves teaching “one” ESL block without the appropriate training to support these learners. Again, the teacher shortage – together with increases in caseload/class size – have helped to create this

situation. Once the school year has begun, new problems present themselves for secondary ESL learners as appropriate timetabling becomes increasingly difficult, if not impossible, and eventually schools are simply “full”. Since immigrants and refugees arrive all year, this issue is not new, per se, but recent events around the world seem to have created a dramatic increase in numbers of learners registering in our schools.

In Vancouver, for example, additional “classes” of ESL students [a class is created when 20 students across the district cannot be placed/timetabled in their “home” schools] have always been created in the spring for a host of valid reasons. This year, such classes began to be created early in the fall and continued to be created until, as of May 1<sup>st</sup>, 13 such classes are scattered around the city. While this is an internal challenge for Vancouver to deal with as a district, the sheer volume of arrivals is not unique and the implied need for trained ESL specialists to support these learners is clear.

A final variable to add is the current crisis is the sudden increase in ESL learners who are refugees. At this time in Canada there is no official body to assume responsibility for the settlement of immigrant children and youth. Various Non-Governmental Organizations initiate the settlement process but the students come to our schools with virtually no preparation for their new reality. A very few school districts are able to offer limited settlement support for immigrant families and ESL students through multicultural liaison workers, but the amount of support compared to often quite obvious needs is not only insufficient but also neither equal nor equitable.

Teachers do what they can on the proverbial front lines – create “breakfast clubs” as it is clear the students are coming to school hungry, set up “chat sessions” to quietly help students understand about proper hygiene [often this includes providing and demonstrating the use of toothbrush and paste; sanitary pads, etc.].

The reality is that many such learners are not yet able to learn; first they have to deal with culture shock, past trauma, missing family members, lack of support systems and so much more – all in a language that is as alien as the new environment. Putting these learners on the five-year time clock for language, content and cultural support is even less tenable than for their non-English speaking immigrant peers.

A secondary teacher in the Lower Mainland has recently written about these concerns, serving here as an illustrative example:

May 1, 2006

Dear Ms Bond:

Re: Refugee/Disrupted Education Student Needs:

As you may have heard, students from places such as Sudan, Afghanistan, Somalia and other war-torn or politically unsettled countries are arriving in our schools with needs far beyond our current resources. These students and their families frequently are victims of trauma, are coping with dysfunctional families - or are missing family members - and are totally unprepared for school and society in our communities. We are hoping that you will be able to help us with situations like this as they are increasingly impacting our schools.

Here is a sample scenario from a high school one of us teaches at in the Lower Mainland.

In April of 2006 two girls arrived at the school with an "uncle" who quickly left to get to his job. The uncle stayed just long enough to fill in a registration form. There were, however, significant gaps and inconsistencies in the information he provided:

- For the birthdates of the girls he wrote March 21, 1989 and March 21, 1991. This seems somewhat unlikely.
- For the previous school name he wrote "Afghan". Place of birth: Iran, however, it was more likely Afghanistan.
- Language spoken was left blank.
- There were no records of any kind presented, neither their medical nor educational status.

The clerical staff was unable to communicate with either the "uncle" or the girls themselves. The ESL teacher tried to elicit more information but the language barrier prevented her from obtaining any additional data regarding previous schooling, family background or current status.

As the semester was already well under way there were no spaces in appropriate classes available, including the two ESL blocks that would have at least been a starting point. These students were unfamiliar with any school setting and did not even know the basics of how to hold a pen or pencil, track a page from left to right/ top to bottom, never mind follow class directions. They did not associate print with meaning. At present, the school is relying on other Farsi speaking students to act as interpreters /tutors. These two girls, however, need so much more. They require intensive individualized programs to address their unique needs starting from the fact that the entire routine of "doing school" is alien to them. It is, after all, our mandate as educators to provide appropriate education and prepare all learners to become contributing citizens of this province and country but where do we start when there is no room and no personnel to help. One route is to make use of additional support blocks available or Special Education Assistants who can work with these girls one-on-one, but neither is available. How, then, will the school be able to provide the services needed to enable them, and other students like them, to become successful members of society?

There are so many needs to be addressed. A few that come to mind are:

- Unfamiliarity with the new culture: food, clothing, manners, social behaviour, hygiene
- Orientation to classroom behaviour and routines
- Education, in this case beginning at a preschool level but within a secondary setting
- Counselling support for trauma and/or culture shock
- Translation and interpretation - actually a cultural bridging is needed that goes far beyond mere translation
- Lack of family support and availability
- Parents or guardians who are unable to provide for basic needs
- Fear of authority figures and/or the new culture
- Medical needs: refugee students and families are often in poor health
- Transportation needs

We would very much appreciate any help you can provide to enable our schools to welcome these students and families with resources - human and material - that will provide the kind of intense educational, psychological and medical support desperately needed. We believe that ultimately it is to the benefit of all Canadians to help such students acquire the social and cultural skills, not to mention the English language skills, that will enable them to become productive, contributing members of Canadian society.

In anticipation of your reply, we remain sincerely yours,

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To conclude, in British Columbia there was a very deliberate philosophical decision made to ensure that our schools be **inclusive**, to include all types of learners in our classrooms. Inclusive schools require a high level of collaboration among classroom teachers, a variety of specialist support teachers and other support staff if we are to provide optimal learning environments for *all* students. When there is inadequate support for any one group of learners, classroom teachers and specialist support teachers are not able to effectively meet the needs of students. ESL learners are one such group. As our future citizens they, too, deserve the opportunity to develop each to their individual potential.

*This outline of issues and understandings about educational support for those commonly referred to as ESL Learners has been prepared by members of the ESL PSA [ English as a Second Language Provincial Specialist Association], in particular Joy Wild, Sylvia Helmer, Pat Tanaka and Sydney Dean. We represent three of the Lower Mainland school districts where over 90% of those designated as ESL are attending public schools. Our information summary is based on current best practice as well as a synopsis of reported issues and concerns. Any one of us would be happy to answer further questions you might have.*

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