



British Columbia Teachers' Federation

100-550 West 6th Avenue, Vancouver, BC V5Z 4P2 • 604-871-2283, 1-800-663-9163 • www.bctf.ca
TTY 604-871-2185 (deaf and hard of hearing) Executive Office fax: 604-871-2290

A brief to the Budget 2010 Consultation Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services

from the
British Columbia Teachers' Federation

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President

Executive Director

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<http://www.bctf.ca/BriefsAndPositionPapers.aspx>

Protecting and improving education should be a top priority for the BC government. Unfortunately, much of this last decade has seen conditions in BC schools worsen, rather than improve.

Recent government decisions have just added to existing shortfalls in funding for schools. Unless the BC government reverses direction, projections are for conditions to deteriorate further.

We urge significant changes in the funding of education in BC and offer four recommendations for these changes. In addition, we repeat our previous call for the government to take action to eliminate child poverty.

Recommendation 1: Increase funding to reflect real increases in costs.

We have often heard the mantra of “highest funding ever.” However, what is hidden by that slogan is the reality of “highest costs ever.”

Funding has not kept up with inflation, with the provisions of the collective agreement, or with the costs that have been downloaded onto school districts. The result of this has been cuts in service to students. Supports for students with special needs have been reduced. School libraries and teacher-librarians have been cut. Classroom resources have been reduced. Now funding for maintaining our schools has disappeared.

We could go on and on in identifying these, but the story is familiar and repeated, although there is little sign that it has been heard by those who decide the provincial budget.

Recommendation 2: Maintain stability—keep promises made to school districts about funding.

Retroactively cancelling the Annual Facility Grant was only the latest failure of the government to deliver on its promises. It happened previously when funding rules were changed midyear and holdback funding was cancelled.

It happened in the 2008–09 school year when funds promised for Distributed Learning grants were frozen by Treasury Board (according to the ministry Annual Service Plan of July, 2009). It has happened to the many groups that have built programs based on reasonable expectations that they would continue to be funded: sports organizations and Parent Advisory Councils, in particular.

In many cases, commitments had already been made by boards and funds expended, based on a promise from the government. While government gets away with refusing to pay its obligations, local boards of education cannot.

When a policy changes once, it can be accepted if there are special circumstances. However, when it becomes a common mode of operation, cynicism becomes an understandable response. This cynicism itself then becomes another factor contributing to a downward spiral.

When school districts objected to the arbitrary change in rules over the holdback funds, the minister of the day promised that in the future there would be consultation before such decisions were made. This is another promise broken.

Recommendation 3: Fully fund new requirements and new initiatives.

The last decade has been characterized by more and more requirements put on school districts, with inadequate funding to meet those requirements. Even when they are laudable and widely supported decisions, such as all-day Kindergarten, they have a negative impact on the whole education system when they force boards to cut elsewhere to meet the new requirements.

The list of downloaded costs is long and disturbing. Some recent examples include increases in MSP premiums for employees (and indexed now for annual increases in the future); the cost of becoming carbon neutral; freezing the transportation grants since 2001; H1N1 prevention costs.

The nature and impact of these downloaded costs are outlined in more detail in an appendix—“Education program funding: A comparison of the September 2009 Budget Update to the February 2009 budget estimates”

(http://www.bctf.ca/uploadedFiles/Publications/Research_reports/2009EF03.pdf).

All-day Kindergarten is another example of a commendable policy that will have a negative impact on all the rest of the education system:

- The Early Childhood Learning Agency (an arm of the Ministry of Education) said that total operating costs of all-day K would be about \$130 million a year.
- The government announced that it has budgeted \$44 million in 2010–11 for half the students of Kindergarten age, and \$107 million for the second year for all Kindergarten-age students.
- The actual funding included in the September 2009 updated budget is \$37.6 million for the first year and \$78.6 million in 2011–12.

The actual dollars provided by the budget are considerably less than the government promised and even further below the real cost that its Agency said would be required. Where will the funds come from? Unless there is more funding, they can only come from reducing resources for other parts of the system.

Recommendation 4: Eradicate child poverty.

The following is what we said last year. It applies even more for this year, as the economic crisis has left many workers without jobs and many more families without the resources to fully support their children.

Child poverty can be eradicated—government should act

The first thing to recognize is that child poverty is a result of family poverty. Child poverty can only be eliminated if there are government policies to increase the income of low-income families.

One action that could be taken immediately is to increase the minimum wage. BC's minimum wage is among the lowest in the country, and has not been adjusted for six [now seven] years.

Another action would be to place a priority on finding homes for the children who are homeless and their families. No child should face the physical and emotional impact of being without a home. We cannot say that we are serious about providing an education to a child when she or he does not have a stable, warm, and welcoming place to live.

British Columbia, one of Canada's richest provinces, has the highest level of child poverty in the country. One out of every five students lives in poverty. This is a shameful situation, and does harm to the future of BC's society and economy.

Beyond that, the BC government should adopt a plan to eliminate child poverty. It should join with Quebec and Newfoundland and Labrador and create a comprehensive plan. The plans in these two provinces address the range of supports that are necessary to overcome poverty, including employment-related programs, income assistance, and affordable housing.

One small action in BC has addressed the school experience of children living in poverty—the courts have ruled that schools cannot charge fees for programs leading to graduation.

Unfortunately, fees have not disappeared. Loopholes were adopted by government in regulations. Some schools have found other guises for attempting to collect money from families. This is unacceptable, but understandable, because the province did not increase education funding to cover the resources that had been, incorrectly, paid for by fees in the past.

A provincial plan to eliminate poverty should incorporate all of these elements—income for families, housing for the homeless, meals provided for hungry students, and a fee-free public education. We urge the province to set a target, create a plan, and take action to eliminate child poverty.

Attachment—Appendix, BCTF research report: *Education program funding: A comparison of the September 2009 Budget Update to the February 2009 budget estimates.*

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