



British Columbia Teachers' Federation

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Children in Care

A report to the

Representative for Children and Youth

from the

British Columbia Teachers' Federation

October 2009



President



Executive Director

Children in Care Report 2009

BC Teachers' Federation

bctf.ca/BriefsAndPositionPapers.aspx

Context:

As the teachers in the public schools of British Columbia, we have a special responsibility to help ensure that the aesthetic, emotional, intellectual, physical, and social development of children in care is met. Representatives of the British Columbia Teachers' Federation from the Aboriginal Education Advisory Committee, the Committee for Action on Social Justice, and the Professional Issues Advisory Committee have read the reports from the Representative for Children and Youth entitled, *Joint Special Report, 2007* and *Kids, Crime and Care, 2009*, and responded by making a series of recommendations to the Executive Committee of the British Columbia Teachers' Federation. The BCTF has considered this advice and submits the following report to the Representative for Children and Youth for her consideration.

Section 1: Supporting children in care

Throughout the two reports of the Representative for Children and Youth, *Joint Special Report, 2007* and *Kids, Crime and Care, 2009*, a clear call is made for the gathering of information about children in care, so those responsible for these children may track and plan the educational progress of each child. While the BCTF agrees with the importance of supporting and planning for the educational progress of each child, we believe it is critical for teachers of children in care to have timely access to, and input to, that information. Teachers should work with principals and school-based teams, where appropriate, to access data on the children in care with whom they work. Teachers will respect the confidentiality of this data, as befits a professional working in any area with children.

Children in care often experience high rates of transiency, resulting in a lack of school attachment and belonging. The work done by Dr. Kimberly Schonert-Reichl at UBC draws a strong correlation between emotional attachment and comfort in schools as a predictor of future academic success.

In order to keep the attachment bond as intact as possible, teachers need to be fully informed that there are children in care in their classrooms so they may provide the appropriate support as needed. Unfortunately, more often than not, classroom teachers and school counsellors are completely unaware of children in care in their classrooms and schools, and therefore do not know that additional support may be needed.

Research shows that all children benefit by learning in an environment that is supportive of the whole child. This includes their social, emotional, aesthetic, intellectual, and physical development. The Ministry of Education's Framework for Early Learning recognizes the importance of all of these realms. The BCTF believes that limited information provided by the Foundation Skills Assessment test which focuses solely on literacy and numeracy scores is not

good enough. The learning plans of children in care have to be much broader in scope in order to support full learning potential and overall development of these children.

If teachers are to be able to support the learning plans for children in care, we recommend that:

- **There needs to be an appropriate sharing of information about children in care between the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Children and Family Development, and others involved in their formal education.**
- **Sharing information between those providing services, including classroom teachers, to children in care should be a cornerstone of interjurisdictional collaboration.**
- **A wide range of indicators, including the child's aesthetic, emotional, intellectual, social, and physical well-being, should be referenced when supporting and assessing the individual progress of children in care.**

Section 2: Specific supports and interventions for children in care

Research tells us that children need to feel safe and secure in their schools, and have a well-developed sense of belonging as a member of their school community in order to find academic success (Schonert-Reichl, 2009). Therefore, it is imperative that children in care be able to establish roots in their school community and not face the fragmentation that movement from school to school entails. In order to deepen their connections in their school, children in care should be able to be part of a grade-to-grade transition process, so they are introduced to their new teachers before they are expected to be part of a new class, with new expectations and procedures. Just as we gently initiate Kindergarten children into the world of school in order to minimize trauma and maximize success, children in care should be supported in their transitions from grade-to-grade and teacher-to-teacher. In the event that changing schools is unavoidable, we believe children in care should be involved, whenever appropriate, in their transition plans as they move from school to school. The goal of minimizing anxiety that surrounds any change can only be met if the children have a sense of some control over their lives. All of this should be done to help maintain and, hopefully, strengthen their attachment to the schools they attend and the adults who care for them.

Therefore, we recommend that the Representative for Children and Youth:

- **work with appropriate ministries to find alternatives to moving children in care from one school to another.**
- **include teachers working with children in care to help develop transition plans for students who move between grades or schools.**
- **include the students, as appropriate, in their own transition plans.**

Children in care have poor graduation rates. Any inducement that might encourage them to continue with their education, provide them with the impetus to set and be able to meet future goals, and give them a sense of financial security may well improve those dismal statistics. There are many bursaries, grants, and funding opportunities available for students who want to pursue post-secondary education and we believe that children in care need to receive information about

all such opportunities to further their education. Like all successful messaging, however, the information needs to be repeated often so the audience will remember and be clear about the objective. Social workers, school counsellors, and school support teams can help children in care find out about these financial aids as part of their overall support plans.

Therefore, we recommend that students in care be informed and annually reminded of post-secondary bursaries, grants, and scholarships that may be available to help them further their education.

Section 3: Common education plans for children in care

Children in care have unique needs which place them at higher risks for dropping out of school or becoming involved with the criminal justice system. In order to attempt to avoid this, we believe that common education plans need to be developed in collaboration with classroom teachers who are in a position to best support these students. School-based teams of professionals can also provide advice and support to children in care. The status and progress of each child in care should be discussed within school-based team meetings. This is where MCFD staff and classroom teachers can jointly develop common education plans for each child in care.

School-based counsellors should be assigned to children in care at a specific ratio in order to help track the progress of these students and provide them with ongoing support over time. We believe that these counselling positions need to be funded by the Ministry of Education over and above existing staffing levels.

Currently, classroom teachers are sometimes the last ones to know about a child in care being in their rooms. In some cases, critical information about a child's needs go unreported. Teachers need to be fully informed in order to provide quality learning experiences that meet the individual needs of these at-risk students. Classroom teachers require knowledge about the full spectrum of a child-in-care's developmental needs in order to best support each child-in-care's learning goals. Having common education plans developed in collaboration with MCFD staff is critical to providing these students with the supports they deserve.

Therefore, we recommend the following regarding common education plans:

- **Teachers and appropriate staff develop common education plans for children in care.**
- **School districts employ onsite school counsellors whose sole work is to support children in care (recommended ratio of one to eight).**
- **MCFD staff be fully involved in the development of a child's common education plan.**
- **Teachers receiving a child in care be fully informed about the child's status and history.**

Chronic underfunding of public schools has led to disparities between schools and with specific student populations. Consequently, children with special needs and children in care are far too often the first ones who fall through the cracks when education cuts happen. The report, *Kids, Crime and Care, 2009*, clearly points out some of these shocking imbalances in our collective ability to support children in care. Aboriginal students are at significantly higher risk than their

peers to be involved with the criminal justice system rather than graduate. Without funding of intervention services to support children in care, these imbalances will most likely continue.

We know that there are a willing cadre of teachers ready to work to develop innovative teaching and learning practices for children in care. All that is needed is a stable source of funding for such pilot initiatives. Without ongoing resources, it is difficult to develop initiatives, consolidate the learning gained, and integrate it into the daily practices of classroom teachers. We believe that systemic changes for children in care can only occur when programs for them are fully funded over the long term. We believe that additional funding needs to be available to do this work and that it must come from new sources outside of the MOE's current education budget. The MOE, MCFD, BCTF, and other education partner groups should be able to do this work in an intersectional manner in order to fully benefit the lives of children in care. Pilot programs, carefully designed and implemented, will allow for sharing of effective strategies and interventions for children in care across the province.

Therefore, we recommend that:

- **the BC government allocate new financial resources to support the special needs of children in care.**
- **collaboration between ministries occurs to address the unique needs of children in care.**
- **the MOE and MCFD allocate new funding for innovative pilot programs that support children in care.**
- **both ministries work collaboratively with classroom teachers and BCTF committees to develop and implement these programs.**

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