



CHAPTER 2:

Child poverty in BC public schools and economic pressures on families

This report is one of a series documenting the findings of the Poverty and Education survey.
For additional information, see: <http://www.bctf.ca/PovertyResearch.aspx>



A BC Teachers' Federation study. This survey was conducted by BCTF Research in collaboration with the Anti-poverty action group of the Committee for Action on Social Justice.

Poverty and
Education survey:
A teacher's
perspective



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About the Poverty and Education survey

The *Poverty and Education survey: A teacher's perspective* was conducted by BCTF Research in collaboration with the BCTF Anti-Poverty Action Group of the Committee for Action on Social Justice, building on the findings of focus group research that explored poverty and education issues with teachers in four school districts¹. The purpose of the provincial survey was to assess whether and to what extent the focus group findings reflect teachers' experience across the province, to deepen our understanding of how poverty and education issues vary by regional, socio-economic, and school characteristics, and to identify what resources are most needed to address poverty within BC schools and the community.

Contributions and acknowledgments

BCTF Research Department

- Research design, data analysis, and reporting of survey results: Margaret White, Senior Research Analyst
- Assistance in all phases of the research project: Anne Field, Research Assistant
- Leadership and support for the project: Larry Kuehn, Director, Research and Technology Division

Committee for Action on Social Justice—Anti-poverty action group

As staff and committee members have changed since the study began, we would like to acknowledge those who contributed, past and present, at various phases of the research project.

- Leadership, co-ordination, and survey promotion: Kathy Hartman, Assistant Director, Professional and Social Issues Division
- Leadership in the early phases of survey design: James Chamberlain, Assistant Director, Professional and Social Issues Division (up to August 2012)
- Pre-testing, survey promotion, and/or input into survey results: Amy Dash, Sue Spalding, Debbie Sabourin, Annie Ohana (current members as of May, 2013) and ongoing input from members of the CASJ Anti-Poverty Action Group.
- Survey development and questionnaire design: Ilse Hill (former member of the CASJ Anti-poverty action group)

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¹ White, M., Hill, I., Kemp, S., MacRae, J., and Young, L. (2012). *Poverty and education: A teacher's perspective—Summary of the findings of the focus group research*. Available at: www.bctf.ca/PovertyResearch.aspx.

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Information on study design and who responded to the survey: See *Chapter 1, Teachers who responded to the survey and the students that they teach*, at www.bctf.ca/PovertyResearch.aspx.

Introduction

Over the past decade, BC has experienced persistently-high child poverty rates. The *2014 Child Poverty Report Card*² shows that child poverty worsened after the 2008 global recession, with only marginal improvements since 2010 (using the after-tax Low Income Measure). In 2012, child poverty rates remained unacceptably high, with one in five (20.6%), or 169,420 BC children aged 0–17 living in poverty. *BC Child Poverty in Maps* show child poverty rates vary greatly within a local geographic area such as North Vancouver, North Vancouver City, and West Vancouver (from 7.3% up to 48%), Surrey and White Rock (from 8.2% up to 46.2%), and Langley City and Langley Township (from 7.9% to 41.4%).³ Whichever region of BC these children live in, most are attending public schools, or will be when they reach Kindergarten age. This means tens of thousands of children who attend BC public schools are experiencing the effects of poverty, and in some areas almost half of the children are in families with poverty-level incomes.

Considerable research exists on factors contributing to child poverty in Canada⁴ and on the impact of socio-economic factors on educational outcomes⁵. Much less is known about how persistently-high child poverty rates affect students attending BC public schools. There is evidence to suggest that BC children entering Kindergarten in the years following the global recession are more vulnerable in a number of developmental areas. Each year, Kindergarten students in BC are assessed by their teachers using the Early Development Instrument (EDI) developed by the Human Early Learning Partnership⁶. The EDI data shows that the percentage of Kindergarten children in BC schools who are vulnerable on one or more domains increased from 28.7% in Wave 3 (07/08 to 08/09) to 32.5% in Wave 5 (2011/12 to 2012/13), with vulnerability increasing in four of five domains: Physical Health and Well-being; Social Competence; Emotional Maturity; and Communication Skills and General Knowledge⁷.

One objective of the survey was to assess the extent to which students are experiencing poverty in BC classrooms, whether the proportion of students experiencing poverty has changed over time, and to elicit teachers' observations about how poverty has changed in the time they have been teaching at the school. This chapter reports on the quantitative and qualitative survey results on the proportion of students in BC classrooms who are experiencing poverty, and how poverty has changed in the school community, based on the perspective of teachers responding to the survey. The results are analyzed and presented by regional zone.

² First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition (2014). *2014 Child Poverty Report Card*, Factsheet #1, pp. 7–8.

³ See First Call's *BC Child Poverty in Maps* (Regional District and Census Tracts), available at www.still1in5.ca.

⁴ See Albanese, P. (2010), *Child Poverty in Canada*, Oxford University Press, for a comprehensive review of Canadian literature and analysis of causes of child poverty, including p. 21, entitled "BC's Child Poverty Shame".

⁵ See Brownell, M., Roos, N., Fransoo, R., et al. (2006), "Is the class half empty?: A population-based perspective on socioeconomic status and educational outcomes." *IRPP Choices*, 12(5), and Flessa, J.J. (2007), *Poverty and Education: Towards Effective Action: A Review of the Literature*. Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

⁶ HELP defines The Early Development Instrument (EDI) as "a questionnaire designed to measure children's development in kindergarten. Designed by Drs. Dan Offord and Magdalena Janus of McMaster University, the EDI is a checklist that kindergarten teachers complete for each child in their class... The EDI is a population level measure of child development. The results are reported at the group, NOT the individual level."

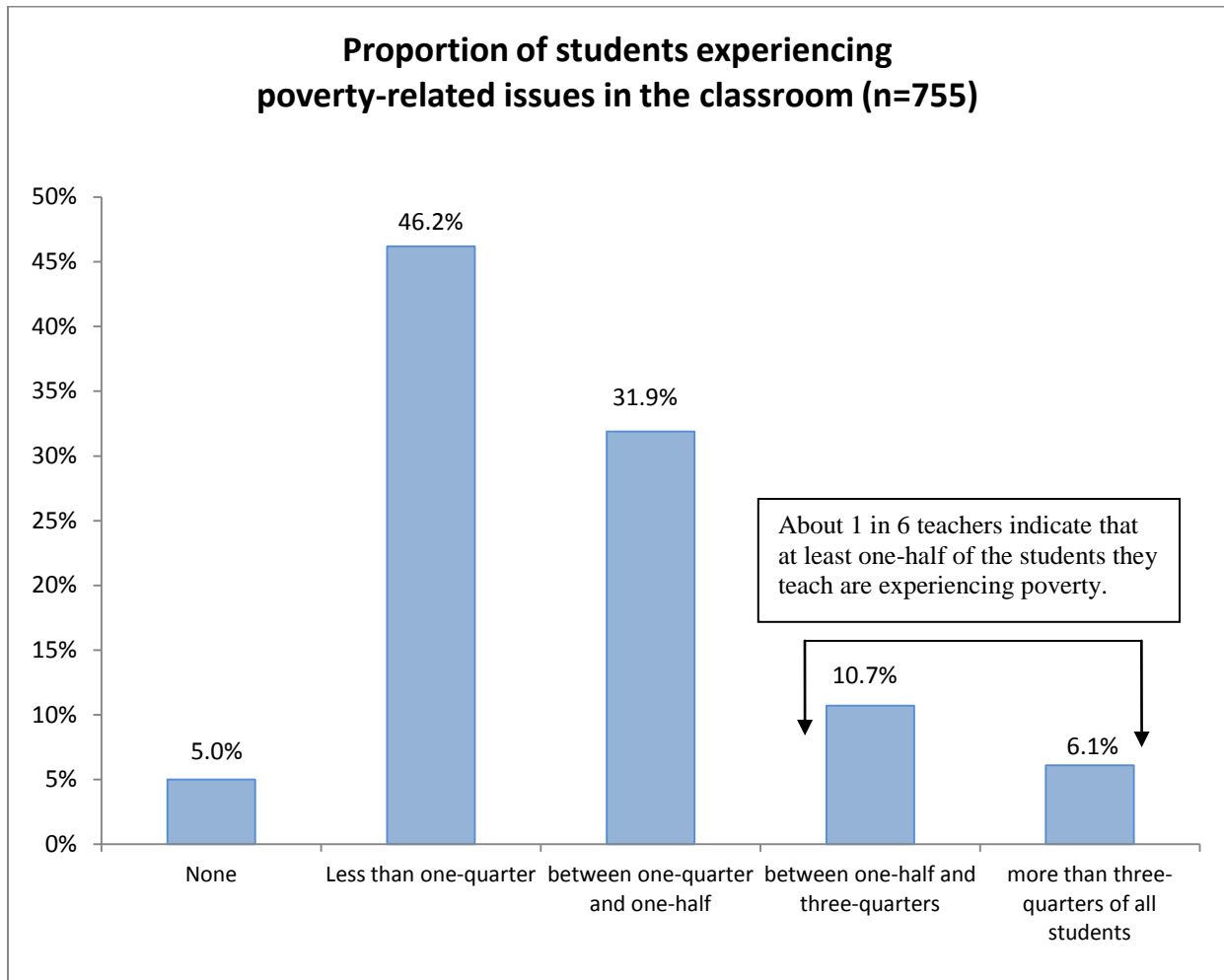
⁷ EDI statistics on the percentage of vulnerable children for BC by wave of data collection are from an Excel File provided by HELP with EDI data at the neighbourhood, school district, local health area, and provincial levels: *EDI Waves 2–5 (SD, LHA, NH, BC)*, last updated October 10, 2013. The file is available on the HELP Data Library webpage. Retrieved on January 8, 2015 at earlylearning.ubc.ca/maps/data/.

Survey results

Proportion of students experiencing poverty

The survey asked teachers, “Of the students you currently teach, please estimate the proportion experiencing poverty-related issues in the classroom.” Almost all of the 755 teachers who responded to the question teach students who are experiencing poverty-related issues. Only 5% of teachers answered “None” of the students they teach are experiencing poverty. Almost half of the respondents (46.2%) are teaching in what could be characterized as lower-poverty schools, with “Less than one-quarter” of students experiencing poverty. The other half of respondents are teaching in what could be characterized as higher-poverty schools, with 31.9% indicating “Between one-quarter and one-half”, 10.7% indicating “Between one-half and three-quarters”, and 6.1% indicating “More than three-quarters” of all students were experiencing poverty issues.

About one in six teachers have classes/teaching situations where at least one-half of the students are experiencing poverty. In a classroom of 30 students, this means from 15 students up to all of the students in the class may require support to overcome educational barriers related to poverty.

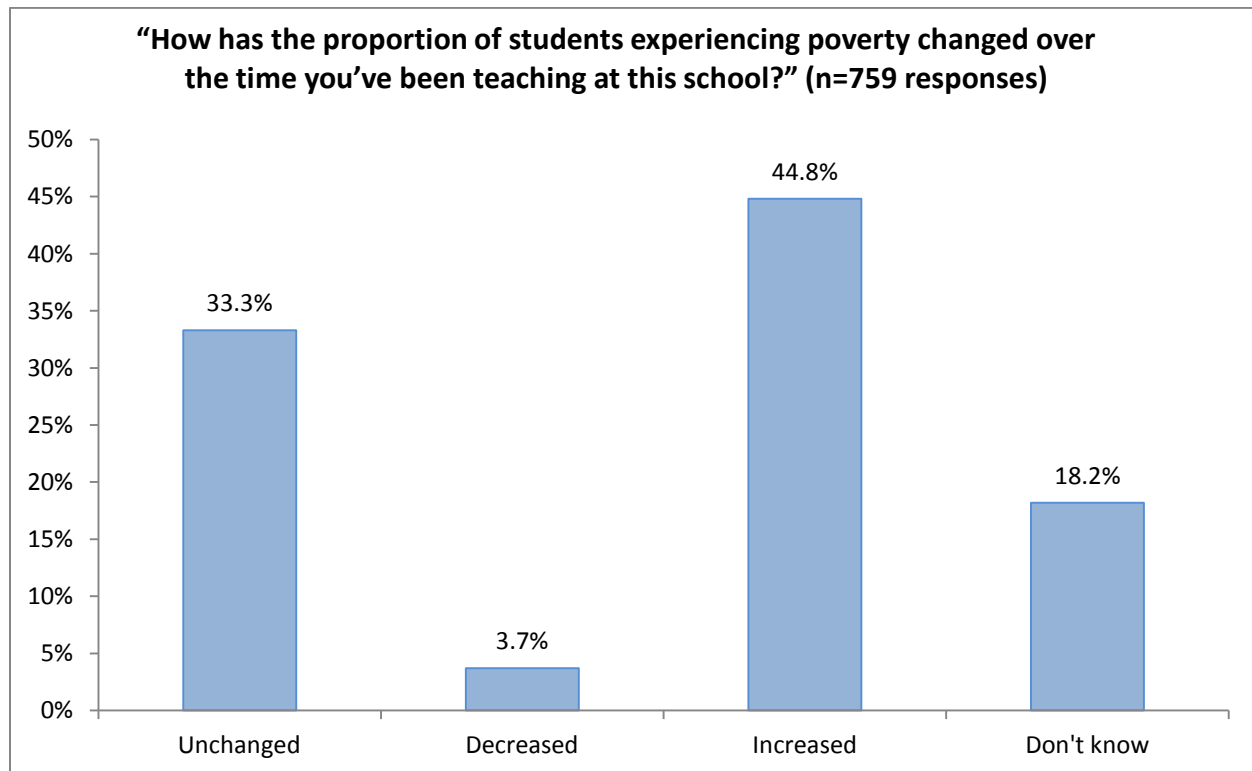


Regional zone

A breakdown of the responses by zone indicates that teachers in zones outside of the Lower Mainland were more likely to report a higher proportion of students in their class/teaching situation experiencing poverty compared to the sample average. Teachers in Kootenay (45.2%) and Okanagan (43.3%) reported “Between one-quarter and one-half” of the students they teach are experiencing poverty, considerably higher than the overall sample (31.9%). Those teaching in the North Coast zone are most likely to teach in settings where at least one-half of the students are experiencing poverty. Teachers in North Coast (24.1%) reported “Between one-half and three-quarters” of students experiencing poverty, more than double the sample as a whole (10.7%). Teachers in North Coast (10.3%) and North Central/Peace River (10.0%) reported “More than three-quarters of all students I currently teach” are experiencing poverty, while teachers in Fraser Valley (3.2%) were least likely to do so (see Appendix, Table 1).

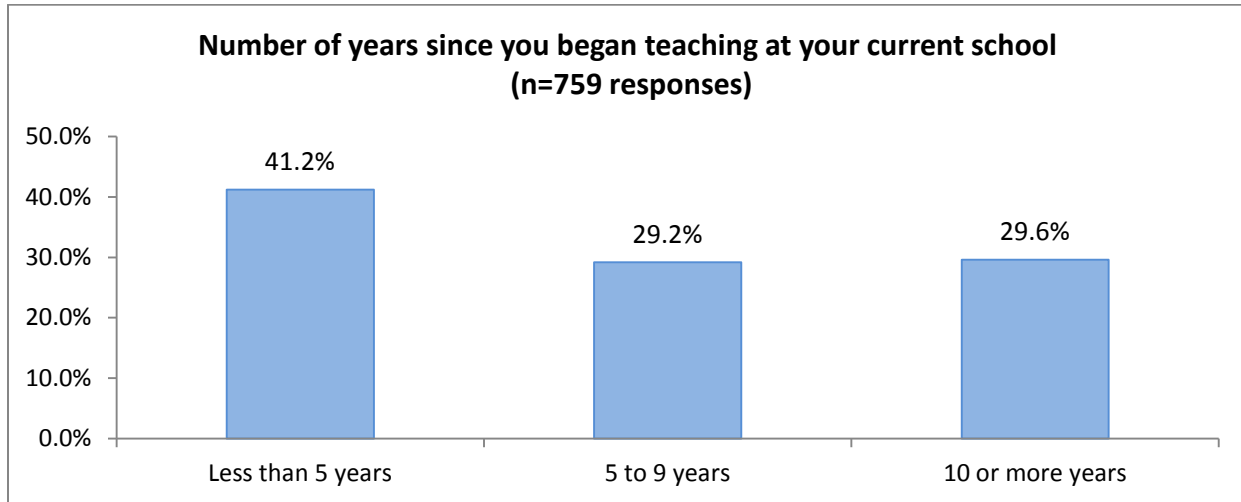
Changes in proportion of students experiencing poverty

The survey also asked teachers, “How has the proportion of students experiencing poverty changed over the time you’ve been teaching at this school?” Almost one-half (44.8%) of the 759 teachers who responded to the question indicated the proportion of students experiencing poverty had increased over the time they have been teaching at the school. Only 3.7% reported a decrease in the proportion of students experiencing poverty, while one-third (33.3%) reported poverty remained unchanged, and one in five respondents (18.2%) indicated “Don’t know”.



Number of years teaching at the current school

As socio-economic changes in neighbourhoods often occur gradually over the years, teachers who have been at a school for only a few years are less likely to report these changes than teachers who have spent several years at the same school. The length of time teachers in the survey have been teaching at their current school varies—41.2% of respondents have been teaching at their school less than 5 years, 29.2% for 5 to 9 years, and 29.6% for 10 or more years.



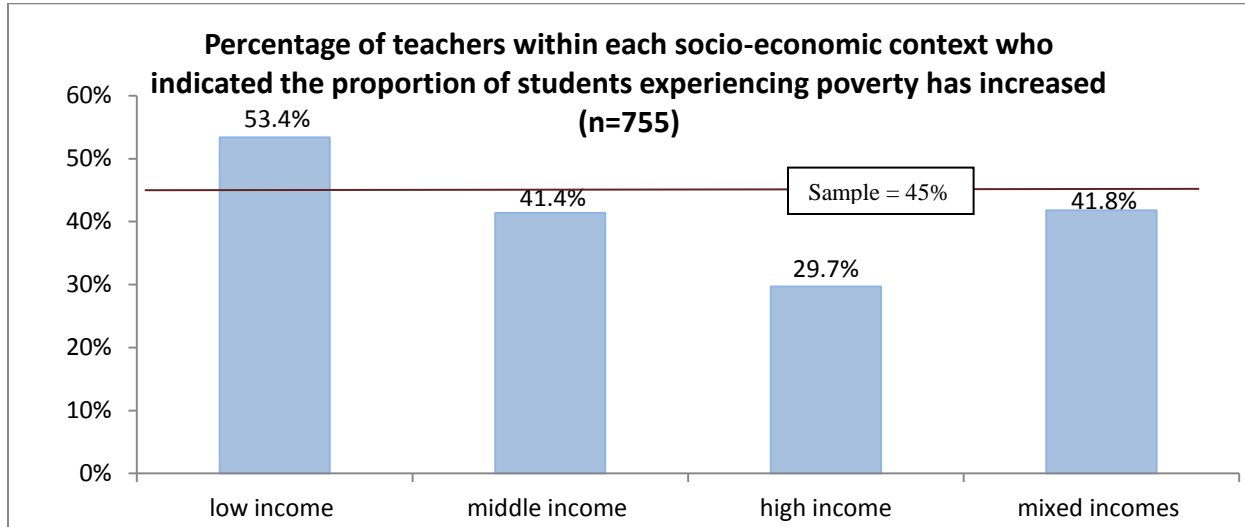
Teachers who have been teaching at their current school for 10 or more years (58%) and 5 to 9 years (53.8%) were twice as likely to indicate poverty has “Increased” compared to teachers with less than 5 years (28.5%) at their current school. Teachers with less than 5 years at their current school were more likely to indicate poverty was “Unchanged” or that they “Don’t know”, compared to teachers at their current school for 5 to 9 years and for 10 or more years.

Has poverty changed since you began teaching at the school by years at current school (N=757)

How poverty has changed	Years teaching at current school			Sample average
	Less than 5 years	5 to 9 years	10 or more years	
Unchanged	42.0%	29.9%	25.0%	33.4%
Decreased	2.2%	2.3%	7.1%	3.7%
Increased	28.5%	53.8%	58.0%	44.6%
Don't know	27.2%	14.0%	9.8%	18.2%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Socio-economic context of the school

Teachers in schools located in low-income neighbourhoods were most likely to indicate poverty had increased during their time at the school. Over one-half of teachers in schools located in low-income neighbourhoods (53.4%) indicate that poverty increased during their time at the school, almost double that of teachers in schools located in high-income neighbourhoods (29.7%). About the same percentage of teachers in schools located in middle-income (41.4%) and mixed incomes (41.8%) neighbourhoods indicated poverty had increased since they began teaching at the school (see Appendix, Table 4).



Students who self-identify as Aboriginal

Teachers with the highest proportion of students who self-identify as Aboriginal in their class/teaching situation were the most likely to say poverty had increased at the school. About two-thirds (64.9%) of teachers who indicated “more than three-quarters of all students I currently teach self-identify as Aboriginal” indicated poverty has increased over the time they have taught at the school, while only 25.6% of teachers with no students who self-identify as Aboriginal indicated poverty had increased (see Appendix, Table 2).

Students newly arrived in Canada (within two years)

A different pattern emerged for students who are newly arrived in Canada. While only 3.6% of the overall sample indicated poverty had decreased at the school, 10% of teachers with “between one-half and three-quarters”, and 20% of teachers with “more than three-quarters” of the students they currently teach being newly arrived to Canada, indicated poverty has decreased. This may in part reflect the growing number of students in the International Program who attend BC public schools⁸. Family poverty statistics show that families newly immigrated to Canada experience higher unemployment and poverty rates⁹ (see Appendix, Table 3).

⁸ Enrolment of international students in BC public schools increased from 4,083.3 FTE in 2001–02 to 9,680.7 FTE in 2012–13. See Kuehn, L. (2014). *International Students in BC, 2012–13*.

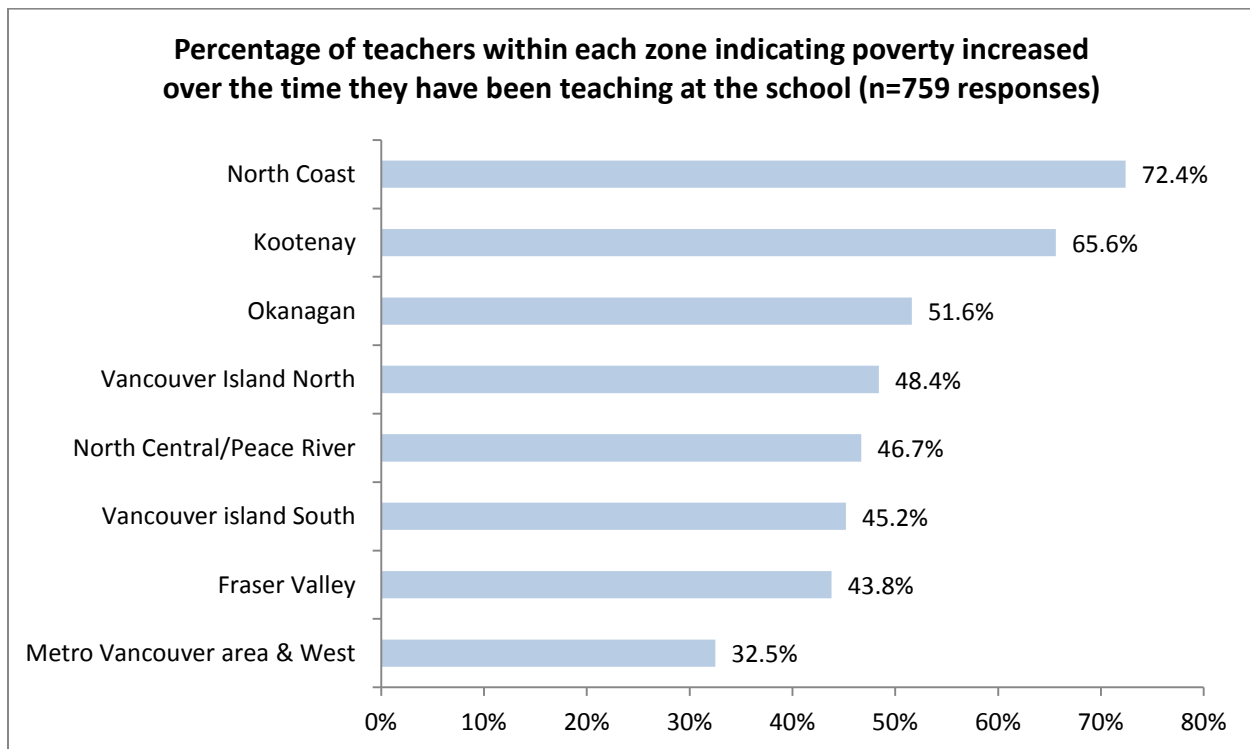
bctf.ca/uploadedFiles/Public/Publications/ResearchReports/RR2014-01.pdf

⁹ According to First Call, *2011 Child Poverty Report Card*: One in two (49.6%) BC children of recent immigrants lived in poverty in 2005 (p. 7), and the poverty rate of children under 18 who arrived in BC between 2001 and 2006 is 49.6%, compared to 36.1% of families who arrived between 1996 and 2000, and 16.2% for Canadian-born families (p. 12).

Change in the proportion of students experiencing poverty, by regional zone

Two-thirds of teachers in Kootenay (65.6%) and about three-quarters of teachers in North Coast (72.4%) indicated poverty had increased during their time at the school. This is considerably higher than the sample as a whole (44.8%). No teachers in these two zones indicated poverty has decreased. Teachers in Metro Vancouver area and West were less likely to indicate poverty had increased (32.5% compared to 44.8% of sample) and more likely to indicate poverty had decreased (9.8% vs. 3.7% of the sample) over the time they have been teaching at the school. The regional zone Metro Vancouver area and West is comprised of a mix of urban and suburban areas with wide income disparities within and between school districts¹⁰.

These findings suggest schools across the province are undergoing changes in the socio-economic composition of students. Compared to the sample average (44.8%), teachers in two of the most rural/remote zones (Kootenay and North Coast) are most likely to indicate poverty is increasing, while teachers in the most urbanized zone (Metro Vancouver area and West) are the least likely to indicate poverty is increasing. The qualitative comments by teachers about how poverty has changed at the school provide insights and context to better understand the economic pressures families are experiencing in urban, suburban, rural, and remote communities.



¹⁰ *BC Child Poverty in Maps* shows child poverty rates for Census Tracts within a city or municipality, with a wide range of child poverty rates within a local geographic area such as North Vancouver, North Vancouver City, and West Vancouver (from 7.3% up to 48%), Surrey and White Rock (from 8.2% up to 46.2%), Langley City and Langley Township (from 7.9% up to 41.4%). See: *BC Child Poverty in Maps* (Regional District and Census Tracts), First Call Coalition's 2014 *BC Child Poverty Report Card* web-page, available at www.stillin5.ca.

What teachers had to say about how poverty in their school's community has changed in recent years

The survey included an open-ended question for teachers to “add any comments you have about how poverty in your school’s community has changed in recent years”. The qualitative analysis provides insight into teachers’ views on how economic pressures such as the 2008 global recession, long-term economic decline in local economies, and high real-estate prices in urban centres are affecting low-income families and their school-aged children. Several teachers commented on the growing number of students at their school who are without basic resources such as food, school supplies, and clothing, and/or the increasing number of families having more difficulty paying fees for school supplies and extra-curricular activities. Teachers in both urban and non-urban areas observed that poverty seems to be increasing among working families, with many parents working at two or more jobs to make ends meet.

Many teachers who teach in inner-city schools in urban areas reported the socio-economic mix of students is changing, which was attributed to the gentrification of lower-income neighbourhoods. A few teachers noted their school had since lost inner-city schools funding, leaving the school with fewer resources to address poverty-related needs. Several teachers expressed concern about the social divisions between students arising from growing income disparities among the student population. Comments by teachers suggest that school closures and reconfiguration, combined with district policy on open school boundaries, is also changing the socio-economic context of schools, and in some cases appears to be having an adverse impact on low-income students. Several teachers expressed concern about how government cutbacks and inadequate funding are contributing to reduced access to much-needed support services for low-income students and their families.

As part of the validation process for the analysis of the qualitative data, teachers who are members of the Anti-Poverty Action Group of the Committee for Action on Social Justice (CASJ) also reviewed comments for their geographic area with the researcher, to identify areas of consensus and dissonance on themes, and to provide an opportunity for the CASJ member to share their impression of the themes emerging in their region. The impressions that were shared include: in North Coast, that some comments indicated a low level of awareness of how students are impacted by living in poverty; in North Central/Peace River, a note on how few qualitative responses were provided by teachers; in Vancouver Island North, a note that the tone of some comments seemed to attribute poverty among families as being due to “poor choices”, and in Fraser Valley, a note that the eastern Fraser Valley (with more low-income families) is not well-represented in the qualitative responses to this question.

The following section of this report provides a summary of five thematic areas, with illustrative quotes from teachers that reflect each of the themes. These themes include:

1. More students without basic resources, more families facing financial difficulties;
2. Economic pressures contributing to family poverty (global recession, economic decline, lack of affordable housing);
3. Teachers’ perceptions of the impact of economic pressures on families;
4. School closures, reconfiguration, and school policy; and
5. Loss of government services due to funding cutbacks.

The regional zone which the teacher is located in is indicated in brackets to provide additional context.

1. More students without basic resources, more families facing financial difficulty

Of the respondents who reported increased levels of poverty at their school, many teachers commented on the growing number of students without basic resources such as food, school supplies, clothing, and families having more difficulty paying fees for school supplies and extra-curricular activities:

More families struggling and needing extra support... More children accessing breakfast or lunch programs. Less children able to pay for school supplies, band instruments, field trips, etc. (Vancouver Island North)

More students unable to buy school supplies, participate in extra-curricular activities, bring nutritious lunches, participate in field trips, etc. Many more are coming from insecure homes (low quality rentals), students now have to pay for bussing to school...many can't afford to pay. (Fraser Valley)

More families asking for assistance, less field trips (are) planned because we know they just can't afford it, and everyone is tapped out as far as fundraising goes. (Kootenay)

Those who are in poverty seem to have less than before plus we have more families (often who have working parent(s)) who are entering the realm of living in poverty (relying on food banks, not able to pay for the lunch program/field trips, unable to provide school supplies, unable to participate in pizza days and popcorn sales, pawning kids computers and other games & electronics to make it to payday, unable to pay for sports teams and drive to games etc.). (Vancouver Island South)

Two teachers commented that while the proportion of students experiencing poverty has decreased over time, they have observed an increase in the depth of poverty at the school:

While the number of students whom I work with who are living in poverty seems to have gone down, those who are living in poverty seem to be poorer than in the past, and this is especially true of the Jarai refugees and First Nations students. I am saddened that students still come to school hungry and improperly dressed for the weather. (Metro Vancouver area and West)

The school has traditionally served students from low income families, so I don't think the proportion has increased, however the depth of poverty appears to have increased over time. (Fraser Valley)

The comments also indicate that a decrease in the proportion of students experiencing poverty can result in income disparities, which may negatively impact the well-being of low-income students:

As this district grows, the area is more gentrified so there is an obvious disparity between those who "have" and those who "don't". (Vancouver Island South)

Though my school doesn't rank as a high-poverty population, the experiences of our students who are afflicted by poverty (loneliness, depression, etc.) are exacerbated because of the demographics of our school. (Okanagan)

2. Economic pressures contributing to family poverty

Economic decline increases poverty and economic instability among families

Teachers in the Kootenay zone attributed increases in family poverty to business closures and job loss caused by the global recession, in addition to the long-term impact of government cutbacks earlier in the decade.

Families are struggling with business closures. I've known kids whose hydro has been shut off or who don't have proper clothing. The recession has hit hard here. (Kootenay)

In 2002 when the Government consolidated Ministries, Nelson was devastated. Many of our higher income families were transferred or laid off. Our community has never returned to those income levels since. (Kootenay)

In the Okanagan zone, teachers describe a local economy in decline, with mill closures, decline of the ranching industry, and business closures that previously provided quality jobs for families. Several teachers noted there are more families where one parent leaves the region to find employment, as well as families relocating to Alberta or other parts of BC.

Poverty seems to be affecting more families, even those with both parents working. Men seem to be traveling further afield to find work, which causes additional stress on the wives and children left at home. (Okanagan)

Over the years I have noticed a change in the students who live in poverty. It used to be that if your parent didn't have a job, you needed financial assistance. Now I have noticed a marked increase not only in the clearly destitute, but also in the working poor. Many F.I. students have parents working two jobs in order to maintain a minimal standard of living and many of our other students need regular aid. (Okanagan)

Teachers in the North Coast zone spoke of the impact of long-time economic decline as well as a recent mill closure on job loss. One teacher noted that families with specific training and skills are moving away to seek employment elsewhere, leaving the most economically-vulnerable families behind.

In this community, jobs dwindled and many people with training left for other communities. This exodus of trained workers and the lack of jobs for those left behind resulted in many people going on unemployment or assistance. (North Coast)

In the North Central/Peace River region, a few teachers described a growing economy with increased job opportunities for some families.

Poverty has decreased with the economy improving in northern BC. More jobs in oil/gas/mining. (North Central/Peace River)

Currently there are a lot of employment opportunities in the area. There seems to be an increase in the standard of living in our catchment area. (North Central/Peace River)

Other teachers in the same region described a declining economy, with job loss in the mining and lumber industry, in addition to a mill closure.

In the time that I have been at this school I have seen that it has risen from 50% to nearly 100%. The families that used to be working poor are now living in poverty and that is a tragedy. (North Central/Peace River)

A downturn in the lumber industry and the explosion of our local mill (which employed 200+ people) has had a significant impact on families in our town. (North Central/Peace River)

A teacher in Vancouver Island North described the region as being in long-term economic decline, with families with the resources to do so having moved away to find work. Other comments from this region indicate that many families now struggle in an economy with high unemployment, underemployment, and low-paying jobs.

This is a resource town...fishing has declined..., forestry is in crisis and raw logs are shipped rather than processed, our open pit mine closed. Jobs are dwindling. Our town population has declined from nearly 7000 in 1990s to less than 4000 now. Stores are closed... More affluent, educated families tended to move with work opportunities. Laborers tended to stay. (Vancouver Island North)

More unemployment and underemployment; more families struggling with mental illness. (Vancouver Island North)

More students have parents who cannot find either full-time employment or skilled jobs paying a good wage. (Vancouver Island North)

The eastern Fraser Valley region is more rural than the suburban cities that comprise much of this zone. One teacher's comment indicates high unemployment is also an issue for some areas of the Fraser Valley:

We have a very mixed group, but as employment opportunities have disappeared in Hope, poverty has skyrocketed. (Fraser Valley)

Teachers in urban areas also commented on an increase in working families who are struggling to make ends meet:

Although our population is becoming more diversified, the working poor are increasing. (Vancouver Island South)

There are many families with parents working at two to three jobs; they are paid minimum wages and struggling to make ends meet. (Metro Vancouver area and West)

Many of our parents might be classified as "working poor" people. Some parents work two jobs to help make ends meet. (Fraser Valley)

We have many families who are new Canadians and who have limited English skills so they are often working in very low paying service jobs.... (Fraser Valley)

Real-estate prices, redevelopment, and affordable housing

A common theme in the responses of teachers in urban and suburban areas related to economic pressures on families arising from high real-estate prices, urban redevelopment, and the search for affordable housing.

Teachers in the Metro Vancouver area described how sustained, high real-estate prices are changing the socio-economic mix of families in urban schools. Several teachers spoke of how gentrification is pushing out many low-income families who can no longer find affordable

housing in urban neighbourhoods. Some teachers observed an increase in the number of refugee families in the school, more students who are without food, and an increased depth of poverty among families. Concern was expressed about the emerging gap between “have” and “have-not” families in the school. Teachers in Vancouver Island South also noted that high real-estate prices are placing stress on families, with gentrification and loss of affordable housing changing the socio-economic mix of some schools.

Lot(s) of gentrification in our school and so homelessness and having to move away from community is a growing concern. The lower middle class is also becoming poor. (Metro Vancouver area and West)

Our school was once identified as an inner city school in Vancouver and was fully funded under this program. The neighbourhood has become gentrified and many of the students in poverty have left the neighbourhood. However, for some immigrant families poverty remains an issue and we do not have the resources in the school to support them. (Metro Vancouver area and West)

Rising housing prices have forced low income families to the outlying areas outside of the city...on the other hand, families that are trying to hang on here are having a tougher go of it...so the numbers remain the same, although the neighbourhood “looks” nicer in terms of the old houses being torn down and fancy new ones going up...differences between have and have-not student groups are much greater... (Metro Vancouver area and West)

This school’s population has changed significantly in even the past four years. Four years ago it qualified for a hot lunch program. In the past it had many families living in poverty and many families new to the country. Today, the majority of families have two professional-level working parents (e.g., physiotherapists, lawyers, web design) who own a home in the neighbourhood, or are from out of area. It appears many families who were originally in this area are being priced out of this community. (Metro Vancouver area and West)

Several teachers in the Fraser Valley commented on changes in the real-estate market that appear to be changing the socio-economic composition of families at the school. Some teachers observed a trend toward gentrification:

Newer/bigger houses have been built in the area attracting more economically comfortable families. (Fraser Valley)

Older homes have been demolished in our school neighborhood and bigger more expensive homes now surround our school. (Fraser Valley)

A Fraser Valley teacher described how a school in a low-income neighbourhood lost inner city funding when the number of middle-class families in the school increased:

I am new to the school. Apparently, the school used to have an inner school designation which was dropped as more middle-income families have moved into the area. (Fraser Valley)

Some teachers in the Fraser Valley reported an opposite trend, where more low-income families are moving into rental suites in houses in middle/upper income areas. Schools previously attended by mostly middle- or high-income students are changing to mixed-incomes schools.

My school community is mostly middle class but lately we are seeing a higher ELL (English Language Learning) and immigrant population. There are more basement suites and rental suites opening up in our area. (Fraser Valley)

More basement suites in the area, more transient families. (Fraser Valley)

One teacher observed that the growing income disparities among families can create divisions between lower-income and higher-income students within the school.

We have a lot of upper middle class homes with higher incomes, but many have basement suites which they rent out to low-income families, single parents etc., so there is quite a division of the haves and have-nots in our school. (Fraser Valley)

Another teacher noted that some families who own these new homes are financially constrained, which in turn has implications for the school:

While the school is situated in a nice area of town, many families are “house poor” (i.e. they are paying so much for their homes, there is little left for the constant demands of fundraising and extra class activities). (Fraser Valley)

3. Teachers' perceptions of the effects of economic pressures on families

Teachers described the effects of these economic pressures on families in their community, such as more transience as families move in search of employment and affordable housing, families working at two or more jobs to try to make ends meet, and more families where one parent travels out of the region to work.

A teacher in an urban school noted the tensions arising from economic pressures on families:

Although the poverty level of my students has remained generally the same, gentrification of our neighbourhood is putting increasing pressure on young people and families, raising rents, decreasing affordable child care spaces, groceries, etc. and increasing tensions. (Metro Vancouver area and West)

Another teacher expressed concern about how the lack of affordable childcare means the care of younger children is sometimes placed upon older siblings.

...Siblings as old/young as Grade 6 are being asked to care for Kindergarten aged children—dress them, feed them, pack their lunches, get their bags ready, etc.... more and more parents can't afford childcare outside of school hours so they are relying on children to get children ready for school. The Kindergarten students in my care who come to school via one of these older siblings are unprepared for the day, usually no notices read, not ready for field trips, no healthy lunch prepared, etc. (Fraser Valley)

Teachers also observed that when families have to work at multiple jobs to make ends meet, there is less time to be involved with their children's school activities.

More parents unemployed or working shifts--2 or more p.t. [part time] jobs...i.e. no benefits...less time to help kids with h.w. [homework], more kids left alone, parents unable to help in class, kids missing school supplies and “inside” shoes, etc due to no funds, schools providing more lunches. (Vancouver Island North)

While most students at my school have their basic needs met, I have noticed in the past several years that an increasing number of parents have to now work 2 or 3

jobs to make ends meet. This means they have less time to spend reading with their child, helping with homework, etc. (Vancouver Island South)

Several teachers noted that poverty associated with unemployment and underemployment is increasing the stress on families, and in some cases appears to be leading to substance abuse:

Anxiety and stress of parents showing up in child's behaviour, inability to generate PAC participation or funding, less involvement from parents in school activities, parents coming forward and saying it is very difficult financially, at home. (Metro Vancouver area and West)

We have a resource based community. After the mill was permanently closed, the level of poverty and its attendant drug and alcohol problems increased dramatically. (North Central/Peace River)

Children are hungrier. More parents out of work, more alcohol issues in families, children having to raise themselves. Parents cobbling together work in multiple places. Absentee fathers having left town for work. (North Coast)

Some teachers, especially in Vancouver Island North, noted an increase in the number of students and families experiencing emotional stress and mental-health issues. A teacher in the Fraser Valley region noticed that stress levels have especially increased since the 2008 global recession.

More unemployment and underemployment; more families struggling with mental illness. (Vancouver Island North)

Dramatic increase in number of students who are highly agitated. (Vancouver Island North)

More families [are] struggling and needing extra support. More children demonstrating emotional, behavioral or learning problems. Less family support for homework or home reading. (Vancouver Island North)

I am seeing increased stress levels in the students and their parents every year, especially in the past three years (2009–10, 2010–11 and 2011–12. (Fraser Valley)

More people with less and [with] higher needs. I also have more students on independent living agreements with the Ministry of Family Services. There are also many more students who are emotionally needy. (Fraser Valley)

4. School closures, reconfiguration, and school policy

Teachers' responses also revealed how school closures, reconfiguration, and policy on school boundaries may be influencing socio-economic changes in the school. In the Kootenay and North Central/Peace River regions, teachers reported that school closures and restructuring of schools resulted in low-income students having to move to schools outside of their neighbourhood. In one example, students moved from a school that provided a breakfast and lunch program, to a new school having no such services. In the North Coast region, a teacher described her community as high-income, with low-income families being encouraged by the "government" to move into the area.

This at one time was considered an affluent school - that has changed, one reason was a school closure in a less affluent area but also young families are struggling - loss of jobs - family members going out of province for jobs etc. (Kootenay)

We are now a feeder school for many schools that have been closed. Their former schools were recognized as needing breakfast and lunch programs, but not currently recognized because we were once a school in a higher economic area. (North Central/Peace River)

We went from being a middle school to an elementary school and so lost many students from high income families and gained some from low income as the catchments changed. (North Central/Peace River)

Three years ago a school in a low socio-economic area was closed. Part of the catchment area for the closed school was added to our school's catchment area. (North Central/Peace River)

In the Fraser Valley region, a few teachers commented that school restructuring increased the proportion of low-income students at their school, with one teacher noting that some middle- and upper-income parents responded by withdrawing their children, crossing boundaries to register them in another school. Another teacher noted that only a third of the students in the catchment areas now attended local schools, with more affluent parents choosing "schools of choice".

The district merged 2 high schools that shared the low income students. Now that the merge has happened the one school has all the low income students and many parents from the middle class cross boundary (to register) their children to another high school. (Fraser Valley)

Since "Schools of choice" the majority of students from higher socio-economic backgrounds go to other schools. Approx. 34% of students in our catchment attend our school. (Fraser Valley)

Teachers in Vancouver Island South also expressed the concern that school policies such as bussing resulted in affluent families moving their children out of mixed-income schools to schools in more affluent areas. In one example, the teacher noted that the school is now mostly populated with Aboriginal students, most of whom are experiencing significant levels of poverty. Another teacher commented on the impact of open boundaries on the school:

With open boundaries our school has lost the balance it once had as more affluent families have chosen to move their children to schools in more affluent neighborhoods. (Vancouver Island South)

5. Loss of government services due to funding cutbacks

Some teachers also commented on how government cutbacks and inadequate funding are contributing to the poverty-related barriers that affect a student's ability to receive much-needed support. A teacher in the North Coast region noted that government cutbacks in transportation services left families in remote areas without access to health and other services. Other impacts of inadequate government funding observed by teachers include low levels of income assistance benefits, lack of resources in the school to address learning challenges, and lack of access to basic services such as vision and dental care.

Our remote community has had many cuts to basic health care and mental health services. Families who can't afford their own car cannot access dentists, optometrists, etc. since we have lost our bus service. Many students have health issues that are not being addressed because of poverty and lack of local services. (North Coast)

Poverty has increased but compounding the problem of increased poverty is the fact that our school budget which used to help those in need is being absolutely stretched to the limit trying to deal with the learning challenges (hiring more EAs for example) for support for those students who don't qualify under the ministry's narrow description as 'designated'. (North Central/Peace River)

Government funding is inadequate for persons requiring assistance (especially students living on their own). Expenses continue to spiral out of control and people are receiving wage cuts as well as hours available cut instead of cost of living increases. (Fraser Valley)

I believe that it is a crime that the government does not fund the essentials for all children who need it. The children who live in poverty go without the basics that would help ensure that they are successful at school, such as nutritious meals, warm clothes, safe, pest free homes, glasses, good dental care, and so on. The schools should be a place where kids can get their eyes tested, see a nurse or doctor, or get their teeth checked through teeth/trolleys or travelling dentist vans. From experience, I can tell you that it is very difficult to learn to read if you cannot see because of poor vision or to concentrate if you are hungry or in pain... (Metro Vancouver area and West)

Chapter 2: Summary and discussion

The purpose of this section of the survey was to learn from teachers about how the proportion of students experiencing poverty has changed since they began teaching at the school, and to elicit their observations about how poverty has changed in their school community. The Poverty and Education survey was conducted in the 2012–13 school year, about four years after the start of the 2008 global recession. Child poverty rates in BC spiked between 2008 and 2009, decreasing slightly after 2010¹¹, but were still above the Canadian average. In 2012, four years after the start of the global recession, child poverty rates¹² remained persistently high, with one in five (20.6%) BC children aged 0–17 living in poverty in 2012¹³. *BC Child Poverty in Maps* shows child poverty rates vary greatly within a city or municipality, with some areas having almost one-half of children living in poverty.¹⁴

Child poverty on the increase in many BC public schools

Almost all teachers responding to the survey teach students who are experiencing poverty. About one in six teachers have classes/teaching situations where at least one-half of the students are experiencing poverty, with teachers in the North Coast twice as likely to indicate such a high proportion of students in poverty. At the time of the survey, almost one half (of the 759 teachers who responded) said the proportion of students experiencing poverty had increased since they began teaching at the school. Two-thirds of teachers in the Kootenay zone and about three-quarters of teachers in North Coast indicated poverty had increased, considerably higher than the overall sample. The qualitative survey results provide insights into the economic pressures on students and their families in the first few years following the global recession. Several teachers commented on the growing number of students at their school who are without basic resources such as food, school supplies, clothing, and/or the increase in the number of families having more difficulty paying fees for school supplies and extra-curricular activities. Teachers also observed that poverty seems to be increasing among working families, with many parents working at two or more jobs to make ends meet.

Some teachers commented on the increased depth of poverty they observed among some families, even when the number of families experiencing poverty had decreased at the school. The *2014 Child Poverty Report Card*¹⁵ provides evidence as to why, noting that BC income assistance rates have not increased since 2007. After adjusting for inflation, income assistance rates for a single parent with one child in BC is lower in 2012 (\$12,108) than in 1989 (\$15,919). After taking into account federal child benefits and tax credits, a single parent on income assistance lived on an income \$5,548 below the poverty line in 2012.

Growing income disparities within schools and among BC families with children

The survey findings suggest schools in some areas of BC are undergoing significant changes in the socio-economic composition of students. Teachers in inner-city schools in urban/suburban areas reported the socio-economic mix of students changing at the school, which was attributed to the gentrification of lower-income neighbourhoods. A few teachers noted the school has since lost inner-city schools funding, leaving the school with fewer resources to address poverty-

¹¹First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition. (2014). *2014 Child Poverty Report Card*, p.8.

¹²Note: Figures for the child poverty rate cited here are based on the after-tax Low Income Measure (LIM).

¹³First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition. (2014). *2014 Child Poverty Report Card*, Factsheet #1, p. 7.

¹⁴See: *BC Child Poverty in Maps* (Regional District and Census Tracts), First Call Coalition's 2014 BC Child Poverty Report Card web-page available at www.stillin5.ca.

¹⁵Source: First Call (2014), *2014 Child Poverty Report Card*, p. 23.

related needs. Several teachers expressed concern about the social divisions arising from growing income disparities among the student population.

The observations of teachers in the survey reflect the trend toward greater income inequality among BC families. In the decade leading up to this survey, the income distribution of BC families was undergoing significant changes, with low-income families faring the worst as the gap between the wealthiest and poorest of families widened. According to a BC Stats¹⁶ report, income inequality worsened in BC since 2000 compared to the previous two decades. More-recent income data shows the income disparity among BC families with children persisted after the global recession. First Call's *2014 Poverty Report Card*¹⁷ shows BC ranked last among the provinces in income inequality in 2011, concluding that "BC had the most unequal distribution of income among rich and poor families with children."

Loss of affordable housing a significant economic pressure on families in urban areas

While many BC families were coping with the post-recessionary effects of unemployment, low-wage employment, and low income assistance rates, shelter costs (housing and rental accommodation) increased significantly, especially for families living in urban areas. Many teachers in the survey commented that persistently-high housing prices were increasing economic pressures on families in general, and pushing low-income families out of urban areas in search of affordable housing. Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation¹⁸ data shows Vancouver CMA having the highest average housing price and Victoria CMA the fourth highest in Canada in 2012. The 2014 *Canadian Housing Observer*¹⁹ states that "Vancouver, Toronto and Victoria had the highest incidences of core housing need among Census Metropolitan Areas (CMAs) in 2011".

Perhaps this is why households in BC are the most economically-vulnerable in Canada.²⁰

Loss of services to support low-income students and their families

Teachers also observed that the economic pressures on families are increasing emotional stress on parents and children at a time when government has cut services that would most support these families. Several teachers expressed concern about how government cutbacks and inadequate funding are contributing to reduced access to much-needed support services for low-income students and their families. These observations by teachers reveal the extreme distress some families are experiencing and the growing unmet need for services to support them as austerity policies take effect in the local community. In the years following the global recession (2009–10 to 2013–14) government spending on public services lagged well behind GDP.²¹

¹⁶ BC Stats (2012), "Mind the Gap: Income Inequality Growing," *Business Indicators*, January 2012, pp. 2–3.

¹⁷ First Call (2014), *2014 Child Poverty Report Card*, p. 26.

¹⁸ Canada Housing and Mortgage Corporation. (2012 data included into 2013 release.) Housing Now Tables 4 and 4.1 "Absorbed Single Detached Units by Price Range March 2013", *Regional reports*, date released: April 2013: www03.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/catalog/productList.cfm?cat=70&lang=en&fr=1365543961098

¹⁹ CMHC, *Canadian Housing Observer 2014 –Housing affordability and need*, 1–6, available at: www.cmhc.ca/en/corp/about/cahoob/cahoob_001.cfm

²⁰ The TD Bank found BC recorded the highest Household Financial Vulnerability index, at 10.4, in 2010 (first three quarters), increasing by 20.2% in BC since 2006. Source: TD Economics, "Assessing the financial vulnerability of households across Canadian regions", *Special Report*, February 9, 2011, pp. 2–3.

²¹ The Province of British Columbia's Public Accounts 2013/14 report (p. 18) shows program spending for the province increased by only 9.0% since 2009–10, while GDP increased by 15.2%. The 2013/14 Public Accounts report is available at: www.fin.gov.bc.ca/ocg/pa/13_14/PA%20FSD&A%2013-14.pdf.

In summary, the survey findings in this chapter document the incidence of child poverty in BC public schools and provide insights into some of the economic pressures on families that are contributing to high child poverty rates in British Columbia. The qualitative comments by teachers reveal the extent to which many BC families are experiencing economic stress as a result of unemployment, low-wage employment, inadequate income supports, and rapidly-increasing housing prices, especially in urban areas. These findings also suggest there are significant socio-economic shifts occurring in some areas of BC which have implications for the services available to support low-income students, and for the social issues that can arise from growing income disparities among the students who attend the school. The next chapters²² in this report examine more closely issues related to students coming to school hungry, school fees and participation in school activities, the adequacy of resources to address poverty-related needs at the school, and what is most needed to support student and families experiencing poverty.

²² Additional chapters in this study can be found online at www.bctf.ca/PovertyResearch.aspx.

Appendix

Table 1: Proportion of students experiencing poverty-related issues in the classroom—Percentage of teachers by zone in which school is located (n=755 responses)

	Percentage of teachers indicating the proportion of students they currently teach who are experiencing poverty					Total
	None	Less than 1/4	Between 1/4 and 1/2	Between 1/2 and 3/4	More than 3/4	
Kootenay	0.0%	48.4%	45.2%	6.5%	0.0%	100.0%
Okanagan	4.4%	38.9%	43.3%	8.9%	4.4%	100.0%
North Coast	3.4%	27.6%	34.5%	24.1%	10.3%	100.0%
North Central/Peace River	5.0%	38.3%	33.3%	13.3%	10.0%	100.0%
Fraser Valley	5.4%	50.8%	26.5%	14.1%	3.2%	100.0%
Metro Vancouver area & West	8.3%	52.1%	26.0%	6.8%	6.8%	100.0%
Vancouver Island North	2.1%	42.1%	35.8%	12.6%	7.4%	100.0%
Vancouver island South	2.7%	46.6%	34.2%	6.8%	9.6%	100.0%
(% of total Sample)	5.0%	46.2%	31.9%	10.7%	6.1%	100.0%

Table 2: How poverty has changed at the school—Percentage of responses by proportion of students teachers currently teach who self-identify as Aboriginal (n=753)

	Sample	None	Less than 1/4	Between 1/4 and 1/2	Between 1/2 and 3/4	More than 3/4	Don't know
Unchanged	33.2%	44.9%	34.1%	26.9%	28.9%	24.3%	25.0%
Decreased	3.7%	9.0%	4.1%	0.8%		2.7%	
Increased	44.9%	25.6%	43.8%	53.8%	47.4%	64.9%	50.0%
Don't know	18.2%	20.5%	18.0%	18.5%	23.7%	8.1%	25.0%
Total	100.0%		100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Table 3: How poverty has changed at the school—Percentage of responses by proportion of students teachers currently teach who are new to Canada (n=751)

	Sample	None	Less than 1/4	Between 1/4 and 1/2	Between 1/2 and 3/4	More than 3/4	Don't know
Changed	33.5%	31.8%	35.6%	40.0%	10.0%		11.8%
Decreased	3.6%	3.9%	3.2%	3.3%	10.0%	20.0%	
Increased	44.9%	49.6%	43.0%	36.7%	50.0%	40.0%	47.1%
Don't know	18.0%	14.7%	18.3%	20.0%	30.0%	40.0%	41.2%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Table 4: How the proportion of students experiencing poverty has changed over the time you've been teaching at the school, by socio-economic context of the neighbourhood (n=755 responses)

Socio-economic context of school	Unchanged	Decreased	Increased	Don't know	Total
Low income	29.2%	2.0%	53.4%	15.4%	100.0%
Middle income	35.4%	6.1%	41.4%	17.2%	100.0%
High income	51.4%	-----	29.7%	18.9%	100.0%
Mixed incomes	33.3%	4.6%	41.8%	20.2%	100.0%
% of Sample (n=755)	33.1%	3.7%	45.0%	18.1%	100.0%

Table 5: How the proportion of students experiencing poverty has changed over the time you've been teaching at the school, by regional zone (n=759 responses)

	Unchanged	Decreased	Increased	Don't know	Total
Kootenay	18.8%	---	65.6%	15.6%	100.0%
Okanagan	33.0%	1.1%	51.6%	14.3%	100.0%
North Coast	17.2%	---	72.4%	10.3%	100.0%
North Central/Peace River	35.0%	3.3%	46.7%	15.0%	100.0%
Fraser Valley	34.1%	2.2%	43.8%	20.0%	100.0%
Metro Vancouver area & West	37.6%	9.8%	32.5%	20.1%	100.0%
Vancouver Island North	32.6%	1.1%	48.4%	17.9%	100.0%
Vancouver island South	32.9%	1.4%	45.2%	20.5%	100.0%
% of Sample (n=759)	33.3%	3.7%	44.8%	18.2%	100.0%