CHAPTER 4:

School fees and equal access to participation in school activities

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
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 districts\(^1\). 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)

We would like to acknowledge former members of the CASJ Anti-poverty action group (Ilse Hill, Julia MacRae, Stacey Kemp), and Linda Young of the Vancouver Elementary School Teachers’ Association Anti-poverty Committee, for their contribution to the focus-group research in phase one of the study. We also wish to acknowledge the contribution of all the teachers who took the time to complete the survey, assisted in the pre-testing, and the teachers who participated in the focus groups that led to the development of this survey.

We also wish to thank Adrienne Montani of First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition, for taking the time to review a draft of the survey, and First Call for providing us with opportunities to share the research results with community groups across BC.

*We also wish to acknowledge the BC Teachers’ Federation for supporting this project.*

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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](http://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

In Better Schools for BC,² the BC Teachers’ Federation reminds us, “A strong public education system that provides equal opportunities for all is fundamental to democracy”. BCTF expands on this notion in their social justice lens,³ of which “Access” is one component:

“Access is the gateway to inclusion and participation. It hinders or enables an individual or group to take part. As teachers, we recognize the inherent socially just nature of the public education system and strongly voice our concerns to ensure that all students have real access to all programs and educational opportunities.”

Charging school fees for the cost of course materials and extra-curricular activities may hinder the ability of some students to fully participate, even when there is legislation to address financial barriers for students who cannot afford the fee. In British Columbia, the School Act requires schools to provide, free-of-charge to every school-aged student, the educational resources necessary to participate in the educational program, with a few exceptions. Boards may also charge a refundable deposit on educational resource materials. Where school boards are allowed to charge a fee for a program or materials, the School Act requires boards to have “established policies and procedures to facilitate participation by students of school age ordinarily resident in British Columbia who would otherwise be excluded from the course, class or program because of financial hardship”⁴.

A recent Canadian survey⁵ found, on average, parents of children attending public schools spend $511.50 per child on back-to-school expenses (such as school supplies, activities, clothes, tuition, and transportation). The amount parents spend per child doubles to just under $1,000 per child for Grades 6 to 12, compared to Grades K to 5 ($480.10 per child). Little is known about the impact on students and families who are unable to afford school fees, whether they are aware of or request financial assistance, and what the impact is on participation in school-related activities.

In the focus group research conducted by BCTF prior to this survey,⁶ teachers expressed many concerns over school fees, including the reluctance of parents to request financial assistance, inadequate funding to support school field trips, and the impact of school fees on the participation of low-income students in fee-based school activities. For this reason the BC Teachers’ Federation included a section on school fees in the Poverty and Education: A teachers’ perspective survey, to determine to what extent these focus group findings reflect the concerns of teachers across the province. The objectives for this section of the survey are to assess, from a teacher’s perspective, to what extent schools are charging fees for school supplies and course materials, whether parents are aware of a process at the school to apply for assistance to cover the fee, how well this process is working, reasons why parents may not request financial assistance when available, and the participation of students experiencing financial hardship in school-activities that charge a fee.

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² See Better Schools for BC at www.bctf.ca/uploadedfiles/public/Parents/BetterSchools-English.pdf
⁶ 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. www.bctf.ca/uploadedFiles/Public/Publications/ResearchReports/2012-EI-01.pdf
Survey results

School fees and ability of families to pay fees

The survey asked teachers to indicate whether the school they teach in charges students a fee (or deposit) for course materials or supplies, if it applied to their teaching situation. Of those teachers for whom the situation applied, 62.6% indicated the school charged a fee for school calendars, 44.3% indicated the school charged a fee for band and music instruments and supplies, 42.9% indicated the school charged a fee for general school supplies, 23.3% charged a fee for materials for art, shop, and/or sewing classes, and 17% for textbook deposits or other course materials.

![Graph showing percentages of respondents who indicate school charges a fee for different items](image-url)
Payment for these fees and charges at the start of the school year

The survey asked teachers who collect money for fees to indicate how many families are able to provide payment for these fees at the start of the school year. About half of respondents (54.1%) said that they were responsible for collecting money from parents for the above fees.

Of the 421 teachers who said they are responsible for collecting money from parents for fees at the start of the school year, one-quarter (combined percentage) of these teachers indicated only “Some” (17%) or “A few” parents (8.6%) were able to provide payment for fees at the start of the school year. Two-thirds (68.2%) indicated “Most” and 5.7% indicated “All” families are able to provide payment for these fees at the start of the school year.

“Of the students you teach, how many families are able to provide payment for these fees and charges at the beginning of the school year?” (n=421)
Awareness of a process for requesting financial assistance

Process for requesting financial assistance
Where school boards are allowed to charge a fee for a program or materials, the School Act requires boards to have “established policies and procedures to facilitate participation by students of school age (resident of BC) who would otherwise be excluded from the course, class or program because of financial hardship”.

Two-thirds (67.2%) of teachers said they are aware of a process in place at the school for a student, parent, or teacher (on behalf of a student) to apply for assistance to cover the fee for course materials or school-related activities. One in ten teachers (11.3%) indicated there is no process in place at the school to apply for assistance with the cost of school fees.

Not all teachers in the survey were aware of such a process—16.8% of teachers responded “Do not know” if there is a process in place to assist with fees for students experiencing financial hardship.

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"Is there a process in place at the school where you teach for a student, parent, or teacher (on behalf of the student) to apply for assistance to cover the fee for course materials or school activities?" (n=778)
Level of awareness of students (parents) of financial assistance

Most teachers (523 respondents) who indicated being aware of a process for requesting financial assistance responded when asked “overall, how aware do you think students (or parents) are that financial assistance is available to cover course fees or the cost of school-related activities?”

When asked to rate the level of awareness of students (or parents) that financial assistance is available to cover fees, 23.1% (of 523 teachers) rated them as being “Quite aware” and 8.4% rated them as “Very aware” of a process for requesting financial assistance. At the other end of the continuum, 24.7% rated the awareness of students (or parents) as “Not very aware” and 3.8% as “Not at all aware” of a process for requesting financial assistance. The remainder (39%) rated level of awareness of parents of a process for requesting financial assistance as “Somewhat aware”.

![Bar chart showing level of awareness of availability of financial assistance to cover fees, costs (n=523).]
Level of awareness of students (parents) of financial assistance

By regional zone
Teachers in the North Coast (2.9) and Fraser Valley (2.91) rated (on average) the level of awareness among parents of a process to request financial assistance the lowest of all zones and considerably lower than the sample average (3.08).

![Level of awareness of students (parents) of financial assistance available to assist with fees, by zone (n=518)](chart)

(On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1=Not at all aware and 5=Very aware)

Sample average = 3.08
Socio-economic context
Teachers rated the level of awareness among parents of a process to request financial assistance the lowest in mixed income schools (2.97) and low-income schools (3.04). Teachers in middle-income schools (3.14) and high-income schools (3.1) rated level of student and parental awareness of a process to request financial assistance the highest.

Proportion of students in poverty of all students I currently teach

Level of awareness of students (parents) of financial assistance available to assist with fees - Socio-economic context (n=515)
(On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1=Not at all aware and 5=Very aware)

Sample average = 3.08

Level of awareness of students (parents) of financial assistance available to assist with fees - By proportion of students in their class experiencing poverty (n=514)
(On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1=Not at all aware and 5=Very aware)

Sample average = 3.07
Perceived barriers preventing families from applying for financial assistance for fees

The survey asked teachers, “Based on your experience as a teacher, do any of the following factors prevent families from applying/asking for financial assistance when it is available?”

The results suggest that the most significant barrier for students experiencing financial hardship is the social and emotional impact of having to disclose their financial situation.

Over half (55%) of the 778 teachers surveyed identified “Parent and/or student is not comfortable asking” as a barrier to seeking financial assistance with school fees. Sometimes families are able to afford the fee, but not other associated expenses. About one-third (31.1%) of teachers indicated “Family has no transportation to and from activity”, and 28% indicated “Family cannot afford equipment or clothing” as barriers preventing families from applying for assistance with fees. Other barriers are related to the application process itself, with 23.9% of teachers indicating “Application technically difficult to complete”, and 8% indicating “Language barriers, when translation is not available” as factors preventing parents from applying for financial assistance with school fees.

This chart represents the percentage of teachers who answered “Yes” based on the total sample. The following table shows three in ten teachers did not answer this question and about one in ten teachers indicated “Does not apply” for four of the five factors listed. For comparison, the results are also shown based only on those teachers who answered “Yes”, “No”, or “Do not know”.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors preventing students (parents) from requesting financial assistance when it is available: % of teachers who answered &quot;Yes&quot; (n=778 responses)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent or student not comfortable asking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family has no transportation to and from activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family cannot afford equipment or clothing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application technically difficult to complete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language barriers, when translation not available</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Based on your experience as a teacher, do any of the following factors prevent families from applying/asking for financial assistance when it is available? – % of survey sample (n=778)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Do not know</th>
<th>Does not apply</th>
<th>No answer</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent or student not comfortable asking</td>
<td>55.0%</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
<td>29.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family cannot afford equipment or clothing</td>
<td>28.0%</td>
<td>13.9%</td>
<td>18.6%</td>
<td>8.1%</td>
<td>31.4%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family has no transportation to and from activity</td>
<td>31.1%</td>
<td>12.7%</td>
<td>14.9%</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
<td>31.1%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application technically difficult to complete</td>
<td>23.9%</td>
<td>22.8%</td>
<td>14.0%</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
<td>30.7%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language barriers, when translation not available</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
<td>31.7%</td>
<td>19.9%</td>
<td>9.4%</td>
<td>31.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The following chart shows the percentage of teachers who answered “Yes”, after excluding non-responses and those who indicated “Does not apply” from the total. Of these teachers, 78.5% identified “Parent and/or student is not comfortable asking” as a barrier to seeking financial assistance with school fees, one-half (53.0%) of teachers indicated “Family has no transportation to and from activity”, and 46.3% indicated “Family cannot afford equipment and clothing”. In terms of factors that might prevent families from completing an application for assistance, 39.4% indicated “Application too technically difficult to complete,” and 13.4% indicated “Language barriers, when translation is not available”
How well does the process work for providing financial assistance to ensure students can fully participate?

The survey asked teachers, “In your opinion, how well does the process for providing financial assistance to students work to ensure that all students can fully participate in courses and school-related activities?”

The survey results reveal that only about one-third of teachers (combined) view the process for providing financial assistance to students as working quite or very well to ensure all students can fully participate in courses and school-related activities. One-quarter (25.8%) of teachers rated the process as working “Quite well” and 7.8% as “Very well”. One in three teachers rated the process as working “Somewhat well” (34.6%). About one in five teachers (combined) rated the process as working either “Not very well” (15%) or “Not at all well” (4.2%).
How well does the process for providing financial assistance work—
Region

A comparison of means reveals there is considerable variation by region and socio-economic context of the school, in how well teachers perceive the process for requesting financial assistance is working.

Teachers from North Coast (2.74) and North Central/Peace River (2.94) rated how well the process for financial assistance worked lower than all other regions, and considerably lower than the sample average of 3.21. This is consistent with results for type of geographic area where teachers in remote areas rated how well the process is working to provide financial assistance the lowest at 2.67, also below the sample average.
The survey results suggest that the process for requesting financial assistance works the least well for schools in the most need. Teachers in low-income schools rated how well the process worked the lowest (mean=3.14) compared to a mean of 3.47 for high-income schools.

The following charts show that the process for providing financial assistance is rated as working that least well by teachers where more than three-quarters of the students they teach are experiencing poverty (2.92).
School fees as a barrier to participation in school-related activities

The survey asked teachers, “Of the students you teach whom you know are experiencing financial hardship, how many participate in school-related activities that charge a fee?” Of the six types of activities, 65.6% of teachers (for whom the situation applied) indicated “Most” or “All” students experiencing financial hardship participated in field trips, 51.5% indicated “Most” or “All” participated in graduation ceremonies, 32.9% indicated “Most” or “All” participated in school band or music programs, 28.4% indicated “Most” or “All” participated in extra-curricular sports, and 17% indicated “Most” or “All” students participated in academies.

This data suggests that a considerable proportion of students whose families are experiencing financial hardship do not participate in school activities that charge a fee. Even in graduation ceremonies, which should potentially include all students, only half of teachers (for whom this activity applies) indicate that “most” or “all” students in financial hardship participate. An even smaller proportion of teachers indicated “most” or “all” students experiencing financial hardship participated in programs such as band and extra-curricular sports. The data suggests that school academies (hockey, dance) are especially exclusive, with only 17% of teachers (for whom this applies) indicating that “most” or “all” students experiencing financial hardship participate in these programs. (See the Appendix for a table with all of the responses to this question.)
What teachers had to say about school fees and participation in courses and school-related activities:

Teachers were asked to comment on how school fees affect students’ ability to fully participate in courses and/or school-related activities. The responses by teachers provide insights into the varying resources schools have to provide financial assistance to students experiencing financial hardship. Several teachers described how the process and funding in place at their school works well to ensure students in financial need are not excluded from participating in fee-based school activities. Many other teachers expressed concern about the burden school fees impose on students and families, and how this in turn limits the type of enrichment activities offered in schools in low-income areas. The qualitative analysis also reveals the inequities that can arise between schools depending on their capacity to fund-raise and the proportion of low-income students who require financial assistance to cover school fees. Several teachers observed the emotional discomfort some parents feel at having to disclose their economic situation, and some parents will avoid applying for financial assistance for this reason.

The qualitative results are organized into three thematic areas, as follows:

1. How schools cover the cost of fees for students in need of financial support so they can participate in fee-based school activities:
   - Funding the cost of fees so all students in need can participate works better for some schools than for others
   - Fund-raising and fees a financial burden on parents
   - School fund-raising a major source of funds to cover the cost of fees
   - Teachers also covering the cost of school fees when funds are short

2. Impact of school fees on access to educational opportunities for low-income students:
   - Schools lacking in funds limit field trips and other activities
   - School fees for extra-curricular activities create inequities between schools
   - Some students may avoid courses that charge a fee for materials or supplies

3. Reasons students may not participate in fee-based activities, when financial assistance is available:
   - Emotional burden on families associated with requesting financial assistance
   - Other reasons students may not participate in fee-based activities, when financial assistance is available
     - Transportation as a barrier to participation
     - Cultural and language barriers
     - Working in paid employment
1. How schools cover the cost of fees for students in need of financial support so they can participate in fee-based school activities

Funding the cost of fees so all students can participate works better for some schools than for others

Several teachers commented that the school had sufficient funds to cover the cost of fees for students experiencing financial hardship, to ensure all students have the opportunity to participate in field trips or other school-based activities charging a fee. The comments suggest that for these schools the process to provide financial assistance with fees and the available funding to do so is straightforward.

_Inability to pay school fees do not affect students who are unable to pay. Materials, instruments, school supplies, field trip costs are provided for those in need._

_Music and band programs are offered at my school - if a student is unable to rent a band instrument and really wants to be in band, I find an instrument for them at no charge. Any other fees (concerts, etc) are absorbed by the school / district._

_I have found that all the schools I have worked at have found ways to support students in all school based activities._

_I have had students unable to pay the ‘donation’ to cover costs for field trips, and the school has covered the costs for those families. No child ever misses out due to financial issues._

_My school has always looked out for children who have difficulties with fees, especially for school based activities like field trips and school materials._

_I feel that in elementary school, where I teach, we do a good job of ensuring that all students have equal access to school related activities, and that we work with families to ensure that mechanisms are in place so that they can participate._

_However, I am aware that the same situation does not apply when students move to a larger school community, and when due to their age, or their sense of pride or shame, or desire to not draw attention to them, the same supports are not in place._

_Being an inner city school, generally the school has helped to pay for students that are struggling to pay for field trips and/or necessary materials._

A few teachers indicated teaching in a school where no fees were charged:

_My school is a community school that offers many after school programs (e.g. BMXing, drama, cooking) led by community volunteers for no fee... an excellent program for all students._

_Our school charges no fees, and covers the cost of one-day field trips. High school students fundraise for longer trips as a group and no one is turned away. If fees were charged for any supplies or activities, we would have many students who could not participate._

While some teachers described their school as easily being able to provide assistance with fees, other teachers described the challenges their schools encountered, as few parents were able to afford school fees, and there was not adequate funding at the school to provide financial assistance to all students in need of support.
At my school, the majority of families live below the poverty line, and cannot afford even basic school supplies, let alone extra fees for field trips, activities, or even lost books. We work hard to provide subsidies for our students, but our budget is utterly insufficient to the task - despite our best efforts, students lose out. 

Financial assistance comes from our very limited school budget. It is not encouraged to be used.

This program is a good idea and can help many students...but we regularly struggle to find the funds to help these students. If a student requires funding to participate in a program, where are these funds supposed to come from?

We charge way too much money for all the students. Many students, even if they do not live in poverty, have families with tight budgets and these fees are difficult for them. It is embarrassing to ask for financial support.

The main technique is to avoid paying for the field trip and then skip that day.

**Fund-raising and fees a financial burden on parents**

I think that school fundraising, while done in a spirit of ‘fun’, burdens families by pressuring them to participate by purchasing items that they do not need and cannot afford, such as poinsettias, magazines, popcorn, school logo clothing...

The impact on children of not being able to participate in even such common practices as treat days is huge. I teach students in grades 3 and 4 and am able to supply them with basic school supplies in a fairly straightforward, unobtrusive way but this becomes much more of an issue as students get older and more aware.

I feel very uncomfortable sending home fund-raising requests as I know many families in our school (even though it’s not many in my class) need that money for themselves and I don’t think schools should be pressuring families to donate.

Requiring parents to pay for school supplies in September puts a huge burden on families who are also asked to provide a back pack, inside shoes, etc. Also society encourages back to school clothes, haircuts, etc. Then we burden them by asking for another $25 to cover basic supplies. It is particularly bad for families with more than one child.

There are some avenues for families in need, but I don’t think everyone knows the full extent of how poverty holds our kids back from living and learning to their full potential.

**School fund-raising a major source of funds to cover the cost of fees**

Many schools appear to depend on donations from the Parent Advisory Council (PAC) to cover the cost of school fees for students in financial need. The comments by teachers reveal to what extent providing financial assistance to families is based on a charity model, with schools dependent on the PAC’s capacity to raise sufficient funds.

Teachers have to ask PAC for funds. No fees are collected; few trips are taken, to shield children and families who mask their financial stress. The PAC is supportive, but stretched for funds.
Parent’s access to information about financial assistance and the assistance itself depend on both the will of the teacher to communicate such information and the ability of the PAC to provide the assistance.

They are usually included because of generous donations by the Parent Advisory Council, but even they have limited funds.

Our PAC raises funds to give to classrooms to sponsor field trips and I use this fund to cover fees for students from families who need assistance. As a result, we lack other resources that PAC might typically fund like computers.

**Teachers also covering the cost of school fees when funds are short**

Several teachers indicated that they and/or other school staff pay for students when schools funds are not available.

All my students participate in everything that is classroom or during the school day. I will pay for whatever needs to be paid for in exchange for that student working for me at lunch time or after school. ALL parents appreciate this. My family is supportive of this.

I would never allow one of my students to miss a function in which the whole class takes part. I will pay, or my colleagues..., the fees for field trips, movies, skating, etc.

Many staff provide extra time and money on an on-going basis, and have for such a long time, that we don’t really keep close tabs anymore.

**2. Impact of school fees on access to educational opportunities for low-income students**

The comments reveal how schools vary greatly in their capacity to generate school-based funds to cover the cost of school fees, when needed. This has implications for the amount of funding available to support students who would otherwise be unable to participate in fee-based activities, and for the types of field trips and other enrichment activities schools can offer.

**Schools lacking in funds limit field trips and other activities**

Several teachers indicated they limit field trips and activities offered, as the schools they teach in do not have sufficient funds to provide financial assistance to all students in need, and because teachers do not want to burden low-income students and their families with school fees. Without adequate funding to cover the cost of fees, students attending schools in low-income neighbourhoods have access to fewer educational opportunities.

Due to budget cutbacks and the amount of people facing financial hardship, most of our trips and activities have been dropped. Kids have fewer activities and almost no opportunities to travel out of town.

I believe that teachers limit field experiences rather than choosing to ask parents to provide more for a fieldtrip.

I teach Kindergarten and am very aware of the issues of poverty in my class. I try not to go on fieldtrips unless they are free of charge. So, I believe the students who live in poverty do not feel singled out...
Without funding... it is very difficult to run a program which will allow students to fully experience the curriculum and its objectives. It is necessary... but often teachers are reluctant knowing the families’ hardships.

School fees for extra-curricular activities create inequities between schools

Some teachers who have taught in both low-income and middle-/upper-income neighbourhoods commented on the diverse range of enriching educational opportunities that are available to students in schools where parents can afford the fees and/or have a greater capacity to generate fund-raising to help cover the cost of these activities.

At other schools I have worked at, teachers can simply charge for field trips, so there are many more opportunities for enrichment activities like live theater, museum trips, etc. At my school, any field trip has to be free, which obviously limits what we can offer. Again, teachers and staff work heroically to overcome these obstacles, but, in the end, there are simply not enough resources.

I have worked in both have and have-not areas of the city. Generally, teachers choose not to plan field trips, lessons or activities that are $$$ in have-not schools, so as not to put pressure on students. In the “have” areas, field trips such as skiing, hiking, outdoor camps, plays, bus trips to great places, are done on a regular basis. My “have not” school also suffers because parents have not got the expertise or business connections to raise large sums of money required for basic computer equipment or even projector screens, never mind the nice stuff. Poverty in communities goes deep and impacts neighbourhood schools hugely.

Teachers here don’t even try to do the monthly field trip, the overnight camp, the ski trip, the play, the movie, or anywhere near the number of field trips that suburban or west side schools have. E.G. Kids don’t have the clothes for the outdoor stuff; we can’t afford to supply it. Also, we don’t have parents with the acumen to raise the money for stuff we need, either.

In a school with a high level of poverty, school-related activities that would incur a fee are limited. So schools with a high level of poverty will simply organize fewer field trips, special events, extra-curricular, performances, etc., because the money isn’t there, and the system doesn’t work for providing financial assistance to the whole population. (Whereas a school may subsidize 5% of students for a field trip in a wealthier area, the school might have to subsidize 75% for the same activity in a poorer area, so the activity is just not offered.) While the model of subsidizing students might maintain some degree of equity within a school, it increases inequity across schools.

Some students may avoid courses that charge a fee for materials or supplies

The School Act requires schools to provide, free-of-charge to every school-aged student, the educational resources necessary to participate in the educational program, with a few exceptions. Where school boards are allowed to charge a fee for a program or materials, the School Act requires boards to have “established policies and procedures to facilitate participation by students of school age (resident of BC) who would otherwise be excluded from the course, class or program because of financial hardship”. Even though the school may have a procedure in place

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to cover the cost of course materials, the following comments suggest that some low-income students avoid secondary course electives that charge a fee for materials and supplies.

I think most students who are affected by poverty avoid taking courses that involve fees as they know it would be a financial hardship on parents to pay them. I believe this limits opportunities to experience a variety of courses and therefore affects future employment and post-secondary education choices.

Don’t choose the elective because of the cost. Affects self-esteem.

I know for a certainty that courses with additional fees are completely ignored by many financially challenged families and this number is unknown so how do you factor this into Ministry statistics?

We find ways or ignore the fees that go unpaid if it means a lot to the student or is important for them to participate i.e. grad. Many choose not to go into fee heavy classes to avoid it. Same with the school sports.

3. Reasons students may not participate in fee-based activities, when financial assistance is available

Some teachers commented that there may be other reasons low-income students sometimes do not participate in school activities, even when funds are available to cover the cost of fees.

School fees were banned from the court case by John Young. Some school change the way fees are collected to get around the ruling, my school follows the intent of the ruling. Poor families don’t look to get involved even when fees are not the issue.

Emotional burden on families associated with requesting financial assistance

Several teachers noted the emotionally-challenging situation parents are placed in when they must disclose their economic situation so as to apply for financial assistance. The comments suggest that some parents and students fear being stigmatized if they do so and for some, feelings of embarrassment or humiliation prevent them from requesting financial assistance.

At our school, if a child has difficulty paying fees, the administration finds ways to cover the cost. But the student must ask, and that is difficult because of the stigma of not having money.

I firmly believe that there should be no general supplies fee. I believe that families, who struggle to make ends meet, will likely not request a subsidy for fear of being stigmatized. This is a public service and should be funded fully by our government.

It is so embarrassing to the students to be singled out. Other students are aware of who ‘has paid’ and ‘who hasn’t.’

Many have too much pride to ask for help so make excuses why they cannot go or participate.

Many parents find it difficult to ask for financial aid or are embarrassed to ask. Often they just don’t pay and teachers or the school covers it.

Many poor students have already pulled away from peers due to poverty embarrassment, so they often don’t want to participate.
The poor students I know about are very proud and try hard to cover up their family’s lack of financial resources.

The process to access financial assistance in order to fully participate is often humiliating for parents and students.

NOT having the financial means to participate in extra-curricular activities is in itself a very humbling experience for a student.

In recent years, many school districts started charging a fee for students to ride the school bus. The following quote illustrates the social impact such a policy can have on students:

*The current bussing fee has caused some parents to move their children or to form car pools to drive their children. Catchment areas have been changed so students may not be able to ride their usual busses. This has caused upset and hardships for our students. They do not wish to leave their school or their friends because of a change in board policy.*

**Other reasons students may not participate in fee-based activities, when financial assistance is available**

Other reasons why students do not participate when financial assistance is available to cover the fee include students who are working outside of school hours being unable to participate in extra-curricular activities, lack of transportation to and from the activity, do not have the clothing or equipment required, or are unfamiliar with the type of activity. Cultural and language barriers were also mentioned, with one teacher suggesting more effort be put into communicating with immigrant and refugee parents. A few teachers noted that school fees and the cost of field trips for Aboriginal students attending their school are covered by Band funding. One teacher observed that fewer Aboriginal students participate in sports activities, suggesting this could be because of the cost of equipment or lack of transportation, but may also reflect a cultural unease on the part of the community with the school.

**Transportation as a barrier to participation**

*Transportation is our biggest obstacle. We have so much that most students can’t attend or take part in and yet desperately want to. Majority of our students are bus students that live quite far away and their families do not have the means to be giving them rides.*

*This affects poor families in and outside of school. Many poor children never get to participate in community sports because they don’t have the money, transportation or equipment, clothing to partake.*

**Cultural and language barriers**

*There are students who would benefit from financial assistance who do not receive it because the family does not feel comfortable asking for help or who do not have enough awareness of How to ask for help. Therefore, I feel that there needs to be much better communication with parents and esp. with the immigrant or refugee parents.*

*Sometimes cultural/class issues prevent students from feeling entitled to participate.*

*I would like to do a travelling field trip with my choir and there are many barriers to the planning of this to get it off the ground. Language barriers. Schedules (trying to get parents here) but most of all money.*
Working in paid employment

...students of families that are struggling financially have to make hard choices; some students are working DURING the week as well as on weekends to support their families, either because parents can’t find work OR children are helping parents’ business after school hours.

Some students have part time jobs to assist their families financially so they don’t participate in extra-curricular activities.
Chapter 4: Summary and discussion

System for providing financial assistance not working well
The survey results suggest that, from a teacher’s perspective, the system for providing financial assistance to cover the cost of school fees works better for some schools than others. One-third of teachers rated the process for providing financial assistance to low-income families as working either “Quite well” or “Very well,” while one in five teachers rated it as either “Not very” or “Not at all” well to ensure that all students can fully participate in courses and school-related activities (combined percentage). The survey findings suggest the process works least well for schools located in northern regions, schools located in low-income neighbourhoods, and those with the highest proportion of students experiencing poverty. While some teachers described their school as easily being able to provide assistance with fees, other teachers described the challenges their schools encountered, as there was not adequate funding at the school to provide financial assistance to all students in need of support. Some teachers expressed concern about the burden school fees impose on students and families, and how this in turn limits the type of enrichment activities offered in schools in low-income areas. Several teachers indicated that they and/or other school staff often pay for students when schools funds are not available.

While there is a legal requirement to provide assistance to students experiencing financial hardship, the survey findings suggest a low level of awareness among parents that financial assistance is available. Two-thirds of teachers in the survey were aware of a process in place at the school for a student, parent, or teacher (on behalf of a student) to apply for assistance to cover the fee for course materials or school-related activities. Only one-third of these teachers rated the level of awareness of students (or parents) as either “Quite aware” or “Very aware” of such a process to cover the cost of school fees. Some teachers commented they are aware of low-income students who avoid secondary course electives that charge a fee for materials and supplies to avoid putting financial stress on their families.

Emotional and social barriers to applying for assistance with school fees
Not being aware that financial assistance is available may be one reason low-income students avoid activities or courses involving a fee. Or as the survey findings suggest, some parents may be aware that financial assistance is available but are reluctant to apply. The survey asked teachers about factors they feel prevent families from applying/asking for financial assistance when it is available. Over one-half of teachers identified “Parent and/or student is not comfortable asking” as the most significant barrier to applying for financial assistance. Several teachers noted the emotionally-challenging situation parents are placed in when they must disclose their economic situation so as to apply for financial assistance. The comments suggest that some parents and students fear being stigmatized if they do so, and for some, feelings of embarrassment or humiliation prevent them from requesting financial assistance.

Other factors may also prevent families from applying for assistance with school fees. One-third of teachers indicated “Family has no transportation to and from activity”, and about one-quarter indicated “Family cannot afford equipment or clothing” as factors preventing families from applying for assistance with school fees. Other barriers are related to the application process itself, with one-quarter of teachers indicating “Application technically difficult to complete,” and

8 The proportion of the 523 respondents who answered “Yes” they are aware of a process in place at the school for a student, parent, or teacher (on behalf of a student) to apply for assistance to cover the fee for course materials or school-related activities.
9 These percentages are based on the teachers for whom the factor applied to their teaching situation.
8% indicating “Language barriers, when translation is not available”. Barriers related to the application process could be resolved by providing staff support from the school or community to assist parents to complete applications. But this does not address the emotional and social barriers. What the qualitative survey results reveal is that school fees can create considerable stress and anxiety for low-income students; that it is hurtful for families to have to ask for financial assistance; and that students may avoid courses or activities involving a fee rather than put further stress on their parents.

**School fees and equal access to participation in school-related activities**

One objective of this survey was to assess, from a teacher’s perspective, how school fees impact on the ability of students experiencing financial hardship to fully participate in school activities. The survey findings suggest that a considerable proportion of students whose families are experiencing financial hardship do not participate in school activities that charge a fee. Even in graduation ceremonies, which should potentially include all students, only half of teachers (for whom this activity applies) indicate that “most” or “all” students experiencing financial hardship participate. An even smaller proportion of teachers indicated “most” or “all” of students experiencing financial hardship participated in a band/music program (one-third), extra-curricular sports (about one-quarter), or school academies such as hockey or dance (one in six).

**Conclusion and implications**

These survey results indicate a need for a comprehensive assessment of the impact of school fees on equal access for all students to fully participate in courses and school-related activities; on the emotional, social, and educational implications for low-income students who bear the burden of school fee policies; and on the inequities that arise between schools depending on their capacity to generate sufficient school-based funds to provide enrichment opportunities for students.

A new study suggests there is an educational imperative to address barriers such as school fees that may prevent low-income students from participating in extra-curricular activities. A 2015 Statistics Canada study found that First Nations youth living off-reserve who participated in extra-curricular activities such as art, sports, and/or clubs on a weekly basis, during their last year of high school, had a much higher probability of completing high school by the age of 18 than those who participated less often (13% higher for male students in sports, 16% higher for male students in art activities, and 19% higher for female students in clubs or groups). Statistics Canada notes that these results “take into account other academic, family, school and peer characteristics that may have an impact on high school completion of First Nations people living off reserve”. This is a remarkable finding which suggests that policy efforts to improve access to extra-curricular activities may have a significant impact on graduation rates and should be explored for other student populations at risk of not completing high school. The relatively small increase in provincial funding that would be required so school districts can cover the costs of extra-curricular activities without charging a fee may yield far greater benefits by improving graduation rates and reducing the risk of poverty associated with not completing high school.

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Appendix

Of the students you teach whom you know are experiencing financial hardship, how many participate in school-related activities that charge a fee? (Excludes missing values and “Does not apply”)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>School field trips (n=675)</th>
<th>Overnight travel (n=378)</th>
<th>School band or music program (n=422)</th>
<th>Extra-curricular sports (n=487)</th>
<th>Academies (n=383)</th>
<th>Graduation ceremonies (n=353)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td>10.9%</td>
<td>9.2%</td>
<td>23.8%</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A few</td>
<td>12.9%</td>
<td>14.0%</td>
<td>14.7%</td>
<td>22.0%</td>
<td>14.4%</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some</td>
<td>9.3%</td>
<td>14.0%</td>
<td>15.4%</td>
<td>20.3%</td>
<td>11.0%</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most</td>
<td>28.4%</td>
<td>16.4%</td>
<td>15.6%</td>
<td>14.8%</td>
<td>9.4%</td>
<td>28.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>37.2%</td>
<td>10.1%</td>
<td>17.3%</td>
<td>13.6%</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
<td>22.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
<td>28.8%</td>
<td>26.1%</td>
<td>20.1%</td>
<td>33.9%</td>
<td>28.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>