



British Columbia Teachers' Federation

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

Research Department fax: 604-871-2294

2012 Poverty and Education survey: A teacher's perspective

Executive Summary

This survey was conducted by BCTF Research
in collaboration with the Anti-poverty action group
of the Committee for Action on Social Justice

November 2013

Introduction

Over the past decade, BC has experienced persistently-high child poverty rates, the worst of all provinces for most years¹. Child poverty appears to be worsening, with the most recent Statistics Canada data showing that BC's child poverty rate increased from 10.5% in 2010 to 11.3% in 2011, with 93,000 children living in poverty². This means tens of thousands of children in BC schools are experiencing the effects of poverty. For this reason, the BC Teachers' Federation conducted a provincial survey of teachers across BC to document, from a teacher's perspective, the poverty-related needs of students, assess the adequacy of resources to meet these needs, and identify what is most needed to address educational barriers related to poverty.

Teachers who responded to the survey and the socio-economic context in which they teach

In total, there are 778 valid survey responses to the *2012 Poverty and Education survey: A teacher's perspective*, with respondents being well-represented across regional zones. Mid- to late-career teachers (over twenty years' teaching experience) are over-represented in the survey, while early-career teachers are under-represented. About one in three respondents teach in schools located in a low-income area and almost half of respondents teach in schools located in a mixed-income area. Almost all teachers responding to the survey teach students who are experiencing poverty. One-half of teachers surveyed estimate at least one-quarter of the students they teach are experiencing poverty issues. Only 5% of teachers answered "None" of the students they teach are experiencing poverty. When asked if the proportion of students experiencing poverty had changed at the school, almost one half (44.8%) of the 759 teachers who responded to the question said the proportion of students experiencing poverty increased since they began teaching at the school.

Hungry students and adequacy of resources to support them

Eight in ten teachers responding to the survey said they have students in their classroom who come to school hungry, while less than half indicated the school has a lunch program (44.3%) or breakfast program (42.9%). Of the 550 teachers who indicated that some form of nutritional support is available at the school, half (50.2%) said they had students who would benefit from the school meal programs but do not participate. Of the 572 teachers who rated the adequacy of school meal programs to meet the needs of all students who require nutritional support, only one-third (combined) rated the adequacy of meal programs as either "Quite adequate" or "Very adequate". Four in ten (40.2%) teachers indicated they bring food to school for students who are hungry, spending an average of about \$30 per month (\$28.88) of their own money on food for students.

¹ First Call (2012), *2012 Child Poverty Report Card*, pp. 5–6.

² First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition. "Child poverty rate in British Columbia back to the worst, children of single moms hard hit. News release, July 5, 2013.

School fees and participation in school-related activities

The survey results indicate that many schools charge students a fee (or deposit) for course materials or supplies such as school calendars, band and music instruments, general school supplies, materials for art, shop, and/or sewing classes, and textbook deposits. Of the 421 teachers who said they are responsible for collecting money from parents for fees at the start of the school year, 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. About one-quarter of these teachers (combined percentage) 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 (67.2%) of respondents 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. Only one-third of teachers (combined percentage) rated the process for providing financial assistance to low-income families as working “Quite well” (25.8%) or “Very well” (7.8%) to ensure that all students can fully participate in courses and school-related activities.

The survey asked teachers about factors they feel prevent families from applying/asking for financial assistance when it is available³. Over half (55%) of teachers identified “Parent and/or student is not comfortable asking”, 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 factors preventing families for applying for assistance with school 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”.

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.

School attendance and poverty-related barriers

The survey asked teachers about poverty-related barriers that can make it difficult for students to attend school, the approaches schools use to encourage attendance, and the challenges encountered by students who are working in paid employment.

Most teachers (84.5%) have some students for whom low attendance is a concern. About one in four respondents (combined percentages) indicated at least one-half of the students for whom attendance is a concern are also experiencing poverty. The survey results indicate that the most significant barrier to school attendance is “Student doesn’t have a stable living or housing situation”. Two-thirds of elementary teachers and 85.6% of middle/secondary teachers indicate having students in their class(es) who miss school for this reason. Middle/secondary students seem most vulnerable to poverty-related barriers to attendance. Of the 307 middle/secondary teachers in the survey, 72.6% indicate having students in their class(es) who miss school to “Stay

³These percentages are based on the teachers for whom the factor applied to their teaching situation.

home to look after younger siblings". Two-thirds indicate having middle/secondary students in their class(es) who miss school because of "Lack transportation to and from school" (63.2%) or "Parent has illness or disability that makes it difficult to get children to school" (64.2%).

Of the 220 middle/secondary teachers who indicated having students in their class who work in paid employment, almost one-half (45.5%) indicated "A few" students, one-quarter (26.4%) indicated "Some" students, and 7.3% indicated "Most" students work to help support themselves or their families. When asked how many of these students miss school because "Work schedule conflicts with school", 40.5% indicated "A few", 27.3% indicated "Some", and 1.4% indicated "All" students working in paid employment miss school for this reason. About one-quarter of these 220 teachers indicated it is a challenge for "Most" or "All" students working in paid employment to: "Complete assignments on time" (26.8%) and to "Maintain grades" (23.1%). About one in ten teachers indicated it is a challenge for these students to "Attend classes regularly" (13.2%) and/or to "Stay enrolled in course or school" (10.9%).

Staff awareness and understanding about poverty issues

The purpose of this section of the survey was to document teacher perceptions of staff awareness of poverty issues. One-quarter (24.4%) rated the level of staff awareness of poverty issues at their school as "Very aware", and one-third (33.2%) as "Quite aware" of poverty issues at the school. The survey results suggest that teachers do not consider resources to help increase awareness and understanding about poverty to be adequate. At least two-thirds of teachers (for whom it applied to their teaching situation) rated the adequacy of a "Resource manual on services to assist low-income families" (71.8%) and "Curriculum that fosters a critical perspective on poverty" (66.4%) as either "Not very adequate" or "Not at all adequate". About one-half (52.1%) rated the adequacy of "Training to increase awareness and understanding about poverty", and 45.7% rated "Resources meaningful to the cultural experience of students", as either "Not very adequate" or "Not at all adequate".

The survey results suggest that most teachers do not feel they are adequately prepared to respond to poverty-related issues in the classroom. Only 21.7% of respondents said they feel "Quite prepared" and 7.5% "Very prepared" to teach in a classroom where poverty issues are present on a regular basis. On average, teachers who work in a school located in a low-income area feel the most prepared to teach where poverty issues are present, while teachers in schools in high-income areas feel the least prepared. The survey results also suggest that many teachers do not feel they received sufficient training and in-service to prepare them for teaching students who are experiencing poverty. Very few respondents rated their teachers' training and in-service as "Quite adequate" (5.9%) or "Very adequate" (1.7%) in preparing them to work with students who live in poverty. On average, early-career teachers rated their teacher training and in-service higher than those with ten or more years of teaching experience.

Many more teachers are interested in attending BCTF workshops pertaining to poverty and education issues than have attended to date. While 12.9% of teachers in the survey have attended the "Poverty as a classroom issue" workshop, 53.1% indicated an interest in doing so. While 7.7% of teachers surveyed have attended the "Teachers can make a difference for children living in poverty" workshop, 58.2% indicated an interest in doing so.

Adequacy of resources to address poverty-related needs at the school

Most teachers considered at least some of the students they currently teach as “grey area” students who are in need of extra learning support and have not been assessed. Of the 727 teachers who responded to the question, 47.7% indicated that “Less than one-quarter”, and 35.1% indicated “Between one-quarter and one-half”, of the students they teach are “grey area” students. One in ten teachers (combined percentage) indicated that at least one-half of the students they teach are in need of extra learning support and have not been assessed.

The survey results suggest that the majority of teachers do not feel the current level of staffing resources is adequate to provide the extra support needed to address learning gaps. The percentage of teachers who rated each type of staffing resource, as either “Not at all” or “Not very” adequate (combined percentage) is as follows: Counsellors/Psychologists (66.7%), English as a Second Dialect (66.1%), Special needs assessment (57.6%), English Language Learning teachers (55.6%), Learning Assistance teachers (52.1%), and Aboriginal Education teachers (45.3%).

When asked to assess the overall adequacy of resources to meet the poverty-related needs of students (714 teachers responded), only 10.4% rated the adequacy of the resources at their school to address the poverty-related needs of students as “Quite adequate”, and 1.8% rated the adequacy of resources as “Very adequate”. On average, teachers in schools located in low-income areas rated the adequacy of resources to address the poverty-related needs of students the lowest, and teachers in schools located in high-income areas rated the adequacy of resources the highest.

What is most needed to support students and families?

The survey asked teachers to indicate the level of need in their school for a range of staffing resources to support students who are experiencing poverty, if it applied to their teaching experience. Of those teachers, 64.8% indicated a “High need” for “Specialist teachers to address learning gaps”, 60.5% a “High need” for “Counselling services for students and families”, 43.6% a “High need” for “School library and literacy programs”, and 35.4% a “High need” for a “School nurse to address health-related needs of students”. For each type of professional staffing resource, the need is rated the highest (on average) by teachers in schools located in low-income areas, and rated the lowest (on average) by teachers in schools located in high-income areas.

The survey asked teachers to rank five areas of focus, from highest (1) to lowest (5), as to how important they consider each as a priority area for the BCTF to focus on in advocating for the needs of students who are experiencing poverty. Of the five areas of focus listed, over half of respondents chose “Extra teaching support to address learning gaps related to poverty (56.5%)” and “Increased provincial funding for programs that support students in poverty” (55.2%) as either a first priority or second priority area for the BCTF to focus on in advocating for the needs of students who are experiencing poverty.

Teachers' recommendations for the provincial government

The survey asked teachers if they had recommendations for what the provincial government could do to improve learning conditions and address poverty-related barriers for students. About one-third of respondents made recommendations, which can be grouped in four thematic areas:

1. Provide extra resources to address learning gaps
2. Improve education funding to address poverty-related barriers
3. Address underlying causes of poverty, suggesting a range of poverty-reduction strategies
4. Increase government awareness and understanding of poverty and education issues.

For a full summary of the recommendations (in *Overview of the findings*, p. 40), as well as more-detailed reports on the study findings, see bctf.ca/PovertyResearch.aspx.

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)
- 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.