



British Columbia Teachers' Federation

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2012 Poverty and Education survey: A teacher's perspective

“What we learned from teachers”

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

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Over the past decade, BC has experienced persistently-high child poverty rates¹. The most recent Statistics Canada data show BC's child poverty rate at 11.3% in 2011, with 93,000 children living in poverty². This means that tens of thousands of children in BC schools are experiencing the effects of poverty. In 2012–13, the BC Teachers' Federation conducted a provincial survey of teachers to assess the poverty-related needs of students, the adequacy of resources to meet these needs, and identify what is most needed to address educational barriers related to poverty. In total, 778 teachers completed the survey, with respondents being well-represented across BC. Late-career teachers were more likely to respond to the survey than were early-career teachers.

Hungry students and adequacy of resources to support them

We learned that most of the teachers in the survey have some students who are experiencing poverty, and that 80% of teachers have students who come to school hungry. Less than half (about 45%) of teachers surveyed indicated the school had a lunch program or a breakfast program. Of the 550 teachers who indicated some form of nutritional support at the school, one-half said they have students in their class who would benefit from meal programs but do not participate. Teachers' comments suggest this may be because the family cannot afford the fee, is not comfortable requesting financial assistance, or the student is concerned about being judged by peers. Only one-third (of 572 teachers) rated the adequacy of school meal programs as either "Quite adequate" or "Very adequate". Four in ten teachers bring food to school for hungry students, spending an average of about \$30 per month.

School fees and participation in school-related activities

We also learned that schools charge fees (or deposits) for a wide range of course materials and school supplies. Of the 421 teachers who collected school fees, two-thirds indicated "Most" families are able to provide payment for fees. About one-quarter of teachers indicated that either "Some" or "A few" families are able to pay the fees at the start of the school year. While the *School Act* requires that the school district have a process in place to provide financial assistance to students experiencing financial hardship, only two-thirds of teachers were aware of such a process. And only one in three teachers considered the process to be working either "Quite well" or "Very well" to ensure all students can fully participate in courses and school-related activities. The survey results suggest the process works the least well for schools in low-income areas.

When asked how many of the students they teach experiencing financial hardship participate in school activities requiring a fee (if it applied to their teaching situation), two-thirds of teachers indicated either "Most" or "All" of these students participated in field trips, one-half indicated either "Most" or "All" of these students participated in graduation ceremonies, and one-third indicated either "Most" or "All" of these students participated in school band or music programs. Less than one-third of teachers indicated "Most" or "All" students experiencing financial hardship participated in extra-curricular sports, overnight travel, and school academies. When asked which factors prevent families from applying/asking for financial assistance, about one-half of teachers in the survey identified "Parent and/or student is not comfortable asking", one-third of teachers identified "Family has no transportation to and from activity", and one-quarter identified "Family cannot afford equipment and clothing". Some barriers related to the application process, with one in four teachers identifying "Application is technically difficult to complete", and one in ten indicating "Language barriers, when translation is not available".

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 attendance and poverty-related barriers

Most teachers (84.5%) have students for whom low attendance is a concern. One in four teachers indicated one-half or more of these students are also experiencing poverty. Two-thirds of elementary teachers and 85.6% of middle/secondary teachers indicate having students in their class(es) who miss school because “Student doesn’t have a stable living or housing situation”. Middle/secondary teachers were more likely than elementary teachers to say students miss school for reasons such as “Stay home to look after younger siblings” (72.6%), “Lack transportation to and from school” (63.2%), or “Parent has an illness or disability that makes it hard to get children to school” (64.2%). Of the 220 middle/secondary teachers with students in their class who work in paid employment, about two-thirds indicate these students miss school because “Work schedule conflicts with school”.

Staff awareness and understanding about poverty issues

We learned that many teachers do not feel well-prepared nor do they feel their teacher training and in-service adequately prepared them to teach students who are experiencing poverty. Teachers in schools in low-income and northern remote areas felt more prepared than those in suburban and high-income areas. Overall, teachers did not view available resources to enhance awareness and understanding about poverty as adequate. At least two-thirds of teachers (if it applied to their teaching situation) rated “Resource manual on services to assist low-income families” and “Curriculum that fosters a critical perspective on poverty” as either “Not very adequate” or “Not at all adequate”. About one-half of teachers rated “Training to increase awareness and understanding about poverty” and “Resources meaningful to cultural experience of students” as either “Not very adequate” or “Not at all adequate”.

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

Most teachers reported having at least some students whom they would consider to be “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, about one-half consider one-quarter or more of the students they currently teach are “grey area” students. When asked to indicate the level of need for specialist teachers at the school (if it applied to their teaching situation), 64.8% indicated a “High need” for specialist teachers at their school to address learning gaps, 60.5% a “High need” for counseling services for students and families, and 43.6% a “High need” for school library and literacy programs.

What is most needed to support students and families?

When asked about priority areas to focus on in advocating for the needs of students experiencing poverty, over half of teachers 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. When asked what can the provincial government do to improve learning conditions and address poverty-related barriers, one-third of teachers made recommendations, which can be grouped in four areas: (1) Provide extra specialist staffing 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; and (4) Increase government awareness and understanding of poverty and education issues.

A full report of the study findings is available at bctf.ca/PovertyResearch.aspx.