

SPECIAL EDUCATION FUNDING

Our government must change course

Parents and teachers know that every child is unique. When students have special needs, it's that much more important for schools to recognize and respond to their unique gifts and challenges.



What matters more—students or statistics?

Unfortunately, the BC Ministry of Education is planning to change how it funds services for students with special needs. Rather than funding based on the needs of individual children, it would be based on the prevalence of their condition or disability across the student population at large. Teachers are deeply concerned that switching to a funding model based on prevalence statistics rather than actual students' needs will have terrible consequences for special education in BC.

Parents, teachers, and support staff excluded from panel

This change is being recommended by a panel that had no representatives of parents, teachers, or school support staff. In other words, those with the most to lose in terms of support for the kids they love, and those with the most to contribute in terms of how to help them, were excluded from the panel.

Breaking the link between needs and services

If students' needs will no longer have to be diagnosed for funding, there will be less tangible evidence that they deserve services. Without designations of special needs, there's less incentive to provide the dollars to meet them.

In Ontario, the prevalence model has raised serious concerns. A report by the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario states: *The breaking of the link between funding and needs has had profound implications for students, parents, teachers, and special education administrators, [whose] role... has been transformed from one of enabling access to needed services to a gatekeeping role of rationing scarce resources and cost containment.*

Parents will have to fight harder for services

A prevalence model will put significantly more pressure on parents, who will be left competing for attention to their precious children. Some parents are highly skilled advocates who have the time and resources to fight for the services their children need, but many others are not. The sad result will be increasing inequities across our school system, unfairness compounded for the most vulnerable students and their families.

A lack of accountability

Another worrisome aspect of the prevalence model is that it would allow government and the Ministry of Education to disavow accountability for the lack of services to kids who need them most. By downloading responsibility onto school districts, they can shirk their responsibility for the fair funding of public education. The prevalence model is about reducing administrative burden, not about truly serving students.

Epidemiologists out of Queen's University who have studied rates of autism spectrum disorder, learning disabilities, etc., over 20 years found that BC had some of the most reliable data because we have linked funding to the designations, which means access to ... timely assessments wasn't a barrier for our students, as we've seen in other jurisdictions. So, there's further proof that once you separate the funding, once you separate the accountability for the districts, students' disability rights are often not upheld.

—Reagan Sawka, President, Prince Rupert Teachers' Union

Current funding is inadequate

Funding for K–12 education as a share of the provincial economy has been falling steadily for the past 18 years. While government has been making capital investments, operational funding for K–12 remains woefully inadequate. If BC was still spending at the same level as in 2002, we would have \$3,000 more per student in our public schools!

Because of this chronic underfunding, school districts spend hundreds of millions of dollars more on special education services than they receive from the Ministry of Education every year. They're forced to pull dollars from other programs to try to meet special needs. It is long overdue for government to significantly improve operational funding.

Scarcity will only get worse

Under a prevalence model the amount of funding will be easier to limit, leaving programs to squabble over even scarcer dollars. School districts will face untenable choices—breakfast programs or autism services? Clearly, these cannot be either/or choices in our schools. Both are crucial.

A teacher's plea

Even though this is the smallest class I've ever taught, I now have seven designated students.... With reading levels as low as Grade 1, I have another five students waiting to be tested. My one tired EA and I are trying as hard as we can to get them ready for middle school. And we have victories every day, but it's never enough.

Even without the changes the government wants to introduce, I'm working in a system where students are no longer being lost in the cracks: they are falling en masse down sinkholes! I have had enough of trying to reach over the edge of the hole, standing on shifting sands, trying to haul so many kids back from the brink.

—Tamara Thomson, 25-year teacher

Share your concerns with MLAs

Teachers are calling on colleagues, parents, and concerned British Columbians to speak out now.

Please, urge your MLA to change course right away! It's crucial that all MLAs, not just the Education Minister, hear our message:

**Stop planning for the prevalence model and start funding public education with the best interests of kids and families at heart!
Because every child has the right to a public education that meets their needs.**

Find your MLA's email address here:

www.leg.bc.ca/content-committees/Pages/MLA-Contact-Information.aspx

