



BC Confederation of
Parent Advisory Councils

BC Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils (BCCPAC)

Presentation to

The Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services

Virtual Public Hearing

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Submitted by

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Introduction

The [BC Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils](#) (BCCPAC) is once again pleased to have the opportunity to submit its recommendations on public education priorities to the Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services for the 2021 provincial budget.

BCCPAC, a non-partisan registered non-profit charity in operation since 1922, represents the parents/guardians of over 565,000 children attending provincial public schools. As the provincially mandated voice of parents in public schools, we engage, empower and support parents for the success of all learners through collaboration, partnership and education, in a culture of acceptance, inclusion and equity. BCCPAC is governed by a volunteer board of directors elected annually by the membership; our District Parent Advisory Councils (DPAC) membership represents 96% of parents in public education and Parent Advisory Councils (PAC) from all 60 school districts across the province.

Every child has the right to a free, high-quality public education and the provincial government has the responsibility to ensure this right. The [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) and the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) both affirm the responsibility of governments to ensure that all children—irrespective of race, religion, gender, ability or economic situation—have equal right to access an education directed to the development of their full human potential, respecting cultural, national and Aboriginal identities and for the perpetuation and furtherance of human freedom, equality, tolerance and environmental sustainability for all.

The importance of investing in K-12 education was yet again recognized in the [2019 Report](#) from this Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services:

“...Committee Members recognize the importance of investing in K-12 education, reflecting on suggestions put forward by British Columbians with respect to student supports, programming and curriculum, and recruitment and retention. The Committee focuses their recommendations on two areas: sustaining capital investments in new construction, seismic upgrades and maintenance; and ensuring funding is adequate to meet the province’s commitment with respect to reconciliation.”

Also in the [2019 Report](#) “education was the sixth most common theme in question one of the online survey, with respondents particularly referencing a need to increase funding for public education. In question two regarding dividing up a dollar between programs and services, K-12 education received 6.7 cents, the fifth highest amount”.

Since 2014, the [Select Standing Committee for Finance and Government Services](#) has repeatedly affirmed that public education is not adequately supported by public funds. This Committee has [recommended](#) “the need to ensure that every child, including children with special needs and vulnerable students, can benefit from the education system”. They further agreed on the “need to establish clear standards of support for students with special needs in

both the public and independent school systems”. The Committee recognized the challenges faced by the education system, including “acknowledging the need for more capital funding to address issues, such as deferred maintenance, seismic safety and capacity”. BCCPAC and its members fully support the K-12 funding recommendations made in the previous six reports of this Committee.

Additionally, in the [2021 Budget consultation paper](#) the Minister of Finance stated:

“We are working towards a new normal for ourselves and our economy. Now more than ever, we need to invest in people, communities. In communities throughout B.C., work is underway on new roads, hospitals and schools to create a better quality of life with more access to the health and community services people depend on. Significant investments in K-12 education, skills training and the new B.C. Access Grant will help people respond to the current challenges in our job market, while moving towards a future in our province where your opportunities are not defined by your age, income bracket or home address.”

The current pandemic has the capacity to affect every individual across the globe—and how each person responds can potentially affect everyone else. This is most true with children and youth within K-12 public education. It was only 12 months ago that BCCPAC made a similar submission to this Committee but the world, our province, looks so very different today. COVID-19 has affected every aspect of our lives, our communities, and the way we operate. We have seen both positive and negative changes; we are challenging long held beliefs and assumptions. There are adaptations we will take forward and others we will leave behind. But many families are grappling with the financial reality of reduced hours or job loss and the ones most deeply affected are those who were already vulnerable. Our children are facing increased levels of stress and anxiety both at home and at school.

We have identified **three key recommendations** that are critical for every child to have equitable access to public education with the supports and services they need to succeed and thrive, both pre and post-pandemic:

Recommendation 1—Safeguard Stable, Predictable and Adequate Education Funding

That the provincial government act now on the recommendations from the past six years of the Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services and safeguard adequate, stable, and predictable funding for the K-12 public education system to ensure the provision of education programs, resources, wrap-around services, and personnel that meets the actual needs of all students now and post pandemic. There must be equity of funding across all 60 school districts to ensure equal opportunity for all students across BC.



Recommendation 2—Increase Capital Funding

That the Treasury increase capital funding for the Ministry of Education to continue to accelerate the Seismic Mitigation Program (SMP) to meet the provincial government commitment of having all public school building upgrades and replacements complete by 2025/2030 and by doing so contribute to infrastructure and job creation.

That the Treasury double capital funding to the Ministry of Education for the Playground Equipment Program which attempts to address the continued pressure on parents to fundraise for accessible playground equipment and recognizes one of the many inequities within the public education system.

Recommendation 3—Increase Operational Funding

That the provincial government increase K-12 public education operational funding in Budget 2021 to ensure sustainable, predictable funding through a student-centered model that allows school districts to cover the costs of delivering education, reflects the actual fixed operating costs of operating school facilities and covers all the downloaded costs to school districts, and net new costs to K-12 education as a result of COVID-19 pandemic and costs associated with recovery as affects children and youth.

Recommendation 1

— Safeguard Stable, Predictable and Adequate Education Funding

There is a very strong case to be made to ensure that the provincial government safeguards a continued investment in K-12 public education. Education must be at the center of our pandemic recovery plans to ensure we build resilience for the future and prevent inequalities from further widening.

“Spending on education is not the problem, it is the solution. If we spend on education we are increasing people’s information and knowledge about health, we are increasing economic opportunity for countries to get back to growth and we are making possible more cohesive society where every individual has a chance to develop their talents.”

[Gordon Brown, UN Special Envoy for Global Education June 2020](#)

Mr. Brown went on to say, “governments have to be persuaded not to ‘crowd out’ education because of pressures to spend on health and social safety nets”. Beyond learning losses, especially for the most disadvantaged children, participants in the Global Education meeting underlined that the “new normal” would require more funding for learning recovery and acceleration programmes, school health and safety, connectivity and support to teachers.

Co-Chair Stefania Giannini, UNESCO’s Assistant-Director General for Education, concluding the meeting stating “We need unity, solidarity and new forms of collaboration, to protect and

promote education as a global public good – one that every society depends on to end poverty, combat inequalities and shape a sustainable future”.

The current funding model and the total amount of money for public education does not adequately meet the needs of all our students. The principle that every student in the province should have an equal opportunity to be educated per the School Act is not the reality across BC. Economic and social realities differ across the province with the consequence being that school communities even within a district have vastly differing capacities for fundraising (e.g., through charity, student fees, and/or parental fundraising). Schools dependent on the ability of their communities to address inadequate funding results in unequal learning opportunities.

The provincial government with the Ministry of Education must continue the process of the [Funding Model Review](#) in developing a new student-needs-based, equitable, transparent and accountable funding model for the K-12 public system for Budget 2021.

Changes to the funding formula must be student-centric, be consistent with changes to the Special Education Policy, reflect the diverse challenges of individual school districts, be equitable across the regions, provide the supports and resources needed to meet the diversity of all students’ educational needs and meet the real costs of delivering public education across the province while also clearly demonstrating transparency and accountability by all districts to all the stakeholders, specifically parents.

There is a historic and continued heavy reliance on PACs and parents to raise funds for use and distribution at the school level to reduce the expenses of school budgets. Even within school districts, schools vary in programming depending on PAC fundraising for items now considered “optional.” It’s been demonstrated that PACs subsidize much more than the clichéd playground construction. PAC fundraising pays for basic classroom supplies (books, readers, math materials), sexual health education, resource supplies, art and music materials, gym equipment, playgrounds, furniture (including curtains, cafeteria tables, desks and chairs), technology and much more.

In this COVID environment, since March 2020 through the next 12-18 or even 24 months, PACs will not have the ability to fundraise as before as their communities have been adversely affected financially. Additionally their parents will not have the mental energy and bandwidth to engage as they had before the pandemic. As noted above, inequities among schools and PACs already exists and this pandemic factor will increase the gap between “the haves” and the “have nots”. This reliance on parent subsidies has created unacceptable inequities based on socio/economic differences. This is harmful to neighbourhood schools, who do not have the capacity to fundraise and particularly in urban areas where student mobility to wealthier catchments exacerbates these discrepancies.

Adequately funding public education is not about whether or not we have the public funds; it is a choice in priorities and spending made by the government. Unpredictable funding and unfunded cost increases require school districts to spend time and resources on balancing

budgets each year instead of strategically planning the most effective use of funding to support student success.

Parents across the province expect that downloaded cost pressures, such as provincially negotiated wage settlements and collective agreements and, energy rate increases be fully funded annually as additional increases to operating funding and that the overall annual funding to public education be adjusted for inflation and for increased costs due to long term adaptations for COVID-19.

Currently school districts are conducting their annual budget consultations and are reporting budget shortfalls and the need to use their contingencies and surpluses. If public education funding isn't safeguarded and retained at its current level or higher as the actual costs of education during the pandemic with a hybrid model are increasing, then how will the Ministry and the school districts deliver on their mandate of public education?

We ask that the provincial government act now on the recommendations from the past six years of the Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services and safeguard adequate, stable, and predictable funding for the K-12 public education system to ensure the provision of education programs, resources, wrap-around services, and personnel that meets the actual needs of all students now and post pandemic. There must be equity of funding across all 60 school districts to ensure equal opportunity for all students across BC.

Recommendation 2

— Increase Capital Funding

We support Recommendation 65 from the Select Standing Committee on Government and Financial Services' [Report on Budget 2020](#), that the Treasury "sustain capital investments in schools and ensure flexibility in the funding process for new builds, seismic upgrades and maintenance, including leveraging opportunities for modernizing facilities".

In the [2021 Budget consultation paper](#) its noted under Infrastructure and Job Creation that "BC is ready to respond to the challenges ahead with an economic plan that provides good jobs building the infrastructure our growing province needs in communities throughout British Columbia. By continuing to build up our province, people will have access to the jobs, infrastructure and services that are needed to weather the COVID-19 pandemic and transition to a new, stronger economy".

Capital projects benefit the economy and infrastructure by creating much needed jobs and would help move forward the backlog of school building upgrade projects and new builds.



According to the Ministry of Education’s [Seismic Mitigation Program Progress Report](#) of June 2020, there are 16 projects “Proceeding to Construction”, 29 at “Business Case Development” and 244 deemed “Future Priorities”. Sustaining capital investments in new construction, seismic upgrades and maintenance will help support infrastructure and job creation across the province.

Seismic and New Builds

The provincial government initiated its [Seismic Mitigation Plan](#) (SMP) in 2004 and at that time identified 347 High Risk schools across the province. Buildings that are designated “High Risk” are likely to suffer structural failure (collapse) during even a moderate earthquake and be unusable afterwards. In 2005, the government promised British Columbians that “all at-risk schools in BC would be seismically upgraded by 2020.”

In 2005, the provincial government stipulated as part of the SMP that replacement schools should be built instead of upgrading existing structures, if the cost of seismically upgrading was more than 70% of the cost of building a new school. While retrofitting or upgrading an existing school building such that it can hopefully withstand an earthquake and allow students and staff to exit and survive is often the lowest-cost choice (as opposed to replacing it with a new building) retrofitted buildings are designed only to meet the standard of ensuring occupants exit safely—unlikely to be achievable in a major earthquake—they are not designed to be usable afterwards. Alternatively replacement/new buildings are designed to be usable the next day. It is short-sighted to save a small amount of money and risk countless lives by doing retrofits when it will be much more expensive later when we need to rebuild these schools after an earthquake. Community and neighbourhood schools are the heart of the community and will be required as emergency shelters and to help families return to normalcy.

Replacing an old school will also eliminate millions in deferred maintenance costs—Vancouver alone has over \$800 million in deferred maintenance. These are buildings that, in addition to being seismically unsafe, contain lead pipes, lead paint, and asbestos, are not full accessible and/or lack appropriate or sufficient facilities like washrooms, and aren’t designed to enable 21st-century learning and the redesigned curriculum. These issues are not necessarily addressed during a seismic retrofit.

In 2013, the provincial government stated it would be up to school districts to “confirm the scope, schedule, budget and risks” associated with individual seismic projects before they will receive approval to move to the design and construction phase. In 2015, delays were caused by disagreements over the scope of the projects. The initial 2020 completion date for 347 upgrades was pushed back to 2025, and for Vancouver as late as 2030.

The [SMP report in June 2020](#) indicates there are 16 projects “Proceeding to Construction”, 29 at “Business Case Development” and 244 schools which have not truly even begun the seismic approval process. With the government’s commitment date of 2025/2030 fast approaching, there needs to be strengthened financial commitment to help expedite the SMP to ensure all



children across the province are learning in safe buildings. Capital investments which enable the building of new seismically safe schools can't be halted.

We ask that the Treasury increase capital funding for the Ministry of Education to continue to accelerate the Seismic Mitigation Program (SMP) to meet the provincial government commitment of having all public school building upgrades and replacements complete by 2025/2030 and by doing so contribute to infrastructure and job creation which is greatly needed due to the impact of the current pandemic.

Playground Equipment Program

The creation of the annual Playground Equipment Program (PEP) in 2018 finally recognized the ongoing and significant pressure on parents to fundraise for school playgrounds. While the current \$5 million annual capital expenditure within PEP does help to alleviate some (not all) of the inequities in parent fundraising and enable Parent Advisory Councils (PACs) to strengthen their advisory and advocacy roles, it doesn't go far enough. Parents believe that safe, inclusive and accessible playgrounds should not be dependent on a school community's ability or inability to raise some or all the funds required.

BCCPAC members were pleased in April 2019 when the Ministry of Education updated the [Capital Plan Instructions](#) to school districts ensuring that only universally accessible Playground Equipment requests will be accepted. Universally accessible playground equipment serves the same purpose as standard playground equipment, but is designed to be accessible by all elementary-aged students, including children with disabilities or developmental challenges who need to interact with playgrounds in a specialized manner, including wheelchair use.

Given there are over 1100 elementary schools across the province, at the current rate of about 50 playgrounds each year with the existing funding, and the higher costs associated with accessible playground structures, there are children in elementary schools who will age out (i.e. leave the school) before a playground is built for their use. Currently there are a number of schools without any playground facility for their students.

Additionally, given our current pandemic environment, as being outdoors and children playing outside is essential to both their physical health and mental well-being, playgrounds on school sites (which are used every day by neighbourhood children) are critical.

We ask that the Treasury double capital funding to the Ministry of Education for the Playground Equipment Program which attempts to address the continued pressure on parents to fundraise for accessible playground equipment and recognizes one of the many inequities within the public education system.



Recommendation 3

— Increase Operational Funding

In its [2019 Report](#), this Committee received several submissions and presentations specifically referencing improving services for children and youth mental health. The YMCA of Northern BC explained that 50 percent of mental illness begins before the age of 14, and that early learning and interventions are critical for promoting child/youth mental health. The British Columbia School Trustees Association recommended funding to “implement an integrated program of services across education, health and social services, sharing that boards of education and school districts have experienced an increasing need for staff and programs to address student mental health”. The Committee recommended the provincial government “ensure investments in the continuum of services for mental health and addiction needs, including funding for integrated, wrap-around support services with housing”.

More recently on June 9, 2020 during Budget 2021 consultations, the Canadian Mental Health Association urged the Committee:

“...for the province to invest in mental health and well-being, especially given the impacts of COVID-19 and the projected recovery phase from the pandemic as we move into the next fiscal year and the province's fiscal and budget plan.”

[According to](#) Dr. Michael Kobor, a fellow in the Child and Brain Development Program at CIFAR, professor and Canada Research chair in social epigenetics in the department of medical genetics at the University of British Columbia (UBC); Dr. Candice Odgers, co-director of the Child and Brain Development Program at CIFAR and professor in the department of psychological science at the University of California; and Dr. Kim Schmidt the research manager of the Healthy Starts Theme, BC Children’s Hospital Research Institute and the Social Exposome Research Cluster at UBC:

“Economic changes can leave a lasting mark on our children. A shocking 44 per cent of Canadian households have already suffered job losses or reduced hours during the pandemic. Research has shown that household income is related to asthma, obesity, depression, and educational outcomes in children, as well as their risk of developing chronic diseases later in life. Strikingly, household income in childhood is often a better predictor of health in adulthood than current income level. “

These doctors further state that “increased time at home with stressed-out parents will change the quality of parent-child interactions and, tragically, in some cases increase the occurrence of child abuse. Already, calls to the Kids Help Phone, Canada’s 24/7 national support service for children, have increased by over 100 per cent”. They conclude by stating, “There are policy actions we can take now in order to prevent this pandemic from having a lasting impact on the health and well-being of our children. We must provide direct support and prioritize children’s unique needs in our decisions and plans”.



Children First Canada in their report [“Kids Can’t Wait](#) in May 2020 stated:

“Children are uniquely impacted by the crisis and they and their families need urgent attention and support. Children are affected by disruptions to their daily lives due to the closure of schools, recreational programs and other public places. Children’s health has been directly impacted by the pivoting of healthcare systems to focusing on the needs of adults and seniors during the pandemic; meaning that many vital services for children have been cancelled or postponed. They are also impacted by the increasing economic pressures and stress that their parents and other caregivers are facing due to work closures and job losses. All children are impacted, and some are being particularly hard hit.”

“Kids growing up in poverty have limited access to nutritional programs that would otherwise be offered in schools and they no longer have access to recreational supports that would have been available through afterschool programs. Children who experience family violence no longer have a safe refuge at school, and more kids are at risk of abuse due to the increased economic pressures that their families are experiencing.”

This government has strongly committed to working cross-ministry and with First Nations to ensure the mental well-being of all those affected by COVID-19. Children with disabilities and diverse abilities and those marginalized by socio-economic inequities, racism and structural violence are most impacted. Their unique needs require funding to ensure equitable and coordinated response to support their mental well-being during the pandemic recovery, and to prevent short-term and long-term harm.

According to [UNICEF](#), more than one in four children in Canada (27 per cent) starts kindergarten with developmental challenges. There is an acknowledged gap in resources and supports for special needs and other vulnerable students, including early identification, designation and programming for these learners. Exacerbating the current inadequate levels of special needs supports is the long wait time for formal assessments of students who have been identified as having a learning difference. According to BCCPAC members, wait lists of three and four years are sadly common and a number of parents are told their child will never be assessed. As a result, many frustrated parents opt to have their children assessed privately in order to more successfully advocate for their child’s access to supports and intervention. This has created an inequity in the public education system, as costs of psycho-educational assessments are borne by parents who are financially able, and other students wait years for intervention and assessment. All students—regardless of their family economic situation—deserve timely early intervention and assessment.



Immediate [increased funding and resources](#) must be provided to address the backlog of students waiting for assessment. Additionally, ongoing funding must be increased to school districts, to support the early identification and assessment required to obtain "designations" needed for intervention and support for students' academic, physical, behavioural, social and/or emotional challenges.

Staff from School District 57 in Prince George [presented to the 2019 Standing Committee for Children and Youth](#) and their comments clearly illustrate one of the many issues faced by parents of neuro-diverse special needs children in the public education system including a province-wide shortage of school psychologists:

“The majority of children with mild to moderate intellectual disabilities are identified at school by school psychologists. This poses a challenge for schools and families, because we’re seeing a trend toward later initial diagnosis in our district of children with intellectual disabilities, due to chronic short-staffing and the prioritization of conducting repeat assessment of 16-year-olds with intellectual disabilities. We’re also having difficulty making space in our caseloads to assess and diagnose children with specific learning disorders in reading, mathematics and writing.”

In 2019, the Select Standing Committee for Children and Youth’s [Report on Children with Neuro Diverse Special Needs](#) recommended that the provincial government ensure services and supports in the early years and within the school system based on need and functional ability and provided prior to diagnosis; promote a positive learning environment for all children by ensuring that the Ministry of Education’s inclusion policy is observed and enables children with neuro-diverse special needs to be part of the school community while accessing individualized education; conduct a labour force review of all professions serving children and youth with neuro-diverse special needs, including examining open positions, service wait times, compensation and post-secondary training.

A process by which a child could be supported from birth to age 20, with wrap-around services and resources would be transformative. Formalizing connections between the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Mental Health & Addictions, Ministry of Education, and Ministry of Children & Family Development so they work more seamlessly together would facilitate a holistic approach and help limit or remove many barriers. Improving the communication and interaction and the sharing of information between these Ministries would improve the experiences of students and their families as they enter the school system, experience their educational years, and transition into adulthood.

These Ministries should be working side-by-side and there should be trained specialists and addiction counsellors in our schools; if we can educate and guide while children/youth are in school, we can prevent issues in adulthood. The BC Coroners Service just this week reported that 170 people died of an illicit drug overdose in May 2020, the highest total ever recorded for a single month in provincial history. These adults are someone’s child and they too were

products of our education system. Now is the time to stem the tide; now is the time to connect Ministries and educate children of the dangers of drugs.

We ask that the provincial government increase K-12 public education operational funding in Budget 2021 to ensure sustainable, predictable funding through a student-centered model that allows school districts to cover the costs of delivering education, reflects the actual fixed operating costs of operating school facilities and covers downloaded costs and net new costs to K-12 education as a result of COVID-19 pandemic and costs associated with recovery as affects children and youth.

Conclusion and Recommendations

“The true measure of a nation’s standing is how well it attends its children – their health and safety, their material security, their education and socialization, and their sense of being loved, valued, and included in the families and societies to which they were born.”

[UNICEF REPORT CARD 7](#)

Parents strongly believe that public education must remain at the forefront of government’s list of priorities. By increasing its investment in K-12 education, the provincial government can continue its work towards creating a public education system in which each child receives the necessary supports and services they need to thrive and succeed, pre and post pandemic.

We recognize that this will be a lean year due to the provincial expenses related to the COVID-19 pandemic which will continue for many months yet. We understand that the provincial Budget update in July 2020 may be telling. However, the provincial government cannot afford to “take a year off” or defer education funding—it’s essential that public education remains a priority for our future generation during these incredibly stressful times.

There is vast research which indicates that resilience is more effectively supported through collective, system-level supports rather than relying on individual actions and the invisible labour of parents, caregivers and teachers to mitigate stress, often with insufficient resources to support them.

We must all work together to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic on children and youth.

We need to stay the course on funding for public education. It’s not just another year.

We ask this Committee to consider BCCPAC’s three key recommendations which address the need for equitable access to education and mental well-being for every learner:

- 1. Safeguard Stable, Predictable and Adequate Education**
- 2. Increase Capital Funding**
- 3. Increase Operational Funding**