

Healthy, resilient schools: Cornerstones of community and COVID-19 recovery



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Healthy, resilient schools: Cornerstones of community and COVID-19 recovery

The COVID-19 pandemic has upended life across our province for students, teachers and everyone connected to our public schools. The crisis has also exposed the fragilities of our economy in meeting the basic needs of all and highlighted the importance of the public sector, of community, and of care work. Schools are key public spaces of community and care. They must be protected and made more resilient both during and coming out of this public health crisis.

In this unique, urgent context, British Columbia teachers are pleased to present their views on priorities for the 2021 provincial budget to the Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services. The British Columbia Teachers' Federation (BCTF) represents 43,000 teachers and associated professionals in public schools across our province. This year, our brief to the Committee is focused on two categories of recommendation: those aimed at underlying, long-term issues in the public education system, and those arising from the intertwined public health and economic crises we now face, labelled (COVID-19). A single aim unites them: to give our students the education system they deserve, one that is healthy and resilient in every sense.

In these challenging times, British Columbia has an opportunity to make the necessary and pressing improvements to public education that will re-orient public education funding to fully reflect the needs of students, classrooms, and schools as community hubs. We must act boldly and for the long-term. Good will on the part of everyone in the system will, we are sure, allow for the establishment of a new equilibrium, where schools and students across the province have what they need to flourish and thrive.

Contents

Summary of issues and recommendations.....	1
1. Adequate funding for a resilient system	6
2. Supporting health and safety in challenging times	13
3. Successful inclusion strengthens resilient school communities	16
4. A strong foundation: funding for resources and teacher recruitment and retention	20
5. Enabling schools to be hubs of community.....	24
6. Adult education makes for a more resilient society	26
7. Investments in schools and communities	29

Summary of issues and recommendations

Adequate funding for a resilient system

Recommendation 1

That the Ministry of Education provide stable, predictable, and adequate funding to enable school districts to fulfill their responsibility to deliver quality public education to all students in British Columbia.

Recommendation 2

That the Ministry of Education terminate the consideration of a prevalence-based model for special education funding and align special education funding with special education needs.

Recommendation 3 (COVID-19)

That the Ministry of Education immediately move ahead with significant enhancements to operational funding for K–12, beyond the funding increases associated with enrolment growth, to enable increased health and safety measures and to support schools as hubs of community.

Recommendation 4 (COVID-19)

That all new provincial initiatives or costs, in particular those arising from measures related to the COVID-19 pandemic, be reflected in provincial funding grants, eliminating the practice of downloading costs onto school districts.

Recommendation 5 (COVID-19)

That the Ministry of Education fund any school district shortfalls in international student tuition revenue relative to 2019–20 for the coming school year and commit to reforming the international student program for an equitable distribution of students and tuition revenues among districts for the following school year.

Supporting health and safety in challenging times

Recommendation 6 (COVID-19)

That the Ministry of Education ensure sufficient and targeted funding to enable districts to expand teaching and support staff to accommodate smaller class sizes necessary for physical distancing as needed.

Recommendation 7 (COVID-19)

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Recommendation 8 (COVID-19)

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That the Ministry of Education provide targeted funding to support a trauma-informed approach to mental health for students, staff, and district administration, including more counsellors and professional learning for teachers on trauma-informed practice.

Successful inclusion strengthens resilient school communities

Recommendation 10

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Recommendation 11

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A strong foundation: funding for resources and teacher recruitment and retention

Recommendation 12

That the Ministry of Education provide substantial new funding for classroom resources in line with the updated provincial curriculum as well as infrastructure and support for new technology, resources, and in-service to enable teaching under pandemic conditions.

Recommendation 13

That the Ministry of Education provide dedicated funding for teacher recruitment and retention initiatives across all school districts.

Enabling schools to be hubs of community

Recommendation 14

That the Ministry of Education provide grants to school districts for school meal programs.

Recommendation 15 (COVID-19)

That the Ministry of Education provide grants to school districts for creating or expanding school gardens and other community spaces.

Adult education makes for a more resilient society

Recommendation 16

That the Ministry of Education increase the number of funded courses in adult education to reflect a broad range of educational needs and interests that help create an educationally enriched society as well as improved employment opportunities for individuals.

Recommendation 17

That the Ministry of Education fund adult students on an equivalent basis to school-age students.

Investments in schools and communities

Recommendation 18

That the Ministry of Education accelerate capital funding for seismic upgrades to meet its target of having all upgrades complete by 2025.

Recommendation 19 (COVID-19)

That the provincial government accelerate its planned investment in a universal, \$10-a-day childcare system in BC, which should include a build-out of public childcare facilities and the provision of before- and after-school care.

Recommendation 20 (COVID-19)

That the provincial government move rapidly towards a universal, public, \$10 per month broadband service.

Recommendation 21 (COVID-19)

That the provincial government lobby the federal government for increased transfers to provinces and continued support for provincial borrowing by both the federal government and the Bank of Canada, making it easier for it to make the necessary investments in stronger, healthier, more resilient public services that will be a cornerstone of post-pandemic reconstruction.

Adequate funding for a resilient system

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The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic launched British Columbia and the entire world into a state of great turmoil and uncertainty. There are two overlapping crises. First is the immediate public health crisis. Second, however, the very necessary measures to combat the spread of the virus have in turn generated an economic crisis of proportions not seen since the Great Depression. Together they have exposed how precarious the capacity to meet basic needs is for so many. People are worried about their health as well as that of their loved ones, workers are worried about their jobs, renters and mortgage-owners are worried about their housing—and teachers, students, parents and all K–12 staff are worried about how the education system will not just function but thrive under these new conditions.

This is the unprecedented context for the upcoming year’s budget. While restrictions on activity and physical distancing have been effective in curbing the spread of the novel coronavirus in British Columbia so far, scientists’ best estimates that a vaccine is many months or years away means that the pandemic will impact life in BC and our province’s public finances for the foreseeable future. In the meantime, we must face both the public health and economic crises head on. The role for the public sector in overcoming both is critical and irreplaceable.

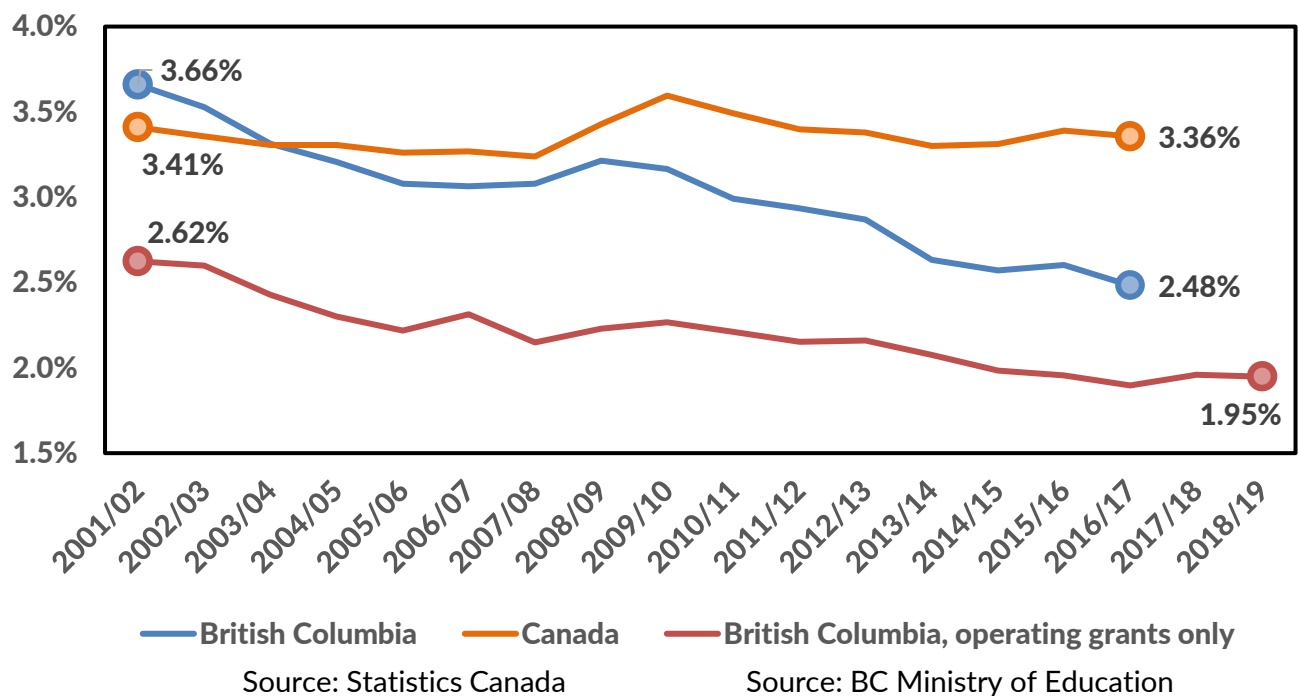
While there are already voices calling for belt-tightening after the initial burst of emergency spending, they fundamentally misunderstand what is required of the public sector (federal, provincial and municipal) in a crisis of this magnitude. Public spending will be the fulcrum around which any recovery takes place. Spending will have to remain elevated to support demand, support incomes, and generate investment and jobs. Recovery and reconstruction will be a long process and expanded public services will be crucial to a more resilient and more just economy that can meet the needs of people and planet. As part of the care economy, education provides green jobs that will be key to overcoming the climate crisis.

We have a unique opportunity to build a more resilient public education system, one that finally overcomes the decade and a half of suffocating austerity that accompanied the start of the current millennium. After 15 years of neglect, British Columbia can today make the necessary investments that will put our public

education system on a stable and safe footing for students, parents, and teachers. Public education is a great social equalizer and its role must be strengthened.

Between 2001 and 2016 (the latest year of available comparable national data), British Columbia saw spending on education drop relative to GDP by nearly a third.¹ This was the government of the day effectively saying that education should be less and less important, and putting aside an ever-shrinking part of our total social resources towards teaching our children.

Figure 1.1: Spending on public K-12 as a share of GDP



In addition, while total operating grants grew relative to GDP in 2017–18 as the Classroom Enhancement Fund was implemented, they have now continued to stagnate, barely exceeding inflation otherwise. Put differently, total grants per full-time equivalent (FTE) student were 26% lower in the 2018–19 school year than they would have been had British Columbia continued to put aside the same share

¹ BCTF calculations based on Ministry of Education Operating Grant Tables, Statistics Canada GDP Tables (CANSIM Table 384-0038), and Education Spending Tables (CANSIM Table 478-0014).

of GDP towards public K–12 education as we did in 2001–02, even adjusting for enrolment decline.

As a result, the gap between British Columbia and other provinces in per-student public education spending has grown since the mid-2000s and closed only slightly in past years. Today, British Columbia still lags the Canadian average for per-student spending by approximately \$1,800, according to the latest data from Statistics Canada from 2016–17 and BCTF calculations to bring it up to date. The addition of the Classroom Enhancement Fund has brought the gap down from above \$2,000 per student.

So what does adequate funding mean today?

It means no cutbacks. No teacher or other public worker in the K–12 system should lose their job now or during the long recovery. Direct public sector employment is an automatic stabilizer of demand, ensuring that spending keeps flowing through the economy and supporting the private sector—which has seen demand collapse in many places. Anything else at this stage is economically damaging.

At minimum, the government must maintain current levels of funding for human service-driven sectors like public education.

Making funding predictable also means that the government should fully cover any losses to school district revenues from lower numbers of international students in 2020–21 relative to 2019–20. Trustees in many districts are already considering budget cuts for the 2020–21 school year as they anxiously watch international student numbers—and tuition revenues—dry up. Funding reform during the 2000s pushed districts, primarily those in urban areas better able to attract international students, to become over-reliant on international student tuition to fund operating expenses. Students in these districts should not face program cuts because of dramatic shifts in international travel due to the COVID-19 pandemic over which they have no control.

Instead, the provincial government should not only cover losses for the coming year but use this moment as an opportunity to create a provincial international student program that overcomes the current system of competition and inequity between districts. International students bring much to the diversity of our public education system, but their presence should not be an object of financial competition. We need a provincial program that distributes international tuition revenues equitably across the province and ensures that all districts have the opportunity to host international students, providing equity of access to diverse cultures as part of the educational experience for both BC and out-of-country students. A new provincial program would also be resilient to future shocks, whether another wave of COVID-19, another pandemic or an economic crisis.

Going further, the provincial government must fund health and safety measures to enable school districts to follow all relevant provincial health guidelines. Health and safety for teachers, staff and students cannot be an afterthought or something squeezed out of already-strained budgets. The Ministry of Education must provide districts with dedicated, targeted funding for the full range of health and safety measures necessary both over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic and eventually coming out of it: staffing levels to enable physical distancing, mental health support, increased cleanliness, supplies of personal protective equipment to new professional learning, and online teaching resources. Simply put, keeping students, teachers, and other staff safe will require more staffing and supports. Districts must be enabled to guarantee the health and safety of students, staff, and their communities and these increased costs cannot be downloaded, as has happened so often in the past.

Finally, schools are not only places of instruction; they are key hubs of community. This role is all the more important in these trying times. Adequate education funding recognizes the multiple roles schools play in community life and enables them to support communities beyond the classroom, as expanded in Section 4 of this report.

The Ministry of Education should use this period of change as an opportunity to revisit the provincial funding formula for operating grants—to base funding more closely on the identified needs of school districts, replacing an over-reliance on abstract per-student amounts.

This is an opportunity to bring funding in line with needs instead of continuing to bring needs in line with funding.

Crucial to this realignment is termination of plans to implement a prevalence-based model for special education funding. Instead, we should align special education funding with special education needs, closing the current gap between what school districts receive in special education funding and the much greater amount they spend on special education.

Teachers too often have had to pose the question, “what can I do without?” This question is even more dangerous in a pandemic. We have a unique opportunity to fundamentally reverse the chronic underfunding that has plagued BC’s public education system. The effects of underfunding are felt every day: outdated materials, insufficient supplies, portable classrooms. We cannot add lack of personal protective equipment, classrooms unequipped for distancing measures, and scarce mental health resources to that list. We must eliminate the list altogether.

Teachers have had to deal with major changes to public K–12 education brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic on short notice and with little preparation. Changes have produced strains and stresses in our own lives, those of our students and their families. At the same, teachers from Victoria to Fort St. John have risen to the challenge. The British Columbia government has also performed admirably, in both cross-Canadian and international comparison, in the immediate response to the pandemic. The task now is to ensure that the short-term response translates into a long-term public-led recovery and reconstruction effort.

Our province can, and *must* do more for K–12 education, especially in such challenging times. We urge the Committee to bring forward, once again, the

recommendations of previous reports that have called for adequate, stable, and predictable funding for public education, bolstered by immediate, significant enhancements to deal with health and safety, community building and bolstering district resources. In many ways these recommendations are the foundation for everything else in this submission.

Supporting health and safety in challenging times

Recommendation 6 (COVID-19)

That the Ministry of Education ensure sufficient and targeted funding to enable districts to expand teaching and support staff to accommodate smaller class sizes necessary for physical distancing as needed.

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That the Ministry of Education provide targeted funding to support a trauma-informed approach to mental health for students, staff, and district administration, including more counsellors and professional learning for teachers on trauma-informed practice.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought occupational health and safety back to the forefront of the minds of workers and society more broadly. Government must urgently make the necessary investments in health and safety that are the foundation for public education to proceed at all during the current COVID-19 pandemic.

Schools must be safe as workplaces for teachers and all other public education workers, and safe as places of learning for students. They cannot become vectors of transmission that put students, teachers, parents, and entire communities at risk.

While some measures may be temporary, investments in health and safety should be seen as building blocks for a more resilient system better capable of withstanding future crises.

Primary among urgent changes are smaller class sizes. Teachers have long advocated for smaller classes as a pedagogical measure; this pandemic has turned them into a health and safety imperative as well. While emergency measures that include only part-time in-school instruction are, and will inevitably continue to be, in place during the acute phases of the current pandemic, government should be looking to gradually reduce class sizes as full-time instruction resumes. This will require recruitment and retention of teachers and educational assistants (EAs), capital investment in schools and investment in training spaces for teachers and EAs. Increasing teaching and support staff across the province could be a key part of a green pandemic recovery and reconstruction plan—one necessitated by the scale of the economic crisis accompanying the pandemic and the climate crisis that is still with us through it all.

More immediately, school districts require funding to ensure that they can sustain staffing despite pressures from higher use of sick leave and maintain higher levels of cleanliness in school buildings and all other district sites. With a global pandemic on-going, school districts will be facing cost pressures due to the heightened use of sick leave by teachers and other staff complying with public health regulations, in particular those with existing health vulnerabilities; districts must have the resources to hire Teachers Teaching On Call (TTOCs) and other replacement staff as necessary. Public health officials have also stressed how frequent cleaning and disinfection are crucial to slowing the spread of COVID-19. School districts must have the capacity to increase custodial staffing as well as to purchase cleaning

supplies and personal protective equipment (PPE) for those who need or request it. Educators are front-line workers and should have access to PPE upon request, as should students. We cannot allow access to PPE to be a new source of social inequality.

In the long term, school buildings themselves should be adapted to dealing with COVID-19 and future pandemics. Both the trends towards smaller classrooms and open spaces where large numbers of students congregate will need to be rethought in light of the current pandemic and the prospect of future health crises. The Ministry of Education should work quickly to reform the school building standards to ensure that new schools are better suited to handle physical distancing measures and other physical space restrictions necessitated by public health emergencies. While this pandemic may well be over before any new school goes from an architect's drawing board to physical reality, we will surely face future public health challenges for which we should start preparing immediately.

Finally, health and safety go far beyond distancing and all other measures required to make schools physically safe. School districts need resources to alleviate the burden of the pandemic on the mental health of both staff and students.

The pandemic has led to significant amounts of trauma and stress for students as well as teachers.

In response, government should provide districts with targeted funding for increased mental health supports centered on a trauma-informed approach. This must include resources for professional learning and in-service for teachers on trauma-informed practice, a trauma-informed approach to teacher mental health and increased numbers of counsellors in schools. The long-term impacts of not supporting mental wellness are severe. School districts must have sufficient resources to deal with all aspects of making schools healthy and safe for everyone—crucial to building a resilient public education system.

Successful inclusion strengthens resilient school communities

Recommendation 10

That the Ministry of Education provide targeted funding to support the early identification and designation of students with special needs, particularly in Kindergarten and Grade 1.

Recommendation 11

That the Ministry of Education introduce per-student funding amounts for high-incidence designations, including children with learning disabilities and those requiring moderate behaviour support, into the funding formula.

The COVID-19 pandemic is showing just how fragile our systems can be. From elder care to food provision to housing, we have seen how easily a natural crisis can undermine what appear to be stable social structures. As the public education system largely shut down because of the pandemic, its fragilities have been less visible; however, they are still there. Education for students with special needs in particular has been disrupted in significant ways. This pandemic has magnified existing inequities. As social life restarts, and students and teachers go back to schools, we must make the public education system more resilient, taking greater care to tackle the inequities that already exist and furnishing more supports where greater needs exist.

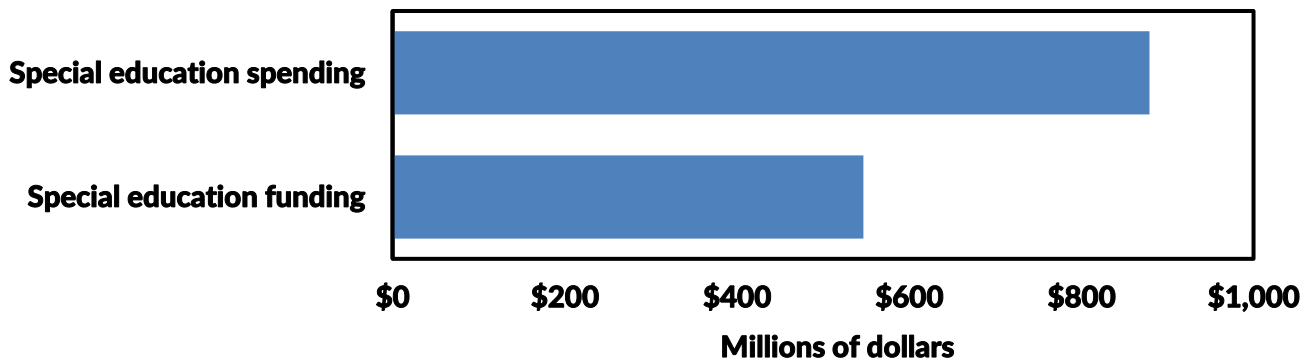
Doing so first requires the identification of needs. Inclusive education cannot be truly successful if we do not know who is to be included and how. BC schools need the resources to identify and designate students with special needs so that they receive the supports they require as early as possible—identification should take place in the K-1 years. However, in a recent BCTF survey of Kindergarten and Grade 1 teachers, 71.7% of respondents found the current process of identifying

and assessing students with diverse learning, physical, and behavioural needs to be “inadequate” or “very inadequate.”² We cannot let another generation of students leave the system having never received sufficient supports.

Early, well-resourced identification and assessment is key to making this a reality. Existing wait times for special needs assessments are a signal that student needs are going unidentified and unmet. These long wait times are an outcome of chronic underfunding not a symptom of administrative inefficiency as is sometimes suggested. Without dedicated new funding, wait lists will continue to get longer and more families will be forced to fend for themselves, a prospect difficult enough in “normal” times, made even more difficult in the context of a pandemic. While directly affecting students with special needs and their families, a lack of identification impacts the education system as the whole through classes that are too large for existing, but unidentified needs. Inequity impacts everyone.

Once student needs are identified, districts require funding adequate to meet them. Today, school districts receive supplemental funding only to cover the additional needs of students with so-called “low incidence” designations. However, about half of students with an identified need are designated with a “high incidence” designation, which is accompanied with no additional funding. This has created a situation where districts only receive \$6 in supplemental special education funding out of every \$10 they spend on special education services.

Figure 3.1: Funding versus spending on special education, province-wide, 2018-19



² BCTF, *Full Day Kindergarten Working and Learning Conditions Survey 2018*.

Providing new per-student funding amounts for students with “high incidence” designations would go far in reversing this trend and recognize these students as having particular needs. Our education system has an opportunity to break from the path worn by the current, enrollment-based funding model introduced in 2002. This model largely funds “students” in the abstract, has little recourse to the actual (and escalating) costs of providing services, and absolves the provincial government of responsibility for ensuring adequate resources. The result, too often, is that student needs are unmet.

Funding based on identified needs reduces the risk of unfunded cost pressures; in other words, it adds resiliency to the system.

When the incentive for austerity baked into the current formula has created gaps in funding, the previous government patched them with last-minute, temporary funding. British Columbia students need funding for inclusive education that can adapt to new circumstances and provide stable and adequate funding as a baseline. There should be no need to patch frequent gaps with unpredictable, temporary funding that too often reflects fleeting political priorities.

Most broadly, our recommendations here stem from a needs-based approach to education funding. There are two ways to fund a public education system. The first option, implicit in recommendations made by international organizations like the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and in the funding model changes proposed by the Ministry of Education’s Funding Model Review (FMR) panel, is to determine a pool of resources and then ask what kind of public education system can be maintained from this pool. In this approach, what public education is and what it can accomplish follows from the whims of overall funding allocations. Alternatively, there is a second option—where funding follows from the vision for what public education should be and the identified needs of students. We first ask what mandate the education system should fulfill and what needs exist that must be met to do so, and only then determine what resources are needed to fulfill this mandate and meet those needs.

Teachers firmly believe in education funding based on this second option. Education funding must be responsive and proportional to the real, identified needs of classrooms, schools, and school districts. Tying funding to the actual costs and resource needs of running schools gets districts away from the excessive cost control enforced by the current formula, one too reliant on abstract per-pupil funding. Education funding in British Columbia should be reoriented towards the first option that starts with the mandate of and vision for the K–12 system.

For many years, this Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services has included a version of a recommendation to review the funding model in its final report to the provincial legislature, recently writing, “with broad stakeholder input, [the Ministry should] review the per-pupil funding formula to develop a new needs-based, stable and sustainable model to fund actual costs, resource needs, and professional development requirements of each school district.”³ In our view, the report of the FMR panel released in December 2018 cuts against this recommendation. Indeed, teachers were relieved to hear that the recommendations to reform funding for inclusive education made by the FMR panel, in particular the recommendation to move to prevalence-based model for funding special education, were delayed with the release of Budget 2020. As noted in Section 1 of this submission, these recommendations should be fully abandoned. Instead, moves to make funding more responsive to identified needs are necessary, starting with the modest changes suggested here.

³ Report of the Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services 2017, emphasis added. Retrieved from https://www.leg.bc.ca/content/CommitteeDocuments/41st-parliament/2nd-session/FGS/Budget2018Consultation/FGS_2017-11-15_Budget2018Consultation_Report.pdf

A strong foundation: funding for resources and teacher recruitment and retention

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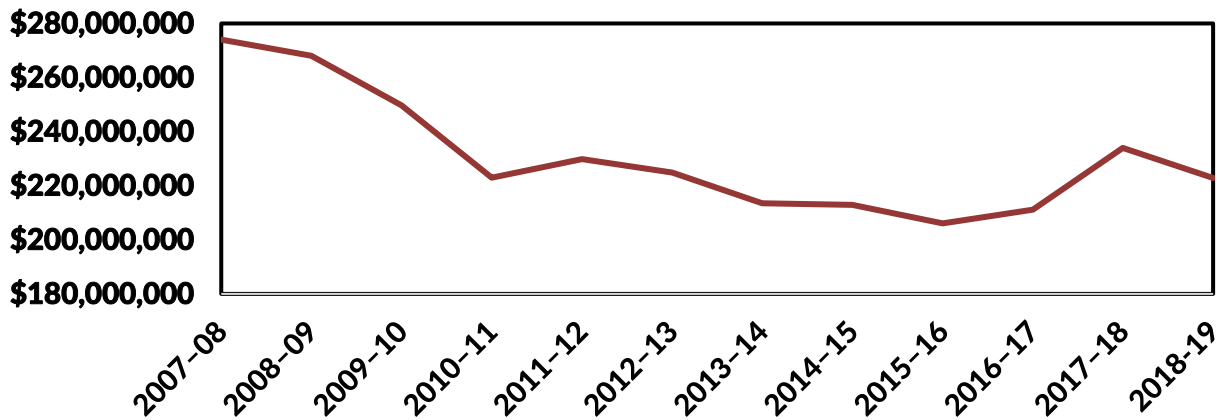
Public education needs strong foundations to meet its existing mandate in full as well as to rise to unforeseen circumstances. Lack of investment into classroom resources and teacher recruitment and retention are two pre-existing, chronic challenges that unfortunately undermine the foundations of education in British Columbia. Both have been magnified by the COVID-19 pandemic: the sudden shift to distance learning for most students has generated new needs for resources and tools, while health worries have left many teachers anxious about the return to in-person instruction, accentuating retention challenges.

For too many years public schools around the province have seen insufficient investment into classroom resources. Annual spending on supplies dropped nearly continuously between 2007–08 and 2016–17, as visible in Figure 3.1. In sum, spending fell by 23% in inflation-adjusted terms over those 10 years. No part of this decline was due to falling enrollment; the number of full-time equivalent students actually increased slightly over the same time frame.⁴ And while 2017–18 saw a

⁴ Ministry of Education, Operating Grant Tables.

welcome above-inflation increase in expenditure on supplies, the following year saw these gains all but erased with spending still 19% lower than in 2007–08 in inflation-adjusted terms.⁵ Today, supplies account for just 3% of total operating expenditures, down from 5% in 2007–08.

Figure 4.1: Spending on supplies, inflation-adjusted 2019 dollars



The decrease in funding for resources is all the more striking given that K–12 education in British Columbia has undergone unprecedented curriculum change that creates a need for new resources and places new demands on teachers across all subject areas. Crucially, schools need resources for the integration of Indigenous ways of knowing across the curriculum—a key aspect of implementing both the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UNDRIP) and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s (TRC) Calls to Action. Resources are also needed to tackle the crisis of systemic racism, one brought to the fore by police brutality and the unequal impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is essential that the Ministry of Education works with teachers to create curriculum that more accurately evaluates the past and ongoing histories of minority ethnic communities. This content should be brought to the same level as the White Euro-centric content we see in our textbooks today.

⁵ Ministry of Education, BC School District Revenue and Expenditure Tables.

Respondents to a recent BCTF survey on curriculum change rated their access to necessary instructional materials as a 4 on a scale of 0 to 10.⁶ These existing pressures are now joined by a rapid increase in online and distance learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which creates additional needs for resources, particularly online tools and technology. To deal with these pressing needs, the Ministry of Education should provide school districts with targeted funds for resources, including learning materials, lesson plan examples and technology (for virtual or hybrid learning situations).

To be successful, investment in resources to deal with both curriculum change and pandemic-induced temporary changes to instruction must also cover professional learning and planning time for teachers. Given the scale of change, professional learning and planning should be taken very broadly to include additional non-instructional days, a wide variety of teacher-led professional development and employer-provided in-service opportunities in all regions of the province, as well as a collaborative model for joint district and local planning, especially around pandemic response—one in which teachers and local teacher associations take a leadership role. There is also a pressing need for in-service around privacy as new technologies create new privacy risks for students and teachers while simultaneously placing significant new responsibilities on teachers. Without proper supports, there is a risk that resources and technology will be underutilized or simply not used at all, rendering investments much less effective.

Teacher recruitment and retention measures are another longstanding priority at the foundation of our public education system that has been left unaddressed too long. British Columbia is experiencing major demographic shifts that are creating an increasing demand for teachers—and critical personnel shortages. According to provincial labour market projections, BC schools will require 18,918 new teaching staff over the next decade because of a combination of projected student population increases and teacher retirements.⁷ Numerous BC school districts are already

⁶ BCTF, *2017 Curriculum Change and Implementation Survey*. Retrieved from bctf.ca/CurriculumSurvey/.

⁷ WorkBC, *British Columbia Labour Market Outlook: 2019 Edition* (includes educational counsellors).

reporting significant, chronic shortages for TTOCs, as well as general and specialist teachers, in part due to the on-going restoration of collective agreement language on class size and composition. Some districts, particularly in Interior and Northern regions, have significant numbers of retired teachers working as TTOCs, and, province-wide, there are large numbers of uncertified instructors employed on Letters of Permission (without formal teaching certification).

While the last round of collective bargaining between teachers and school districts made some inroads into these challenges, there are numerous administrative initiatives that can also ameliorate recruitment and retention. These include student loan forgiveness programs, assisting new hires with moving expenses, making available more unpaid mid-year leaves, addressing gaps in classroom conditions in some school districts, and offering greater access to in-service learning. All would require additional funding, distributed equitably among districts. In fact, in December 2017, the Minister of Education's own Task Force on Immediate Recruitment and Retention Challenges released an extensive set of recommendations,⁸ only a handful of which have been implemented to date. Minimal progress on recruitment and retention would see implementation begin on the remaining short- and long-term recommendations from the Task Force.

Finally, teachers in BC earn among the lowest salaries in Canada (at all levels of experience), but face some of the highest living expenses, particularly when it comes to housing. A targeted way to improve both recruitment and retention of teachers is provincial government support for programs to reduce the high cost of housing for teachers.

⁸ Ministry of Education, *Report presented by the Minister's Task Force on Immediate Recruitment and Retention Challenges*. Retrieved from www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/education/administration/kindergarten-to-grade-12/uploads/task_force_report.pdf.

Enabling schools to be hubs of community

Recommendation 14

That the Ministry of Education provide grants to school districts for school meal programs.

Recommendation 15 (COVID-19)

That the Ministry of Education provide grants to school districts for creating or expanding school gardens and other community spaces.

Schools are hubs of community. They are where children develop intellectually, emotionally, and socially. They are gathering places for parents and others from all walks of life. They host sporting events, concerts, festivals, and more—providing invaluable public space in an increasingly privatized world. They often house additional social services like childcare and serve as voting places during elections. In short, they are central to social and civic life in British Columbia.

The COVID-19 pandemic has served to highlight the importance of community. We have had to rely on one another, even if physically distancing and isolating at times. In fact, the lack of in-person contact has demonstrated for so many British Columbians just how critical community and social ties are to their lives.

In this context, protecting and expanding the function of schools as centres of community life is doubly important.

This submission highlights two key functions that schools play to which new resources should be urgently allocated.

A 2016 report for the Provincial Health Services Authority found that approximately 1 in 6 (15.6%) children under 18 in British Columbia live in

households experiencing food insecurity.⁹ It is bad enough that children in one of the wealthiest societies in the history of the world go with unmet basic needs, but we also know that food insecurity is linked to challenges in childhood development, compounding the inequity. Across time and jurisdictions, public education systems have attempted to remedy this inequitable access to sufficient nutritious food by providing low-cost or free school meals to students.

Given both existing levels of food insecurity and the emerging risks of even greater challenges in access to food due to the COVID-19 economic recession, it is time for British Columbia to rapidly explore the provision of school meals to all children. The province should create new targeted grants for breakfast and lunch programs serving healthy, nutritious, and culturally relevant food for all school districts. While initial programs can be focused on children facing food insecurity, the aim should be to create a universal program that ensures all children across the province at least two nutritious meals per day and creates new good jobs in food services for British Columbians.

While food provision is currently a relatively modest element of British Columbia's public education system, schools already play a large role as physical hubs of community. Schools host community events and provide outdoor spaces for recreation and socializing. With the COVID-19 pandemic heralding both an economic recession and an increased need for public spaces where people can effectively physically distance, schools will need to play an expanded role as community spaces. School districts need targeted funds to put towards improvements like expanding school gardens, creating new public spaces indoors and out, adding spacious play areas and renovating recreation facilities.

The current moment is an opportunity to increase community and decrease inequities in access to nutritious food for all children and welcoming public spaces for all British Columbians.

⁹ Provincial Health Services Authority, *Priority health equity indicators for British Columbia: Household food insecurity indicator report*. Retrieved from www.bccdc.ca/pop-public-health/Documents/Household%20food%20insecurity%20in%20BC_full%20report.pdf.

Adult education makes for a more resilient society

Recommendation 15

That the Ministry of Education increase the number of funded courses in adult education to reflect a broad range of educational needs and interests that help create an educationally enriched society as well as improved employment opportunities for individuals.

Recommendation 16

That the Ministry of Education fund adult students on an equivalent basis to school-age students.

Even when the global pandemic is resolved, the economic recovery from the public health measures necessary to contain the COVID-19 virus will certainly be long, difficult, and halting. As of now, millions of Canadians are unemployed, and it is unclear how quickly they will return to work when health measures ease more significantly. Adult education and retraining are powerful recession-fighting tools and workers made jobless often take up education as a way of dealing with a recession. It has long been the case that adult education in British Columbia's public K–12 education system should be strengthened and better funded—that case is all the more urgent today.

The availability of adult education and training makes economies more resilient in dealing with recessions and crises.

As of June 2020, Canada's official unemployment rate stands at 13.7%, the highest figure since the Great Depression; however, due to the unique nature of the current crisis, where many workers have retained ties to work while losing hours, it is estimated that around one in four of those working before the pandemic have either

lost their jobs or the majority of their hours.¹⁰ This hardship has been very unequally distributed: about half of those in the bottom two deciles of the wage distribution (making under \$16 per hour) have lost their jobs or most of their hours while those in the top decile (making over \$48 per hour) have been unaffected. This economic inequality is also interacting with other social inequalities as women and racialized Canadians are disproportionately represented among workers in the bottom deciles.

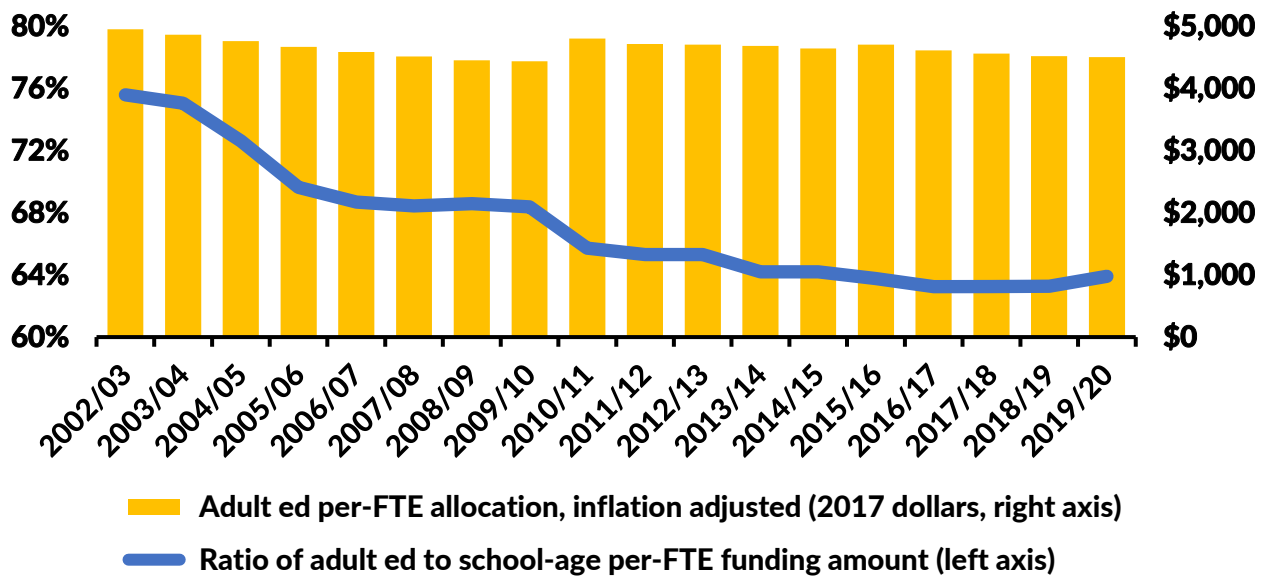
In this context, improvements to adult education in B.C.'s public education system should be a top priority. Elimination of tuition fees for adult learners in 2017 was an excellent beginning, but more needs to be done to create a learning society accessible to all. The next step must be to ensure that adult learners have a full range of educational opportunities available to them. Adult education is particularly important for those who need to develop their language skills and enhance skills for employment and further education; course offerings should respond to a full spectrum of such diverse needs. Adult Education should open opportunities for upgrading, retraining, and lifelong learning for all.

These enhancements in turn require that funding be commensurate to that in school-age programming. Funding from the Ministry of Education should ensure that school districts have the resources to offer a wide range of adult education offerings. The current funding formula dramatically underfunds adult students relative to their school-age peers. While the basic funding amount for a school-age full-time equivalent (FTE) student is set at \$7,468 in the current school year, it is just \$4,773 for an FTE funded adult learning student—a gap of 36%.¹¹ Not only is the funding amount for adult students over a third lower than the base amount for their school-age peers, it has declined relative to inflation over the long term. Today it is nearly \$500 lower in inflation-adjusted terms than it was in 2002–03, nearly two decades ago.

¹⁰ David MacDonald, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. “Canada’s job losses reach Great Depression levels. Here’s how we move forward.” Retrieved from behindthenumbers.ca/2020/06/05/job-losses-reach-great-depression-levels/.

¹¹ BCTF calculations based on data drawn from Ministry of Education, Operating Grant Tables.

Figure 6.1: Adult education funding amounts



While the funding gap between adult and school-age students has grown in recent years, adult learners have the same, if not greater, learning needs as their school-age counterparts. If we want adults to succeed within our education system and adult education to help fight the post-COVID recession, then we must ensure that adult education is furnished with the resources to make this possible.

Investments in schools and communities

Recommendation 18

That the Ministry of Education accelerate capital funding for seismic upgrades to meet its target of having all upgrades complete by 2025.

Recommendation 19 (COVID-19)

That the provincial government accelerate its planned investment in a universal, \$10-a-day childcare system in BC, which should include a build-out of public childcare facilities and the provision of before- and after-school care.

Recommendation 20 (COVID-19)

That the provincial government move rapidly towards a universal, public, \$10 per month broadband service.

Recommendation 21 (COVID-19)

That the provincial government lobby the federal government for increased transfers to provinces and continued support for provincial borrowing by both the federal government and the Bank of Canada, making it easier for it to make the necessary investments in stronger, healthier, more resilient public services that will be a cornerstone of post-pandemic reconstruction.

Public investment and jobs will be critical to getting Canada out of the historic economic crisis that is coming on the heels of the COVID-19 pandemic and an opportunity to simultaneously make progress addressing the current climate crisis. The necessary decision to shut down entire sectors of the economy in the interest of public health has created vast economic uncertainty and untold economic hardship, disproportionately affecting those with less income and wealth. This is a situation that market solutions and private investment are ill-equipped to handle, a lesson painfully learned in the Great Depression.

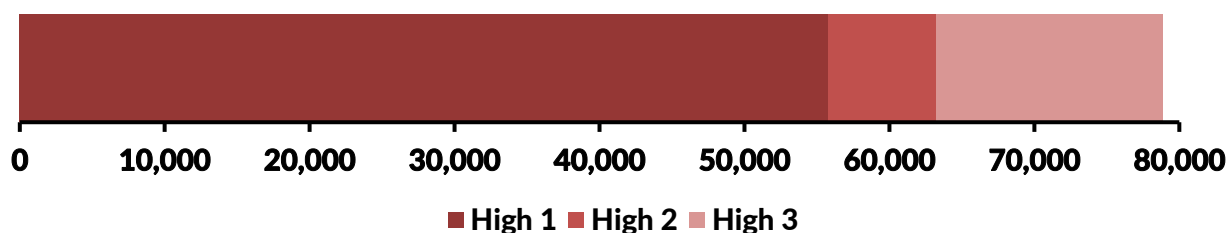
Governments—federal, provincial, and municipal—will have to continue to intervene in the economy in unprecedented ways to stave off greater collapse and foster reconstruction.

The recommendations in this section are but a small part of the necessary investments, but all touch substantially on education. Most directly, the government should urgently invest to upgrade all seismically vulnerable schools by the existing 2025 deadline and replace portables with permanent structures. Many of these are shovel-ready projects that will not only keep students and teachers safe but create good jobs and generate local economic activity.

When the provincial government formally announced its plan to make seismic upgrades to school buildings in 2005, the goal was to have these upgrades complete by 2020. In 2015, the completion deadline was extended to 2025, and to 2030 for Vancouver. Between September 2016 and June 2020, 39 schools finished their seismic upgrades; however, 14 schools previously completed were deemed once again inadequate based on updated scientific evidence, leaving a net increase of only 25 upgraded schools over the past four years. Today, there are 158 schools marked with the highest risk rating that have still not begun developing a business case for a seismic upgrade. In total, there are 78,826 students in 222 schools with the three highest risk ratings on which work is not being done, over two-thirds of these students in schools with the highest risk rating (H1).¹² At the current rate, it will be at least 2050 before the last school is upgraded—and this does not count the additional schools that, as they age, will likely be identified as in need of seismic upgrades.

¹² BCTF calculations based on Ministry of Education data; compiled in BCTF Research Report, “Seismic mitigation: The urgent need for safer schools”

Figure 7.1: Number of students in each of the highest risk categories of schools not worked on



To protect the lives of students, teachers, and all other public education workers, and jump-start B.C.’s economic reconstruction, the government must keep its promise to accelerate the seismic upgrade program and make BC schools safer.

Two other key areas that demand new public investment are worth highlighting in the context of education: childcare and broadband. In 2018, the British Columbia government embarked on a historic path towards a universal, province-wide, \$10-a-day childcare system, slated to take a decade. The COVID-19 pandemic should fast-track these plans. Existing inequities and lack of access to affordable childcare has impacted some families even more acutely during this pandemic. The number of \$10-a-day childcare spaces should be rapidly increased via a mix of transitioning existing licensed spaces to \$10-a-day and building new public childcare facilities, paying special attention to sites where before- and after-school care can be easily provided to school-aged children.

Not only would this increase needed investment in care infrastructure, but \$10-a-day childcare is a form of income support to households hit by income loss from the current economic crisis, especially as furloughed workers return to work.

Unemployment and underemployment in this crisis has disproportionately affected women, partly due to the type of jobs being shed—most acutely in low-wage sectors like food services, accommodations and retail—and partly due to the fact that women are more likely to stay home with children when schools close and childcare is not available. A rapid expansion of childcare would allow women to return to the workforce more quickly and help ensure that this crisis does not further accentuate existing inequalities. Finally, over the long term, universal, \$10-a-day childcare can

be largely self-financing as more women are able to participate in the labour market, generating higher growth and tax revenues.¹³

Universal broadband is a second major public investment that is urgently needed, though one so far not on the agenda. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed many existing inequities and access to broadband internet is one of them. The inequity in access is felt even more strongly today by school-aged children as online and distance learning has grown dramatically to fight the virus. Broadband is already a basic requirement of modern life—even more so both during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. It is increasingly necessary for work, social life, and full citizenship.

Broadband is also a natural monopoly. There are high initial costs in fibre-optic infrastructure and powerful economies of scale once they are in place, as adding new customers in dense areas costs less and less. At the same time, the geographic size of a province like British Columbia means that there are few incentives to serve rural and remote areas, leaving them with no or very expensive options. There are therefore reasons of both equity and efficiency to turn broadband into a public utility, a public investment into a 21st-century society and economy. British Columbia needs a single public broadband provider offering \$10 per month service for all, operating on the basis of solidarity and cross-subsidization. This would facilitate building online communities while under pandemic conditions and enable a resilient, high-tech economy more prepared for future crises.

Most broadly, British Columbia will need massive public investment, both in physical infrastructure as well as in the care economy.

The investment and jobs programme should be ambitious and should aim not so much for a recovery of the status quo but a reconstruction of a better, greener, more equitable economy.

¹³ Iglia Ivanova, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. *Solving BC's Affordability Crisis in Child Care*. Retrieved from www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/BC%20Office/2015/07/ccpa-bc-solving-childcare-full.pdf.

This is a chance to implement a made-in-B.C. Green New Deal. Public debt should not be a worry right now—even for provincial governments. With interest rates on federal public debt effectively at zero, the Bank of Canada supporting the provincial debt market, and the economy operating far below its potential with so much capacity, including human capacity, left idle, the only worry should be how to most effectively counteract impoverishment, unemployment, and economic dislocation. B.C. will need support from the federal government in the form of increased transfers and continued backing for provincial borrowing by both the federal government and the Bank of Canada—but this is something for which government should decisively lobby alongside other provinces.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a crisis that has engulfed all of society, though our capacities to deal with its impact differ greatly based on existing inequalities that have exploded over the last several decades. Only sustained public investment can ensure that the overlapping crises we find ourselves in are resolved without another period of stagnation and depression, and that society emerges more equal than it entered them. We need to come out of this crisis with a more resilient provincial economy, both economically and environmentally. The public-led reconstruction effort must begin now.

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