

BCTF Education Funding Brief 2023:

Funding inclusive and
flourishing schools

BC Teachers' Federation
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Contents

Summary of recommendations..... 2

Recommendation 1 3

Recommendation 2 7

Recommendation 3 11

Summary of recommendations

Over the past several months, news headlines have been filled with stories that illustrate the realities of an underfunded public education system. All across BC, school districts are facing “tough budget decisions”¹ and gaping budget shortfalls.² To manage deficits, school boards have announced deep cuts to children’s music programs³ and the removal of positions that provide support to students that need it the most.⁴

While the COVID-19 pandemic has indeed exacerbated the pressures on public education, the budget shortfalls and other challenges currently facing BC education are the cumulative effects of over 20 years of grossly underfunding public education. BC continues to fall behind other provinces in funding. Funding for inclusive education, a key value of our provincial education system, remains woefully inadequate. The lack of investment into teacher recruitment and retention remains a chronic challenge that undermines the foundations of education in BC.

To address these compounding challenges, the British Columbia Teachers’ Federation (BCTF) respectfully submits the following three recommendations for the 2023 provincial budget to the Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services:

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1. Dani Penalosa, “Delta school district estimates larger 2022/23 budget, but lack of COVID-funding could still sting,” *Delta Optimist*, March 21, 2022, <www.delta-optimist.com/local-news/delta-school-district-estimates-larger-202223-budget-but-lack-of-covid-funding-could-still-sting-5164021>.
 2. Barry Gerding, “Central Okanagan trustees distraught by \$3.3M budget shortfall,” *Kelowna Capital News*, April 28, 2022, <www.kelownacapnews.com/news/central-okanagan-trustees-distraught-by-3-3m-budget-shortfall/>.
Lauren Collins, “‘Lingering aftermath’ of COVID will have impact on Surrey school district budget: Allen,” *Peace Arch News*, May 13, 2022, <www.peacearchnews.com/news/lingering-aftermath-of-covid-will-have-impact-on-surrey-school-district-budget-allen/>.
Mary P. Brooke, “Dealing with \$3+ million shortfall in 2022-2023 SD62 budget,” *Island Social Trends*, April 20, 2022, <<https://islandsocialtrends.ca/dealing-with-3plus-million-shortfall-in-2022-2023-sd62-budget/>>.
 3. “Some music programs cut, others reduced as Greater Victoria School Board passes 2022-23 budget,” *Chek News*, April 8, 2022, <www.cheknews.ca/some-music-programs-cut-others-reduced-as-greater-victoria-school-board-passes-2022-23-budget-1006830/>.
 4. Janet Millar, “Letter: SD61 budget cuts will hurt kids most in need,” *Saanich News*, April 2, 2022. <www.saanichnews.com/opinion/letter-sd61-budget-cuts-will-hurt-kids-most-in-need/>.

Recommendation 1: Abandon the current path of austerity and increase educational funding to meet the real, identified needs of classrooms, schools, and school districts.

Recommendation 2: Provide dedicated funding for teacher recruitment and retention initiatives across all school districts to address the acute teacher shortage in BC.

Recommendation 3: That the Ministry of Education terminate the consideration of a prevalence-based model for special education funding and align special education funding with identified special education needs, including targeted funding for early identification and designation of students with special needs and per-student funding amounts for high-incidence designations.

Recommendation 1

Abandon the current path of austerity and increase educational funding to meet the real, identified needs of classrooms, schools, and school districts.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been widespread recognition that education is crucial for the well-being of all children. As the BC Center for Disease Control stated, “schools support the learning, health, and development of children and youth and are key to reducing societal inequities.”⁵ Yet funding and resources have not accompanied the discourse. The current moment presents an opportunity to reform our provincial funding formula for public education into one that can fulfil the needs of British Columbians and provide a stronger foundation for future generations. In other words, an opportunity to match the rhetoric with stable and adequate funding.

5. Naomi Dove, Jason Wong, Réka Gustafson, Trevor Cornell, “Impact of School Closures on Learning, Child and Family Well-Being During the COVID-19 Pandemic,” BC Centre for Disease Control & BC Children’s Hospital, September 2020, <www.bccdc.ca/Health-Info-Site/Documents/Public_health_COVID-19_reports/Impact_School_Closures_COVID-19.pdf>.

There are essentially two different philosophies for funding a public education system. The first perspective, typical of austerity educational regimes, and present within the operating procedures of BC's current and historical enrollment-based funding model, is to first determine a pool of resources and then ask what kind of public education system can be sustained within this—often arbitrary—budget. In this approach, what public education is, and what it can accomplish, follows from the whims of overall funding allocations.

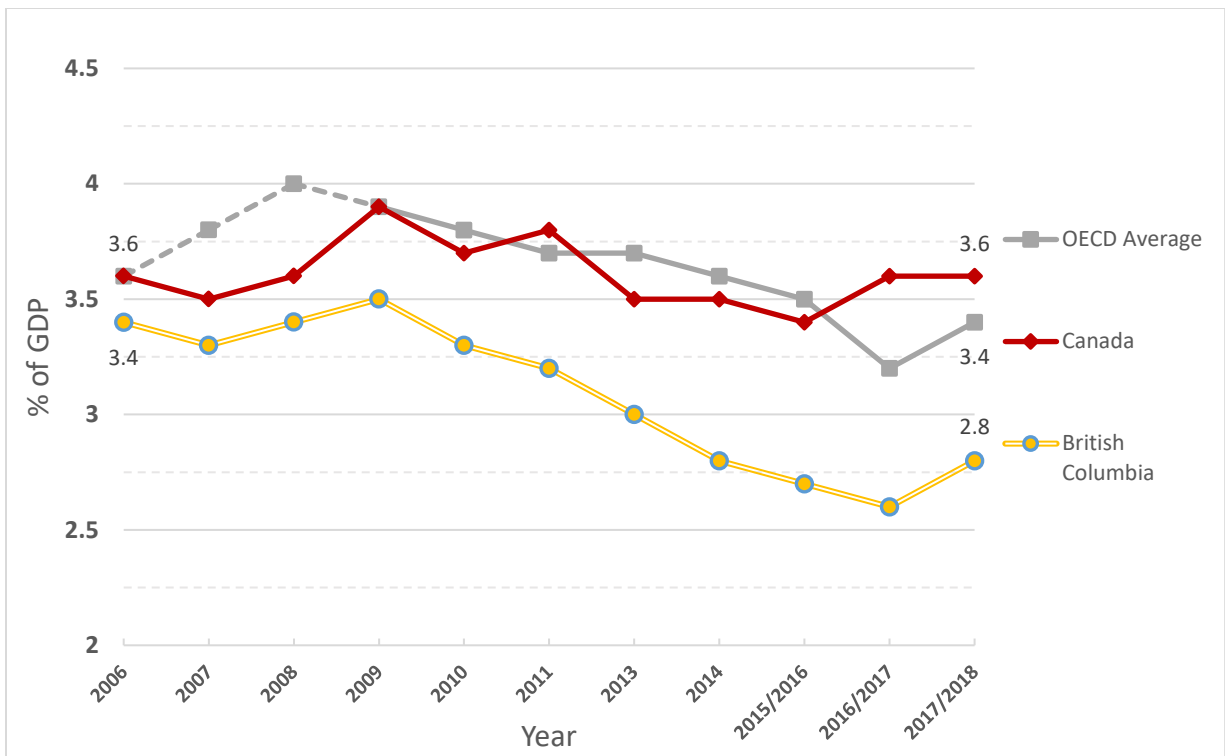
A major contributing factor to the underfunding of BC public education over the last two decades is the incentive toward austerity baked into the very structure of the funding formula.⁶ The two-decade legacy brought about by this funding model is one of austerity and cutbacks—as districts tried their best to make do with funding that was never sufficient to enable local visions for what a quality education could look like. The enrollment-based funding model has achieved its primary purpose of increasing cost-control at the provincial level: by funding “students” in the abstract and downloading the actual (and escalating) costs of service to the districts, public education spending by the provincial government is now incredibly low. So, these savings at the provincial level are enabled only by the decision to underinvest in BC's education system—a decision that has serious consequences for districts, schools, and ultimately the quality of education that BC students receive.

While Canada as a whole has maintained funding for education in line with Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) averages since 2006, British Columbia has only lagged further and further behind (see Figure 1 below).

Figure 1: Spending on education as a % of GDP (Primary and Secondary)⁷

6. Michael Rozworski, “How BC is short-changing schools and how we can fix it,” Policy Note, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, August 16, 2018, <www.policynote.ca/how-bc-is-short-changing-schools-and-how-we-can-fix-it/>.

7. “Education Indicators in Canada: An International Perspective,” Pan-Canadian Education Indicators Program, 2020. <www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/catalogue/81-604-X>.



Notes: OECD average figures for 2006, 2007, 2008, and 2009 include post-secondary non-tertiary for some countries. This should not affect international comparability, as noted within the source technical notes (see associated footnote). Additionally, data for 2012 were not available.

Kindergarten is grouped under primary education in Canada (which is not the case for some OECD countries).

BC's spending on primary and secondary education (as a percentage of GDP) has declined for over a decade. The effects of this underinvestment have been devastating. For example, an investment of provincial wealth in line with BC's 2006 figure (3.4% of GDP) would have added an additional \$1.7 billion to BC's educational system in 2017–18. If funding for the 2017–18 school year had been equal to the national figures (3.6% of GDP), our provincial educational system would have been strengthened by an additional \$2.3 billion.⁸

The second approach to education spending offers a promising and viable alternative. Here, funding derives from the vision for what public education should be. This

8. Calculations use midpoint between British Columbia's 2017 and 2018 GDP figures to estimate a between-year figure for GDP – \$285,590.5 (millions). Alternative calculations using 2017 and 2018 figures yield the same results after rounding to the nearest hundred billion.

philosophy on funding is firmly connected to the identified needs of students. We first ask what mandate education should fulfil and what needs exist within the system, and, only then, is it determined what resources are required to fulfil this mandate and best meet the real, identified needs of classrooms, schools, and school districts.

Teachers firmly believe in an education funding model based on this second option—with a well-resourced, flourishing school as the reference point for a new vision of education in BC. We can start by raising educational spending in BC to match the levels seen in other Canadian jurisdictions.

For many years, the 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, previously 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.”⁹ The historic moment has arrived to begin the transition toward an educational funding model that is more responsive to identified needs in the present and the anticipated needs of the future.

This recommendation to abandon the austerity of the per-pupil funding model and increase educational funding through a needs-based approach is our primary concern—and an assumed prerequisite for the recommendations that follow. Without a general increase in educational funding overall, it is inevitable that any reshuffling of funds from one area of our overburdened educational system will simply result in the further degradation of other vital functions. Some of the areas that urgently need more funding (rather than a reshuffling of existing funding) include:

9. Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services, “Report on the Budget 2018 Consultation,” Legislative Assembly of British Columbia, November 2017, <www.leg.bc.ca/content/CommitteeDocuments/41st-parliament/2nd-session/FGS/Budget2018Consultation/FGS_2017-11-15_Budget2018Consultation_Report.pdf>.

- up-to-date educational resources to address systemic racism, including those needed to implement both the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UNDRIP) and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) Calls to Action.
- a flexible, adaptable, and fully resourced process to implement the new requirement for all secondary school students to complete Indigenous-focused course work before graduation.
- professional learning and planning time for teachers.
- a more accessible and comprehensive adult education system to enable all British Columbians to develop their skills for employment and future education.
- equity and inclusion, by redirecting public resources currently spent on funding private, elite education to public education.

Recommendation 2

Provide dedicated funding for teacher recruitment and retention initiatives across all school districts to address the acute teacher shortage in BC.

The province is experiencing major demographic shifts that are creating an increasing demand for teachers and critical personnel shortages. According to labour market projections, BC schools will require 20,206 additional teachers over the current decade (2020–29).¹⁰

This is a critical issue that pre-dates the COVID-19 pandemic. In December 2017, the Minister of Education's Task Force on Immediate Recruitment and Retention Challenges highlighted teacher shortages in several key areas—specialist positions, TTOC availability, and vacancies in rural or smaller districts—and noted the increasing recruitment and retention challenges associated with an aging population.¹¹ However, only a handful of

10. Labour Market Information, BC Ministry of Advanced Education, Skills and Training (2020). *2020-2029 Labour Market Outlook Occupations Job Openings by Type and Occupation for BC and Regions*. Victoria: Government of British Columbia. [NOTE: These projections include Secondary school teachers (NOC 4031), Elementary school and kindergarten teachers (NOC 4032) and Educational Counsellors (NOC 4033)].

11. Ministry of Education, "Report presented by the Minister's Task Force on Immediate Recruitment and Retention Challenges," Government of British Columbia, December 11, 2017, <www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/education/administration/kindergarten-to-grade-12/uploads/task_force_report.pdf>.

the recommendations released by this task force have been implemented to date, and the experience of teaching during a public health crisis has intensified the challenges of teacher recruitment and retention.

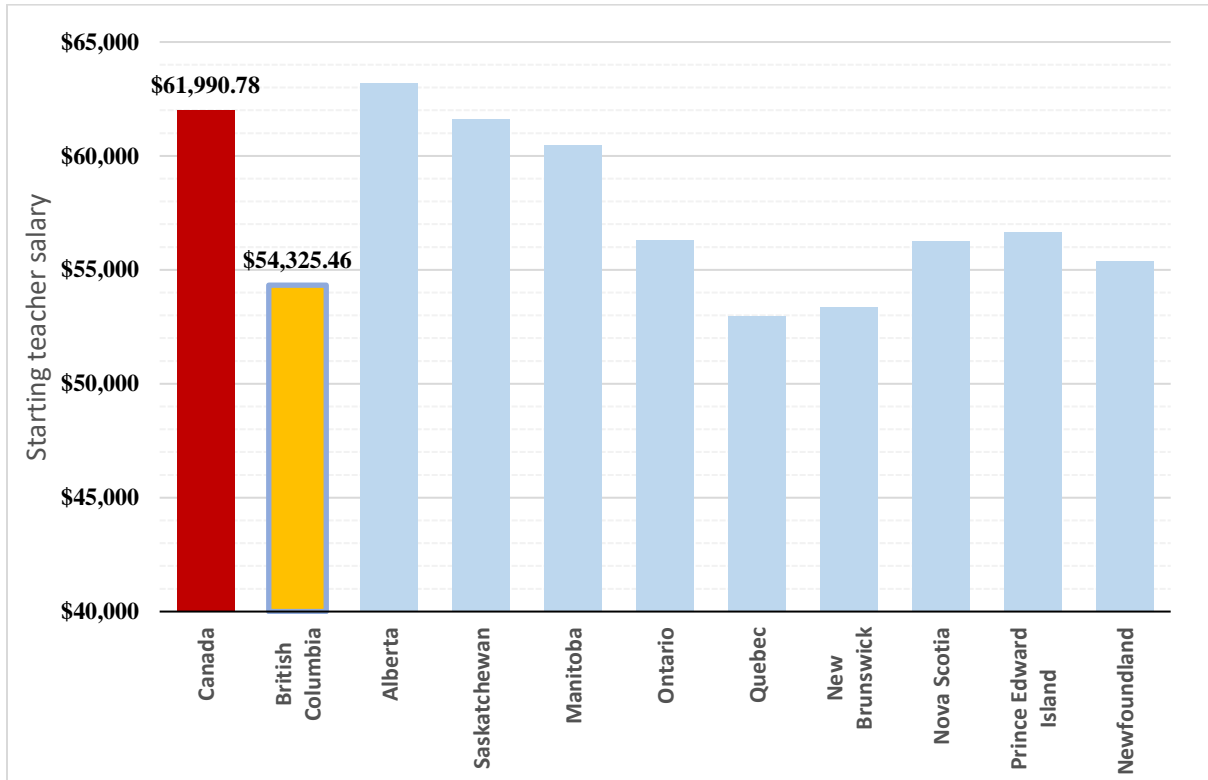
In a recent BCTF health and safety survey, 72.8% of the teachers who were working in person in BC schools reported that their workload had increased in comparison to before the pandemic.¹² Additionally, one-third of the surveyed teachers (34.2%) indicated that they were now more likely to leave the profession within the next two years due to their experience of teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹³ These findings are echoed by a recent study by Human Early Learning Partnership (HELP) at the University of British Columbia (UBC) on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on teacher well-being in BC. When teachers were asked about their turnover intentions in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, 40.3% of the respondents to the UBC HELP survey said that they were now more likely to seek to leave the profession in the next few years.

To best meet the challenges of recruitment and retention in BC, a number of initiatives should be considered. Teachers in BC still earn among the lowest salaries in Canada (at all levels of experience), but the salaries of new teachers stand out as being particularly depressed—the third lowest of the provinces.

12. BCTF Research, “Keeping Safe Schools Open in a Pandemic: What BC teachers say we still need,” BC Teachers’ Federation, 2021, <<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED613704.pdf>>.

13. Ibid.

Figure 2: Starting salary of public school teachers (Canada and provinces)¹⁴



Notes: National figures are a simple average of Canadian provinces and territories. Ontario figures are for Toronto Elementary.

In addition to these comparatively low wages, teachers in BC are also faced with some of the highest living expenses (particularly when it comes to housing). Government support for reducing the high cost of living for teachers is a targeted way to improve the situation for both recruitment and retention. There are a number of creative initiatives that could be implemented toward this purpose: loan forgiveness programs, assistance with moving expenses, teacher housing allowances, development of non-market teacher housing, increasing the availability of unpaid mid-year leave, and funding new teacher mentorship programs to support teachers new to the profession or transitioning into new roles. The effectiveness of different recruitment and retention initiatives will need to be compared—and it is likely that the appropriate strategy may vary by district and school—but all of these initiatives will require new funding if they are to be successful.

14. Sourced from regional collective agreements and salary grids.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also amplified other teacher retention issues. As documented in a February 2021 survey by UBC HELP researchers, 80.5% of BC teachers reported that their mental health was worse than before the pandemic—this can be contrasted with only 40.5% of the wider Canadian population.¹⁵ The same study found that, according to standard psychological measures, the majority of BC teachers displayed the characteristics of “moderate mental distress” (56.5%) and another 22.9% were in “serious mental distress.” At least one other research study conducted during the same period corroborates these findings,¹⁶ and it is undeniable that the teachers of BC have experienced an inordinate impact on their mental health over the course of the pandemic. The long-term impacts of not supporting mental wellness are severe. This underscores the need for a comprehensive strategy to address both recruitment of new teachers into the profession alongside meaningful and supportive retention efforts to keep teachers in the system for the long-run—two crucial components for building a resilient public education system.

15. Gadermann, A.M., Warren, M.T., Gagné, M., Thomson, K.C., Schonert-Reichl, K.A., Guhn, M., Molyneux, T.M. & Oberle, E., “The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on teacher well-being in British Columbia,” Human Early Learning Partnership, 2021, <http://earlylearning.ubc.ca/media/bcteachersandcovid-19surveyreport_062821_final.pdf>.

16. BCTF Research, “Keeping Safe Schools Open in a Pandemic: What BC teachers say we still need,” BC Teachers’ Federation, 2021, <<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED613704.pdf>>.

Recommendation 3

That the Ministry of Education terminate the consideration of a prevalence-based model for special education funding and align special education funding with identified special education needs, including targeted funding for early identification and designation of students with special needs and per-student funding amounts for high-incidence designations.

BC has long committed to an inclusive education system in which students with special needs have “equitable access to learning opportunities for achievement, and the pursuit of excellence in all aspects of their educational programs.”¹⁷ However, this commitment has yet to be matched with the requisite funding or a full understanding of what inclusive school communities actually require. This too often results in “integration” rather than “inclusion.” As stated by the Executive Director of BCEdAccess, “When we talk about inclusive education, we’re often talking about...integration and...putting a child in a seat. Making sure they’re in the classroom, but not necessarily making sure that they are a welcome part of the community.”¹⁸

One child’s recent experience makes the failures of inadequately funding inclusive education starkly obvious. Tristan’s story has been widely shared by his mother Karyn Millar on social media, alongside a picture of her son. The picture’s caption reads: “This is my son Tristan, if you have driven by Katzie Elementary at recess or lunch there is a really good chance you will see him sitting here, on the furthest corner of the school...alone and on his phone, maybe munching on some veggie straws watching some YouTube while

17. “Special Education: Policy statement,” Government of British Columbia, 2006, <www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/education-training/k-12/administration/legislation-policy/public-schools/special-education>.

18. Stephen Quinn, “Inclusive education advocate on funding for children on the autism spectrum in the public school system,” The Early Edition with Stephen Quinn: CBC Radio 1, May 24, 2022, <www.cbc.ca/listen/live-radio/1-91/clip/15914353>.

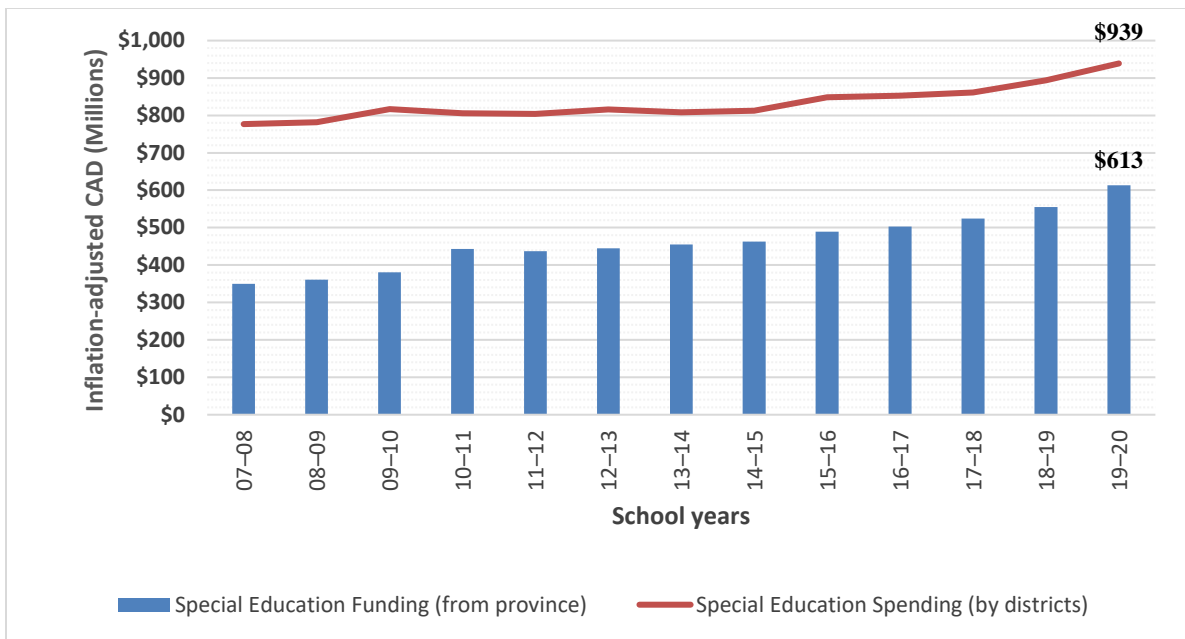
hundreds of kids play around him.... Tristan has autism but Tristan is also age and grade appropriate for many things including socializing and making friends...sorry what I mean to say is he could be. But Tristan has never been given a chance...."¹⁹

Karyn Millar's original social media post about her son received widespread attention, and Tristan's parents (Karyn and Ryan Millar) were interviewed a number of times by various media outlets in the spring of 2022. The parents have described in detail how their son's school is not allotted enough hours of support to cover every student's needs, and how much-too-scarce resources are deployed with the first priority of addressing cases involving disruptive behaviour, while less visible student needs are much less likely to receive support. Unfortunately, this one experience is far from unique. Since the Millars shared their son's story, other parents have also spoken out about the lived realities of underfunding: being forced to lobby for their childrens' needs and fighting for the few resources that are available.

The data on inclusive education funding in BC puts numbers to these stories. In the 2019–20 school year, BC's school districts received only 65% of what they later ended up spending province-wide on special education from supplemental special education grants from the province.²⁰ This mismatch between what the government believes districts need for special education and districts' actual needs has been a chronic problem for BC education (see Figure 3 below).

Figure 3: Special education provincial funding vs. actual district special education spending²¹

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19. Karyn Millar, posted on May 18, 2022, [www.facebook.com/karynmillar/posts/pfbid02JdhcQAx1yDetSpHXTwfmmwiJ8fhq7j3wza42Me5BCHHvJEgevLC8j313R9V17n2M!?__cft__\[0\]=AZVZSA7oHSqUGGOa9T3QZn9HwpUQEGEf5nW_bEbch3KEPnnluhmOmR5rSNMuqjsrDrX_sBdjPEG28_JEAWVgagDatcFw96xyWCnki2lnvTcXktE9vOnzPU5Bby9VYdWsTcw&__tn__=%2C0%2CP-R](https://www.facebook.com/karynmillar/posts/pfbid02JdhcQAx1yDetSpHXTwfmmwiJ8fhq7j3wza42Me5BCHHvJEgevLC8j313R9V17n2M!?__cft__[0]=AZVZSA7oHSqUGGOa9T3QZn9HwpUQEGEf5nW_bEbch3KEPnnluhmOmR5rSNMuqjsrDrX_sBdjPEG28_JEAWVgagDatcFw96xyWCnki2lnvTcXktE9vOnzPU5Bby9VYdWsTcw&__tn__=%2C0%2CP-R).
20. Ministry of Education, Operating Grants Tables (2019-2020); Ministry of Education. BC School District Revenue and Expenditure Tables (2019-2020).
21. Ministry of Education. Operating Grants Tables (2008-2020); Ministry of Education. BC School District Revenue and Expenditure Tables (2008-2020).



This regular provincial funding shortfall creates austerity pressures to ration special education services at the district level and results in the redirection of funds from other areas with their own pressing needs in localized efforts to patch-up inclusive education. These pressures will be exacerbated, not solved, by a move to a prevalence-based model for special education (see the Report of the Funding Model Review: A Recipe for Inequity for Students for a detailed analysis of this model).²² Any introduction of a prevalence-based model for distributing special education funding would only further cement austerity and cost control pressures, while misdiagnosing local conditions and true student needs. Consideration of such a prevalence-based model should be fully abandoned, and the Ministry should instead move toward a funding model that can fully accommodate the actual needs that are present within our education system.

Moving toward a needs-based special education funding model requires accurate and timely identification of needs; inclusive education cannot be truly successful if we do not know who is to be included and how. The earlier this happens the earlier students can

22. BCTF Research. "Report of the Funding Model Review: A recipe for inequity for students," BC Teachers' Federation, 2019, <www.bctf.ca/whats-happening/news-details/2019/01/01/report-of-the-funding-model-review-a-recipe-for-inequity-for-students>.

receive the support they need. However, as found in a recent BCTF survey of Kindergarten and Grade 1 teachers, 71% of teachers found the current process of identifying and assessing students with diverse learning, physical, and behavioural needs to be “inadequate” or “very inadequate.”²³ Without dedicated new funding, wait lists for assessment and identification will continue to get longer and more families will be forced to fend for themselves—a prospect made even more challenging for families that may have been disproportionately affected by the uneven impacts of the pandemic.

Once student needs are identified, districts should receive targeted funding to meet *all* of those needs. 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 received about \$6 in supplemental special education funding for every \$9 they actually spent on special education services during the 2019–20 school year.²⁴ Providing additional per-student provincial funding amounts for students with “high incidence” designations would go far in eliminating the gap between provincial special needs funding and actual district spending—finally upholding the right of *all* children to access public education.

As the recommendations delineated above show, there are concrete strategies to help alleviate the compounding challenges facing BC education. The opportunity for taking up these recommendations to put rhetoric into tangible action and move BC towards providing all students the education they deserve is now.

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23. BCTF Research, “Full Day Kindergarten Working and Learning Conditions Survey,” BC Teachers’ Federation, 2018, <<http://web.archive.org/web/20210625051659/https://www.bctf.ca/frontline/>>.

24. Ministry of Education. Operating Grants Tables (2019-2020); Ministry of Education. BC School District Revenue and Expenditure Tables (2019-2020).