

Parent Advocacy Voice in BC Public Education

With Representatives from:

BCEdAccess

Nanaimo Parents

Parent Advocacy Network (PAN)(incl FACE)

Richmond Schools Stand United (RSSU)

Seismic Safety for BC Schools

Surrey Students Now (SSN)

December 1, 2017, Vancouver

with

Premier John Horgan

Hon. Rob Fleming, Minister of Education

Summary

We are parent representatives from six grassroots parent advocacy groups across the province. We are pleased to have this opportunity to speak with Premier Horgan and Minister Fleming directly about some key issues we see within our public education system.

We applaud the [key priorities of the Ministry of Education](#) under this new government and their stated commitments to public education. We are hopeful that a fully developed plan for implementation and execution, and the associated funding to support this plan will be communicated fully to parents. Parents and families await long-overdue changes that will make needed supports and services more accessible and equitable for all learners across the province.

The [BC School Act](#) sets out the purpose of the provincial education system: to “enable all learners—regardless of race, gender, ability or economic means—to become literate, to develop their individual potential and to acquire the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to contribute to a healthy, democratic and pluralistic society and a prosperous and sustainable economy.” Additionally, the [BC Statement of Education Policy Order](#) (Mandate for the School System) affirms government’s responsibility for the equitable provision of high quality education to encompass the full range of human development across intellectual, physical, moral and aesthetic spheres. The government’s own policy on diversity clearly articulates government responsibility to ensure that “differences among learners do not impede their participation in school, their mastery of learning outcomes, or their ability to become contributing members of society.”

This is not currently the case for all learners in all schools in all districts.

Recommendation #1 – Accountability and Connection of Services for Vulnerable Students

That the Government expand the mandate of the Representative for Children and Youth in British Columbia (RCYBC), with additional funding for more staff, to include K-12 education.

Schools are mandated to provide many health services, such as autism support, speech-language pathology, some counselling, and assessment. Vulnerable children spend 30% of their time at school. It is reasonable to include education in the role of the RCYBC to bring together the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Children and Family Development, and Child and Youth Mental Health. Moreover, RCYBC advocates already often have to be involved in integrated case meetings that involve schools.

Recommendation #2 – Examine and Plan for Action to Improve Student Mental Health

That the government conduct the following:

- Student Survey – student report (grade-appropriate for all levels) on the state of mental health support in schools and the community.
- Parent Survey – parent report on family mental health and what families need in terms of support and services at school and in the community.
- School Staff Survey – all staff report on what classrooms and schools need in order to provide and recommend mental health support to students, and to access that same support for themselves.
- Action Plan – A plan of action with SMART goals that connects with the new Ministry for Mental Health and Addictions and takes a tiered approach to solutions – those that can have immediate impact on student success, to those that will require longer term actions.

Recommendation #3 – Expedite SMP, New Schools, Changes to Area Standards

That the Ministry of Education actively demonstrate the acceleration of the Seismic Mitigation Program (SMP) by immediately approving all projects currently prioritized by school districts for SMP and move existing projects forward from their current stage with a comprehensive plan including deliverables and timelines.

That the Ministry of Education develop a plan and timelines to replace old schools in neighbourhoods where existing schools are close to or exceeding their life expectancy, to address the soaring deferred maintenance costs.

That capital funding be released for new schools in districts which are severely overcrowded.

That portables are no longer used as permanent structures, and planning for district growth by municipalities includes schools so that buildings can be in place before they are needed.

That the Ministry update the School Site Acquisition Charges to match current land values and to reflect continually current rates by using a percentage based rate, rather than flat rates.

That the Ministry of Education examine and revise the current Ministry Area Standards as it is the basis for all upgrades and new school builds.

Recommendation #4 – Neighbourhood Schools

That the conversation around public education is reframed as a positive impact for society by ensuring there are well-funded neighbourhood schools.

Every child in BC should be given the opportunity to attend a safe, well-funded school within their own community. Despite well-documented benefits, for well over a decade, there has not been an emphasis on the importance of neighborhood schools; the conversation has been centered around being "efficient" or "cost effective" but we believe that it is time to reframe the conversation to highlight the importance of education for not only our children but for our society.

Recommendation #5 – Project Contribution Policy

That the [Project Contribution Policy](#) 1.8 stating “All major projects, other than the least cost option for a seismic mitigation project, require school districts to contribute a 50 percent cost share” is eliminated for districts seeing a high growth pattern such as Surrey, Langley, Sooke, Chilliwack, etc.

Recommendation #6 – Functional Standardized Assessment Changes

That the Ministry of Education eliminate the abuses of the Functional Standardized Assessment (FSA) data and implement the conclusions of the Advisory Group on Provincial Assessment from 2014 which sees the value of system-wide assessment, but only if the abuses of the data can be curtailed, and if the data is actually used to make informed decisions around policy and priorities in the public education system; influence planning, curriculum development, and interventions; and influence the allocation of resources to meet the needs that are identified through the data.

Background and Context

Systemic Issues and Accountability in Special Education

We believe that the mandate of the Representative for Children and Youth in British Columbia (RCYBC) should be expanded, with additional funding for more staff, to include K-12 education.

This would have the advantage of connecting accountability in other child-centred Ministries under one umbrella, so that intersectional issues for vulnerable children could be addressed together. The following reports reference education supports specifically as well as the lack of integration:

- [Education and Youth in Care](#)
- [Joshua's Story](#)

Many families of children in care and/or with special needs are stressed and overwhelmed. Children who are not successfully engaged and supported end up having greater issues, and the RCYBC has noted many children in care are there specifically because their families could no longer support their special needs.

Given that schools are mandated to provide many health services, such as autism support, SLP, some counselling, and assessment, it makes sense to include education in the role of the RCYBC. Moreover, RCYBC advocates already often have to be involved in integrated case meetings that involve schools.

Children spend approximately 30% of their time per week at school. It makes sense for their representative to have a mandate that includes education.

Since 2015, accountability methodology in K-12 education has been under review; this process continues. It is very difficult for a parent to know where to go and ultimately what kinds of expectations they can hold. Educational assistants, for example, don't have any self-governing body with which to file a complaint regarding ethics or professional conduct.

Currently, accountability in the education system overall is poor, and change is incredibly difficult and slow to nonexistent. The highest level of appeal available to parents within the school system itself is an appeal under Section 11 of the School Act, to the School District. There is no independent oversight of the many decisions school districts and school district staff make in relation to individual learners with special needs and their families.

Parents need a body of oversight that is independent of the Ministry of Education.

Concerns Yet to be Examined

Here is a non-exhaustive list of some concerns that could be examined by the RCYBC:

- Abuse of students/restraint and seclusion: <http://www.inclusionbc.org/whats-new/restraint-and-seclusion-bc-schools-must-be-banned> and <https://t.co/mBn9Po53mW> (current follow-up survey)
- School refusal: <https://www.ucc.ie/archive/pub/medstud/uccmed/Malone%20cp4003/school%20refusal.pdf>
- Students not attending full days, or forced out of the system: <http://inclusionbc.org/sites/default/files/2017-11-01%20Students%20Denied%20Full%20Day.pdf>
<https://equitableaccesstoeducation.wordpress.com/full-forced-out-survey-report/>
<https://equitableaccesstoeducation.wordpress.com/2016/05/24/survey-results/>
- Lack of timely assessments: <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/child-who-doesn-t-speak-waits-2-years-for-therapy-1.1348652>
- Lack of appropriately trained staff: <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2017/03/how-teacher-training-hinders-special-needs-students/518286/>
- Students suspended because too many educational assistants called in sick that day: <https://theyee.ca/News/2017/11/06/Schools-Excluding-Special-Needs/>

Critical Need for Better Mental Health Support

According to the Waddell Report [1], published by the Simon Fraser University Child Health Policy Centre for the Ministry of Children and Family Development, “as many as 12.6% of children and youth aged 4-17 years – or 84,000 in British Columbia (BC) – are likely experiencing clinically significant mental disorders at any given time.” Of these children, it is estimated that under one third are actually receiving specialized mental health services.

A 2016 study published by Kids’ Help Phone on the well being of teens in Canada [2], found that approximately 1 in 5 teens (22%) had seriously considered suicide in the last 12 months. Almost half of these teens (46%) also reported they had given serious consideration to how, when and where they would attempt suicide. The study further notes that 2 in 5 teens had experienced important relationship problems with family or friends over the preceding 12 months.

The 2016 Census Data indicates that there are 729,740 children and youth between the ages of 5-19 years in the Province of British Columbia. Over 50,000 public school students are identified as having special needs [3]. Learning disabilities and mental health issues are positively correlated. 2012 data released by Statistics Canada indicates that 63.6% of teens and young adults aged 15-24 years with a learning disability have a co-occurring mental health issue [4]. For adults aged 25-64 years, that number rises to 71.5%.

Research shows that children and youth diagnosed with mental health issues potentially face a lifetime of challenges. Mental illness is a barrier to employment. The Mental Health Commission of Canada estimates the economic burden of mental illness is at least \$50 billion per year [5].

These costs include health care, lost productivity, and reductions in health-related quality of life. Health, social, and income supports make up the largest proportion of these costs. The Mental Health Strategy for Canada recommends raising the proportion of health spending that is devoted to mental health to 9% by 2022 to prevent and treat mental health disorders. [BC-specific recent statistics](#).

All of these statistics point to an urgent crisis in child and youth mental health. BCEdAccess did an informal survey of the 1250 parents in our group, and the list of concerns is long.

Here are some of their suggestions for improvement:

- Direct free access to a therapist/psychologist/counselor without all the bureaucratic challenges of referrals and waitlists, etc.
- More “big buddy” programs/parent social groups with childcare
- More school psychologists, counsellors, SLPs, EAs, SEAs
- More social workers
- A defined/formal ‘mental wellness’ program mandated by the Ministry of Education and delivered by schools to every grade
- Community based supports and programs to train families
- Behavioural Consultant district team to come into schools to help reintegrate students not attending school full time
- Not waiting until crisis; early intervention for mental health
- Crisis teams in the community to support families in immediate need instead of having to call police
- Long term access to counselling both in school and outside of it
- Equity in funding for various diagnoses
- Collaboration between all health providers including mental health. There are so many obstacles to actually treating the "whole person."
- Family supports before it reaches the level of a crisis
- Family support through crisis – stop recommending putting kids in care and start offering in-home support long term to repair the family unit
- Supports based on need, not diagnosis – complex needs require needs-based solutions
- Given that 80% of learning disabilities are dyslexia, and 20% of the population has a learning disability, screen and apply structured literacy remediation to at-risk readers. Mental health concerns in students with learning disabilities lead to mental health disorders in adulthood
- Trained coaches on playgrounds for support around bullying/behaviour support

Mental health is important to the whole school community. In the 2015 First Nations Mental Wellness Continuum Framework Report, being mentally healthy was described as “a balance of the mental, physical, spiritual, and emotional well-being” of a person. The framework described key themes:

- Culture as Foundation
- Community Development, Ownership, and Capacity Building
- Quality Care System and Competent Service Delivery
- Collaboration With Partners
- Enhanced Flexible Funding

Although some of the issues mentioned by our parent group are very urgent (such as an on-call crisis team in the community, and District supports to help learners to be successful in reintegrating into the school community full time), it became quickly obvious that the real answer here is to have a closer look at what the school community feels is needed. Therefore, we are recommending the following:

- Student Survey – student report (grade-appropriate for all levels) on the state of mental health support in schools and the community.
- Parent Survey – parent report on family mental health and what families need in terms of support and services at school and in the community.
- School Staff Survey – all staff report on what classrooms and schools need in order to provide and recommend mental health support to students, and to access that same support for themselves.
- Action Plan – A plan of action with SMART goals that connects with the new Ministry for Mental Health and Addictions and takes a tiered approach to solutions – those that can have immediate impact on student success, to those that will require longer term actions.

Healthy school communities happen when we have a system that offers support, education, and care to our children/youth, families and educators as well. Working towards mental health is not eliminating the illness, but rather working to develop the skills, awareness, and capabilities that will allow individuals to manage the day-to-day demands and pressures of life.

[1] Waddell, Charlotte et al. Child and Youth Mental Disorders: Prevalence and Evidence-Based Interventions. Children’s Health Policy Centre, SFU, 2014. See: <http://childhealthpolicy.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/14-06-17-Waddell-Report-2014.06.16.pdf>

[2] Kids’ Help Phone. Teens Talk 2016. See: <https://kidshelpphone.ca/sites/default/files/2017-04/Kids-Help-Phone-Teens-Talk-2016-English.pdf>

[3] BC Teacher’s Federation Fact Sheet – Student Enrolment. See: <http://bctf.ca/uploadedFiles/Public/Publications/FactSheets/StudentEnrolment.pdf>

[4] Statistics Canada. Learning Disabilities among Canadians Aged 15 Years and Older, 2012. See: <https://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-654-x/89-654-x2014003-eng.htm>

[5] Mental Health Commission of Canada. Making the Case for Investing in Mental Health in Canada. See: https://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/sites/default/files/2016-06/Investing_in_Mental_Health_FINAL_Version_ENG.pdf

Seismic Mitigation Plan

The provincial government's Seismic Mitigation Plan (SMP) began in 2004 with the aim of making all 342 high-risk schools safe by 2020. As of August 2017, 155 high-risk schools remain at the "Business Case Development" stage—in simple terms, no work has begun—and the completion date has been pushed back to 2030 for Vancouver. Currently thousands of BC kids—for example, there are 28,000 in Vancouver and 7,000 in Richmond, in addition to thousands of teachers, administrators, and support staff—spend their days in high-risk schools.

Why aren't all the remaining SMP projects across BC moving full-steam ahead? School districts have been tasked with organizing seismic projects while waiting for provincial funding approval, which can take years. Districts submit prioritized capital projects, but the projects that are approved have not necessarily been those prioritized by the district. There have been disagreements over the scope of projects, and the government has refused to fund the costs of temporary "swing space" during construction.

We are asking that the Ministry of Education actively demonstrate the acceleration of the SMP program by immediately approving all projects currently prioritized by school districts for SMP and move existing projects forward from their current stage with a comprehensive plan including deliverables and timelines. Included in this plan, we ask that emergency kits also be provided for schools so as to ensure all schools are equally prepared.

Replacement Schools – Better Long-Term Investment than Retrofit

The BC government has historically taken a "lowest-cost" approach that disregards long-term economic considerations and the public good that is served by well-built school buildings. Retrofitting a school so that it can stand up long enough after an earthquake for kids to get out alive is often the lowest-cost choice, as opposed to replacing it with a new building. But consider the ramifications.

Retrofitting buildings are designed to meet the standard of letting occupants get out alive; they are not designed to be usable after a huge earthquake. Replacement buildings are designed to be usable the next day. So saving a bit of money now by taking the retrofit option would be more expensive later if we need to rebuild these schools after an earthquake. Given the enormous impacts (including financial) of such a disaster, why not get it right the first time? Build new, safe, usable buildings—and save money in the long term as lives depend on it. Families and communities need these buildings to be usable after the earthquake. Schools are the very heart of a neighbourhood and will be required as emergency shelters for individuals and families who've lost their homes.

Replacing an old school can eliminate millions in deferred maintenance costs—Vancouver alone has over \$700 million in deferred maintenance. These are buildings that, in addition to being seismically unsafe, are over 100 years old, are not easily accessible, don't have enough facilities like washrooms, and aren't designed to enable 21st-century learning. They are less energy efficient than newer buildings and contain lead pipes, lead paint, and asbestos. These issues are not necessarily addressed during a seismic retrofit. Retrofitting will reduce the chances of children being crushed by their schools, but they might still have to run through clouds of asbestos dust to get to safety.

But there are issues when building new schools. The government created the [Ministry Area Standards](#) in 2004. Under this provision, [new schools are on average 30% smaller](#) than those built for previous

generations and serving equivalent (or larger) population sizes. Classrooms of 75 square meters that must also accommodate a cloakroom, storage areas, teacher area, and desks for up to 28 students, do not provide adequate space for arts-based learning. Outside the square footage maximums, allocated for classrooms, offices, resource rooms, and gym space, the extra 'design space' allocation based on population size is taken up in hallways and washrooms and sometimes a single multipurpose room used for before/after school care and as a lunchroom. There are no specific space allocations for non-enrolling classrooms within elementary schools; these include specialty rooms for core curricular subjects like music and art, or supplementary resource rooms such as sensory rooms or reading recovery spaces.

The current [Area Standards](#) does not allow sufficient space for school facilities that reflect best educational practices or the aspirational educational goals of the new curriculum. Investments in new schools should reflect best practices in education research and support the new BC curriculum; there should be guidelines for optimal sizes for student populations that prevent the creation of mega schools in urban centres for purely cost 'efficiencies'. It is imperative that this guiding document be examined and revised as it is the basis for all upgrades and new school builds.

It's an Infrastructure and Public Safety Issue, Not an Education Issue

The buildings in which our children spend the majority of their day should keep them safe in an earthquake, not present a compounded threat and jeopardize their safety. The structural and seismic safety of public school buildings should not be linked to the education budget: seismically upgrading schools is an urgent matter of public safety.

Many of the schools still in "business case development" are over 100 years old and were built using unreinforced masonry construction. Several schools constructed in the same way collapsed during the Long Beach [Earthquake of 1933](#). Fortunately, school was over for the day when the earthquake happened. Why have we allowed our children to continue spending their days in buildings that have been a known danger since at least 1933? The NDP platform in the 2017 election acknowledged the urgent need "make our schools safe by accelerating critical seismic upgrades." Building such infrastructure has multiple societal benefits: children and adults will not be harmed by the buildings they learn and work in; communities will have safe hubs to rely on; and construction jobs will result for the duration of the seismic projects in the multiple communities whose schools have not been made safe yet, which accords with the NDP platform promise to "create good jobs close to home."

Neighbourhood Schools

We believe that every child in BC should be given the opportunity to attend a safe, well-funded school within their own community. Neighborhood schools offer many benefits to both children and the community overall such as:

- They are safer - Children know the neighborhood, their fellow students, and with less travel time community schools are the safer option.
- Lower costs to parents - neighborhood schools eliminate the need for transportation costs to parents which can put an unnecessary financial strain on families, especially those with lower incomes

- Less travel time for children - in some areas children travel up to an hour or longer every day on buses which makes their school days longer and leaves less time for study and play time. Adding an extra hour or more of sitting to a child's day means they are less likely to absorb what is being taught in the classroom - and for high energy children and those with special needs the extra sitting time can be detrimental to their learning.
- More opportunities for students - When children attend schools in their neighbourhood they have opportunities to engage in before/after school activities such as sports teams, clubs and other extra-curricular activities that exist outside school hours. Many children who rely on buses to get them to and from school miss out on these opportunities and instead of gaining valuable experience, engaging in physical activity, and forming bonds with fellow students, they spend that time commuting to and from school.
- Having a heightened sense of community - Children who attend school in their community foster relationships with children and families that are also their neighbours which helps them gain a stronger sense of community, create stronger and closer friendships and helps create a safer community overall. School buildings, fields, and playgrounds also create a community space that can be utilized for community events and activities.
- Health benefits - When children attend schools in their neighbourhood they often walk to and from school. When compared to sitting on a bus for long periods of time walking to and from school creates a daily health benefit and promotes physical activity. Having the ability to walk to and from school also promotes independence and confidence in children.
- Decrease in traffic congestion - Before and after school pick up/drop off lines at schools have become a scary place - there are constant stories of near misses, traffic tickets, and even frustrated parents engaging in arguments in the parking lot. Traffic congestion in some cities is already a nightmare and having more students walking and eliminating the need for pick up and drop off not only creates a safer environment at the school itself but decreases traffic congestion in the area overall.

Despite well-documented benefits, for well over a decade, there has not been an emphasis on the importance of neighborhood schools; the conversation has been centered around being "efficient" or "cost effective" but we believe that it is time to re frame the conversation to highlight the importance of education for not only our children but for our society.

Portables and Their Issues

Many Districts are overcrowded and are using portables to mitigate the issue. We need to reduce the number of portables in school districts where portables are being used as permanent structures; portables are meant to be temporary structures. Where we cannot reduce the portables, there needs to be consideration made to how the portables are being funded. We will replace Surrey portables with real classrooms, building new schools in BC's fastest growing region

Schools need to be built now in high growth areas such as Surrey, Sooke, Langley, and Chilliwack. As it takes several years to build a school, we have a growing issue with the number of portables being used. Currently, the annual maintenance and operational costs of portables is approximately \$13,000 each (\$5m annually in Surrey alone) and does not include major maintenance items. This amount currently comes out of the district's operating budget, not the capital budget. Operational budgets include other budget categories including teacher salary/benefits, education assistant salary/benefits, classroom supplies, technology, music programs, custodial, etc.

Additionally -

With overcrowding in Elementary schools:

- Children are in the portable for the entire day – exposed to the issues such as too hot in summer, too cold in winter, potential exposure to mold & mildew, no running water or bathrooms, etc.
- Schools must accommodate more children, resulting in reduced time in shared spaces such as libraries, music rooms, computer labs, bathrooms, etc.
- Common activities such as play, assemblies, and music productions are done over multiple days, taking away from the school cohesiveness.
- Schools have to rotate the days in which children can use the playground equipment, or stagger play times.
- Drop off and pick up is challenging due to lack of road and parking infrastructure.
- Choice programming is being cut, due to District policy on available seats.

With overcrowding in High Schools:

- Maximum numbers on sports teams, band, and other school clubs means more students are not engaging in positive and enriching activities and are falling through the cracks.
- The most overcrowded schools are on a dual bell schedule which means student learning is compromised and this schedule inhibits schools from building a sense of community.
- Students are competing for electives including university draw courses. Some students are forced to then take an additional semester or night courses to complete for graduation.
- Students with minimum requirements met are asked to graduate early, missing out on school opportunities.

We need schools to be built in line with municipalities growth.
Portables should be funded separately from operational budgets.

Capital Funding Policies

The Ministry of Education needs to rescind Policy 2.3 in the [Capital Plan Instructions](#) that states “a district must adjust educational programming’ and create policy that protects the location and curricular approaches of existing programs, enshrines the individuality of learning, and simply recognizes a child needs a seat in a school building.” This policy creates unnecessary strain on a District’s ability to offer programming that meets the needs of the students they support.

The Project Contribution Policy 1.8 in the Capital Plan Instructions is unattainable for districts in a high growth pattern considering the sheer number of capital projects that need to begin immediate construction. This policy inhibits districts from receiving capital funding approval in districts that need those funds to adequately secure seats for students in their community schools. This policy needs to be eliminated for districts seeing a high growth pattern such as Surrey, Chilliwack, Langley, and Sooke.

School Site Acquisition Charges

School Site Acquisition Charges (SSAC) is a charge per dwelling unit to be paid by residential developers. The charge is collected by local government and transferred to school boards. The money collected is used to help pay for new school sites needed as a result of new residential development. One of the principles of the SSAC is to collect a per unit charge that can vary between school districts to meet local

conditions. School Districts partially rely on the Site Acquisition Charges for land acquisition revenues, but these charges have not increased since the year 2000; yet land value has doubled since that time. An example is in the Surrey School District where, in the past, has expected approximately 35% of their capital revenue for land acquisition to come from the SSAC, it is currently seeing approximately 20%. The Acquisition Charge Policy needs to move to a percentage-based amount to stay current to fair market land value.

Functional Standardized Assessments

Each year, the Foundational Skills Assessment tests (FSAs) consume a significant amount of "instructional time" for students in grades four and seven. Yet there is no demonstrable benefit of writing the FSAs for individual students, schools, and districts. The results are not part of the student's record, and are not used to direct funding and resources where improvement is needed. As a result, it leaves the impression with parents and stakeholders that the only purpose of the FSAs is to provide the Fraser Institute with data for its divisive annual school rankings.

A few years ago, an advisory group consisting of representatives of all major stakeholders in public education in BC (including parents) worked together to examine the issue of provincial assessment. The [Advisory Group on Provincial Assessment](#) issued its final report in June 2014. We agree and support its conclusions.

The Advisory Group sees the value of system-wide assessment, but only if the abuses of the data can be curtailed, and if the data is actually used to:

- inform decision-making around policy and priorities in the public education system;
- influence planning, curriculum development, and interventions;
- influence the allocation of resources to meet the needs that are identified through the data;
- develop priorities and support for educational research.