

February 28, 2017

“Status Quo” Budget Not Acceptable— Government Does Bare Minimum for Public Education

Parent Advocacy Groups Respond to Budget 2017

VANCOUVER—The BC government has characterized its 2017 Fiscal Plan as “providing an additional \$740 million over three years to the education budget.” However, this budget does not put sufficient money behind the Finance Minister's statement that education is the “most important” service the government provides. Budget 2017 does not redress the current deficiencies in our public education system nor does it provide the adequate, predictable, and sustainable funding necessary to ensure a quality equitable education for all children.

The Parent Advocacy Network for Public Education (PAN) in cooperation with parent and advocacy groups—Chilliwack DPAC, Comox Valley Families for Public Education, Families Against Cuts to Education, Public Education Network Society, Richmond Schools Stand United, Seismic Safety for BC Schools Committee, Surrey Students Now—are deeply disappointed by the government’s allocation of funds for public education within Budget 2017.

While it is a relief to have a budget without overt cuts to public education, parents across BC know that this is the bare minimum that government is obligated to provide without being in contempt of court or in contravention of its own per-pupil funding formula. “This budget does not address the systemic, structural inadequacy of the per-pupil funding model that continues to undermine and erode our public education system. The government again cut education funding in last year’s budget and this one barely maintains the scarce status quo. This is unacceptable after 15 years of cumulative cuts,” said parent and PAN co-founder Andrea Sinclair.

We acknowledge and welcome the \$320 million in provisional funding allocated to comply with the Supreme Court of Canada ruling and restore class size and composition language that was unlawfully removed from contracts in 2002, and we expect that the full amount will be reflected in the revised budget once a final settlement has been reached. This money will enable school districts to begin to address untenable classroom conditions and improve supports for students with special learning needs.

In response to the budget, the BC School Trustees Association (BCSTA) stated: “Beyond funding additional teachers, school trustees will be looking for government to meet their commitment to funding such key needs as additional classrooms, corresponding support staff increases and school district operational budgets.” These needs are not currently addressed in Budget 2017, and will not be covered by the settlement with the teachers. Like the BCSTA, we expect government to provide the requisite funding to meet these increased costs.

The government states that it is “adding” \$228 million over three years to address increased enrolment levels. To call this “additional” funding is disingenuous: increasing funding to reflect enrolment growth according to its own per-pupil formula is the government’s legal obligation and not a funding increase. The government has failed to address the fact that the current per-pupil funding amount, which doesn’t even reflect inflation, is insufficient for school districts to meet the educational needs of BC’s children.

Similarly, reinstating previously funded services such as busing in rural areas is not “extra” funding, nor is the partial return of forced “administrative savings.” In November 2016, BCSTA advised government that school districts would require an additional \$96 million for 2017/18 above and beyond these “relief” funds restored in the spring of 2016, merely to maintain services at current levels. As a result of this \$96 million structural deficit, school districts with stable or declining enrolment will once again need to cut programming and vital student supports.

Parents cannot be placated with a one-time \$27.4 million Student Learning Grant for supplies to “help defray” fundraising pressures. A one-off partial restoration of the \$29 million that was stripped from operational funding in 2015, which amounts to little more than \$50 per student, is insulting to parents and demonstrates a complete failure to comprehend the degree to which underfunding has decimated public education. The government must do more than “help defray costs”; it is the government’s duty to provide a quality and fully funded public education that encompasses the full curriculum and is accessible to all children regardless of ability or economic means.

Budget 2017 does not provide supports for the thousands of children designated with special needs that do not qualify for funding under the current model. It does not provide relief for children living in poverty, who require additional supports to succeed in school. It does not restore the staff or resources necessary to support arts education in elementary schools. It does not allow high schools to offer the full range of core and elective courses reflected in the new curriculum. It does not address the cumulative deficit of digital technologies, books, equipment, and educational supplies, including furniture, which schools rely on parents and charitable organizations to provide. It does not provide the funding necessary for districts to begin to address the hundreds of millions of dollars in deferred maintenance that is evident in the decrepit state of many school buildings.

The government’s continued failure to provide adequate, predictable, and sustainable funding for K-12 public education to meet the learning needs of all students and the resulting disparity between educational equality based on economic advantage that is occurring as a direct result is in contravention of the democratic purpose of education as set out in the BC School Act.

We reiterate our call on the provincial government to increase K-12 public education annual operational funding by 20% to redress all of the current deficiencies and reprioritize our education system to ensure an equitable quality education for all children.

See Provincial Letter and Declaration in Defence of Public Education.

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About the Parent Advocacy Network

The Parent Advocacy Network for Public Education (PAN), is a non-partisan grassroots collective of parents and community members who share a commitment to public education. We are working to address the chronic underfunding and devaluing of public education in Vancouver and across British Columbia by creating a strong network of parents who support one another in advocacy.