

DECLARATION IN DEFENCE OF PUBLIC EDUCATION

Public education is a sacred trust. Every child has the right to a free, high-quality public education and the government has a responsibility to ensure this right.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the child both affirm the responsibility of governments to ensure that all children—irrespective of race, religion, gender, ability or economic situation—have equal right to access an education directed to the development of their full human potential, respecting cultural, national and Aboriginal identities and for the perpetuation and furtherance of human freedom, equality, tolerance and environmental sustainability for all.

The 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”. Further to this, 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.”

In practice, BC provincial funding for K-12 public education has proven inadequate to satisfy this mandate. The current service plan of \$4.6 billion in operational grants for public education for 2016/17 is insufficient to provide all children in BC, without discrimination, equal access to educational opportunities across the entire curriculum and in accordance with their learning needs to allow them to reach their full potential as individuals and as citizens of our society.

Therefore, we demand that the provincial government increase annual K-12 public education operational funding by 20% to redress all of the current deficiencies and fully prioritize and revitalize our education system to ensure an equitable quality education for all children.

Each year, structural underfunding has forced school districts across BC to “balance budgets” with increasingly deficient funds—specialist teachers, teacher librarians, core programs, basic resources, and vital student and special needs supports have been systematically and cumulatively eliminated from schools, disproportionate to enrolment decline. The reprehensible reality is that half a million children are being denied equitable and full access to the educational opportunities to which they are entitled under the BC School Act and which are emphasized within the revised BC curriculum. As a result, parents are subsidizing their children’s education by raising funds to equip schools with basic educational resources; many parents are privately outsourcing art and music classes, sports programming and vital remedial supports. Children whose parents lack the means to make up for government underfunding—and there are many: 19.3% of BC’s children live in poverty—must do without. In these ways, underfunding has created unacceptable inequality in educational opportunity for children based on economic advantage. This situation undermines the very democratic principles of equitable access to education on which the BC School Act is predicated.

This grave situation has repeatedly been brought to the attention of the government by its own all-party Select Standing Committee for Finance and Government Services (2014/15, 2015/16, and 2016/17) which affirmed that public education is not adequately supported by public funds. In light of this, the government’s persistent de-prioritization of public education and its failure to establish sufficient funds to support the equitable provision of public education in keeping with the purpose of the system outlined in the BC School Act is a violation of public trust.

The government of British Columbia has claimed that our province “has the strongest and fastest growing economy in Canada”. As we live in a province of prosperity with a \$2-billion-plus budget surplus, there is no

impediment for government to discharge its financial and legal responsibility to establish a level of funding that ensures the "needs of students are met first and foremost".

Structural underfunding, the persistent erosion of the breadth and quality of educational programs, and the continual reduction of resources within the public system have cumulatively created unacceptable levels of inequality and discrimination that violate the democratic purpose of the education system. This has dire implications for the future health, stability and economic prosperity of our province as it is dependent on the strength of our public education system as the foundation of our common "wealth".

We defend the right of all BC children to receive high-quality public education, accessible in their own neighbourhoods, in educationally appropriate and seismically safe buildings with the resources and staff necessary to meet their learning needs. Therefore we, the Parent Advocacy Network for Public Education (PAN), in solidarity with parents and citizens across the province, submit the following demands:

THAT ALL CHILDREN IN BC ATTEND SAFE AND EDUCATIONALLY APPROPRIATE SCHOOLS

- The immediate approval of all projects currently prioritized by school districts for seismic mitigation and support for comprehensive plans developed by local school districts for their completion by 2025/2030.
- The funding of portables, where necessary, for temporary accommodation during seismic upgrades, not forced school closures to create swing space.
- The replacement of old schools where existing schools are close to or exceeding their life expectancy, to address soaring deferred maintenance costs.
- Proactive funding for new school construction in areas of current and anticipated population growth.
- Funding approaches that recognize the fixed costs of operating school facilities to protect smaller neighbourhood schools as the best learning environment for children.

THAT ALL CHILDREN IN BC RECEIVE FULLY-FUNDED HIGH-QUALITY EDUCATION ACROSS THE ENTIRE CURRICULUM

- Sufficient additional ongoing operational funding to enable all public schools to offer a high quality education across the entire K-12 curriculum.
- The restoration of fine arts programming in all BC elementary schools, by funding specialists, equipment, and supplies.
- The immediate restoration of pre-2004 graduation requirements to support a comprehensive and full-time schooling for students through Grade 12.
- Sufficient funding to allow upper-level courses to run at lower capacity thresholds to ensure that all secondary students have access within their local high school to a full range of core curricular and electives courses offered within the BC curriculum.

THAT ALL CHILDREN IN BC HAVE ACCESS TO THE STAFF AND RESOURCES THEY NEED TO LEARN

- The immediate and unequivocal allocation of the estimated \$300 million of additional annual funding needed to comply with the ruling of the Supreme Court of Canada to begin to address class size and composition.
- The immediate addition of funding, trained staff and resources to support the early identification, designation, and meaningful inclusion of students with special needs, in order to meet their learning needs.
- An immediate increase to CommunityLINK and Vulnerable Student Supplement funding given to school districts to address the nutritional and social-emotional needs of children living in poverty.
- Sufficient operational funds to supply schools with the necessary furniture, educational resources and equipment needed to provide a quality education in all areas of the BC curriculum including and fully funded, and staffed school libraries with access to digital technologies.