

Hi, thanks for this opportunity. I'm Tracy Humphreys and I'm speaking from the unceded lands of the Lekwungen speaking peoples, specifically the Esquimalt and Songhees Nations. The BCEdAccess Society is an organization of parents and guardians of children with disabilities and complex learners with over 2700 community members around BC.

Since 2015, accountability methodology in K-12 education has been under review. Although we're aware that a new draft framework exists, it's not publicly available and it's very difficult for a parent to know where to go and ultimately what kinds of expectations they can hold.

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 is an appeal to the School District under Section 11 of the School Act, and very limited access to the Superintendent of Appeals at the Ministry of Education.

And that's only for the families who are aware that these limited mechanisms exist. Too many families are not aware they can appeal decisions at all. Others may be fearful of retaliation if they do so. And especially now during the pandemic, a majority of families find they just don't have the time or capacity to follow the appeals process. Yet all of their children have the same right to equitable access to education.

There is no independent oversight of the many decisions school districts and school district staff make in relation to children and youth with disabilities and their families. It's time to remove the burden of accountability from parents and guardians.

This is not our first presentation to this committee with the same recommendation. We continue to recommend that the Government create capacity for a body of independent oversight and an accountability mechanism for the over 68,000 children and youth with disabilities in our education system.

This may be done through the Representative for Children and Youth in BC or through the establishment of a new independent body. Over 50% of human rights complaints internationally are disability-related. At the BC Human Rights Tribunal 46% of complaints were disability-related last year. As the largest group discriminated against internationally as well as in our province, it's important to have knowledgeable staff independent of the School Districts and Ministry of Education.

We estimate a cost of approximately 1 million dollars for this investment. In a multibillion dollar provincial budget this is a very small ask that would yield great returns not only in equity and accountability, but also in benefit to the economy by allowing parents to be able to work more and students to graduate and get into the workforce more successfully.

I want to share a quote from a Facebook post by one of our community members:

“As a single parent, I had to leave my job because of my son being excluded from school so often. I haven’t been able to go back to work full time since. The thought of more advocacy next school year has me in tears. I am very fortunate to have advocacy and peer support. Of course I will advocate for my son to have what he needs, but I am tired. He is going into grade 2 and it has always been the same thing with no end in sight. Everyone involved knows what he needs. It’s just a matter of systems and politics, and I’m done with it. I’m tired, and it’s not fair. The weight should not be on my shoulders, yet it always is.”

This is not one family’s experience. Far too many families have had this same impact on their finances and are facing the same struggle in advocacy year after year.

What does accountability look like? From our perspective it looks like each child’s family doesn’t have to beg, in some cases every year, for appropriate, effective and continuous supports for their child. It looks like elimination of waitlists - timely assessments. It looks like School Districts being required to address the root causes of exclusion, seclusion and restraint.

In our written submission we’ll expand on this, and we’ll also address mental health, something that we have raised before as well, but which needs special and additional attention now due to the pandemic.

We would also like to endorse everything that Inclusion BC has asked for, and that Cynthia and Cindy will be presenting on, as well as recommendations by BCCPAC, BCSTA and school district presenters.

It’s long past time to finally invest in children, youth and adults with disabilities.