
VANCOUVER PARENTS FOR SUCCESSFUL INCLUSION

February 23, 2010

Hon. Margaret MacDiarmid,
Minister of Education
Victoria, BC

While seeking re-election in February 2005, Premier Gordon Campbell announced five great goals for the decade ahead that promised, among other things, to:

- *Make B.C. the best-educated, most literate place in North America; and to*
- *Build the best system of support in Canada for... special needs and children at risk.*

Seeking re-election during the depths of the global recession, he promised to protect education despite economic and fiscal challenges facing our province, stating in the 2009 Throne Speech:

“Education is the best economic development and health promotion program ever invented. In tight economic times, it is only smart to maintain and expand educational investments.”

These promises offered hope to families of students with special needs, who struggle to support their children in the face of disappearing special education services in our public schools.

A decade of cuts

In September, our [budget brief](#) to the Standing Committee on Finance & Government Services showed Vancouver had lost 26% of its special education teachers since 2001, despite a 29% **increase** in students with special needs. And Vancouver still spends more than twice as much on special education as the province actually funds.

Now Vancouver joins other Boards warning of dire cuts to front-line services in 2010-11 unless the Province agrees to fully fund new costs that it has imposed on local districts. The shortfall is an estimated \$300 million, with Vancouver’s share projected at between \$17 and \$35 million.

Our families are alarmed by warnings from districts like Vancouver, Victoria, Richmond and Surrey that this would require them to cut core special education programs to balance district budgets, jeopardizing student supports already under critical stress and threatening inclusion.

Special needs unprotected

The threat to students with special needs is heightened by a major flaw in Bill 33. While this new provincial law affords typical students some protection from cuts by setting limits for regular classes, it excludes core services for students with special needs and special ed classes from such protections. It allows special ed classes of unlimited size, with no specialized teaching support.

Provincial laws don’t require Boards to actually provide any special education services other than drafting Individual Education Plans. The province does not regulate what such plans must contain or what services must actually be provided as a result. Ministry audits only look for a paper plan on file, ignoring entirely what services are provided or whether they are appropriate.

The Ministry has also stopped tracking achievement (outputs) for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities. This accountability gap has promoted significant erosion of learning supports, affecting a much broader group of at-risk students. Many are denied the access they need to specialized staff. Special education teacher caseloads now often exceed 120 students, and many such teachers lack the required training or resources they need to be effective.

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Now, with Boards facing unprecedented budget pressures and with few other options, they will be forced to focus budget cuts on these unprotected and critically-stressed learning supports.

The Provincial government has created all the conditions for a dangerous crisis in services for at-risk and special needs students, at a time when demand for such services is rising. This would violate the pre-election promises to protect education, represent a terrible betrayal of the Premier's 2005 promises to BC's children, and reflect a failure of responsible governance.

It also violates principles of fiscal responsibility, given the far higher costs to society of failing to support vulnerable children and youth so that they can learn successfully. And we know British Columbians strongly support public education and supports for vulnerable children as priorities.

Our students need your help

We have patiently watched your government commit to enormous public spending on other priorities, despite the fiscal challenges facing our Province. We now need you to act urgently to support children with special needs by:

1. Fully funding all provincially-mandated education costs, including special education, in the upcoming BC budget and
2. Moving urgently to afford equivalent protection and accountability for delivery of core services and outcomes for students with special needs and students at risk.

We request an urgent meeting with you to discuss these concerns and thank you in advance for your support.

Dawn Steele, Coordinator

Vancouver Parents for Successful Inclusion

CC: Vancouver MLAs, Vancouver DPAC, VSB Special Education Advisory Committee, Coalition for Public Education, Vancouver Courier, Vancouver Sun