

October 4, 2017

Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services
Legislative Assembly of British Columbia
Room 224, Parliament Buildings
Victoria, B.C., V8V 1X4

Dear Committee Members:

Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to present our views on the funding needs of the K-12 public education system, and in particular, the specific need of students in Richmond.

As in previous years, this brief is presented to the Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services jointly by the Board of Education of School District 38 (Richmond), the Richmond District Parents Association, the Richmond Association of School Administrators, the Richmond Teachers' Association, CUPE Local 716 and the Richmond Management and Professional Staff. Our joint presentation demonstrates the strong commitment to collaboration and cooperation that is shared by all associated with the Richmond School District. Our district motto is "*Our Focus Is On The Learner*", and our recommendations for the funding of the K-12 system reflect that focus.

Recommendations

1. Provide Increased Funding For Student Instruction and Support

The additional funding provided to school districts to work towards restoration of the collective agreement language for teaching staff has resulted in improved class sizes and increased teaching resources for students. Full restoration will take several years to achieve, as the demand for specialized teachers exceeds their supply. Targeted funding to ensure that full restoration is achieved should therefore be a multi-year commitment to school districts. Over the next five years teacher training, particularly in the specialty areas, will need support from the Ministry.

While the increase in teaching resources has been welcome, the need for higher funding for non-teaching staff continues. Districts across the province are experiencing difficulties filling Education Assistant positions. These EAs are the front line support for students with special needs, who provide invaluable support in very challenging circumstances. Because of the prevailing compensation structure for their positions, there are fewer people willing to take on the roles, hence the recruitment challenges facing all districts. This is a situation that cannot be remedied by any one district – there needs to be a provincial solution to this significant issue facing BC school districts.

As a result of funding reductions over a number of years, administrative staff at both the school and district are now at unsustainably low levels. With the increase of teacher positions to the system and ever increasing demands on administrative time the system is critically poised to be unable to meet the public mandate that we are charged with.

This has come at a time when the expectation levels around leading curriculum change, increased consultation and information sharing, as well as, maintaining privacy and cyber-security have all contributed to a series of never-ending demands. Our system leaders - district management, principals and vice-principals and executive staff - have been approved for salary increases in accordance with a region-wide strategy, however funding for these salary increases has not been provided. This has meant that the district has had to effect budget cuts in order to ensure that the salary increases could be implemented. This is an additional area for which increased provincial funding is requested.

2. Reform the School District Financial Funding Formula

The current funding formula allocates the bulk of funding to school districts on a per student basis. For districts such as Richmond which are experiencing declining enrollment, this means that for every student that is lost, funding drops by approximately \$7,000. Over the past five years, our district has lost close to 2,000 students, which accounts for about 9% of our total student population. Because the loss of students is spread across schools and grade levels, the related reduction in costs is relatively small. We estimate that only 25% of the revenue that is lost is offset by cost reductions. The remaining 75% of lost revenue results in direct cuts to staffing levels and services to students.

While the current "funding protection" system is designed to provide some mitigation to schools with declining enrollment, it is insufficient. We therefore urge the provincial government to provide supplementary funding to school districts in declining enrollment to assist in operations, while a review of the funding formula is undertaken.

3. Increase Capital Funding For Facilities

The Select Standing Committee has consistently supported the need of school districts across the province for capital funding to meet emergent needs, especially as they relate to the need for space and seismic remediation. In Richmond, 23 of our 38 elementary schools have been evaluated to be of high seismic risk. Changes to the "seismic retrofit guidelines" to factor in the possible liquefaction of soils has increased the risk rating of many of the blocks in our schools. Our district has therefore been working very closely with the Capital Branch of the Ministry of Education to develop a plan to remediate our schools.

The current process that must be undergone to obtain project approval is complicated and cumbersome. Each project is required to compare costs of full remediation, partial remediation with partial replacement, and full replacement. As most schools are comprised of multiple blocks, this means that each block must be separately assessed in detail to determine whether it is cheaper to remediate it or to rebuild it. In past years, approval was given to rebuild a school if the cost of remediation or renovation was over 75% of the cost of a new school. We request consideration of a return to that system, as it resulted in a process that was significantly less complex to navigate, as well as resulted in construction decisions that made long term sense.

Provincial policy that looks at seismic projects in isolation of the other non-seismic work that should be undertaken at the same time also results in projects that are short-term fixes rather than long term solutions.

Currently, the only costs that can be considered as part of a seismic project are those costs that are directly required from a seismic remediation perspective. This does not recognize other required costs as part of the project; for example, it would make sense to replace the plumbing system in schools that have lead in the drinking water at the same time as the seismic remediation project is being undertaken, yet these costs are not funded because the focus is on seismic requirements only. We ask that provincial policy be changed to allow for consideration of all costs, whether directly seismic in nature or not.

Conclusion

We appreciate the opportunity to present the Standing Committee with this brief. Trustees, staff and parents in Richmond are committed to ensuring that our K-12 system continues to be strong, vibrant and efficient. We hope that you will look favourably on our requests.

Sincerely,



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On Behalf of the Board of Education
(Richmond)



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