

VSB

Submission to:

**Select Standing Committee on Finance and
Government Services**

Budget 2019 Consultation

Submitted by:

**Board of Education of School District No. 39
(Vancouver)**

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

Dear Committee Members:

The Vancouver Board of Education (“VBE”) is pleased to provide this submission for consideration by the committee as it recommends funding and investment strategies to the Ministry of Finance for the development of the Government’s 2019-2020 fiscal framework. The VBE is one of the most diverse public school systems in Canada with an annual enrolment of approximately 49,500 students in Kindergarten to grade 12. In addition, the VBE provides educational programs and services to 300 adult students and 1,800 international students. The VSB invests significant resources in a broad range of programs to meet our learners’ diverse needs in fulfillment of our vision to “inspire student success by providing an innovative, caring and responsive learning environment”.

Student Achievement

The District directs all its efforts on improving student achievement by focusing on the Board’s VSB 2021 Strategic Plan goals of:

- Engaging our learners through innovative teaching and learning practices;
- Building capacity in our community through strengthening collective leadership;
- Creating a culture of care and shared social responsibility; and,
- Providing effective leadership, governance and stewardship.

To ensure that all students are included and have the opportunity to succeed, VBE has a broad offering of specialty programs to support learners in a variety of ways, addressing a range of needs. There is a clear focus on improving the graduation rates for all students, and in particular Indigenous learners. This begins with an emphasis on providing supportive learning experiences and interventions as children transition from pre-K into Kindergarten, through to Grade 12, and then on to post-secondary.

The provincial education mandate has expressly prioritized 21st Century Learning, supporting early learners and sustainability. It has also consistently stressed the importance of parental involvement in student learning and school communities. These priorities, coupled with the completion of the implementation of the new curriculum and the restoration of collective agreement language, exemplify the challenges we faced in delivering the mandate. From a financial perspective, it is essential that these areas receive dedicated, consistent and adequate funding if they are to become cornerstones of the education system. Accordingly, the VBE is making the following recommendations to the Committee:

Recommendations

The VSB recommends that the provincial government:

- 1. Ensures that the Ministry of Education’s funding formula review for school districts results in stable, predictable and adequate funding to enable districts to fulfill their responsibility to assist all students to achieve their potential.**

In order to have a funding formula that provides stable and predictable funding, the resources necessary to support all students need to be identified. While certain components of the current funding formula work well to support students (targeted funding for Indigenous students, for example), others are confusing (supplement for geographic factors, for example). The new funding formula needs to be clearly understood as to how it relates to student achievement. There needs to be an element of flexibility in how districts decide how to spend the funding received and processes should be established to monitor how that linkage is working over time. Districts across the Province differ greatly in their needs. Rural districts require more support in certain areas of their operation than metropolitan districts (transportation, weather conditions, recruitment and retention, for example). While those challenges should be addressed in the new funding formula, there should not be a “winners and losers” reality at the end of the day. While the challenges faced by smaller rural districts require more support, challenges also exist in metropolitan districts, such as Vancouver, related to poverty and mental health that don’t exist to the same degree in other districts, but which put a significant financial strain on limited financial resources.

- 2. Provides the necessary funding to fully implement the Memorandum of Agreement resulting from the Supreme Court Ruling.**

In Vancouver's written submission to the Select Standing Committee in 2017 the District provided this statement related to the first year of implementation of the MOA: *“The recruitment and retention of teachers, the shortage of teachers teaching on call, the cost of remedy provisions, and the need for facility renovations are challenges that will place pressure on the initial funding that has been provided and will need to be addressed to ensure the implementation fully complies with the MOA.”* Indeed, there was significant pressure on the funding required as districts across the Province required approximately 300 more teachers in September 2017 than what had been projected provincially in the spring of 2017. Vancouver did not receive enough funding in 2017-2018 for the teachers it hired to implement the MOA due to misinterpretation of the language in the MOA and is still engaged in conversation with the Ministry of Education on rectifying that shortfall. The Vancouver situation has been experienced in other districts and the Provincial Government needs to fully fund each district’s requirements under the MOA. There also needs to be improved mechanisms for resolving matters of interpretation.

3. Provides funding to ensure the new curriculum implementation is complete and successful.

A commitment to provide professional development for educators and educational leaders is necessary to ensure successful implementation of the new curriculum. With the pending changes to the Graduation Program completing the transformation agenda for K through 12, there also needs to be sufficient funding to enable the acquisition of resources to implement the changes. Students today learn differently than students of even twenty years ago and there is a need to build currency among all staff, particularly teaching staff, to challenge students in their learning. The restored collective agreement language provides for increased teacher librarian staffing. School libraries will play an increasingly important role in personalized learning agenda and need to be supported, particularly in the area of funding for technology upgrades.

4. Fully fund cost pressures to sustain current services to students, including past and new unfunded cost pressures.

School districts have experienced erosion in their budgets over the years due to the Province not providing funding for cost increases in the areas of exempt compensation, employee benefits, utility costs and inflation. These cost pressures are being exacerbated with the addition of the new Employer Health Tax. While the elimination of MSP premiums mitigates to some degree the impact of the new tax, the Government's \$90 million commitment to offset the impact will result in districts still bearing an additional cost. Also, with the timing of the relief being delayed to 2019-2020, districts will still have an additional cost for 2018-2019. With the addition of the EHT, BCASBO now estimates the accumulated unfunded cost pressures in the system for 2018-2019 to be \$421 million and for 2019-2020 to be \$441 million. Unfunded cost increases require school districts to spend significant time and resources on balancing budgets each year instead of strategically planning the most effective use of funding to support student success.

5. Review and increase supplemental funding grants for students with special needs and students struggling with mental health issues.

The VBE, like most school districts, spends more in supporting students with special needs than is provided by the Province in special needs supplemental grants. Setting aside the basic per pupil allocation the District receives for every student, the amount of support provided to students with special needs in excess of the supplemental grants was \$27 million in 2017-2018. Even when taking the basic per pupil allocation into account the additional support provided to students with special needs in 2017-2018 was \$9 million. Included in this analysis and as explained when Chair Fraser and Vice-Chair Alexander presented in front of the Committee, the VBE has maintained staffing levels for supporting students with special needs in excess of what is required under the provincial ratios in the MOA. This amounts to approximately 50 FTE's with an annual cost of \$4.5 - \$5.0 million.

The increase in the numbers of students in recent years with complex and diverse needs is putting increased pressure on districts' budgets. Provincially there needs to be a recognition of the full costs of providing an inclusive education for all students with special and unique needs. Vancouver has some of the poorest households in the entire country and the poverty that exists in areas of our District is fuel for special learning difficulties and mental health issues among children. The lack of personnel in the District who have specialized training to deal with mental issues is placing pressure on teachers and support staff. Given the Provincial Government's commitment to a mental health improvement strategy, providing funding to districts to hire those who have the necessary training would be welcomed.

6. Provide funding for increased maintenance and upgrades to address needs of aging school facilities.

The Government has made a commitment to providing funding to improve infrastructure in school districts. Deferred maintenance has become a problem that is eroding districts' ability to maximize support for classrooms by diverting funds to emergent repairs to school buildings. The VBE has between \$700 million and \$800 million in estimated deferred maintenance costs due to the age of many of the school buildings. This value reflects the cost it would take to bring mechanical, electrical, structural and life safety systems in schools up to the standards of today. Spending valuable resources maintaining and repairing old systems reduces the ability of the District to enhance the learning environments for our students, especially with respect to implementing the new curriculum. The current Annual Facilities Grant allocations are not adequate to provide the maintenance required. Vancouver annually receives \$11 million in AFG funds and the allocation of those funds is always directed to areas of the highest need. The same challenge is being experienced by other districts. The Province needs to increase funding for ongoing maintenance and should employ industry maintenance standards as a guide to determine adequate funding levels.

One area of maintenance that is of concern today for districts with older schools is the presence of lead in drinking water and the Ministry of Education policy to require districts to, in consultation with their local health authority, test for and develop mitigation strategies to reduce the level of lead in water. To comply with the Ministry policy districts are having to redirect already scarce funds to install bottle filling stations or re-pipe buildings. There is no special direct funding for this work which results in further erosion of the limited AFG funds. Given the presence of lead in water in schools is a health concern the Province should provide funding to districts to mitigate or preferably eliminate the concern.

7. Provide sufficient capital funding to honour the provincial government's commitment to upgrade or replace high seismic risk schools.

In keeping with the Government's commitment to invest in new school facilities, sufficient capital funding is required to seismically upgrade or replace schools, particularly in Vancouver. The VBE has over 60 of its 110 schools in need of seismic

upgrading or replacement. All these schools are high seismic risk buildings (i.e. H1, H2 or H3). Significant seismic funding has flowed into the VBE and some of that funding has gone to build new schools as the lowest cost option to seismically upgrading existing schools. However, while the resulting new school has many up-to-date features the area standards that are applied to new school construction results in smaller schools, by up to 40%, than the one the students were in that required the seismic upgrade. This reduction in size means there is no dedicated space for arts and music programs and breakout space for collaboration. The new curriculum contemplates there should be space to provide the personalized learning students need and it is counterintuitive to decrease those opportunities by applying the current areas standards for construction. The Province needs to recognize the learning needs of students when providing funding in the Seismic Mitigation Program while advancing the pace of approval for seismic capital projects in order to ensure the safety of students and staff in the event of a significant seismic episode.

8. Increase funding to school districts to support Indigenous Learners.

While significant improvement in educational outcomes for Indigenous students have been achieved over the past few years, more needs to be done to continue the progress. The six-year completion rate for Indigenous students in Vancouver is significantly lower than the Provincial rate, a reality that exists in many districts. However, there are districts where the completion rate for Indigenous students is higher than the Provincial average. Funding needs to be provided at a provincial level to identify the best practices that exist in those districts so that their strategies and pedagogy can be shared and implemented across the Province. This strategy would speak to the Ministry of Education's commitment to Truth and Reconciliation and to eliminating the educational outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students.