

Who's Cutting Classes?

Untangling the
Spin about K-12
Education in BC

by Marc Lee
January 2004

PARENTS AND TEACHERS—AND MOST OF ALL, STUDENTS—KNOW THAT SCHOOLS have been closed, teaching and administrative positions have been cut, and class sizes have grown in the past couple of years. The provincial government, on the other hand, argues that per-pupil funding is rising and that spending on education is at all-time highs. The blame for cuts, according to Victoria, lies with local school boards, not the provincial government.

Technically speaking, the government is right. School boards have had to make the tough decisions—but precisely because of funding decisions made by the provincial government. The Minister of Education seems more interested in game-playing with statistics and finger-pointing at school boards than facing up to the challenges in K-12 education. Education has been under-funded for more than a decade, the “easy” cuts have long since been made, and there will be grave consequences for the BC economy if the situation continues.



A Primer on K-12 Education Financing

How education gets paid for is more confusing than it should be. At its core, the public education system is financed by annual grants paid by the provincial government to elected school boards. School boards must then allocate resources to their local schools. A “school tax” appears on municipal (or provincial) property tax bills, but the amount of this tax is set by the provincial government, not school boards or local governments. The school tax does not go directly to local school boards, or into the provincial education system, but into general provincial revenues.¹

This means that, as occurred in 2003, the government can mandate an increase in the municipal education tax of 2.5% without passing on the incremental tax revenue to the provincial education budget. In each annual BC Budget, the provincial government sets out the total contribution to K-12 education based on its own internal process.



There are three principal components of K-12 education financing that really matter: the growth of provincial financing for K-12; changes in the number of students enrolled; and, changes in the cost of providing education services. To show the relative changes in each going back to 1990/91, the three components have each been converted to an index and are shown in Figure 1. These three components can then be combined into a measure of real per student funding to assess the changes in education financing. A table with the data for the figures in this section is available in the Appendix.

Figure 1 shows the percentage increase in total operating funding for public education from 1990/91 to 2003/04, with projections to 2005/06, based on Ministry estimates.² Provincial operating grants grew from \$2.7 billion in 1990/91 to \$3.8 billion in 2003/04, an increase of 43.5%.³ While this may seem like a large increase, it must be put in the context of a growing economy and population, along with rising incomes and inflation.

Little of this growth in provincial operating grants, however, has come in recent years. The education system received some large annual increases in the early-1990s. Operating grants continued to increase, though more modestly, from the mid- to late-1990s. Since 2001/02, operating grants have experienced minimal growth and the trend is projected to continue for the next two years.

The second factor in education financing is student enrolment. As Figure 1 shows, student enrolment expanded rapidly from 1990/91 to 1997/98. Over this time frame, almost 100,000 additional students came into the education system, adding to a base of more than 507,000 at the start of the decade—an increase of 19% in a relatively short period of time. Many of these new students arrived due to an immigration boom in BC during this time, thereby posing additional challenges, such as ESL education, to the system beyond simply the number of students.

Since the high point of 1997/98, enrolment has been declining steadily, a trend that is expected to continue for the foreseeable future. By 2005/06, projected enrolment will be about 38,000 students less than the peak of 604,000 in 1997/98—or at the same level as 1994/95. Nonetheless, estimated enrolment in 2005/06 will still be about 12% higher than in 1990/91.

Declining student enrolment in the context of a flat education budget means that funding per student is actually increasing—a point made repeatedly by the Education Minister and in full-page newspaper ads taken out by the government at taxpayers' expense. However, such claims are misleading because they ignore the third aspect of education financing, the rising cost of providing education services.⁴

Key Findings

- After accounting for changes in enrolment and inflation, K-12 education funding in the past two years has been lower than at any point over the 1990-2004 period.
- Despite the decline in student enrolment, and a modest increase in total provincial operating grants, unfunded cost pressures have led school boards to close schools, cut teaching positions and increase class sizes.
- Based on current projections, real per student funding will drop even further in 2004/05 and 2005/06.
- An increase of \$300 million above current projected levels in 2004/05 is required to restore real per student funding to 1990/01 levels.

Education has been under-funded for more than a decade, the “easy” cuts have long since been made, and there will be grave consequences for the BC economy if the situation continues.

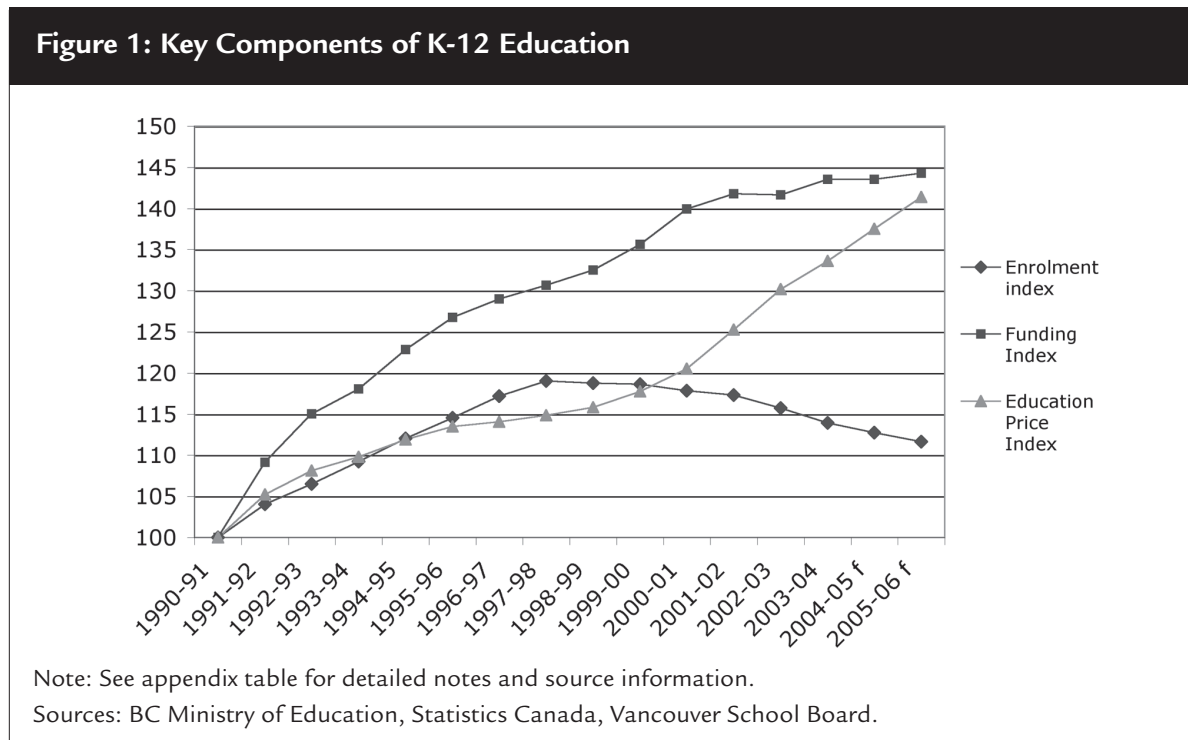
In the same way that consumer prices, or costs of living, tend to rise over time (i.e. inflation), so does the “price” of education services. This includes the cost of salary and benefit increases for teachers, administrators and support staff, the cost of books and classroom materials, the cost of utilities such as electricity, costs related to transportation, and other education-related supplies and services. Increases in these underlying costs of providing the same level of education services are an important factor in education financing.

Consider teacher salaries, a large component of the price of education,⁵ accounting for about half of K-12 education expenditures. Demands for salary increases are driven by the need to keep up with inflation, provide competitive salaries to attract and retain teachers, and maintain teachers’ economic sta-

tus relative to other income earners. Irrespective of these considerations, an increase in teacher salaries is not the same as hiring more teachers. Hiring more teachers is an increase in the *quantity* of education services provided, while higher teacher salaries is an increase in the *price* of purchasing those services.

Figure 1 also plots changes in Statistics Canada’s Education Price Index (EPI), which covers the different cost drivers in education mentioned above. It indicates that the cost of providing the same level of education in 2003/04 is about 34% higher than it was in 1990/91.⁶

Enrolment aside, this rise in education costs eats up a large share of increases in operating grants. Comparing annual growth rates of operating funding and education costs, through the 1990s funding grew each year by more than education costs. This



changed, however, in 2001/02 and subsequent years. Education costs are now rising more rapidly than the growth of funding.

When all three factors are combined, all of the “real world” pressures experienced by educators, parents and students become apparent. In Figure 2, total operating funding is put into real terms (2003/04 dollars as deflated by the EPI) then divided by the number of students to view the changes in *real funding per student* from 1990/91 to 2005/06.

Figure 2 shows that real education funding levels per student were at their highest levels in the first few years of the 1990s (\$7,046 per student at the 1990/91 peak), then declined steadily from 1992/93 to 1997/98 (\$6,735 per student in 1997/98, a drop of more than \$300, or 4.3%, from the peak). Funding per student climbed for the next three years to \$6,943 in 2000/01, but all of this regained ground has been more than lost since then.

Funding levels in 2002/03 and 2003/04 are at their lowest levels over the entire period analyzed. Given current projections for operating funding, enrolment and cost increases, real funding per student will continue to fall in 2004/05 and 2005/06 to new

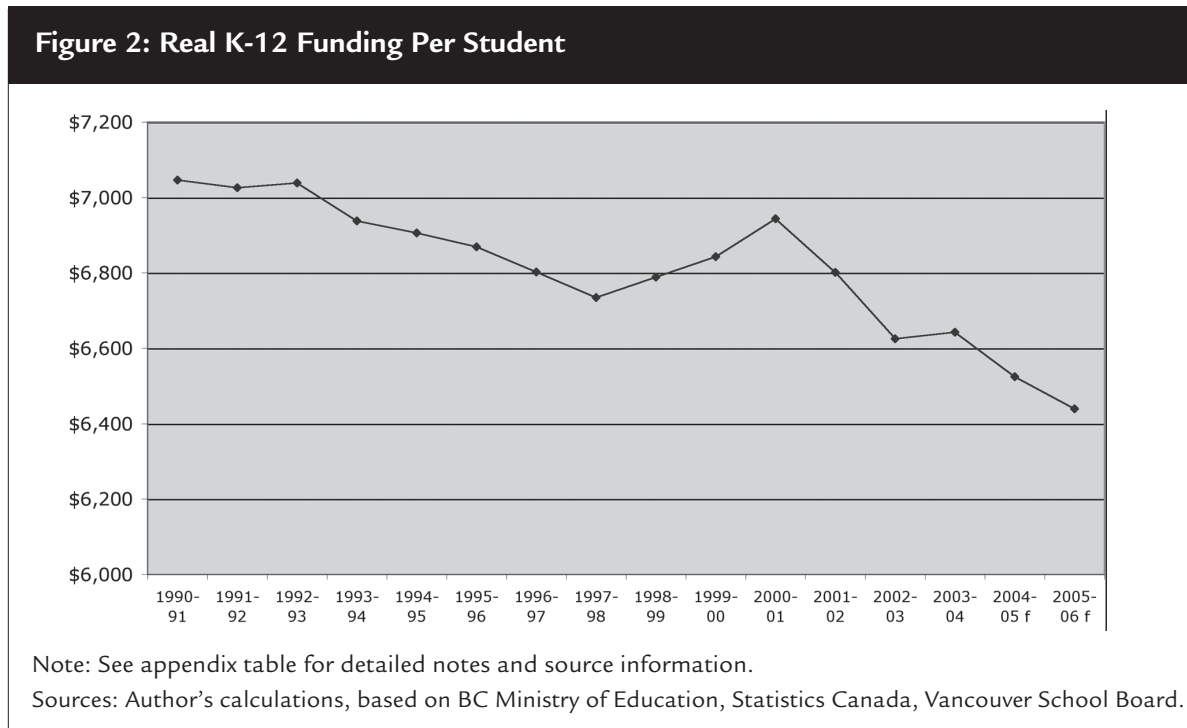
lows. By 2005/06, funding will be more than \$600 per student lower than in 1990/91.

The bottom line is that the provincial government is not providing increases in funding commensurate with the cost pressures faced by school boards, much of which (in the form of legislated salary increases and MSP premium hikes) was imposed by the government itself. The Vancouver School Board (2003) estimates that the cumulative cost increases resulting from the government’s legislated teachers’ contract, the arbitrator’s decision on support staff contracts, and other inflationary pressures to be \$200 million in 2003/04 for the province as a whole.

Under Pressure

This analysis suggests that the K-12 education system is at great risk in terms of its ability to deliver high quality services to BC’s children. Such pressures are obvious to people who have a connection to the education system: students, parents, teachers, administrators and school trustees.

While the current situation in education funding has its roots in the 1990s, budget restraint over the past few years has made a bad situation worse.



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The BC Teachers' Federation reports that in the past two years:

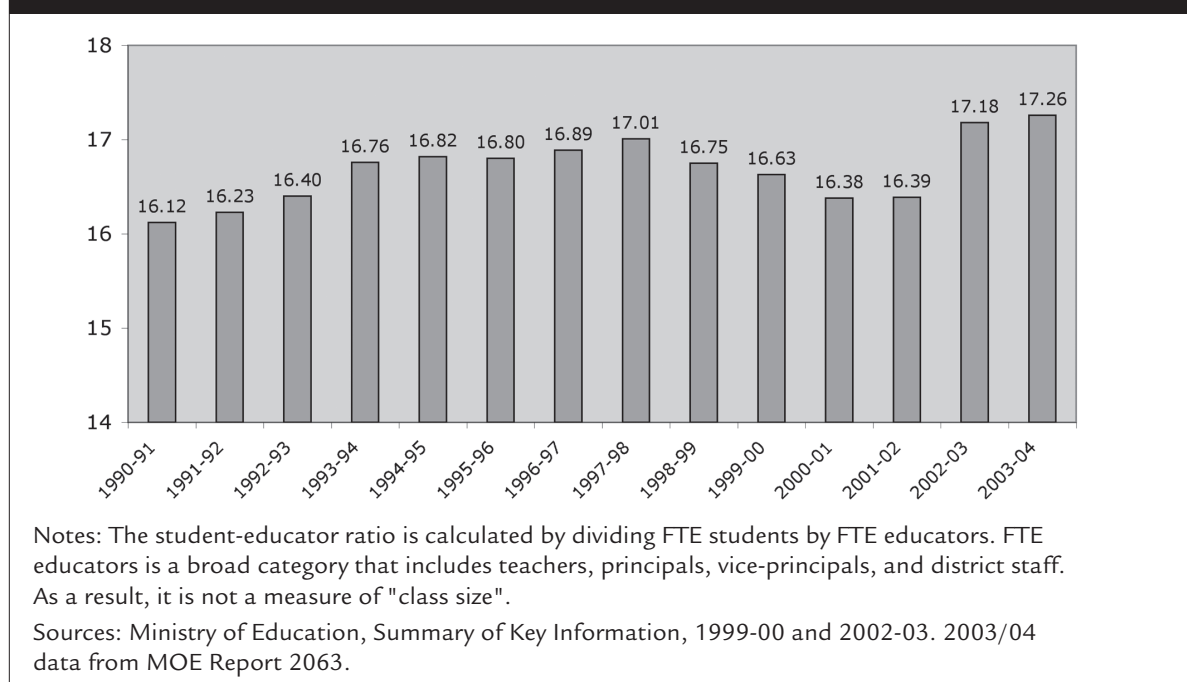
- 44 schools were closed in 2002/03 and another 48 in 2003/04 for a total of 92 school closures;
- More than 14,000 students have been displaced from their schools; and,
- 2,881 teaching positions have been cut.

The quality of education is highly influenced by the relationship between teachers and students. A standard way of looking at this relationship is the student-educator ratio ("educators" includes teachers plus principals, vice-principals and district staff). While distinct from "class size," this ratio can be taken as an indicator of the situation in the classroom.⁷

Figure 3 shows the student-educator ratio back to 1990/91. There is a direct relationship with the real per student funding shown in Figure 2. As real per student funding fell up to 1997/98, the student-educator ratio rose from 16.12 in 1990/91 to 17.01 in 1997/98. The improvement in real funding per student in the late-1990s shows up as an improvement in the student-educator ratio to 16.38 by 2000/01. And the recent decline in real per student funding can be seen as a large jump in the student-educator ratio to 17.18 in 2002/03 and 17.26 in 2003/04.⁸

This confirms what parents, teachers and students all know: class sizes are larger. In Fall 2002, the Vancouver Secondary School Teachers' Association reported that almost 28,000 secondary school students in the Vancouver School District were in classes of

Figure 3: Student-Educator Ratio



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31 or more students. In addition, changes to the provincial funding formula have resulted in less money being made available for students with special needs and ESL students, who face additional challenges. Larger class sizes, accompanied by fewer resources for students that need extra help, are a recipe for a declining quality of public education.

These real cuts to education services in BC perhaps more clearly demonstrate the misleading nature of claims made by the Education Minister that school funding has been protected. The Minister has also attempted to place the smoking gun in the hands of local school boards, arguing that school boards made the decisions to close schools and increase class sizes, not the Ministry. But school boards have extremely limited powers to raise property taxes for education, and cannot run deficits. They have had to make the cuts foretold in the operating grants provided to them by the Ministry of Education.

Some school boards, in order to stave off more service cuts at the classroom level, have cut their own administrative positions, while seeking alternative revenue sources to make up for funding shortfalls. School boards have become more interested in attracting international students, who pay high tuition fees for education, and running distance and continuing education programs, in order to find money for the public system. In 2002/03, Ministry of Education documents cite \$147 million in such “miscellaneous revenue” for BC school boards.⁹

The Education Minister recently fired another salvo at school boards, chastising them for running a combined \$145 million surplus in 2002/03. Most of this surplus represents funds reserved for purchase orders and approved projects that have not yet been paid for. Because the end of a fiscal year is a snapshot of a point in time, this gives a false im-

pression that school boards are hoarding funds at the expense of students.

In addition, at the end of the 2002/03 fiscal year, the Minister announced additional one-time funding of \$50 million for schools. But arriving so late in the school year, school boards were not able to channel that money into education in an effective manner—their budget decisions were made many months before, based on the funding allocated by the Ministry. Additional funds, while welcome, had to be rolled over to the next fiscal year, leaving the current year with an even higher surplus. This allowed the Minister not only to send out a press release showing new funding for schools, but afforded her a cynical opportunity to blame school boards many months later, after the books were closed.

There are some other more insidious consequences of under-funding in schools that do not show up in budget statements. The first is that teachers are paying out-of-pocket for school supplies needed to do their jobs. This phenomenon is so common among teachers that it has become accepted practice. A survey conducted for the Canadian Teachers’ Federation found that in 2000/01, BC teachers spent an average of \$1,095 of their own resources on school-related materials and activities, the highest in Canada and almost double the Canadian average (CTF 2001). And this survey pre-dates the current round of cuts. Even if teachers spend only a few hundred dollars of their own money to do their jobs properly, this is symptomatic of funding problems.

Parents also contribute financially to their children’s education beyond their taxes through a number of regressive measures that disproportionately affect lower-income parents. Parents are increasingly required to pay for school materials, field

trips, music and performing arts fees, while feeling compelled to pay again to support local schools through bake sales and pizza day fundraisers. Parents are also expected to organize fundraising activities in support of their child's school. Clearly, it would be more efficient and equitable for parents to finance a good public school system through their taxes.

Schools have also pursued exclusive contracts for vending machines and have contracted out cafeteria operations, both of which have biases towards junk foods that undermine the health of students. Ultimately, it is difficult to estimate precisely how large is the contribution of school and parent "extra-curricular" fundraising. No data are collected by school boards or the Ministry of Education on how much additional money is raised at the school level.

These trends are troublesome and point to growing inequality among schools, as individual schools have different revenue-generating capacities based on the average income level of parents and neighbourhoods. This makes for an increasingly blurry line between private schools and public schools. Private schools already receive provincial funding (one-half of the per student allocation given to public schools) and raise additional funds from tuition fees and parent and alumni donations. While they are not tuition fees, parents in the public system are required to pay an increasing array of fees for their children, and are encouraged to donate even more money to support the quality of education.

Education as Investment

Taken together, these are serious signs that the public education system is being eroded. And these are not just short-term issues. There are long-term consequences to under-funding public education because of the essential role it plays in sustaining democracy and economic development. First and foremost, public education is mandated to develop children into informed citizens who vote and participate in democratic structures. But even in narrow economic terms, education is essential to the development of a capable and productive labour force in the future.

In the bigger picture, the transformation of BC into a high-knowledge, service-based economy requires that a greater emphasis be placed on education than in the past. In addition, a looming skills shortage has been frequently cited by business and labour leaders as an important priority for the province. Education is obviously part of the solution.

Public education is ultimately an investment. More money spent today will have large payoffs in the future in terms of graduates' abilities to enter the labour market and their earnings potential. Education should not be thought of as just another expenditure to be constrained, but treated in the way we treat essential capital investments.

A CCPA research study by UBC economics professor Robert Allen in 1999 found that there is a huge societal payoff to education at all levels, with the largest payoffs for completion of high school. Huge amounts of money could be "profitably" spent on education when we take into account both the private return to the individual in higher lifetime income and the public return to the Treasury in the form of higher taxes paid on that income.

Education is an area where financing really matters. More real increases in the education budget will lead directly to hiring more teachers, and therefore smaller class sizes, one of the key ingredients in increasing quality of education.¹⁰ It also matters for addressing particular needs, such as ESL, children with disabilities or special needs, and those who come from vulnerable backgrounds, including Aboriginal children.

It is imperative that the provincial government stop pointing fingers at school boards and playing games with education numbers to confuse the public. With the 2004 Budget to be announced shortly, the government should take a first step of restoring real per student funding levels back to 1990/91 levels. The government has already announced some modest increases for 2004/05 and 2005/06, but these increases are not sufficient to cover cost pressures in the system, even after accounting for declining enrolment.

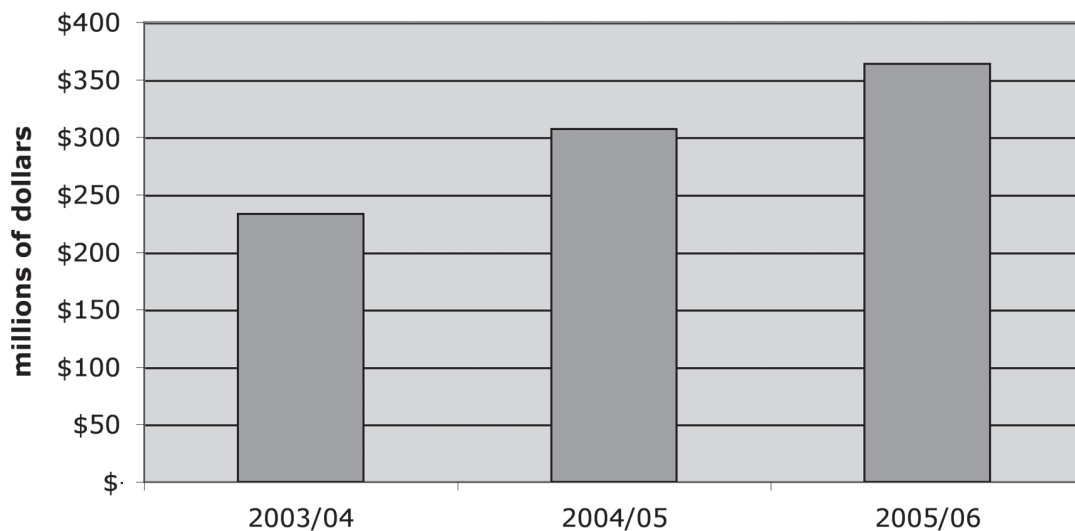
The government needs to increase per student funding by \$537 in 2004/05 and \$642 in 2005/06 over projected levels. This translates into a funding commitment of an additional \$307 million in 2004/05 and \$364 million in 2005/06. This would put funding back to where it was at the start of the 1990s.

Based on the figures in this report, in nominal dollar terms, the government needs to increase per student funding by \$537 in 2004/05 and \$642 in 2005/06 over projected levels already announced by the Ministry. This translates into a funding commitment of an additional \$307 million in 2004/05 and \$364 million in 2005/06 above and beyond projected funding levels (shown in Figure 4). This would put funding back to where it was at the start of the 1990s. However, it should be noted that a great deal more money could be “profitably” spent in edu-

cation given the paybacks mentioned above, and to recover from the cumulative impact of a decade of under-funding.

The government needs to do more than conjure up numbers that create the illusion it is spending more on education. It needs to actually put the financial resources in place to ensure the reality of a high quality education system. Imagine a BC where every child had an equal opportunity to develop to his or her potential. That is an investment that would benefit us all. 🌟

Figure 4: New Funding Required to Return to 1990/91 Per Student Levels



Source: Author's calculations based on data in Appendix.

Notes

- ¹ The presence of the school tax on municipal property tax bills is a holdover from a time when school boards set the school tax themselves based on perceived needs, with top-ups provided by the Ministry of Education. This system was in place up to 1982, when these powers were limited to taxation of residential property (i.e. the corporate tax base was removed). Since 1991, school taxes have been effectively set and collected by the provincial government. School boards do have limited recourse to increase taxes, but only for new programs or capital expenditures, and this must be approved by referendum (a process that is heavily biased against tax increases).
- ² This section considers operating grants from the provincial government that comprise most, but not all, of the budgets of school boards. In the next section, some of the other revenue sources for school boards are considered to the extent that they are used by school boards to supplement their operating budgets. What we are interested in here is the provincial commitment to K-12 education.
- This section does not consider capital expenditures. It is worth noting that in the 1990s, growth of K-12 capital expenditures in BC was strong in response to expanding student enrolment. According to data from the Inter-provincial Education Statistics Project, capital expenditures in 2000/01 were \$571 million compared to \$277 million in 1990/91, an increase of 106% (figures in nominal terms).
- ³ The official increase in provincial operating grants is slightly lower. A \$50 million one-time grant issued at the end of the 2002/03 fiscal year has been allocated to the 2003/04 fiscal year. Without this change, the increase in operating grants was 41.7% between 1990/91 and 2003/04.
- ⁴ An additional consideration is that, from an administrator's perspective, even in the face of declining enrolment, there are certain fixed costs of providing education (such as heating and maintenance of a school) that cannot easily be cut. This puts even more pressure on making short-run cuts where they are possible (such as eliminating teaching positions) in order to balance budgets.
- ⁵ The terms "education prices" and "education costs" are used interchangeably.
- ⁶ According to Statistics Canada, "the Education Price Index (EPI) is used as the main deflator of elementary and secondary expenditures. It is used to put into constant dollars, school board expenditures including teachers' salaries which is the main component." Data for the EPI are available up to 2001. EPI data were converted from annual to school years for 1990-91 to 2000-01. For 2001-02 onward, EPI is based on cost estimates from the Vancouver School Board. However, VSB estimates have been adjusted to assume a 2.5% teacher salary increase and a 1.5% other union salary increase for each of 2004/05 and 2005/06 (both are in collective bargaining processes in 2004).
- ⁷ Actual class sizes can be much larger than student-educator ratios. For instance, a class size of 30 may be accompanied by a student-educator ratio of 20 when other teachers (physical education, art or music) not in the classroom at any given moment, teaching assistants and administrators are added into the mix. See Achilles (1999) for a brief discussion and illustration.
- ⁸ In addition, the prospect of worsening real funding per student over the next two years is likely to show up as even higher student-educator ratios.
- ⁹ BC Ministry of Education, *BC School Board Revenue and Expenditure Information 2002/03*.
- ¹⁰ See, for example, *Education Matters: A Selection of Essays on Education* by Alan Krueger, 2000, and Maria Iacovou, "Class Size in the Early Years: Is Smaller Really Better?" in *Education Economics*, Dec. 2002.

Appendix: K-12 Education Finance Data

Year	Funded FTE enrolment	Enrolment index	Provincial operating grants	Operating grants Index	Operating grants growth rate	Annual education inflation rate	Education Price Index (1990/91 base)	Real Operating Funding (2003-04 dollars)	Real Funding per Student
1990-91	507,397	100.0	\$2,675,506,131	100.0			100.0	\$3,575,298,894	\$7,046
1991-92	527,845	104.0	\$2,920,497,183	109.2	9.2%	5.2%	105.2	\$3,708,641,626	\$7,026
1992-93	540,390	106.5	\$3,077,339,133	115.0	5.4%	2.7%	108.1	\$3,803,376,949	\$7,038
1993-94	554,194	109.2	\$3,158,886,024	118.1	2.6%	1.5%	109.8	\$3,845,064,124	\$6,938
1994-95	568,426	112.0	\$3,286,587,447	122.8	4.0%	1.9%	111.9	\$3,925,179,324	\$6,905
1995-96	581,263	114.6	\$3,391,437,656	126.8	3.2%	1.4%	113.5	\$3,992,820,778	\$6,869
1996-97	594,604	117.2	\$3,451,725,954	129.0	1.8%	0.5%	114.0	\$4,044,696,549	\$6,802
1997-98	603,974	119.0	\$3,495,875,261	130.7	1.3%	0.7%	114.8	\$4,067,747,778	\$6,735
1998-99	602,678	118.8	\$3,545,832,336	132.5	1.4%	0.8%	115.8	\$4,091,120,789	\$6,788
1999-00	601,846	118.6	\$3,628,402,195	135.6	2.3%	1.7%	117.7	\$4,118,337,271	\$6,843
2000-01	597,948	117.8	\$3,744,145,497	139.9	3.2%	2.4%	120.5	\$4,151,784,341	\$6,943
2001-02	595,157	117.3	\$3,793,878,997	141.8	1.3%	3.9%	125.2	\$4,047,851,929	\$6,801
2002-03	587,218	115.7	\$3,790,399,854	141.7	-0.1%	4.0%	130.2	\$3,890,466,457	\$6,625
2003-04	578,106	113.9	\$3,840,284,553	143.5	1.3%	2.6%	133.6	\$3,840,284,553	\$6,643
2004-05 f	572,020	112.7	\$3,840,284,553	143.5	0.0%	2.9%	137.5	\$3,732,055,004	\$6,524
2005-06 f	566,569	111.7	\$3,860,284,553	144.3	0.5%	2.8%	141.4	\$3,648,600,808	\$6,440

Notes: Enrolment figures include adult education and are on a full-time equivalent (FTE) basis. Operating funding for 2003/04 includes a one-time grant of \$50 million announced in February 2003. For operating funding and FTE enrolment, 2004/05 and 2005/06 are Ministry of Education forecasts.

The Education Price Index (EPI) is used as the main deflator of elementary and secondary expenditures. It is used to put into constant dollars, school board expenditures including teachers' salaries which is the main component. EPI data were converted from annual to school years by author for 1990-91 to 2000-01. For 2001-02 onward, EPI is based on cost estimates from Vancouver School Board. However, VSB estimates have been adjusted by author to assume a 2.5% teacher salary increase and a 1.5% other union salary increase for each of 2004/05 and 2005/06 (both are in collective bargaining processes in 2004).

Sources: BC Ministry of Education, Final Funding Allocation, British Columbia School District Revenue and Expenditure Information and Summary of Key Information, various years; Operating Grants Manual 2003/04; EPI data from Statistics Canada, CANSIM matrix v1027045, converted to school fiscal year by author. Vancouver School Board estimates from personal communication.

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