



WHAT DOES THE NEW BC GOVERNMENT HAVE IN STORE FOR PUBLIC SCHOOLS?

BY PATTI BACCHUS



THIS FALL, AFTER YEARS OF BUDGETING-CUTTING AND HUNDREDS OF LOST TEACHING POSITIONS ACROSS THE PROVINCE, BC SCHOOLS FACED AN UNFAMILIAR — BUT WELCOME — CHALLENGE. THEY HAD TO HIRE HUNDREDS OF NEW TEACHERS AND FIND CLASSROOMS FOR THEM AS A RESULT OF THE BC TEACHERS' FEDERATION'S (BCTF) LANDMARK SUPREME COURT OF CANADA WIN IN ITS LONG-RUNNING BATTLE WITH THE FORMER BC LIBERAL GOVERNMENT OVER CONTRACT STRIPPING.

But that was just part of the major shift for BC's public schools — the summer saw a change in government from the Christy Clark Liberals to John Horgan's NDP, and a promise to make investing in public education a key priority.

DIFFICULT DAYS FOR PUBLIC EDUCATION UNDER THE BC LIBERAL GOVERNMENT

When the Liberals swept to power in BC under Gordon Campbell in 2001, they wasted no time passing essential-service legislation that made it difficult for teachers to strike. Campbell appointed a brash, young education minister named Christy Clark. The province legislated a new teachers' contract in early 2002 that stripped previously negotiated contract clauses dealing with class size and

composition and specialist teacher ratios, and prevented teacher unions from negotiating these issues in the future.

The legislated contract included a 7.5% salary increase over three years — but the province didn't fund the increases. That left the province's 60 school boards to figure out how to cover the cost out of their already-stretched operating budgets that rely on — you guessed it — provincial funding. BC school boards do not have any taxing authority so, aside from revenue from fee-paying international students and renting out buildings, they depend almost completely on provincial government funding.

That enabled — or depending how you look at it, forced — cash-strapped school boards to cut teaching positions and create larger classes with more students with special needs, and to reduce “non-enrolling” specialist teachers, including school librarians,

counsellors, English language learner teachers and special education resource teachers to balance their annual budgets. Under the BC School Act, school boards must submit balanced budgets to the Minister of Education each year. If they don't, the minister can fire them.

That happened twice under the BC Liberal government. The first time was 2012, when the Cowichan School Board on Vancouver Island refused to pass a balanced budget due to the cuts required. In 2016, the Vancouver School Board refused (by a five-to-four vote) to approve a budget that contained millions of dollars of cuts that directly affected students, but cutting programs and teaching positions. In both cases the boards were replaced by government-appointed trustees until new boards were elected.

The result was 15 years of budget cutting by school boards across BC, the closure of hundreds of schools, the accelerated deterioration of aging and often seismically unsafe school buildings, and overcrowded schools in growing communities where funding for new schools was grossly inadequate to keep up with the need for new classrooms. As parent groups were left to fundraise to fill gaps, inequities between schools grew: some were able to raise hundreds of thousands of dollars and secure grant funding, while schools in lower-income communities struggled to raise small amounts. This period also saw three teachers' strikes, including the longest one in provincial history, in 2014.

In addition, this marked the beginning of a long and expensive legal challenge by the BCTF against the legislation — a challenge finally resolved in the BCTF's favour by the Supreme Court of Canada in November 2016.

The outcome of the union's landmark victory was an agreement between the former Christy Clark government and the BCTF requiring school districts to abide by the contract language that existed prior to the 2002 legislation. (That language varies among BC's 60 school districts, as it used to be negotiated locally.)

The BC Liberal government promised to fund that agreement with an additional \$330 million for more teachers in the 2017/18 school year, and up to another \$30 million for overhead costs associated with adding additional staff and classrooms.

Other BC Liberal policy changes — like the adoption of school-choice legislation that allows students to enroll in schools outside of their communities — left schools in some lower-income neighbourhoods struggling with declining enrollment and the resulting risk of closure, while schools in more affluent communities filled up.

A COURT DECISION AND A NEW GOVERNMENT HERALD A HOPEFUL ERA FOR BC'S PUBLIC SCHOOLS

BC voters sent a conflicted message when they went to the polls on May 9th to elect a new provincial government. They elected 43 Liberals, 41 New Democrats and three Green party candidates to serve as their members of the legislated assembly (MLAs).

Premier Christy Clark tried to hold on to government, but lost a confidence vote in the legislature in late June. She asked BC Lieutenant Governor Judith Guichon to call another election in what some described as a desperate attempt to cling to power. Guichon declined and invited NDP leader John Horgan to form a government.

With the support of the Green party and its three MLAs, via a deal called a "confidence and supply agreement," Horgan took office in July, ending 16 years of BC Liberal government. He moved quickly to signal a change in direction for BC's public school system, where per-student funding has fallen to among the lowest in Canada since the Liberals took office.

THE BCTF RESPONDED POSITIVELY TO THE BUDGET UPDATE: "...THE GOVERNMENT IS FULFILLING ITS COMMITMENT TO FUND THE THOUSANDS OF NEW TEACHING POSITIONS THAT FLOW FROM OUR SUPREME COURT OF CANADA WIN. THE BUDGET ALSO INCLUDES NEW FUNDING FOR IMMEDIATE SPACE NEEDS IN SCHOOLS AND A PLAN TO INJECT EVEN MORE FUNDS INTO PUBLIC EDUCATION AS ENROLLMENT INCREASES."

POSITIVE STEPS

Both the NDP and Green party made K-12 education a priority in their election platforms leading up to the May election. The NDP promised to "properly fund classrooms and school equipment" and provide stability in classrooms. The Green party pledged large funding increases over several years. Both said they'd make adult education courses fee-free — a promise they've already kept. They also both promised a review of BC's per-student education funding model (a complex process that won't happen quickly, but is long overdue).

Just weeks after taking office, Horgan announced the elimination of tuition fees for adult basic education courses and English language learning (ELL) programs for "adult" students 16 years old and up. Those courses had been free for all adult students until 2014, when the previous government cut funding for students who had graduated. That meant students who needed to upgrade their high school credits to get into post-secondary programs had to pay as much as \$550 in tuition fees per course.

Horgan's first throne speech, which coincided with the first week of school, promised to "restore proper funding to schools to give students the resources and supports they need to succeed." Shortly after, the September 11 provincial budget interim update (a full budget is expected to be tabled in February) pledged a \$681 million increase for kindergarten to grade 12 education system over

three years, which the government says includes “\$521 million to improve classroom supports for children for up to 3,500 new teaching positions, \$160 million for enrollment growth and other pressures, along with \$50 million in capital funding to provide the resources needed to help all children succeed.”

The BCTF responded positively to the budget update:

...the government is fulfilling its commitment to fund the thousands of new teaching positions that flow from our Supreme Court of Canada win. The budget also includes new funding for immediate space needs in schools and a plan to inject even more funds into public education as enrollment increases.

For too long, BC schools struggled under the weight of a BC Liberal government that underfunded rising costs and never met the financial obligations they downloaded onto school districts. After 16 years of cuts and conflict, BC teachers will be heartened to finally see a budget that makes public education a priority.

The provincial group that represents parents — the BC Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils (BCCPAC) — was more measured in its response, calling the update a positive step forward but cautioning that more needs to be done. “District parent representatives from across the province tell us that their districts need additional flexible funding to fulfill other local needs such as more educational assistants, custodial services and occupational and physio therapist,” BCCPAC president Jen Mezei said in a prepared statement on September 19. “Too many students with special needs are being scheduled for a shortened day due to the lack of support staff; support staff play a vital role as part of the team that works with students who have special needs to create an *environment of inclusion for fair and equitable education.*”

SOME DISAPPOINTMENTS

There’s a tremendous pent-up demand for billions in capital spending. Despite the former government’s 2005 promise to seismically upgrade all of BC’s “high risk” schools by 2020, the Clark government failed to fund dozens of schools that are still at high risk of significant structural failure in an earthquake. Districts like BC’s largest — Surrey — are living with overcrowded schools and thousands of students being taught in portables as provincial funding for new schools has failed to keep pace with population growth.

There also a massive backlog of deferred maintenance work that accumulated under the BC Liberals as cash-strapped boards put off repairs and upgrades to their aging school buildings. More than half of provincial school districts have unsafe lead levels in their drinking water and many have resorted to trying to flush their pipes by running the water each day — a less than ideal solution.

Despite the NDP and Green’s pre-election promises of money for seismic upgrades and new schools, the BC budget update didn’t have much to say at all about capital funding for new schools or upgrades to old or seismically unsafe ones though, in fairness, these are early days for the new government.

The provincial organization that represents public school boards, the BC School Trustees Association (BCSTA), responded lukewarmly to Horgan’s interim budget update. In a statement released on September 12, president Gordon Swan said “BCTSA sees promise in this initial budget from the new government, even though it falls short of addressing all of the concerns we raised during the spring election.”

Swan adds in the BCSTA statement that there needs to be further investment in 2018 operating and capital budgets if government is to fulfill its election promises. The BCSTA has been advocating for funding for school construction to provide new schools, replacements and seismic upgrades and an increased to school board operating budgets to address local issues, including special education, the unique needs of rural schools and adequate funding for learning resources.

NO CHANGE TO PRIVATE SCHOOL FUNDING POLICY

In BC, private schools get per-student operating grants that range from 35 to 50% of what public schools receive. (Schools that spend the same or less per student as public schools get 50%, while elite schools with higher tuition and higher per student spending are eligible for 35% of the public schools’ amount.) That rankles many, as private schools can screen and select who they admit, and exclude students. Some of the elite schools boast lavish, country-club like campuses, small class sizes and a rich range of academics, athletics and fine arts programs that are the envy of many in the public system.

It’s a political hot potato the parties tried to steer clear of during the campaign to avoid alienating voters who send their kids to private schools and large faith groups that may vote based largely on this issue. As a result, BC’s 40-year-old policy of giving public funding to private and faith-based schools looks like it’s here to stay under the Horgan government, despite pressure from the BCTF and some education advocates to stop it. Horgan’s September budget update included a \$40.4 million boost to private school funding that brings their 2017/18 school year total to \$398,500,000 to keep up with growing private school enrollment.

But some are more optimistic: Michelle Stack, an associate professor in the University of British Columbia’s Department of Educational Studies, says she’s very hopeful about the new government overall and would like to see it at least stop funding elite, expensive private schools that have admissions tests and exclusive application processes.

In its 2018 BC budget consultation brief, the BCTF calls for the phase-out of private school funding, starting with the elite schools in the funding category that receive 35% of the public school per-student grants.

SCHOOL CHOICE POLICY

In 2002, the BC Liberal government brought in school choice policy changes that allow students to attend any school they want so long as the school has space for them. Previously, students were required to attend their “catchment” school in their neighbourhood,

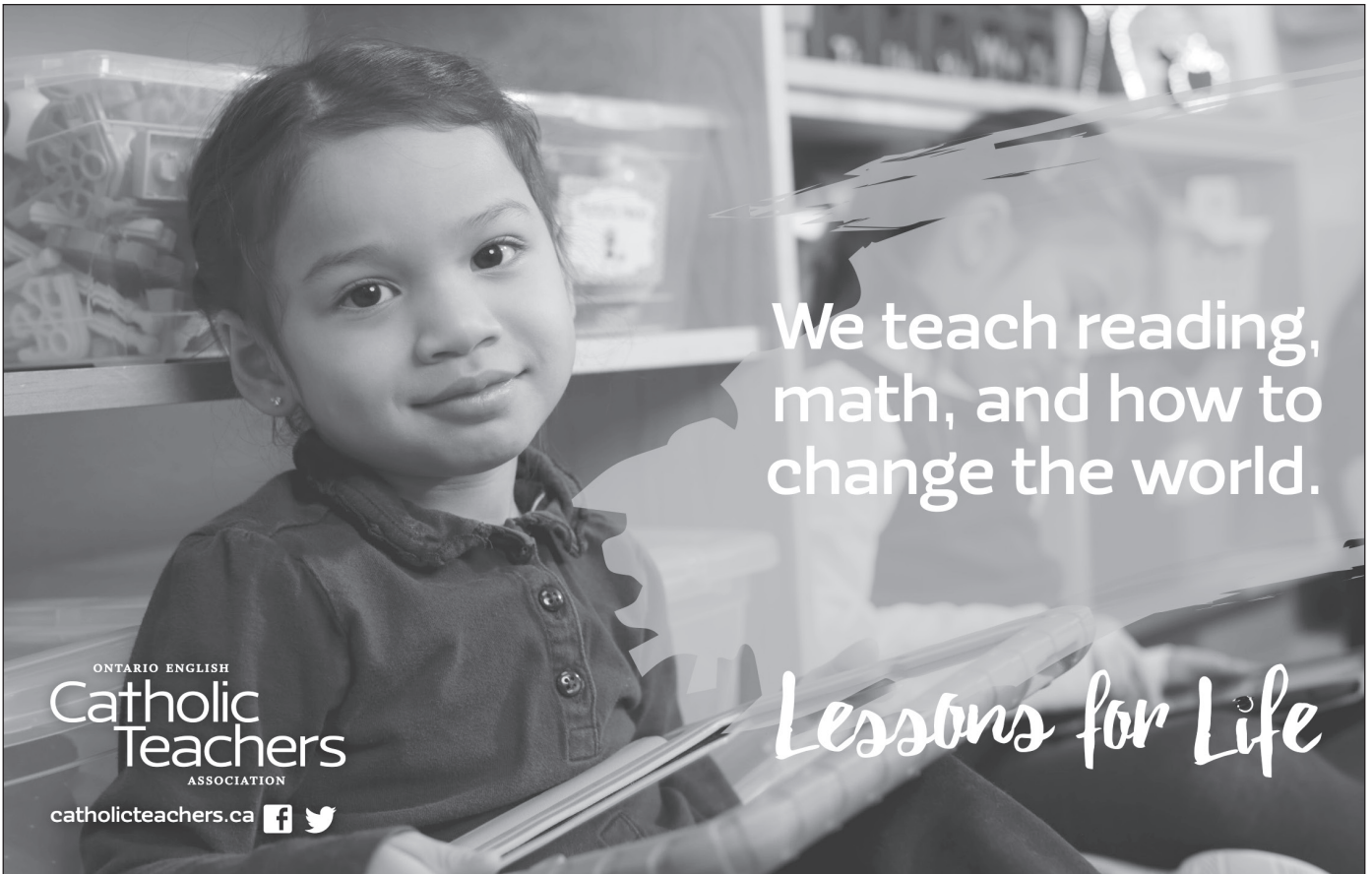


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unless they had specific permission to attend a school in another catchment. While priority is given to “in-catchment” students, this has resulted in enrollment declines in schools in some lower-income communities in Vancouver, and more students attending schools outside their neighbourhoods. This existing school choice policy didn’t get much attention at all during the election campaign, but it is viewed by many public education advocates as something that needs to be revisited because it increases inequities between public schools.

CHILD CARE

Child care was a key issue in last spring’s BC election campaign, and the BC NDP promised to bring in a publicly-funded \$10-a-day child care plan. Affordable, accessible, quality public child care could also help close the readiness gap between students of different social classes, and it would enable parents to upgrade their education and enable them to get better-paying employment, which could result in less financial stress for BC families. “We know that when parents improve their financial situation there are positive effects on kids and their educational and health outcomes,” says Stack. “We pay at one point or another. It makes more sense to invest in kids when they’re young than to pay later in the form of health and other social costs. When kids grow up in a society that cares about them, they are more likely to care about society.”

With so much evidence that providing access to quality early care enables children to make a smooth transition to school, BC families and child care advocates are anxious to see how quickly the new government can move forward on this file after it was left out of the September interim budget update. There is some uncertainty, though; while the BC Green party supports universal, affordable, quality child care, Green leader Andrew Weaver indicated in September that he will be looking for some compromises on how it’s rolled out, as his party does not specifically support the \$10-a-day plan.

OPTIMISM AND IDEAS

Horgan’s appointment of Judy Darcy as Minister of Mental Health and Addictions is an early sign the new government is committed to taking meaningful action on key issues that impact children and their families. Stack says she is also pleased to see the new government show strong signs of recognizing that education is interconnected with issues like housing and poverty, noting it’s

well-established that hunger and housing instability make it hard for kids to learn, no matter how good their teachers are. “Taking family poverty seriously and taking steps to address it will have a positive impact on the outcomes for students in public schools,” Stack says. “Government needs to connect the dots on how what happens to children outside of school affects them when they’re in school.” Meanwhile, discussion — and measured optimism — continues.

There’s no question that one of the new government’s biggest challenges will be managing the public’s expectations, particularly on the public education file, which has suffered greatly under the BC Liberal government. It will take time to change direction and there will be difficult decisions to make along the way. Almost all the new funding committed to education so far will go to covering the costs of the teachers’ contracts that were restored by the Supreme Court of Canada.

Parents are already speaking out about the need to do better in terms of supporting students with special needs and are urging the new government to accelerate the seismic upgrade program and build new schools after years of the previous government’s funding delays. The BCCPAC’s October brief called for stable, adequate and predictable funding with increases in operating funding, increased, targeted funding for students with special needs, increased capital funding to accelerate seismic upgrades, build new schools where needed and maintain aging buildings. The parent group is also calling for a review of the per-student funding model that was brought in by the BC Liberal government — something the Horgan government has also promised to address.

It’s expensive stuff and it’s important to get it right. The promised review of the funding formula will require extensive public and stakeholder consultation and could take a year or longer. Meanwhile parents and educators want to see improved teaching and learning conditions sooner rather than later. It’s an exciting and hopeful time for public education in BC — but progress may not come quickly enough for some...and not at all for the generation of kids who went through school under the previous administration. Here’s to better days ahead. ●

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