

Special Education Advisory Committee of the Vancouver Board of Education Presentation on 2010-11 Budget proposals

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Thank you for this opportunity to comment on behalf of SEAC, the Board's Special Ed Advisory Committee. We will focus on impacts and some context.

The 2010-11 budget proposals would cut 10 district specialists, 9 program teachers, 17 aides, plus an unknown number of school-based Special Ed teachers, as part of the 43 non-enrolling positions.

The direct cuts to Special Education amount to over 3 million dollars. This means that 17% of the total cuts would directly target students who make up 10% of the total population. Many of these students are also Inner City, ESL, Aboriginal students, children in care, refugee children, gifted and learning disabled, etc.

Background: The spreadsheet shows the growing number of students with special needs in Vancouver every year, despite declines in the broader student population.

- **Vancouver now has 35% more students with special needs than in 2001.**
- **However, Vancouver now has 25% *fewer* special education teachers than in 2001. This means average teacher caseloads have almost doubled.**

Actual caseloads for school-based Special Ed teachers are often well over 100 students. Such ratios preclude real face-to-face teaching. At best they can offer some planning, case management and occasional intervention.

The number of aides has not kept pace with the growing number of low incidence students who need support to learn and attend school safely. They are also more thinly stretched.

Impacts

1. Highest caseloads ever: Even assuming that we don't see more students with special needs next year (highly unlikely, given past trends), these cuts would create unprecedented caseloads for special ed staff.

2. Access: Current school-based staffing does not allow students with special needs to fully access public education – a right they should enjoy like everyone else. Many aren't getting the supports specified by district and provincial policies.

More cuts will further compromise access and prevent these students from achieving their potential. Many more will struggle and fail and suffer undue stress.

3. Safety: Current staffing levels make it very difficult for schools to accommodate highly vulnerable students without undue safety risks. More cuts mean more serious safety risks.

4. Specific impacts: Earlier presenters have outlined the crucial roles played by many specialized staff who would be lost, so here are just a few examples

- **Behaviour:** As support services have declined, there has been a steady rise in students labelled as behaviour problems. No one is born with problem behaviour. This is a problem we create when we fail to be there for students who just need some extra help to get through the day. With less school-based support, schools will need more help from the district behaviour consultants whom we are cutting.
- **Psychologists:** More and more unidentified students are entering secondary school due to backlogs in the district's capacity to perform assessments. Cutting psychologists will make this worse.
- **Inclusion:** Losing one of just three district inclusion consultants will mean more crises that severely strain staff and other students and less expert help to resolve them.

5. Other impacts on students with special needs

As others have also noted, cuts to counsellors, school administrators, libraries and other services will compound these impacts on students with special needs. In addition, students with special needs who are also ESL, Aboriginal, Inner City, Gifted/LD kids will be twice hit by further cuts in those areas. The Province is also cutting out-of-school supports. From every direction, we are downloading our problems onto those who can least afford more challenges.

6. Special education cuts will hurt all students

Cuts to Special Ed will hurt the broader student population. Less support means our kids take up more teacher time or become disruptive, making it more difficult for classmates to learn. Special Ed staff also provide extensive support to the many unlabelled students who struggle to keep up in school.

Special education funding

The Ministry has modestly increased special education funding for 2010-11, a step in the right direction which we applaud. However, these provincial grants only cover about half of what it costs to serve students with special needs.

Vancouver spends about \$30 million more each year than it receives from the Province on special education. This intolerable situation cannot continue.

We understand the enormous strain this underfunding places on local boards like Vancouver. Parents have been urging the Province for years to address this serious funding gap. You won't see many Special Ed parents in your audience because they are all out organizing rallies and letter campaigns, pleading with the Minister to stop yet another round of cuts that will be disastrous for our students.

Parents have also urged the Minister to fix the serious gap in the provincial accountability framework since Bill 33 introduced class size limits in 2006. This legislation is forcing local boards to disproportionately concentrate budget cuts on non-enrolling staff like those who deliver special education.

In conclusion, these cuts will not allow Vancouver to live up to the mandate of public education by supporting all children to access a public education that permits them to achieve their potential. We applaud this Board's advocacy in highlighting the disastrous impacts of these cuts on all students and we are ready to do whatever we can to help the District and the Province avoid them.