

We're spending less on schools

By Dawn Steele, The Times

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Editor:

University professor Dr. Lal Sharma is astonished that it costs \$200,000 a year to educate an average class of 25 K-12 students in B.C. today.

Where has he been? University costs are now \$25,000 a year--per student. The average Harvard university professor today earns over \$200,000. Adjusted for inflation, \$200,000 in 2010 buys the equivalent of \$27,000 in 1960. I wonder if he has seen the price of gas lately or the price of a coffee.

Does he realize he can't fill his tank for \$10 any more and a coffee is not a nickel? Although B.C. does have the lowest minimum wage in Canada that has not been raised since 2001, we are still making a lot more than our post-war parents.

In real dollars, B.C. is actually spending less on K-12 education today than a decade ago, any way you look at it.

Adjusted for inflation, B.C.'s 2010-11 education budget of \$5.1 billion is around \$500 million less than the last NDP budget for education in 2000.

In 1991, 26 per cent of B.C.'s provincial budget went to education. Under both the NDP and the B.C. Liberals, that share steadily declined to 14 per cent today.

Sure, \$5.1 billion is a lot of money, but it's a fraction of what Ontario spends on its public schools. The McGuinty government has increased education spending by \$5.4 billion since coming to office because it sees a highly-educated citizenry as key to Ontario's future competitiveness. Ontario now spends over \$10,000 per K-12 student compared to B.C.'s \$8,000, despite very similar costs.

B.C.'s budget for public education is also a fraction of what we're spending on other key sectors of our economy--and that fraction is shrinking fast. Relative to provincial GDP, education spending in B.C. has declined by 14 per cent since 2001.

What about declining enrolment? Enrolment has been slipping by about 0.5 per cent per year on average for the last decade, and is now growing again (and has been growing for years in districts like Chilliwack, which are still being forced to cut teachers and programs to compensate for provincial underfunding). B.C.'s per-student funding formula reduces funding as enrolment drops, but it's not hard to see that losing two or three students per school--which has been the typical pattern in most districts--produces negligible operational savings until that trend has been

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sustained for many years. Despite Chilliwack's growing enrolment for this September we will lose 20 teachers, 2.35 principals, 11.7 support staff and 16.1 educational assistants. Non-funded cost pressures such as HST, salary and pension increases, MSP, hydro carbon offsets add up to \$2.6 million in our district.

Dr. Sharma wonders where all the money goes. We've provided a detailed breakdown of where the \$200,000 per average B.C. classroom goes in the hope of stimulating public discussion on what changes the public thinks would better serve our K-12 students. Administrative costs are just 3.3 per cent. Another 11.2 per cent goes to maintaining and operating school buildings. Principals, counsellors, teaching aides, cafeterias, playground supervisors, school gyms, libraries, computers and textbooks all cost money. Staff salary and benefit costs are controlled by the provincial government.

We do agree strongly with Dr. Sharma that B.C. schools aren't investing enough in early intervention for children with learning challenges. Even without adjusting for inflation, the B.C. government is spending \$100 million less on special education than a decade ago. Chilliwack, for example, spends \$13.4 million on special education, of which only \$7.4 million is funded through ministry special education grants. And yet many students still aren't getting the help they need. This funding gap also contributes to the structural deficits that force the board to cut other services despite growing enrolment. We get the fact that funds are tight. Our point is the premier made education one of his great goals for a golden decade. Since 2001 all we have seen is an attack on public education. Is education a priority for this government or not?

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NOTE: This letter was co-authored and submitted jointly with Chris Bukowsky of the Chilliwack parent advocacy group "[Kids Matter](#)"