

MOVING FORWARD

REBUILDING EDUCATION AFTER COVID-19

a report from the BC School Trustees Association | March 2021

PREAMBLE

B.C.'s K-12 System During COVID-19

The BC School Trustees Association (BCSTA) is proud of the efforts put forth by the province's K-12 sector during the pandemic. The government, boards of education, education partners and the Office of the Provincial Health Officer have worked collaboratively to keep public schools open. This coordinated response has resulted in schools being low risk environments and ensured schools are safe for students and staff during the pandemic. This same level of cooperation and collaboration between government and education partners will continue to be critical as we plan for the 2021-2022 school year.

The role of schools in supporting the health and welfare of children, families and communities has been cemented by the pandemic. The loss of in-person instruction, plus social isolation, has had profound negative impacts on almost every demographic, with young people being the group most immediately affected. The risk of life-long damage cannot be overstated, and a well-supported public education system is essential if we are to mitigate harm.

COVID-19 Challenges

Boards of education understand their role in this coordinated response, and they are acutely aware of the complexity of the task. Students, because of COVID-19, are facing increased challenges, including:

- Declining mental and physical health.
- Decreased educational attainment.
- Family dysfunction, including neglect and abuse.
- Reduced access to community services.
- Issues arising from poverty, such as food and housing insecurity.



PLANNING FOR SUCCESS

This fall will see the return of many children who may have been absent from school buildings for 18 months. We must prepare the sector to serve our communities as effectively as possible. Boards of education are up to the challenge as we move into a COVID-19 recovery stage, but to be successful we must have strong support from our co-governance partner. Through a recent survey, BCSTA member boards have identified six priorities requiring immediate planning.



1. MENTAL HEALTH, WELLNESS AND SOCIAL ISOLATION

The need for integrated post-pandemic mental health supports requires prioritizing the implementation of the Pathways to Hope plan. The pandemic has made it clear that other ministries and community services depend on in-school attendance to deliver effective programming. Rebuilding these essential supports will require a full, rapid rollout of the integrated child and youth (ICY) teams to address the following:

- Redevelop community-based mental health and wellness services so that barriers to student access are removed.
- Engage students who have been unable to access mental health supports.
- Reintegrate students who have missed in-class learning since March 2019.
- Support kindergarteners and primary-aged students who experienced social isolation with high quality supports and intervention.

An effective post-pandemic response will require accelerated approval of Foundry sites across the province to support youth who will benefit from mental health, addiction, employment, sexual health and physical wellness supports.

High levels of stress, anxiety and exhaustion have set in across all employee groups in this sector. Collaboration between the BC Public School Employers' Association (BCPSEA), district leadership, union leaders and boards of education is required to address mental health supports in the workplace by building on practices initiated during the pandemic.



2. SUPPORTING VULNERABLE LEARNERS

Students living in poverty, Indigenous students, English Language Learning (ELL) students and students with special needs are at higher risk for being impacted long-term by COVID-19 restrictions. In many school districts these students were disproportionately represented in remote learning programs and had their supports disrupted in addition to suffering the other effects of isolation.

Boards of education are already planning to meet the needs of these learners during the recovery stage and are eager to collaborate with the provincial government to support the needs of these students more effectively.

Prior to the pandemic, British Columbia had embarked on one of the largest learning transformations seen in a public education system. With the emergence of COVID-19, and in response to public health requirements, school districts made changes to the delivery of programming based on student safety rather than on a forward thinking learning culture that creates healthier schools. Post-pandemic, the Ministry of Education must recognize and demonstrate that supporting a transformative pedagogy is key to mitigating many negative effects of the pandemic. This action has the potential to restore a sense of agency with students and show that schools are interested in how students want to learn. Reinforcing the importance of core competencies also supports and promotes Indigenous reconciliation, a shared priority for boards of education and the provincial government.



3. FOOD IN SCHOOLS

Food insecurity was identified by nearly all boards of education as a significant concern throughout the pandemic and we appreciate that this concern is included in the mandate letter for Minister Jennifer Whiteside. The pandemic response has created an increased reliance on school-based food programs that were already in demand. Boards of education anticipate many students will return to school with increased levels of vulnerability. A coordinated meal program will be essential and require immediate planning and resourcing.



4. CLEANLINESS

A key result of budgetary pressures over the past several decades has been the elimination of daytime custodians, resulting in decreased cleanliness in schools and an increased burden on non-custodial school staff to fill the gaps. It will be necessary, for both the health of students and staff as well as public confidence, that a heightened level of cleaning is maintained.

Districts will need stable, predictable financial resources to carry this action out. It is critical that the government make timely announcements of grants to support pandemic related cleaning so that this essential service for September has adequate planning and roll-out. Benefits of cleaning include a reduction of flu and cold transmission, resulting in improvement in attendance, as well as reduced long-term maintenance costs.



5. CONNECTIVITY

School trustees and district staff understand the challenges of supporting educational needs in areas where internet access and connectivity are limited. This issue was amplified during the school closure period from March-June 2020 and remains an area of significant concern in many areas of the province.

The federal government has a six-year plan to improve connectivity infrastructure, and BCSTA, through the Canadian School Board Association, has already undertaken advocacy efforts at the federal level to champion a speedier rollout of the connectivity infrastructure plan. We note this is also part of the B.C. Minister of Citizen Services mandate. Fast-tracking these efforts should remain a priority for B.C.'s government.

Students and staff also benefited from provincially developed and supplied technology resources and platforms throughout the pandemic and recovery response. Maintaining this access for students, staff and families will help to mitigate student learning-loss in the event of changing conditions related to the pandemic.



6. FINANCIAL RESOURCES AND CERTAINTY

Boards of education acknowledge the post-pandemic economic pressures faced by the province, but it would be a false economy to implement typical economic recovery strategies through service cuts. The pandemic highlighted the important role school services and programming provide in communities. It is time to actualize the predictable and stable funding necessary to create and maintain crucial initiatives for our students.

BCSTA understands the current context and appreciates the increased funding boards of education received to mitigate pandemic response-related costs. Nonetheless, boards require ongoing funding stability to thoughtfully meet intensified operating needs forecasted.

CONCLUSION

Throughout the pandemic, government and boards of education have prioritized keeping schools open, recognizing the important role they play in the lives of students, families and our communities.

Our co-governance agreement with the province has allowed us to work collaboratively and productively across multiple ministries and agencies to meet the needs of those who depend on the services schools provide. It is now time for us to move past the reactionary approach that has characterized this school year to make way for the thoughtful planning needed to bring additional stability to the education system.

We must begin this work immediately to meet the challenges school districts will face and work together to ensure they are ready to meet the needs of students during the province's pandemic recovery stage. We look forward to working with you to build a strong, united provincial public education response as we move forward.

