

June 16, 2023

Dear Members of the Select Standing Committee,

Please accept the following input as you consider development of the 2024 Provincial Budget. While there are many pressing needs requiring provincial funding support, as a Board, we respectfully encourage the committee to deeply consider the following three areas.

Improve accessibility for students

Reinstate funding to provide better accessibility for students with complex needs.

VSB serves a high number of students with special education designations – about 15 per cent of the student population – and of those, many have high complex medical needs requiring educational and accessibility supports. However, only about 20 per cent of our schools are fully accessible. The age of VSB schools also makes simple solutions, such as installing chair lifts, prohibitive. Old schools require intensive reconstruction, which increases the costs. For example, to install a lift that costs \$100,000 requires more than double that amount to complete because of architectural, engineering and permitting expenses due to the structural restrictions of old buildings. Such projects also take years to complete. We urge the government to reinstate or replace the former special education equipment grant so children with mobility challenges can access all areas of schools – washrooms, labs, classrooms, food areas, etc. Furthermore, we request the 2024 budget also add to the Playground Enhancement Program in the Ministry of Education and Child Care capital planning to provide more funding for accessible playgrounds, so more students can take part in recreation and play at their schools – an essential component of the social-emotional experience in their learning journeys.

Mental health and wellness funding

Provide additional funding support aligning with Mental Health in Schools Strategy

The importance of mental health and wellness has become even more evident since the onset of the pandemic. Student achievement is only possible when their mental health and wellbeing is supported so they can learn, pursue new opportunities for growth and connect with and contribute to their communities. We know students’ mental health outcomes are greatly influenced by that of adults around them, including educators. We urge the government to provide additional supports aligning with the Mental Health in Schools Strategy, to strengthen connections and sense of belonging for all learners, as well as targeted professional development and support for education staff. This is very much an equity matter and a future-readying step we can take to protect and enhance the health of BC citizens for generations.

Accelerate and expand Seismic Mitigation Program

Additional capital funding is required to seismically upgrade or replace schools, particularly in Vancouver.

The Board is thankful that significant seismic funding has flowed to VSB over several years to upgrade or replace schools known to be at a high risk of significant damage in the event of an earthquake. Many VSB schools have H1 seismic ratings, meaning they would suffer irreparable damage. Yet, when a replacement school is the lowest cost option, the provincial areas standards result in schools with a smaller area – by up to 40 per cent. This reduction means there cannot be dedicated space for arts and music programs in elementary schools nor sufficient breakout space for collaboration by educators and learners. Furthermore, construction costs escalations continue to be a challenge. The government should provide sufficient funding following the verified costs of projects and before the financial responsibility is handed to school districts.

Sincerely,

Victoria Jung
Chair
Vancouver School Board