



VSTA response to the Ministry of Education Funding Model Review Discussion Paper of March 2018

The VSTA Executive Committee welcomes this opportunity to provide feedback into the VSB's response to the 'K-12 Public Education Funding in British Columbia' discussion paper. The motivation for the funding review is articulated in the introduction:

"Recognizing that funding is an influencing factor in the delivery of educational programs and services across the province, it is important to explore the ways in which BC's funding model can support equitable access and improved outcomes."

The document proceeds to enumerate seven emerging themes and pose several key questions arising from each theme.

General comments:

Several general elements of this paper stand out for us. In the first place, and we hope this concern is unfounded, the poor edit quality signals an apparent haste in delivering this document to the field which leads us to question whether the Ministry's request for input is offered in good faith. (For example, in commenting on graduation rates, the second paragraph states, "This includes significant increases in recent years among Indigenous students and students with special needs in recent years.") The paper is also replete with buzzwords and jargon much of which, if it has a home anywhere, would be better suited to a marketing proposal. (What exactly is intended by "driving student outcomes"?) Secondly, and related to our initial concern, the leading way in which the questions that are drawn from each theme are posed suggests that the opportunity for genuine input may have passed. In fact, considering the curriculum review and the expectation that teachers provide open-ended, thought provoking questions to students of all ages and levels, it is most incongruent that a Ministry of Education document pose simplistic yes/no questions. Thirdly and most significantly, the stated motivation for the review posits that adjustments to the funding model may lead to more equitable access and improved outcomes. We ask how a funding model review of this depth can begin in the absence of a clearly stated vision, at the strategic and operational planning levels, of what we mean by equitable access and improved outcomes? The vision should drive the funding, not the other way around and we should certainly not find ourselves in an exercise that leads to trying to match a vision to fit a preconceived funding model. We grant that the recently completed curriculum revisions are an important element of our strategic planning, but our schools are more than curriculum and many questions remain at the operational level.

With these general comments in mind, we acknowledge that some of the concerns the review has raised regarding the funding model can be considered within the context of our current operational practices and as such, merit review. We are also happy to see that the report acknowledges costs outside the control of the Board such as bargained salary increases, utility costs, and other local factors.

Specific concerns - Themes 1 to 4:

The first four themes are:

- Theme 1: Student Success in the Context of an Evolving Education System
- Theme 2: Education for Special Needs, Vulnerable and Indigenous Students
- Theme 3: Responsiveness to Local Circumstances
- Theme 4: Flexibility

In our view, the main questions that arise from Themes 1 to 4 are questions of relative redistribution of funds within district budgets (or, possibly, from district to district) with a specific purpose in mind. We maintain that any shifts in funding that lead to a refocussing of our purposes funding should follow a broader review of our values and objectives and how we propose to achieve them.

Specifically, we are concerned that current needs are not addressed, nor is there any mention of adequate funding for public education. Under Theme 1, 'Student Success in the Context of an Evolving Education System', we are extremely concerned to see the question "Should funding directly incent improvements to individual student success?". This is evocative of teacher "merit pay" systems which have been introduced to calamitous effect in some jurisdictions in the United States – we would be happy to provide research on this issue. The question "Can different funding approaches be used to promote individual student choice" is suggestive of a voucher-based school system – not a fully funded, comprehensive public-school system.

With respect to Theme 2: 'Education for Special Needs, Vulnerable and Indigenous students', we are concerned that the Ministry seems to view these students as being "the same". Students with special needs are not necessarily disadvantaged by racism/colonialism or socio-economic status. To aggregate these students together is a disservice to them as is the glib premise that the solution necessarily begins with integration into 'regular classroom settings'. We are also concerned that testing students is seen as "administratively wasteful". We believe that students' individual needs are better met when we understand their individual needs. A move from funding based on individually identified needs to a model in which funding is determined by provincial averages would make it harder to target funds to specific students. Districts, such as Vancouver, which may have a higher proportion of students in need of extra supports would likely receive less funding.

Theme 3, 'Responsiveness to Local Circumstances', focusses on the fairness of our current enrollment-based funding model and questions whether adjustments might be made to this model to make it fairer. This section raises important questions including whether or not per student funding should be based on FTE or headcount. We maintain that the answers to questions of this significance have immediate implications for how we deliver educational programs throughout the province. We need to first consider how we imagine the implementation of the new curriculum at an organizational level and then identify the appropriate inputs to the funding formulas.

The considerations and questions raised under Theme 4, 'Flexibility', contemplate whether or not the funding that is delivered through Special Purpose grants should be increased, maintained at its current

level, or decreased. These questions relate to our objectives and how we seek to achieve these objectives at the district level and province-wide. This is where we believe the discussion should begin; with a re-examination of our priorities and how we organize our districts and schools accordingly.

Opportunities - Themes 5 to 7:

- Theme 5: Financial Management and Accountability
- Theme 6: Predictability and Costs
- Theme 7: Geographic, Economic, and Demographic Factors

Our comments regarding Themes 5 to 7 are made in the spirit of contributing to a discussion regarding possible adjustments to the conditions under which current funding is granted and the policies which govern school district financial oversight. While we support our Federation in maintaining that the adequacy of total funding for public education must be a central focus of the review, we see opportunities within the current framework to increase the amount of funding that reaches students and classrooms.

Regarding Theme 5, Financial Management and Accountability, we agree with the assertion in the opening paragraph of this section that ‘the current governance structure for Boards of Education leads to a conservative approach to budgeting’. We would support an examination of funding policy that might provide Boards the confidence to adopt less conservative budgeting and, in so doing, provide a higher level of service to students under the existing programs. (An example might be providing Boards with more ready access to short-term borrowing – perhaps through a pool partly derived, on a voluntary basis, from the \$300M in accumulated surplus province-wide.)

With respect to Theme 6, Predictability and Costs, we agree that funding uncertainty makes it difficult for districts to formulate medium to long term financial plans. We would support an investigation into any measures that might be undertaken to mitigate this uncertainty. (A possible example would be the establishment of self-financed insurance pools modelled along the lines of the Schools Protection Program.) It is worth discussing whether or not it would be feasible to build incentives into these measures that might reward districts for achieving environmental sustainability targets.

In this section, we do take issue with what comes across as a negative attitude towards the restoration of our stripped contract language. On page 15, it is stated that “The added effect of restoring class size and composition language as a result of the Supreme Court of Canada decision in late 2016 *has further reduced flexibility for Boards of Education* in terms of how their schools and classrooms can be organized and staffed”, rather than acknowledging that more teachers working with students is a positive thing. This is a statement we would have expected from the previous government; we are most disheartened to see this trope persist in Ministry documents.

The considerations and questions raised under Theme 7, ‘Geographic, Economic, and Demographic Factors’, focus mainly on the challenges faced by rural districts with a nod to “pressures unique to urban districts such as a higher cost of living and greater competition for qualified resources”. While we support the true cost of delivering a comprehensive educational program throughout the province, we

maintain that the cost pressures facing the various regions of the province must be carefully assessed before the all the inputs into any possible equalization formulas are determined. Based on the points raised in this section, it would appear that there has been considerable amount of work put into identifying the cost pressures unique to rural districts with relatively little consideration of the pressures facing urban districts. The VSB and other Metro Boards of Education, for example, experience operating cost pressures related to a range of geographic, economic, and demographic factors. These include the operating expenses associated with maintaining older buildings, fuel costs for district fleets, and the operational costs associated with being situated in a seismically active zone.

Thank-you for your consideration of our comments. Our main concern, is that in the absence of further strategic and operational planning at the provincial level, many aspects of this review are over-reaching. We would welcome any future opportunity to provide input into this review through the District.