



BCTF

British Columbia Teachers' Federation A Union of Professionals
100-550 West 6th Avenue, Vancouver, BC V5Z 4P2 bctf.ca
604-871-2283 1-800-663-9163 

Executive Office fax: 604-871-2290

Funding Fairness for Adult Learners

A Brief to the

BC Education Funding Model Review

from the

British Columbia Teachers' Federation

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President



Executive Director

Submission to the BC Education Funding Model Review

Funding Fairness for Adult Learners

Last August, teachers wholeheartedly welcomed Minister Fleming’s announcement that tuition fees for adult learners, which had posed such a significant barrier to thousands of students, would be eliminated. As the Minister pointed out when making the announcement, “Tuition fees on ABE and ELL programs shut people out. We’re re-opening those doors. Now any British Columbian can go back to school free of charge, upgrade their skills, and build a better life for themselves and their families.”

And now that these doors have rightfully re-opened and additional revenue from unjust tuition fees is no longer available, we must ensure that the Ministry provides resources for adult learners that are adequate to meet their learning needs. One of the first steps to ensuring vibrant and sustainable adult education in British Columbia’s public education system is ensuring equitable funding for adult learners.

The current funding formula underfunds adult students relative to their school-age peers. While the basic funding amount for a school-age full-time equivalent (FTE) student is \$7,423 in 2018–19, it is just \$4,696 for an FTE adult learning student—a gap of nearly 37%. Yet adult learners have the same, if sometimes not greater, learning needs as their school-age counterparts. If we want them to succeed within our education system, we must ensure that they are furnished with the resources to make this possible.

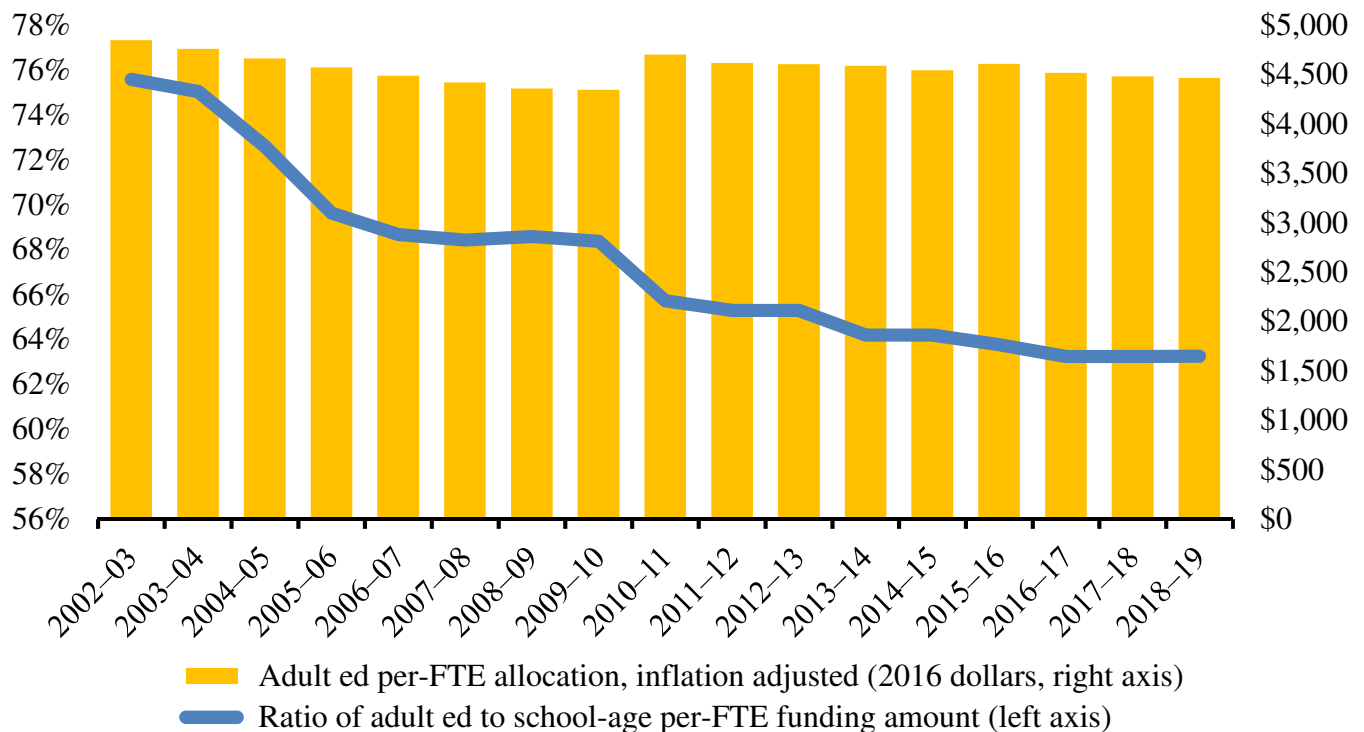


Figure 1. Funding per-FTE for adult education in dollars and compared to the basic allocation, 2002–03 to 2018–19. Data drawn from annual Ministry of Education Operating Grant Tables.

Unfortunately, as Figure 1 shows, the funding gap between adult and school-age students has only grown in recent years. While adult students were already underfunded by one-quarter in 2002–03 when the current funding formula was instituted, the gap is now larger than one-third. This is the case despite a significant increase in funding in 2010–11 when adult education funding amounts were standardized across school districts and supplementary funds for labour settlements were rolled into the basic funding amounts. In inflation-adjusted terms, the formula amount for adult basic education is currently eight percent smaller than it was 15 years ago. That is a real decrease in available resources.

TEACHER VOICES

“Self-paced course funding has been slashed repeatedly over the past two years making access to flexible education difficult for at-risk students.”

“Marginalized students are having to work more to survive, and the programs they are able to take are underfunded in terms of access but also in terms of curricula suitable to adults.”

At the same time, enrollment decline due to the previous government’s decision to allow institutions to impose tuition fees (of up to \$1,600 per semester) for adult basic education (ABE) has put further funding pressure on adult education. As elsewhere in the education system, many costs do not vary neatly with enrollment. The imposition of high tuition fees was doubly onerous: it made adult education courses prohibitively expensive for the very people who needed them, and it defunded adult education programs relying on per-student funding. As demonstrated by Figure 2, enrollment in ABE programs declined significantly, from over 4,000 FTE spaces in 2013–14 to under 3,200 today, continuing an even longer trend.

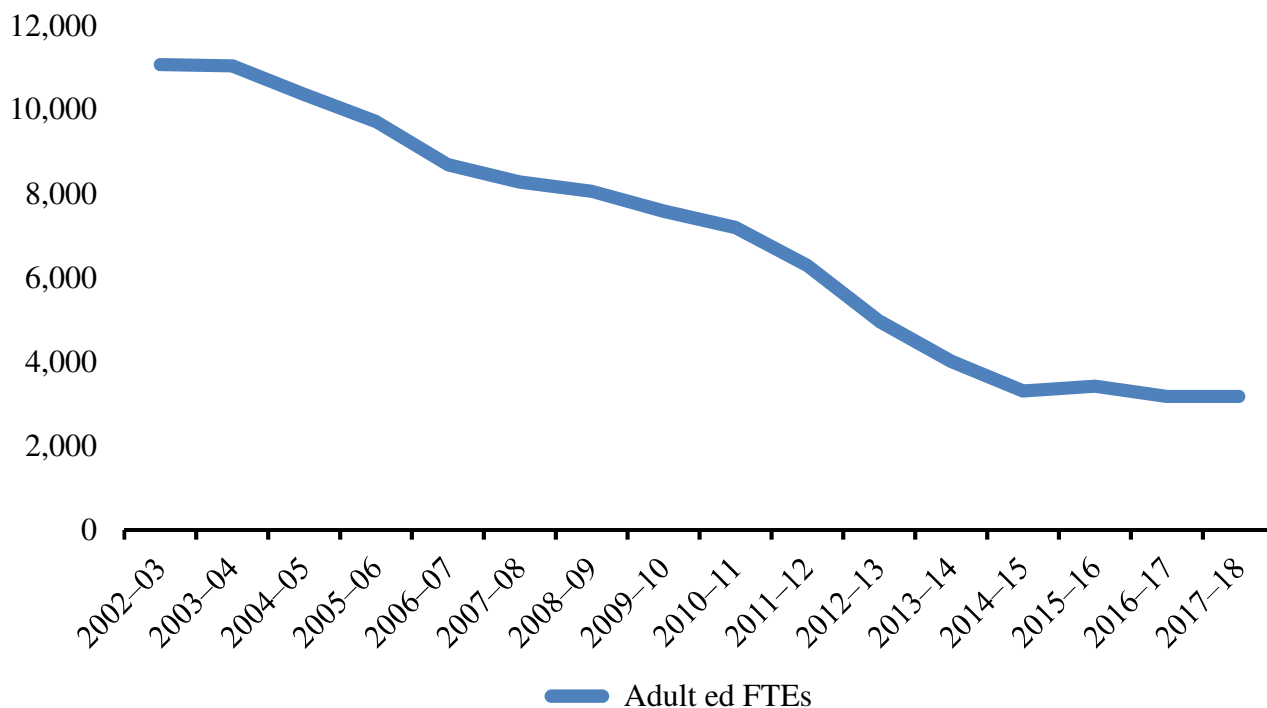


Figure 2. Adult education FTE funded enrollment, 2002–03 to 2017–18. Data drawn from annual Ministry of Education Operating Grant Tables.

These abstract numbers translate into very real hardships in the lives of adult learners and adult educators. While facing the same challenges as regular K–12 education, adult education programs often do not have access to the same supports. They lack access to special education resource teachers, support staff and counsellors. There is little or no time for professional development or to modify and adapt curricula to suite adult learning styles and unique needs. Often, there is no contractually-stipulated preparation time for educators at all.

A BCTF survey of adult educators showed the effects of chronic and inequitable underfunding of adult education. For example, two-thirds of adult educators surveyed rated administrative (68.5%) and counselling (66.7%) services to support adult students living in poverty to be inadequate. Among the top 10 (out of 54 possible) sources of stress identified by adult educators were inadequate prep time, competition between adult education and other programs, inadequate learning resources, job insecurity, and unmet student needs. At the same time, many educators reported working unpaid time to prepare classes, assist individual students, and advocate on their behalf. Sadly, over 40% of adult educators were not willing to recommend adult education as a teaching career to others.

The foundation for socially just and fiscally sustainable adult education is adequate funding in line with adult student needs. This is something adult educators have been saying for many years. The same 2013 survey of adult educators found that the two improvements of highest priority for adult educators were parity with K–12 education and more paid time for planning and preparation. Adult students and educators need the resources to succeed.

The benefits of adequately- and equitably-funded adult education extend far beyond the classroom. Unemployment rates for young adults aged 20 to 24 without a high school certificate are double what they are for graduates in the same age group; non-graduates in this age group who do work also earn less per week than their graduated peers. The child poverty rate for children of parents with less than a secondary education is twice as high as for those with parents who have at least completed secondary education or some post-secondary and five times as high as for those with parent who have a post-secondary degree. Giving young adults an opportunity to complete high school and/or complete requirements for post-secondary training is an essential element of a poverty reduction plan.

Reccomendation: Adult education should be funded on par with K–12 programs and that funding be based on identified, unique needs.

Now that the decision to dispense with tuition fees has been made, teachers recommend that the independent panel entrusted with reviewing British Columbia’s education funding formula ensure that adult education programs are funded on par with K–12 programs and that funding respond to unique adult education needs, including adding First Peoples and other similar courses to the list of funded courses, and including funding for preparation time as well as professional and curricular development.