

**SCHOOL DISTRICT NO. 57 (PRINCE GEORGE)**  
**SUBMISSION TO THE SELECT STANDING COMMITTEE ON**  
**FINANCE AND GOVERNMENT SERVICES**

**August 24, 2021**

The Board of Education of School District No. 57 (Prince George) once again welcomes this opportunity to advocate for our students and to make a presentation to the Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services. We have made similar presentations to the Committee in prior years. As with those presentations, we will provide you with a current overview of our school district, identify three complex challenges that we face, and conclude with our recommendations for your consideration.

In preparation for this submission we have reviewed the Committee's August 2020 Report on the Budget 2021 Consultation, the March 2021 BC School Trustees Association Report on School Life Cycle Funding, the Ministry of Education's 2021/22 – 2023/24 Service Plan released April 2021, the Guiding Principles behind the Framework for Enhancing Student Learning. The recommendations included in our report must be addressed if we are to successfully support the goals outlined by the Government of British Columbia in the Budget 2022 Consultation document.

**Challenges**

With acknowledgement of the additional challenges caused by the COVID19 Pandemic, this presentation will focus on four of the many challenges faced by School District No. 57 (Prince George). We acknowledge that these challenges are not unique to this school district. However, they represent the framework within which we strive towards our mission of "*Inspiring Learning Anywhere*" and our vision of "*Preparing Students to Seize Life's Opportunities*". These challenges are:

1. Predictable and Sustainable Funding
2. Rural and Urban
3. Students and Families in Poverty
4. Aging School Facilities

The challenges must be considered within our school district context.

**District Context**

The Board of Education of School District No. 57 (Prince George) respectfully acknowledges the ancestral lands of the Lheidli T'enneh First Nation, McLeod Lake Indian Band and the Simpcw First Nation on whose lands we live, work and play.

School District No. 57 is located in the centre of the province, extending north to Mackenzie, south to Hixon, and east to McBride and Valemount. The district encompasses 52,000 square kilometers and is the second largest school district in the province in geographical size. It has a student population of approximately 12,875 school-age and adult students enrolled in 32 elementary schools, and 8 secondary schools. In addition, our Centre for Learning Alternatives provides alternate education programs as well as continuing and distance education programs. The school district's annual operating budget for 2021/22 is \$147.9 million. During the 2020/21 school year the school district employed approximately 2,400 staff including teachers, educational assistants, principals and vice-principals, support and professional staff.

**Predictable and Sustainable Funding**

In developing its 2021/22 Annual Budget, the Board of Education again convened a Budget Consultation Committee comprised of trustees, senior staff and representatives of our educational stakeholder and Indigenous rightsholder groups. That committee's input was valuable in moving forward to determine the Board's budget priorities.

The predictability of government funding was a discussion point during the development of this school district's 2021/22 Annual Budget. Changes to funding allocation formulas in the 2021/22 school year were discussed in conjunction with the impact on the funding to the district. We appreciate that a review of the Funding Model has and continues to take place and that this is being performed collaboratively and consultatively with all K-12 Education partners. The overarching themes initially identified during the review are consistent with the concerns of this district – Independence, Funding and Certainty.

Our recommendation would be to ensure that valuable input obtained during the processes held are incorporated into the final outcomes of changes to the Funding Model. And further to ensure that the K-12 Education system is sufficiently funded to provide and deliver the new curriculum equitably to all of our students, and to ensure that districts are able to cover the costs of inflationary, contractually negotiated and PSEC approved increases.

While we appreciate that Treasury Board, through the Public Sector Employers' Council, approved increments to the salary grids of exempt staff and principals and vice-principals consistent with increments to the collective agreement salaries. It remains a significant concern to our Board of Education that school districts must fund these increases from their general operating funds. The government notionally provides funding for collectively bargained wage increases for unionized staff. As the newly approved salary ranges for exempt staff and principal and vice-principals is determined largely in reference to the salaries paid to teachers it does not make sense that incremental funding is provided for unionized staff only. All employees in each school district contribute to improving student learning and achievement.

Our recommendation is to fully fund general wage increases for all staff in the same manner that funding is provided for the increases provided to unionized staff. As the compensation guidelines and approvals are provided by Treasury Board through the Public Sector Employers' Council they should be funded by the government.

**Rural and Urban**

School District No. 57 (Prince George) is geographically large, with three outlying communities included within our boundaries surrounding the City of Prince George. In 2020/21 12,005 students (93.2%) attended schools in greater Prince George. Approximately 6.8% of our student population lives in the outlying communities:

- McBride, two hours east – 128 students,
- Valemount, three hours east – 223 students, and
- Mackenzie, two hours north – 520 students

Although it was already well understood, the Board of Education has certainly heard that all schools are very important to the communities and neighbourhoods that they serve. This is particularly true in the outlying communities of the school district, and the rural schools near Prince George. In these communities the economic viability of the community is often dependent upon the existence of a school offering a complete educational program for students. In addition, on weekday evenings and the weekend, rural schools are used for athletic, recreational, and cultural opportunities for the community.

Our recommendation is to ensure that appropriate government consultation and processes are in place to provide equitable access to quality public education in all rural communities.

**Students and Families in Poverty**

There are vulnerable students and families in all schools throughout the province, and certainly this school district is no exception. The majority of our at-risk students are located in the inner city of Prince George. We know that poverty contributes significantly to our students' readiness for full participation in their learning.

Every day our teachers see the impact of child poverty on the students in their classrooms. As a school district we allocate funds to address the nutritional and socio-emotional needs of our students. We also provide our staff with the professional development and support to establish the appropriate conditions for learning in classrooms. In particular, we have highlighted poverty, social emotional learning, and cultural competencies and provided support throughout our school district to establish the necessary conditions for learning.

To best meet the needs of all of our learners, we have worked closely with teachers and principals to identify those practices and interventions that, while they may not completely eliminate the effects of poverty and social-emotional vulnerability, they allow the most likely avenue to improve the life chances of each child.

We are pleased to see that the BC Government is working to build a comprehensive provincial poverty reduction strategy through the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction to address the needs of vulnerable populations including students and families.

We recommend the adoption and funding of a comprehensive and accountable provincial poverty reduction strategy. With facilitated implementation of such a strategy across the Ministries to ensure that the strategy addresses the needs of vulnerable students and families. We are confident such a recommendation will improve student achievement.

### **Aging School Facilities and Capital Funding**

According to the Ministry of Education's Facility Condition Index, the majority of our school facilities are in poor condition. Despite the high "poor" rating, our Facilities Services maintenance and custodial staff ensure that each of our schools provide clean, safe and well maintained buildings and grounds for learning, even with the ongoing challenge of operating in an environment where the COVID19 Pandemic has altered our expectations. Our operating budget and the Annual Facility Grant funds are allocated and prioritized to address the most critical maintenance needs.

Due to the emergent nature of the work related to aging infrastructure, other important maintenance work is often postponed. We were encouraged to see recommendations related to capital funding in the report on the Budget 2021 Consultation related to sustaining capital investment in schools to ensure funding will be available for new builds, upgrades and maintenance. We appreciate the availability of the School Enhancement Project and Carbon Neutral Capital Project funding which we receive for specific upgrade projects, however, this funding does not go far enough to meet the overall capital needs of our district.

We recommend that the Ministry needs to take a proactive look at the aging infrastructure in our district and others around the province to develop a plan to meet the evolving construction and replacement needs arising with both restored collective agreement language and increasing enrolment. The BCSTA Report titled The Case for Increased School Life Cycle Funding (March 2021) takes a comprehensive look at the provincial picture and provides recommendations moving forward including annual increases in the Annual Facility Grant, School Enhancement Program and Carbon Neutral Capital Program funding to address the identified provincial shortfall of capital infrastructure to extend the useful life of schools and facilities.

## Recommendations

The 2021-2026 Strategic Plan of School District No. 57 (Prince George) “The Pathway to a Diverse Learning Community with Purpose, Options, and Choices for All”. Skeh Hunoont’l hodul’eh ti includes four district directions:

1. Truth and Reconciliation
2. Equity of Access
3. Wellness
4. Learning

As Trustees, we remain committed to providing the quality of education expected by all of our communities. In order to do that we offer the following recommendations to have the proper resources needed to meet that challenge.

1. Predictable and Sustainable Funding

Ensure that the K-12 Education system is sufficiently funded to provide and deliver the new curriculum equitably to all of our students, and to ensure that districts are able to cover the costs of inflationary, contractually negotiated and PSEC approved increases.

2. Rural and Urban

Ensure that appropriate government consultation and processes are in place to provide equitable access to quality public education in all rural communities.

3. Students and Families in Poverty

Adopt and fund a comprehensive and accountable provincial poverty reduction strategy. Facilitate implementation of such a strategy across the Ministries to ensure that the strategy addresses the needs of vulnerable students and families.

4. Aging School Facilities and Capital

Increase the Annual Facility Grant, School Enhancement Program and Carbon Neutral Capital Program funding annually to address the identified provincial shortfall of capital infrastructure to extend the useful life of schools and facilities.