



June 17, 2011

Having All the Facts

In recent weeks, much has been said about the impact of Budget 2011 on students, teachers, support staff, and the education system in general. I want to explain what is going on, and what you can expect in our classrooms this September. You need to have the facts so that you can ask the right questions of school principals and school board trustees as budgets for next year are prepared.



Education Facts

The forecast for 2011/2012 indicates that operational funding for education has increased by 125% since 1997. Teachers salaries have increased by 78.8%. The student population has increased by 8.6%. Inflation growth during the same period was 45.5%.

Education Budget

This year's Education budget increases by \$258 million to cover contractually obligated teachers' salary increases and pension costs. However, as part of the government's commitment to financial restraint, other grants not directly related to funding teachers and support staff were reduced or eliminated.

It's often argued that education is an investment, and thus deserves more funding. However, the idea that more money produces a better education is not supported by research or Alberta's experience. The education budget has increased by 63 per cent over the past 10 years, well ahead of the Alberta inflation rate of 29 per cent. During that period, student outcomes have remained about the same. We have seen steady improvement in our high school completion rate, but that is due in large part to changes in teacher practice – not more funding or more teachers. We certainly have not seen a 63 per cent improvement in student outcomes.

[HTTP://EDUCATION.ALBERTA.CA/DEPARTMENT/BUDGET.ASPX](http://education.alberta.ca/department/budget.aspx)

Supporting Student Learning

How is it possible that school boards plan to cut teachers and support staff in the spring, yet hire more in the fall? There are a number of reasons:

- Schools and school boards plan conservatively for enrolments. Once students are actually in classrooms in September, more teachers and support staff are often hired. You may want to ask your school board about the accuracy of their past projections,

and how many teachers are likely to be hired in September.

- School authorities may reduce administrative staff who are also teachers, giving the impression of teacher cuts but not actually impacting the classroom. You may want to ask your school board how many teaching positions they are proposing to eliminate represent teachers in the classroom
- The budgets passed by school boards often include more teachers and support staff than draft budgets. You may want to ask your school board when they will finalize their budget.
- School boards may be saving money in anticipation of contract settlements with teacher and support staff unions. You may want to ask your school board how this affects their budget.
- Staff reductions may be made due to declining enrolments. You may want to ask your board what they expect next year's enrolment to be.

Class Sizes

We remain committed to the Class Size Initiative, and increased funding for it this year. We have focused most of this money on students in Kindergarten to Grade 3, as we know that student success later in school depends on the foundations established in the early years. This change in approach is particularly important as we expect the number of Kindergarten to Grade 3 students to increase significantly in the next five years. Research also overwhelmingly indicates that most of the benefits of small class sizes are found in the early years. While some students may benefit from small class sizes in later years, for most students, there are instructional approaches which more effectively support their needs and learning.

The class size funding formula is an allocation formula only; boards are not required to spend that money to reduce class sizes, and some boards may choose to spend some or all of these dollars in a different way. I encourage you to ask your school board how it is allocating its class size funding.

[HTTP://EDUCATION.ALBERTA.CA/DEPARTMENT/IPR/CLASSIZE.ASPX](http://education.alberta.ca/department/ipr/classsize.aspx)

Support for Students With Special Needs

In Alberta, we're taking a new approach to supporting students with special needs that we call inclusion. Inclusion is about ensuring that each student belongs no matter their language, cultural background, ability, disability, gender, or age. For some school authorities, a provincial move to inclusive education will mean very little change, but for others the change will be more significant. For now, the primary focus is ensuring that all students are successful and this requires school authorities, government and communities to shift their thinking and practice to create environments that are accepting, provide a sense of belonging and value for all.

There will always be a finite amount of funding. Decisions need to be made within the funding that is available to school authorities. In fact, no amount of funding will ensure attitudinal shift, which requires us to make decisions differently. We have not increased special needs grants over the last three years while we move to a new model of supports, supporting services and funding model. This holistic review began as a result of an audit which disclosed that less than 50% of the students funded actually met the criteria. Obviously the process and policy were not connected as there is no doubt about the learning needs of and the barriers faced by the students.

I encourage families who are concerned about changes in practice to have a conversation with their school about what success looks like for their child, what supports and services are needed to support their child's success and how a program is in place to provide opportunities to meet their child's needs.

Many parents of children with special educational needs are concerned that funding for supports for their children is being cut. At the provincial level, that's not the case. Support was increased by \$12 million or 4.4 per cent. This money will support school authorities as they make attitudinal shifts and empower individuals with the confidence to move forward and work in a more inclusive manner. This will ensure that individuals are equipped to change their current practice to align with the concepts of an inclusive education system. I have recently invited school authorities to submit an expression of interest to access this funding. Decisions regarding allocation will be made by September and will be used to reinforce early adopters and assist development by those that lag.

[HTTP://EDUCATION.ALBERTA.CA/DEPARTMENT/IPR/INCLUSION.ASPX](http://education.alberta.ca/department/ipr/inclusion.aspx)

Improving Learning

The most important conversations about education are those about what we do to improve the ways we teach and support our students' learning. Fundamentally, improving student learning is about improving the quality of teacher instruction that students receive. At the provincial level, Alberta Education is supporting a number of activities to ensure that we continue to develop the expertise and abilities of our teachers. Your school board is also responsible for supporting teacher professional learning. As the needs of teachers vary by board and by school, you should talk to your school board and school principal about what they are doing to ensure that we have highly skilled teachers in every classroom.

New Schools

In May, Premier Stelmach, Infrastructure Minister Ray Danyluk and I announced an estimated \$550 million in urgently needed school construction projects in Alberta communities. A total of 35 schools across Alberta will be built or modernized to cope with a student population expected to soar by more than 100,000 new pupils before the end of this decade,

Now is the time to invest in these projects. Construction costs are at the lowest they are likely to be in the coming years, and borrowing costs are also relatively low. Projects will be delivered through a combination of public-private partnerships and regional bundles, allowing projects to be completed faster and offer excellent value for taxpayers.

While some have argued that it makes no sense for government to invest in school buildings when school boards are considering staff reductions, we must remember that these facilities will be filled with students for at least the next 30 years. Through our funding that supports students today, and projects like these that will serve students tomorrow, we're investing not just in our students' future, but in our future students.

[HTTP://EDUCATION.ALBERTA.CA/DEPARTMENT/IPR/CAPITALPLANNING/NEWSCHOOLS.ASPX](http://education.alberta.ca/department/ipr/capitalplanning/newschools.aspx)

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