



January 20, 2020

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Dear Board Chairs,

As we begin a new year and a new decade, I would like to thank you as our public education co-governance partners for a productive 2019. Through effective collaboration, we are making substantial investments in students, building a better future for our children and ensuring the prosperity of our province.

With your leadership, British Columbia (BC) students entering their final years of secondary school are enjoying a modernized graduation program and an innovative new curriculum. With an increased focus on creative and critical thinking, communication, and personal and social responsibility, the new curriculum will produce educated citizens who are able to contribute to a rapidly changing world and shape a better future for us all. With your engagement and support, we are also on the way towards a comprehensive career strategy that will improve transition rates from high school to post-secondary education and training.

Heading into the new decade, we know a gap remains in student outcomes for those who struggle with mental health issues. Last fall we made additional investments in mental health supports in schools, bringing new funding to nearly \$12 million since 2018. This year, we are also looking forward to our third education-focussed mental health conference. In 2018, for the first time, representatives of BC's public, independent and First Nations schools, police, health authorities, and child and youth mental-health workers met together to develop tangible strategies to make life better for students struggling with mental-health issues. I am also very pleased our government has responded, in partnership with you, to the scourge of vaping in schools with a comprehensive regulatory action plan that is leading other provinces and territories.

Government has also been expanding our provincial ERASE (Expect Respect and a Safe Education) strategy to include a focus on guns and gangs in our school communities. ERASE is a comprehensive prevention and intervention strategy designed to foster school connectedness; address bullying; prevent violence; and provide support to school districts during critical incidents. Last month I joined my colleagues in Surrey to announce an additional \$4.93 million to scale-up this important initiative to four additional communities: Campbell River, Chilliwack, Courtenay and Hope.

.../2

We have expanded our focus to now include gang prevention, mental health and wellness, substance abuse, cyberbullying and supporting students of all sexual orientations and gender identities.

Indigenous students in BC are now completing secondary school at the highest rate in history, with 69.4 percent completing in 2018/19 – an 8 percent increase since 2013/14. In addition, there are now 17 First Nations languages approved to be taught in BC schools, with more in development. In total, we have increased funding for Indigenous education by 29 percent since 2016/17, bringing the total to \$89.6 million this school year. On the path to meaningful reconciliation, more work needs to be done to ensure Indigenous knowledges flourish in BC classrooms for the betterment of all students. Our focus has also expanded to better help students in the care of government to be more successful and engaged in their school communities.

Outcomes for students with special needs in BC are also showing steady improvements. Completion rates were 75.5 percent last school year, up from 63.5 percent 10 years ago. An additional 1,000 education assistants have been hired in the past two years, which has increased the number of classes supported by an education assistant by 37 percent. In total, Government is supporting students with special needs with an estimated \$571 million in supplemental funding in 2019/20 – an increase of \$106 million (23 percent) since the 2016/17 school year.

The Ministry of Education is continuing to speed up the pace of investments in seismic upgrades, school expansions and new schools. With over \$1.7 billion invested since I became the Minister of Education, kids have more safe and modern places to learn. As part of our work to ensure quality child care services are available to families, Government has created over 2,600 new child care spaces in schools by funding Neighbourhood Learning Centres at 23 new or replacement schools since September 2017. With Budget 2020 coming up, school districts will continue to see Government's commitment to invest in public education. Further information will be coming from the Ministry of Education in March.

A key part of supporting student success is ensuring we continue to maintain a highly qualified educator workforce. We have invested \$3.5 million to create about 250 new seats in teacher education programs in B.C. These seats will help fill demand by training 70 special education, 20 secondary math and physics, 74 French and about 85 Indigenous educators. This is in addition to more than 1,500 potential new teachers graduating each year from B.C. universities.

Following the 2019 federal election, I am seizing the opportunity to address the problem of student hunger in schools. Through open discussions with my counterparts in Ottawa, my goal is to leverage funding for school meals. Government has achieved a lot for students in BC, but there are still too many kids in our communities going to school hungry each day. This must change. With your help, I believe we can ensure that no student is held back from learning by the pain of an empty stomach.

After thorough consultation with many of you, and with the final reports from the working groups, my colleagues and I are currently working on a plan to reform and improve the current funding model. The goal is to improve reliability, transparency and ensure that no student falls between the cracks. I know you are eagerly awaiting an update, and I will have more information to share with you in the coming weeks.

I want to thank you again for your incredible work on behalf of students, parents, teachers and support staff and for empowering our government to make foundational changes and long overdue improvements to our education system. Last year your support allowed us to ensure BC became the first jurisdiction in North America to make menstrual products available and free for all students.

I am more confident than ever before that with strong partnerships in education, we can keep moving forward to provide the best educational opportunities possible for all BC students.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Rob Fleming".

Rob Fleming
Minister