

Letter to the Board of Trustees re the 2014 proposed budget cuts

Larissa Predy (Certified School Psychologist)

We are speaking today on behalf of Student Support Services – which includes: school psychologists, speech and language pathologists, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, elementary school counsellors, district helping teachers – including autism and gifted specialists, facilitators, hearing and visions resource teachers, work experience for students with special needs, English second language teachers, and hospital-homebound teacher – and let's not forget our support teachers, administrative assistants, educational assistants, and child care workers.

Student support services provide support for individual children, school teams, families, and support staff district wide. We are appreciated in our various schools for our ability to build capacity in staff and families, our ability to offer direct service to all students who require it, and our ability to collaborate meaningfully and efficiently with each of our school based teams in a timely manner. These important qualities will no longer be possible with even this year's cuts alone. Since 2008 the rates of students with special needs (be it learning differences, communication disorders, mental health or behavior needs, or physical disabilities – to name a small few) in this district has increased by 16% - yet our staffing for serving this population has gone down. With this year's additional cuts to special services in our district, children will be required to suffer long wait times for assessment and treatment, fewer students will receive services each year, and the future of special needs students in our district will deteriorate. There is substantial evidence throughout the literature about education, mental health, behavior, and psychology regarding significant financial- and social-benefits of intervening early and acting in a prevention mindset. This literature demonstrates the many ways we can actively improve the lives of our children and the future of our society through preventive as opposed to reactive counselling, and early intervention as opposed to the "wait-to-fail" approaches to identification of needs. Our special populations are already under-served in our province. We at SSS have the ability to offer a valuable and vast service but are only utilized for a very small part of our capabilities because of heavily disproportioned caseloads (my caseload alone consists of over 3000 students - and the ratios are similar for SLPs – and our counsellors could at one time do their jobs to their full potential with caseloads of 600-650, whereas now they serve over 1200 students each!) – with these numbers it is impossible to reach all the students who require our services. Through identification and support, our jobs actually bring money into the district through special needs funding – with fewer of us, there will be a direct impact on our breadth of service and our availability to assist in the identification of students in highly funded categories (such as intellectual disabilities and autism).

On a final note, SSS professionals in SD42 have long been known in our various professional groups as models for service in BC – our district is sought after by professionals in support because of its supposed priority for special needs services. My colleagues, and myself included, chose SD42 as a career home because of the progressive values and advanced perspectives about the role of support. Despite these no-doubt continued values, without adequate staffing and materials, our previously renowned level of service is on a steady decline. Continued cuts to support services will effectively significantly diminish the service to our community (the community that has built this impressive reputation). Although we understand and acknowledge the value of all members of this school district, we feel strongly that support services should be a priority for staffing and funding as opposed to a place for continued degradation.

Gabrielle Barrett Lennard (Speech and Language Pathologist):

The cuts you are proposing, no matter how you re-adjust them, will damage our highly regarded public education system. We would like to see **public** statements from the school board to appeal for adequate funding from the provincial government. We believe that our public education system helps to create the kind of citizens and society that we all want. Please speak out to support our public education system.