

MCFD Teleconference: Information on services & supports for children and youth with special needs & their families during the COVID19 pandemic

April 3, 2020 from 12:45pm to 1:45pm

On the Call

Ministry of Child and Family Development Representatives:

Danielle Smith, Executive Director of Inclusion Policy
Allison Bond, Deputy Minister

Ministry of Education (MOE) Representative:

Cloe Nicholls, Executive Director of Equity & Representation

Ministry of Health (MOH) Representatives:

Derek Rains, Director of Medical Services
Christy Hayes, Senior Director at BCCH

PLEASE NOTE THAT THESE ARE NOTES SHOULD BE CONSIDERED UNOFFICIAL AS THEY ARE BASED ON WHAT ACT-AUTISM COMMUNITY TRAINING CAPTURED DURING A CALL IN WHICH THE QUALITY OF THE LINE WAS POOR AND THE PRESENTERS SPOKE VERY QUICKLY. WE HOPE THAT MCFD WILL MAKE A RECORDING AVAILABLE AS SOON AS POSSIBLE.

Ministry of Education Representative: Cloe Nicholls

I work at the Ministry of Education, normally in the role of Executive Director of Equity & Representation which includes our Inclusive Education portfolio. I am currently redeployed to support our COVID-19 work but am actively working on ensuring students with disabilities have a voice and a place in the new method and model of instruction. I am joined by Patricia Kovac, Director of Inclusive Education, who is filling in as Executive Director during my redeployment. I wanted to share a little about what the Ministry of Education has been doing and will answer some of the common questions received that Danielle and her team have shared with us.

Update from the MOE

Most people are aware on March 17, under the order of the Provincial Health Officer, the MOE suspended in-school instruction until further notice. We indicated at the time there would be an extended Spring Break for students and that districts and independent schools would be taking that time to plan for what learning will look like in this new world. This Monday was the first day the vast majority of school districts would have been back from Spring Break, so it has been an interesting week to see how some of those initial pieces have been rolling out.

Since March 17, there has been a lot happening. We have been working with all our school boards, independent school authorities, First Nations Schools and organizations, teachers, school leaders and public health officials on a coordinated approach. We have worked with those partners to develop four principles that are guiding our work:

- 1) *Maintaining a healthy and safe environment for all students, families and employees.*
- 2) *Providing the services needed to support children of essential workers.*

- 3) *Supporting vulnerable students that need special assistance.*
- 4) *Providing continuity of educational opportunities to all.*

These principles are also guiding our planning and support for students who have disabilities, students who need extra learning support and some of the other community services that school districts often provide, like meal programs or childcare services, so I thought I would give an update for each of the principles and then answer the questions that have been shared.

Maintaining a healthy and safe environment for all students, families and employees:

We have worked with the Provincial Health Office to develop guidelines for public health in the educational setting. A lot of this is based on work that has already been done in childcare settings - providing that information to staff, parents and everyone on what this new world may look like and what some of the public health guidelines are. There has been a real focus on:

- enhanced cleaning and other things within schools;
- meetings with public health officials and MOE staff, administrators, districts and school trustees;
- mental health and wellness.

You will see when I talk about some of the pieces around continued learning that the main focus has really been on socio-emotional learning, how are kids doing, what check-ins do they need, and what are some of those foundational pieces.

Providing the services needed to support children of essential workers:

The direction we have received from government has been very clear, that in order to support efforts to flatten the curve and address the public health crisis, we need to be ensuring essential workers, particularly in front-line health care, can continue to do their job. We've been:

- working on a process to ensure support for front-line health care workers;
- working directly with health authorities and the Ministry of Health;
- starting to have conversations with other provincial ministries around things like corrections and law enforcement.

We are also working with MCFD on the child-care piece. They have really focused on ages 0 to 5, and the MOE are focusing on kindergarten to Grade 6. We have been asked whether children over Grade 6 or age 12 can be supported and we are working to clarify our messaging to districts. Yes - if you are an essential service worker with a child that is over 12 but who can't stay home independently due to the nature of their disability or who would normally require some of those extra supports, they should also be supported in this case. I have received this question from a couple people, so I wanted to clarify we are providing that messaging to districts.

Supporting vulnerable students that need special assistance.

We are focusing on meal delivery and support to student with disabilities. In terms of meal support, many districts are continuing their meal programs. We have asked them to do that where possible. Some of them have shifted – if they had a universal program prior to the pandemic, they are focusing on more targeted supports now.

We released an internal document last week with an integrated planning framework to help districts frame out their approach moving forward. There is an entire section on supports and services for students with disabilities and diverse ability. We identified that the continuity of learning for these students needs to be aligned with goals and IEPs and consulting with the people who would normally be supporting the student in an educational setting needs to continue.

It is really important to clarify that although we suspended in-person instruction, schools are not closed. We are continuing to pay teachers and support staff. The people who support school-based teams and all of the people who were providing supports to our learners, including learners with disabilities, continue to be in the school system and paid. The services they are delivering will look different and it will be challenging to think through modifications when we can't do as much in person.

Providing continuity of educational opportunities to all

We know there are students that will have challenges making the change to online learning, whether it is access to technology or the internet, or it is simply not a good way for them to learn. Schools been instructed to look at alternative approaches in these cases. Schools are still open, but in-person contact is limited in respect of public health guidelines.

One of the early decisions that was made was to continue to fund the public education system and the independent schools, so the operating grant funding is still flowing, and teachers and support staff are being funded. We are trying to find a balance that acknowledges that our schools are a safe space for our learners with disabilities. We know that schools are a place of community connection and inclusion and there are a lot of relationships and friendships built there. We also know that we are in the middle of a public health emergency and need to be protecting the health and safety of teachers and students.

For elementary school students, our focus has been on socio-emotional learning, numeracy and literacy. We know that asking parents to help with ongoing learning is a big ask and that although parents know their children, they are not trained educators. We have been trying to make a framework that is doable in a home-based environment. We are actively looking at options to ensure graduation and assessment for older high school students.

We are asking parents to be patient and we really appreciate what families are doing to support their children right now. We know that not having access to in-person instruction in a school-based setting is a really big shift for all kids and that missing out on in-person instruction is not going to impact all children equally. We need to keep working with our school districts to make sure that children with disabilities and unique needs are not unfairly impacted during this time.

Q & As from MOE:

Q1: What kind of direction is the ministry given to districts, principals and teachers as to the plans going forward in this new version of education?

We have created the interviewing and planning framework that we have asked districts to use to guide all of their planning. We have created teacher resources and teacher planning materials. There was an announcement last week of our [Keep Learning BC](#) website where parents and caregivers can go as a preliminary place before getting more detailed planning from districts or classroom teachers. It has a whole host of resources. We also have our [Safe & Healthy Schools](#) website where we are putting our

updated Frequently Asked Questions, all of our news releases and information bulletins, and this will be translated into 7 languages. The minister is meeting weekly, sometimes daily, with people in the sector, ensuring we are respecting our government's model while giving clear direction on what the provincial expectation is.

Q2: What will happen to the funding that is used to support students with disabilities in the school-based setting in this new world?

We have committed to continuing to fund schools and boards so that they can continue to employ teachers and support staff. At this point, we are not allocating or shifting any of that education funding that goes directly to boards. We have heard the concerns of many parents about some of the impacts of not having their child be able to go to school during regular school hours. We are actively engaging in conversations with other ministries internally on how to best support parents and students with disabilities right now. We are thinking about it and we know we need to continue to have conversations with MCFD, parents, advocacy organizations, health and others as we move on.

Things are changing almost daily at times and we are really trying to stay ahead of this and ensure that districts have what they need. Know that this needs to be an ongoing conversation to ensure that students with disabilities benefit from this unique time, that the new model is able to meet their needs and that parents have access to the information that they need.

Q3: Who can people talk to if they have questions?

Our government model is a bit unique to the extent that the ministry's broad provincial policy provides funding and the curriculum for assessment, but the school boards have a lot of flexibility and autonomy to meet their unique community circumstances. We would encourage parents with questions to go to the classroom teacher or school principal. School principals are being used as a hub right now to connect what they know about the school community, the parents, the children and to what the school district's plans and visions are moving forward. We encourage people to continue to have those conversations. Beyond the school principal, it can be escalated to district leadership all the way up to the super intendent because they really do, at the local level, know most about what is happening right now. At the provincial level we continue to have cross-ministry conversations and share the broad provincial guidance to try and support each other during this challenging time.