



BLACK GOLD SCHOOL DIVISION

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October 20, 2020 (electronic letter emailed)

Honourable Adriana LaGrange
Minister of Education
Office of the Minister
Education
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10800 - 97 Avenue
Edmonton, AB T5K 2B6

Honourable Tyler Shandro
Minister of Health
Office of the Minister
Health
423 Legislature Building
10800 - 97 Avenue
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Honourable Rebecca Schulz
Minister of Children's Services
Office of the Minister
Children's Services
204 Legislature Building
10800 - 97 Avenue
Edmonton, AB T5K 2B6

Dear Honourable Ministers:

RE: Unintended Consequences of the Revised Program Unit Funding (PUF) Model

We are writing to urge you to implement much-needed changes to the new Alberta Education Special Education Early Childhood Services (ECS) Program Unit Funding (PUF) model to mitigate serious unintended consequences that are causing the program to fail the vulnerable children it is designed to support.

While Black Gold School Division (BGSD) is appreciative of the Province's decision to provide school authorities with the flexibility to direct funding to support the specialized learning needs of students, we recognize that the revised PUF model is in its first year of implementation, and is in need of fine-tuning as it moves forward. As such, BGSD has noted the following unintended consequences that are adversely impacting service provision:

1. *"Severe but not severe enough."* Alberta Health Services (AHS) no longer performs the assessment for ECS eligibility. Previous to this school year, if a parent had a concern with their child's speech or language, they could contact their health unit for an assessment, be given a list of available ECS programs that their child was eligible for, or remain with the health unit for treatment and services. Now, parents must approach ECS providers for assessment, and if the children do not meet the specific criteria for ECS, families are turned away and forced to locate services elsewhere.

Recently, our PUF team assessed a family, and their three-year-old was diagnosed with a moderate-to-severe language delay. Our staff had to tell this family that "yes, this is a concerning problem, but no, we cannot help you. Try your health unit, they should be able to support you, but this program, with the staff you liked, is not available to your child." This family will return to school in one or two years, but their relationship with us has now been irrecoverably tarnished.

The above example illustrates the drain on our resources, using therapist time designated to serve this year's children to assess those who may not qualify, or may not remain with the ECS provider.

For the current school year, BGSD has provided over 150 assessments. Of these, 42 were not eligible and thus turned away. A student assessment requires around three to four hours of professional time, starting with a phone call, then a face-to-face assessment with the child, followed by an analysis of results, report writing, and family debriefing. Some families require two types of assessment if they are concerned with, for example, language and behavior.

We ask that AHS return to performing ECS assessments, so that families are able to remain with them if they don't qualify, and are able to speak with multiple ECS providers after they qualify so parents can make the best informed decisions for their children.

2. *"The wait time at the Glenrose Infant and Preschool Assessment Service (IPAS) clinic is 18 months!"* The new two-tier funding model requires school boards to use their limited resources to ensure children with a medical diagnosis like Autism or a socio-emotional/behavioural disorder are further assessed in order to have the paperwork to support this special education code. The provincial Weighted Moving Average (WMA) is based on the division profile of these codes; however, prior to the recent changes in PUF age limits, families had up to three years to seek assistance from community partners to further query diagnostic assessments. With the current age cap of four years and eight months (4:8), ECS providers have to use their own resources to diagnose children to ensure the WMA remains accurate for the next few years.

A family recently implored to us in tears that the wait time for an Autism diagnosis at the Glenrose IPAS clinic is 18 months. Their child will no longer be eligible for PUF when that diagnosis is received, unless we use our own resources to provide said diagnosis. These are resources that should be used to provide services to help students deal with their issues in the current year, not diagnose students for possible coding.

We also have to use our educational psychologist to perform behaviour assessments for a code 42, instead of supporting all children in the program regardless of codes. Currently, children with disabilities who are only assigned a code 47 are not funded at a high enough level to cover the services of one-to-one education assistants (EA), in addition to speech language pathologists (SLP), occupational therapists (OT), and teachers.

We ask that the two-tier funding model be removed, and all PUF children (codes 41-47) are funded at the rate of \$15,000 plus the basic instructional grant for a 475 hour, half-day program. This will allow providers to focus on meeting the needs of each child, no matter where they are on the continuum.

3. *"My child isn't three yet, he's too young to start school!"* The current age restriction of 4:8 has eliminated a whole set of children from being eligible for two years of PUF if their families are not willing to send them to school before they turn three years old. These words were spoken by a mother who had to choose between her instinct that her child was too young to be separated from the family for four mornings per week, or accessing only one year of PUF by waiting another year.

Children who have a mild or moderate delay, or children who are learning English as a second language are able to access ECS programming as long as they are not five-years-old on September 1 of that school year. Paradoxically, our youngest, most vulnerable children are removed from the PUF grant if they are 4 years and 8 months on September 1.

We ask that children who qualify for PUF are given access to up to two years of programming, as long as they are not five-years-old on September 1 of that school year.

We know that early intervention works, as evidenced by our ongoing success in this area. A recent example: in 2018-2019, 114 of 950 children within BGSD were identified as meeting the criteria for PUF in Kindergarten (12 per cent). After participating in up to three years of PUF, only 88 out of 885 children are currently identified as having a delay in Grade 2 (nine per cent), with only 47 out of 895 falling into the severe (4X code) category (five per cent).

Below are a few other negative consequences for vulnerable BGSD students due to the recent changes. We are concerned that our success story will not maintain its momentum:

- A reduction in the number of PUF programs offered, from 32 to 18.
- A reduction in the number of sites offering PUF programming, from 13 to 6.
- Not able to include non-funded kids to act as peer models for skills development and create a climate of inclusion.
- A reduction in the ratio of professional staff (teachers/SLPs/OTs) to students by 50 per cent.
- A reduction in the number of service hours from 475 to 400 per program.
- SLPs, OTs, teachers and staff are not able to meet with parents on a weekly basis to help them continue working with their children at home.

Ministers, we applaud your strong leadership and collective commitment to protect Alberta's quality healthcare and education, and look after vulnerable children with disabilities so that they do not fall through the cracks but instead have access to the Alberta Advantage, just like the rest of us.

Accordingly, we believe that by addressing the above stated concerns, the Province can fully live up to its commitments to ensure the future of high quality front-line services like education and healthcare, so we can focus on the recovery plan to save livelihoods, grow and build an Alberta that is truly strong and free.

Thank you for your time and consideration, and we look forward to your response. Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have further questions or need additional information.

Sincerely,



Devonna Klaassen, Chair
Board of Trustees



William (Bill) Romanchuk,
Superintendent of Schools/CEO

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