

Presentation to the Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services

Date: June 12, 2025

From: Michelle Waite, Chairperson, Board of Education – Comox Valley Schools (SD71)

Subject: Public Education Funding and the Future of K–12 Learners

Gilakas’la, and welcome,

It’s an honour to welcome you to the traditional territory of the K’ómoks First Nation. Thank you for traveling here to hear directly from those who care deeply about public education.

My name is Michelle Waite, Chair of the Board of Education for Comox Valley Schools, joined today by my colleagues, in spirit, who share a deep commitment to the 11,000 students we serve.

You’ll notice the Bentwood Box at the center of our table. Traditionally used by many Indigenous Peoples to hold sacred items, it symbolizes care, protection, and the interconnectedness of all things. Today, it represents the 11,000 students in Comox Valley and the more than 577,000 students across BC. Like the box holds medicines that heal and restore balance, we are reminded of our responsibility to create learning environments that uplift every child. This conversation, above all, is about them.

Our Core Message

We are asking the Committee to recommend bold, legacy investment in public education in the 2026 budget. Despite broad recognition of its importance, the financial foundation of BC’s public education system is eroding.

In 2001–2002, BC school districts received 15.49% of the provincial budget. By 2023–24, that number dropped to 7.97%. BC now ranks near the bottom nationally for K–12 spending relative to GDP. While per-pupil funding has increased slightly, inflation has outpaced those gains, leaving districts under unsustainable financial pressure.

This isn’t just about balancing budgets — it’s about student outcomes and equity of opportunity.

The Cost of Underfunding

We’re seeing troubling declines in student achievement. Grade 10 numeracy rates have dropped from 62% in 2015–16 to 48% in 2021–22. Literacy rates have declined as well.

These are not only educational concerns; they are economic and societal ones. Foundational skills are eroding at a time when supports for students with complex needs are increasingly strained.

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The Comox Valley Experience

In our district, the complexity of student needs has grown dramatically. What was once exceptional is now commonplace — students arriving with trauma, mental health challenges, and complex behaviours. For example, one of our elementary schools will welcome four kindergarten students this fall who each require full-time one-on-one support — but current funding categories fall far short of meeting those needs.

Without sustainable funding that matches today's reality, we risk our schools becoming places of triage instead of learning. Our strategic plan focuses on the core competencies of learning, on equity, reconciliation, and inclusion — but these require resources.

What We Are Asking

We are not asking for redistribution. We are asking for bold investment — to grow the pie itself. Districts have become masters of doing more with less. But we have reached the limit. Stretching and reallocating further will compromise students' outcomes and staff wellbeing. Our educators are feeling occupational fatigue — the result of being asked to continually do more without adequate support.

Imagine what meaningful increases could achieve: smaller classes, more Educational Assistants, expanded mental health services, stronger early learning interventions, and modern, safe, inclusive learning environments that reflect the needs of every child.

As costs rise, per-pupil increases have not kept pace. It's time to turn recognition into action.

Closing

As governors and MLAs, we make decisions whose full impact may not be seen in our time. But like planting a tree, we do so knowing that others will one day sit in its shade.

On behalf of Comox Valley Schools, I ask you to plant that tree — through bold investment in public education in the 2026 budget — so that today's learners may one day sit beneath the shade of the education you made possible.

Gilakas'la, and thank you for listening.