



## International Comparative Study of Learning Systems

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### **British Columbia, Canada** **Education System Overview**

#### **A. Overview**

British Columbia turned in one of the strongest records of student achievement in the world when the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) was first administered in 2000. These results were further distinguished by the lack of large disparities in student scores across socioeconomic, ethnic, and racial lines. In the more recent iterations of PISA, the province has remained a top performer. In 2015, British Columbia scored at the top of the charts in reading and science and almost as high in math. In 2015, British Columbia scored first in the world in reading, second in science, and sixth in math. In 2018, British Columbia remained a top performer, although its scores declined by a statistically significant margin in all three subjects. British Columbia continued to demonstrate high levels of equity in student performance, however, with no significant performance difference between immigrant students and non-immigrant students in reading in 2018.

British Columbia educates about 11 percent of Canada's five million students and is known for its language and cultural diversity. About 30 percent of its population are immigrants, and 20 percent speak a language other than English at home; the proportion of immigrants is higher in the cities, such as Vancouver, which educate most of the province's students. British Columbia's population is highly concentrated in the southern part of the province, with many of its smaller districts scattered throughout its vast geography to the north. Indigenous people make up about 6 percent of the overall population of the province and more than 10 percent of the student population; there has been a strong commitment to both better serving the needs of the indigenous population and also honoring their history and culture.

Much of the province's educational success is attributed to its high-quality teaching force. However, a history of strained relations between the teacher unions and the Ministry of Education made it very difficult to implement education reforms at the system level until recently. The 2011 Education Plan marked a turning point. It outlined five key elements of education reform: personalized learning for every student; quality teaching and learning; flexibility and choice; high standards; and learning powered by technology. A prominent example of this new approach is the redesigned provincial curriculum, a key outcome of the Education Plan. The goal of the curriculum reform was to create "a more flexible curriculum that prescribes less and enables more, for both

teachers and students [and] ... that will best prepare students for their futures and based on a curriculum that prescribes fewer but more important outcomes." To develop the curriculum, the Ministry consulted closely with teachers and relied on their advice to come up with a plan that teachers could support. This engagement sent the message that the Ministry would be relying on the professional expertise of teachers. The resulting curriculum began implementation in phases in 2015 and was fully implemented in all grades by 2020.

Alongside the reform of the curriculum, British Columbia has revamped their provincial assessment to align with the content and goals of the curriculum; reviewed their funding model with a goal of improving equity in funding across districts; and revamped their framework for planning and monitoring progress in districts (called the Framework for Student Learning) to update both the goals to be monitored and the process for

## **B. Governance and Accountability**

### **Governance Structure**

There is no federal education ministry in Canada and education is overseen almost exclusively by the provinces and territories. Like all Canadian provinces, British Columbia has its own Ministry of Education, which is run by a Minister of Education appointed by an elected Prime Minister (Premier). The Ministry sets standards, determines curricula, allots funding to the schools in the province, and oversees the teacher certification process and the provision of school support services (transportation, health and food services, and libraries). The province assigns much of the responsibility for operating schools to school boards. Local school boards are elected bodies, and they work in conjunction with the provincial government. School boards are responsible for all major hiring and personnel decisions, from the superintendent to the teachers. They also set annual budgets and may have some oversight of new programs and policies. British Columbia has 60 school boards; 59 represent geographic areas and one includes all of the francophone schools in the province. There is a Canada-wide Council of Ministers of Education (CMEC), and the provinces and territories do collaborate and benchmark policies against one another.

### **Education Finance**

The British Columbia government provides funding directly to school districts. About 90 percent of school funding is provided in the form of "operating grants," which can generally be spent flexibly. More than three-quarters of the operating grants funding is allocated to schools on a per-pupil basis. The rest is allocated based on the number of students who need additional support, such as language learners, and district factors like rural location. In addition to operating grants, the province provides "special grants" for specific purposes, such as facilities maintenance and early childhood programs. These grants amount to about 10 percent of funding. Independent schools (including religiously affiliated schools) also receive per-pupil funding from the province. Independent schools whose per-pupil costs are the same as or less than public schools receive 50 percent of their local district's per-pupil funding amount, including

supplemental funding for students who need additional support and any “special grants,” described above; independent schools that have higher per-pupil costs than the public schools receive 35 percent of the local district’s per-pupil funding amount.

During the 2019-20 school year, every school district in British Columbia received a funding increase for the first time since 2006. This was due to an additional investment of CAN\$116 million (US\$90 million) in operating funding for school districts, resulting in a 10 percent increase in average per-student funding compared to three years prior. Funding for some students increased even more; for example, additional funding for Indigenous students increased by nearly 20 percent. While the proposed budget for the 2020-21 school year, introduced in February, includes CAN\$134 million (US\$98.6 million) in additional operating funding, the coronavirus pandemic has had a significant negative impact on British Columbia’s economy and its impact on budget approval during this summer’s legislative session is not yet clear. In late June, the government introduced legislation that, if passed, will allow the province—typically required to keep a balanced budget—to operate at a deficit for the next three years while the economy recovers.

In 2018, the government undertook a review of the provincial education funding formula and appointed an independent panel to consult with stakeholders and consider alternatives. The panel recommended sweeping changes in funding for students with special needs and proposed strengthening accountability for student outcomes and financial management. The Ministry formed working groups to study the implementation of the recommendations and consulted with teachers and parents. The Ministry has now released plans to implement an initial set of the recommendations beginning in 2020-21. During 2020-21, the province will provide additional funding for vulnerable student populations, including children in foster care, children with mental health needs, and children in low-income families. The province will also implement new accountability measures for resource allocation, such as requiring school districts to engage families and community members in developing district strategic plans and setting school budgets. Additional recommendations, for which a specific implementation timeline has not yet been set, include revising the funding and delivery of inclusive education as well as supporting students’ post-secondary transitions by expanding career-focused programming during grades 10-12.

### **Accountability System**

In 2015, the legislature abolished British Columbia’s Accountability Framework and replaced it with the Framework for Enhancing Student Learning. The Accountability Framework, which mandated that districts produce annual achievement contracts and report on student achievement, was criticized for not allowing districts flexibility to set district-level goals. The goal of the new Framework is to encourage local districts to take ownership of their own school improvement efforts. It provides very broad guidelines but allows districts flexibility in how to design school improvement plans. The Framework requires schools and districts to develop public, multi-year improvement plans that identify performance gaps among particular groups of students—including Indigenous students, children in foster care, and students with special needs—and plan support measures to address these gaps. Outcomes to be measured include performance on provincial assessments, graduate and transition rates and district

determined measures for student well-being. There is no common format that schools and districts must follow in creating these improvement plans, and they set their own performance goals, based on the performance gaps they have identified. Schools and districts publish public annual progress reports that include aggregate and subgroup results on student outcomes; the province also reports annually on student performance overall and by subgroup. The results are used to inform policies at the district and provincial levels. The Framework was piloted in early 2020 and was just finalized this fall.

The independent panel that reviewed the school funding formula recommended that the province adopt a new accountability and reporting system that would establish greater consistency across districts. During 2019, the Ministry formed an Advisory Committee for Enhancing Student Learning to provide guidance on implementing this recommendation, which will continue to meet at least six times per year.

### **Support for Low-Performing Schools**

Under British Columbia's Framework for Enhancing Student Learning, schools are required to create teams and local partnerships to address struggling student populations including Indigenous students, students in foster care and students with special needs. The Framework recommends that districts design supports that: engage local partners; leverage existing resources; and use team-based approaches, such as a provincial team to support Indigenous students. Because districts have flexibility to design their own supports within these broad guidelines, approaches to supporting low-performing schools vary across the province. The Ministry can also issue administrative directives and deploy special advisory teams to assist districts by building local capacity if the Ministry determines there is a need.