

What does it mean for school boards to have stable, predictable and adequate funding?

Although Alberta Education has provided funding for the growing number of students, it's difficult for school boards to make long-term strategic plans when other funding streams vary from year to year, or are unexpectedly discontinued.

Base grants have only received one small increase in seven years, and school boards are struggling to keep up with both inflationary pressure and increased expectations from Alberta Education.

Additionally, funding for student transportation has not kept pace with costs. Additionally, money designated for maintaining infrastructure is tied to student numbers rather than building condition.

Specific grants and funds are sometimes withdrawn mid-year when budgets are cut, leaving school boards scrambling to pull funding from other areas when these dollars suddenly disappear.

Sometimes, specialized grants are provided by Alberta Education, but the scope changes from year to year. What results: strong programs are discontinued or school boards are required to put the funding into one area when there's another area that needs it more.

School boards can't provide the best quality education—one that prepares students for an evolving economy—when the budgeting process becomes a series of one-year guesses.

Why does this matter for students?

While school boards do all they can to keep changes in funding from impacting classrooms, there are only so many dollars to go around.

A lack of stable, predictable and adequate funding means we can't invest long-term in the programs we feel best meet the educational priorities unique to the Division.

That could mean that while we can still meet the basics, we may not be able to offer specialized programs and opportunities to help students achieve success beyond high school. In turn, it limits our ability to provide effective interventions for students needing a little additional support.

When the scope of programs is changed or narrowed, the Board doesn't have the flexibility to invest dollars where it will have the greatest impact for students in the Division.

The "one size fits all" model rarely works as well as one that allows school boards to invest in specific areas—which will make the greatest difference and provide students an opportunity to make a meaningful contribution to their communities.

When infrastructure dollars are tied to the number of students in a school rather than the infrastructure needs of the building, those schools with smaller student enrolment risk falling under disrepair.

It costs the same to repair a roof at a school with 1,000 students as it does in a school with 300 students—as a result, school boards must try to find additional dollars within existing budgets to properly operate and maintain buildings throughout the Division. Doing so means an infrastructure deficit is created at more schools.

Specific examples:

- EIPS used the Classroom Improvement Fund (CIF) to hire staff, purchase equipment and obtain materials to enhance literacy in Year 1—a priority for students in our area. In Year 2, however, the focus was narrowed significantly and the Division couldn't continue or grow the original initiative.
- In 2018, the Alberta Healthy Schools Wellness Fund, provided through Alberta Health Services, was ended mid-year, with a request to return funds when contracts had been signed and money already spent.
- The carbon tax further strained Division resources and had direct impacts on the level of transportation services provided to students—the first year it was imposed, the cost to EIPS was \$395,800, it's anticipated the cost to the Division will be approximately \$300,000 each successive year.
- Additionally, the transportation funding formula hasn't been reviewed by the province since 2004—but diesel fuel, school buses and contract costs continue to rise.
- In 2018, the government imposed new requirements for the training of school bus operators—but didn't provide funding to cover the costs of training. For EIPS, the cost will be \$77,000 annually. The change further strains the Division's budget and may require the Board to allocate funds for the training that was originally intended for the classroom.
- Any increases for student transportation have not matched the rate of inflation and we have to find more and more efficiencies every year. As a result, EIPS has fewer buses on the road, resulting in longer ride times for students. In addition, bell changes have students arriving earlier to school, meaning students have to be out the door even earlier in the morning and often arrive to school hungry and tired. For some schools, the tight schedules limit their access and experience in terms of field trips.
- Since the 2007-08 school year, base funding has been frozen three times—and in fact, it has remained the same for the last three school years. The allotment provided doesn't keep track with increasing costs, lowering the spending power of the dollars we are given. The one increase that was given over that time was earmarked to pay the increase in teacher wages negotiated by the province.

Possible Questions:

- **What do you feel are the most important issues in education? What is your party's education platform?**
- **Is providing stable, predictable and adequate funding a priority for your party?**
- **Given the current deficit, how do you intend to achieve a stable funding model for education?**
- **Do you believe locally elected school boards should be able to have greater discretion in allocating funds to areas of most urgent need within their divisions?**
- **Do you believe that it's just as important to maintain current schools as it is to build new ones, regardless of student enrolment? These schools represent an investment of taxpayer dollars, and they should be maintained properly.**
- **Do you believe every student is entitled to the best possible learning environment, regardless of how many students attend? What do you think is the best way to ensure this happens?**
- **If the government places new requirements such as school bus training on school boards, where should the funds for those programs come from?**