

BUDGET 2010

Striking the Right Balance

Tuesday, February 09, 2010

[Unsubscribe](#) | [Printable Version](#) | [Send this to a friend](#)

Today, the Government of Alberta announced Budget 2010. This is an important budget for our province, given that we must manage a difficult fiscal situation while protecting the programs and services on which Albertans depend. In Education, this means putting the best interests of students ahead of other desires.

I am pleased to inform you that we are investing \$6.3 billion in education this budget year, a \$52 million increase over last year. This funding will cover a projected student enrolment increase of 4,200 students for the 2010/11 school year, a 12 per cent increase in the number of students requiring [English as a Second Language](#) or [Francisation](#) programs, and an eight per cent increase in the number of [Early Childhood Services \(ECS\)](#) children with severe and mild/moderate disabilities.

As I noted in the fall, we must be prepared to think through how we use our resources in education and change what we do if it means our teachers and school staff will be better able to do their work and, most importantly, that our students are better able to fulfill their potential.

To that end, while preparing this year's Education budget, we undertook discussions with school boards, the Alberta Teachers' Association, and other stakeholders. This collaboration was a distinct departure from the past, and I believe it produced real benefits that are reflected in today's budget. Some believed that these talks were a harbinger of massive cuts, but I believe our budget today speaks for itself.

One of the key desires expressed during our budget discussions was for greater flexibility in how budget dollars are allocated. Therefore, we have made adjustments to how the [Class Size Initiative \(CSI\)](#) is funded (total support for this program increases slightly to \$222 million).

Since its inception in 2004, the Class Size Initiative has been an effective way to reduce class size averages across school jurisdictions. Research, and the [Alberta Commission on Learning](#), suggests that small class sizes have the greatest impact on a child's learning experience in the early years. The targets have been met and exceeded in high school and junior high classes, but not in elementary classes.

Funding will thus be changed to a per-student allocation focusing on Kindergarten to Grade 6. This new allocation formula will be responsive to the expected increase in the number of students in the earlier grades during the next five years.

Some [Career and Technology Studies \(CTS\)](#) courses are more expensive than others because of the need for close supervision to improve safety and student learning (as in welding or automotives, for example). Therefore, a class size allocation will also be added to specific CTS courses to reduce class sizes.

Another theme that emerged during our discussions with stakeholders was that the department should lead by example in reviewing programs and processes to ensure all our expenditures are directed to improving student outcomes. We have done that – in fact, we have gone well beyond that.

By slowing down initiatives, including curriculum development, high speed networking and information technology support, freezing hiring and management salaries, suspending the management bonus program and reducing discretionary spending, since 2008, the department's budget has been reduced by \$17.6 million to \$81 million.

Today's budget does not include funding for additional increases to teachers' salaries. Last week, [an arbitrator ruled](#) that teachers' raise for the 2009-10 school year should be 5.99 per cent, not the 4.82 per cent that was budgeted for in 2009. This further increase requires an additional \$23 million in fiscal year 2009-10, and continued annual funding of \$40 million. However, the arbitrator's ruling came too late for this funding to be included in Budget 2010.

One of the quirks of our Parliamentary system is that a budget cannot be modified until it has been passed by the Legislature. Therefore, I am not able to seek additional funding to cover this increase until the budget passes, which I expect will be near the end of March. School boards, as the employer, are obliged to immediately implement the arbitrator's decision.

With the arbitrator's decision, we now need to deal with the increases scheduled for September 1, 2010 and September 1, 2011. Budget grants to school boards will not be adjusted beyond the changes outlined above. I will work with the Alberta Teachers' Association, the Alberta School Boards' Association, and school boards on how we will deal with budgeting for increases, while maintaining the all-important focus on having teachers in our classrooms. There is no question that higher wages and limited resources would lead us to fewer teachers, unless we can find a long term solution which recognizes the fiscal reality while meeting our commitment to teachers.

I have been clear with school boards that they should not be planning layoffs as a way to pay for this. We know we will need all the teachers we have, and more, in coming years. It makes no sense to balance the books in the short term by taking a step that will affect our students in the long term. I, like you, would like to be able to focus on improving students' classroom experiences today and on the long-term future of the education system. I do not want what is a relatively small problem with wages to distract us from the bigger picture. After all, we are here to put children first.

More details regarding the budget for education can be found on [Education's website](#). I encourage you to take a look at how this budget continues to support the needs of Alberta's students and the future of the province.

I also want to update you on one of our significant policy initiatives from 2009. [Setting the Direction](#) looked at how we can best meet the educational needs of students with disabilities. The proposed [Setting the Direction Framework](#) is going through the policy approval processes of government prior to the release of a government response. This kind of review takes time, but work on *Setting the Direction* is continuing. This project remains a top priority for the ministry.

Until the government response is released, we cannot anticipate what implementation will look like. While funding will not change for the upcoming school year, steps are being taken to disengage funding and coding. This means that the education system needs to transform from focusing our resources and energies on identifying students' with special education needs and then supporting them, to a system that will focus energies and resources on supporting the learning needs of all students to reach the indicators of success that will be established by their learning team.

If you would like more information, e-mail setting.direction@gov.ab.ca and ask to be added to their mailing list.

The past two years have provided an unprecedented opportunity to pursue the issues that truly make a difference in our students' lives. We have been able to take a big-picture, long-term view of what education needs to be. And we have an excellent working relationship among the government, the [Alberta Teacher's Association](#) and the [Alberta School Boards Association](#) that will continue to produce the best possible results for the students we all serve.

Thank you for your interest in education.

Dave Hancock Q.C.
Minister of Education