



Re: Suspending Speech and Language Services

We are concerned that the Fraser Health Authority has again removed speech and language pathologists (SLPs) from providing important speech therapy services and directed their duties to contract tracing. SLPs help children with both language delays and disorders to communicate, be understood and empower families with strategies to support them. This important intervention tells these children that what they do have to say is valued and important. Most families that receive these services have been without speech therapy from March until October, only to have these services suspended once again without any communication as to the length of the disruption to services. By removing these services, even temporarily, it tells these children and their families that their voices do not matter and that they are not a priority. This is the second time that SLPs have been removed from receiving these services during the pandemic. SLPs deliver a vital early intervention. We are worried about the following:

- 1) Children who require these intervening services do not cease to need these services, in fact during a pandemic it can be even more important. The waitlists for this service have not decreased and referrals for speech therapy have remained consistent.
- 2) SLPs are highly trained and specialized and it is not fiscally responsible to utilize them for a position that requires none of their expertise and much less training. According to Work BC, the median hourly wage for an SLP is \$39.56 per year, whereas Administrative Support Clerk positions that are being hired by Fraser Health are being advertised with an hourly wage of \$19.72 - \$21.78. Furthermore, for families who seek private SLP for therapy the hourly cost could range between \$140 to as high as a recommended \$186.05, by [Speech and Hearing BC](#). This puts additional financial strain in an uncertain time for families.
- 3) Removing these services, even temporarily, puts additional strain on the school district in the near term future. Phonological and phonemic awareness are the most predictive skills for success in learning to read (Anthony & Francis, 2005). Maximizing children's vocabulary and speech perception skills before they begin school may be an important strategy for ensuring that children with speech-sound disorders begin school with age-appropriate speech and phonological awareness abilities (Rvachew, 2006).

The following recommendations are being requested:

1. The Fraser Health Authority have SLPs return to their speech therapy services; delivering this service through online delivery (zoom). Additional resources should be provided to ensure that additional staff can be hired to perform the required contact tracing.
2. The Fraser Health Authority resume hearing screens for both kindergarten and grade 1 students in the 2021/22 school year to make up for the kindergarten hearing screens that were missed in the current school year (2020/21).



3. The Provincial government provide additional funding for speech and language services at the school district level for the 2021/22 school year to assist with ensuring children have the phonological skills to facilitate the efficacy of literacy instruction in kindergarten and primary grades.

By removing the speech services at a critical time like this pandemic, it sends a clear message that it is dispensable. Children being able to effectively communicate is an integral part of becoming an engaged and active member of the community. They not only deserve the interventions necessary to gain the skills for the building blocks of literacy, but also have the human right to early intervention for infants and young children with disabilities as articulated through two United Nations treaties: the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). Early intervention speech and language services are not dispensable and need to be prioritized with the importance they require.

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The BCEdAccess Society is an organization of families of children and youth with disabilities and complex learners all over the province of British Columbia. We champion and support children and youth who have disabilities and who are complex learners to reach their full potential in BC education, and in all aspects of their lives.

This is achieved through supporting families, sharing information, providing education to families, allies, professionals and students, providing community engagement and awareness, and other activities to promote equitable access to education and inclusion for all. We run a well respected annual parent/guardian advocacy conference, bringing together families, self-advocates, educators and allies of children and youth with disabilities. We also do research into the exclusion of students with disabilities from school and community, and other disability issues impacting children and youth. We advocate to local and provincial government on behalf of families to improve accessibility in all aspects of the lives of children and youth with disabilities.

The function of BCEdAccess is to facilitate the following main goal with its supporting objectives:

- to advance education for families of children with disabilities and barriers to social inclusion by:
 - offering instructional seminars, conferences, workshops and webinars to the general public on a part-time basis
 - organizing and operating an annual conference on inclusion in public education



BCEdAccess

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- providing instructional seminars on topics related to disability and social inclusion
- providing opportunities for families to take part in peer support groups, forums and events or exchange ideas, develop coping skills, gather resources and build knowledge about inclusion
- conducting research on best practices related to inclusion in education and disseminating the results of the research to the public
- researching, highlighting and developing information and resources, including through social media, online support groups and public affairs, to help families and the public learn about inclusion in education and the effects of exclusion, both in the past and present

BCEdAccess works collaboratively with other not for profit organizations and charities to assist them in their goals such as inclusion and equitable access to resources, emphasizing educational as well as other social supports. BCEdAccess also works constructively with the British Columbia Ministry of Education and Ministry of Child and Family Development to identify gaps and other areas of service that require attention and improvement. The feedback provided to these ministries is received from both the immediate community they serve as well as the general public seeking help on acute matters of educational concern.