



Dr. Bonnie Henry
British Columbia Public Health Officer

Dear Dr. Henry,

I want to first thank you for your tireless work on behalf of the province during this pandemic. We watch you regularly and recognize that your work is exhausting with few breaks and goes well beyond what we see on TV.

I'm reaching out today to share a blog that we posted today because we're hoping that you can address this for families very worried about the return to school date. Here it is:

Families of disabled students in BC worry about possible extended break

BCEdAccess receives ongoing reports from families who are experiencing distress. This morning a parent contacted us to say they are now seriously considering signing a voluntary care agreement for their child since they heard extending the school break is a possibility and they don't think they will make it that long. We are heartsick.

Heartsick.

<https://globalnews.ca/news/7537387/bc-school-winter-break-extension-students/>

News headlines about potentially extending the break add to uncertainty and overwhelm. If we're going to talk about extending the break, we need to emphasize to parents that help will be there. In fact, the COVID guidelines already say school support has to be available. Families need to know.

<https://www.openschool.bc.ca/covidguidelines/#overview>

It's already been a difficult year for families. Those facing systemic barriers were already under great strain. Many, who needed more in-home support or childcare, were already struggling. These families need access to year-round 8 am to 6pm supports so they can work and thrive, and so their children can access all the supports they need without interruption.

Generally parents are unable to schedule or plan caregiving with this uncertainty. There is a loss of social opportunities much needed by disabled children and youth in particular. This creates havoc for people with low or no income, and creates a challenge for those who must work. Children could be left at home alone. Some are in family structures that are barely functioning financially, emotionally or otherwise.



We want it to be clear that we do support increased safety measures such as smaller class sizes, hand washing, mask wearing where possible, physical distancing, barriers, air circulation and ventilation, increased surface cleaning, and other interventions in place...but we need continued and ongoing access and support for students made vulnerable by systemic barriers like the ones that have been made glaringly visible with this pandemic.

Not all students facing barriers have designations and many students may not even be visible or known to need supports. It may be hard to tell that a student in an unrecognized but difficult family environment depends on the social connections they have at school. Some come from families already stretched to put resources like even childcare around their children. Some students need the social supports and work experience opportunities so that they can be ready to leave the home and support themselves upon graduation. Others need social skills and education support.

The easiest move if reduction in numbers of students at school is required would be a move to Stage 3 or 4. This framework already exists in the Operational Guidelines.

https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/education/administration/kindergarten-to-grade-12/safe-carin-g-orderly/five_stages_k-12_education.pdf

Some Impacts of Extending the Break

- More stress/strain on parents and caregivers already under too much
- Lost work time for parents/caregivers
- More physical demands
- Students who need the support of school community may be isolated at home
- Lack of access to food, menstrual products, community resources, therapies, interventions
- Loss of respite time
- No extra funding being offered
- CERB is gone
- Keeping kids busy and entertained takes financial resources



- Caregiving costs are high and not all families have access to out of school care. Moreover, if students are in out of school care, it makes more sense to keep schools open than shift a financial burden to families.
- Some families depend on settlement and family supports and referrals

Reading this blog, we hope you'll consider clarifying that access will be available, regardless of your decision, in all stages except stage 5, for students with additional support needs.

I would also like to put in a word for parents and caregivers of children and youth with disabilities to be prioritized for the vaccine. This will make everyone safer.

We would love to have the opportunity to connect with your office in the new year to talk about other disability related questions we have for students, and we look forward to opportunities to develop partnership and dialogue with you as we navigate these unique times we all are wading through. In the meantime, 'be kind, be calm, and be safe', and happy holidays!

Tracy Humphreys, she/her
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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:



BCEdAccess

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- 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
- 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 other child-serving Ministries 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.