

July 7th, 2021

Dear Honourable Minister Whiteside,

BCEdAccess Society is an organization of families of children and youth with disabilities and complex learning needs from across British Columbia. We champion and support these children and youth to reach their full potential in BC education, and in all aspects of their lives.

We are reaching out to you as a collective Working Group created by members of BCEdAccess, with the purpose of advancing awareness of ableism within our systems and community, as well as promoting anti-ableism in policies, procedures, pedagogy and curriculum within the BC education system.

Our working group defines Ableism as the discrimination of and social prejudice against people with disabilities, both visible and invisible, based on the belief that typical abilities are superior. At its heart, ableism is rooted in the assumption that disabled people require 'fixing' and it defines people by their disability.

As part of our initial work, the Working Group has been exploring the existing Special Education Policy Manual (1995) through an anti-ableism lens. We realize that it was originally published in 1995 with some undocumented updates in 2016.

When we dig down into the document we find very outdated, problematic ableist language and policy. Here are some examples that stood out to us immediately:

1. The Manual references the DSM-4. Professionals have been using DSM-5 since 2013. Some Districts still refer to the DSM-4 because that is what is in the Manual.
2. The use of problematic euphemisms, for example "Special Needs". "Persons are viewed more negatively when described as having special needs than when described as having a disability or having a certain disability, indicating that special needs is an ineffective euphemism" (Gernsbacher, Raimond, Balinghasay, & Boston, 2016). Outside of the BC Education K-12 system ie. Post Secondary Institutions, Workforce, Law etc. the term "Special Needs" is not used.
3. On pages 93 to 95, reference to a Provincial Resource Program, www.pisp.ca, is now a gambling website. In addition, nine links to www.vsb.bc.ca/programs are no longer working.
4. ADHD, FASD and Down Syndrome are not directly assigned to any one specific designation in the Manual. Their exclusion dismisses their need for support and does not provide schools and families with the acknowledgement required to access additional supports. They all have major impacts on learning and social emotional well-being. [Brief Summary – Centre for ADHD Awareness Canada \(caddac.ca\)](http://caddac.ca)
5. On Page 56 it states: "E.5 Behavioural Needs or Mental Illness Definitions Students can

experience behaviour, social/emotional, or mental health problems that range from mild to serious. Most students with social/emotional difficulties can be supported in school through regular discipline, counselling, and school-based services. A smaller number of students require more intensive support.” Discipline is no longer an accepted treatment for neurodevelopmental disorders, trauma or mental illness and can cause more harm.

6. The manual has many “shoulds” instead of “musts”. This leaves much room for district level interpretation and creates an inequitable experience of learning for students across schools, districts and the province. Plain and clear language can help all parties collaborate in a more effective manner.
7. On page 87 the term "Grandfathering" is used. This term is now widely accepted as inappropriate due to its racist and paternalistic origins. A suitable replacement term would be “legacy”.

On page 9, it states “Special Education programs and services enable students with special needs to have equitable access to learning and opportunities to pursue and achieve the goals of their educational programs.” We know from speaking to other members of BCEdAccess, along with data collected by our Exclusion Tracker, Forced Out Surveys and district graduation rates data, that the existing manual is not serving students with disabilities and specific learning needs in the way that it must going forward. Without clarity, consistency and accountability measures, the current Special Education Policy Manual is an ineffective roadmap to ensuring the right to equitable access to education.

BCEdAccess and the Anti-Ableism working group appreciate the continued communication with your Ministry regarding inclusion and equitable education. We understand that there was some input from members of BCEdAccess in 2019 at a BCEdAccess Conference regarding the Manual and we would like to meet with you regarding our ideas about this important document so it can better serve learners in the education system.

We look forward to hearing from you about what time would work best,

Sincerely,

Jenn Scharf, BEd, MA

Kaori Lau, BA, BEd

Levonne Abshire, BEd, MEd, COC

Kim Block BA, DSW, FLE

Chantelle Morvay-Adams, Secretary, *BCEdAccess*

Secretary@bcedaccess.com