



The Honourable Sheila Malcolmson, BC Minister of Mental Health and Addictions

Dear Minister Malcolmson,

I want to congratulate you on your appointment to Cabinet, first of all. I know that this is still a very new Ministry that former Minister Darcy worked hard to get started from zero and as such we have largely waited to address the issue of mental health for children and youth with disabilities with your Ministry.

However, during the pandemic the lack of disability focused services has really been highlighted and there are more children and families in deep crisis than ever before.

This email was prompted by a post in our parent community Facebook group recently which has generated huge response. Here is the post, shared anonymously but with permission:

" Has anyone actually had success and was actually HELPED instead of just being shuffled from resource to resource, with our child/youth mental health system? We have been trying to get my now 10yr old PROPER help for over 4yrs now. It is to the point where I am having to take her into the ER....where once again we are bounced. "

I want to note that the Foundry has proven to be a great resource for families and appears to have appropriate services and people knowledgeable about disability and also trauma, which is almost always a hand-in-hand issue for disabled youth. Access to their services is still limited but is expanding and this is having a positive impact.

However, there is no equivalent service for children under 12. This is a large gap for children with disabilities. They need the support early in life. This impacts family stability as well as the future of the child.

The intersection of disability and addiction for children and youth is trauma. Layering in the impacts on Indigenous and other racialized children, it is having a disproportionate impact. Mental health interventions need to start earlier than age 12, and they need to include a specific plan to support children with disabilities.

I want to take the time to explain just a couple of mental health supports that are excellent but not sufficient for disabled children and their families.

Kelty Mental Health recently put on a two part series on school refusal. This issue is of course worse during the pandemic and it was a timely series. However, it lacked a disability or trauma lens, being more general, and so the many families whose children are most impacted found nothing to support their children.

Confident Parents: Thriving Kids is another program that, while excellent for many families to set them on a new path, is not helpful as a referral for some families who are struggling because of



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the barriers to accessing support for their child's disability, and it also routinely rejects families whose children's mental health needs are seen as 'severe'.

Access to school counselors would be one thing that could make a big difference to students immediately. Student to counselor ratios right now vary by district but in some districts we are seeing 1200:1 or even higher. While the Canadian Counseling and Psychotherapy Association doesn't recommend a specific ratio because they don't want to limit the opportunity for better service to children, the maximum ratio in BC prior to 2002 was 360:1.

In addition, access to counseling and psychotherapy for children with disabilities and children in need of additional supports should be free and should not depend on qualifying for specific programs through specific Ministries or agencies. Currently Child and Youth Mental Health, for example, will not support autistic children and youth, and even those receiving CYMH services are discharged upon receiving an autism diagnosis, despite still clearly needing mental health support. There is no equivalent service for those autistic children to access.

This letter could be much longer in itemizing and addressing the significant mental health needs of disabled children and youth, and their families. We would really appreciate an opportunity to meet with you and discuss this issue further. I am available to meet over Zoom at any time.

Thank you so much for your time and consideration,

Best regards,

Tracy Humphreys
founder and Chair, BCEdAccess Society
www.bcedaccess.com

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
 - 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.