



The Honourable Jason Kenney
Office of the Premier
307 Legislature Building
10800 - 97 Avenue
Edmonton, Alberta T5K 2B6
Email: premier@gov.ab.ca

March 8, 2020

Dear Premier Kenney;

Re: Alberta Budget 2020, Special Education Crisis

In 2018 the Public Health Agency of Canada reported that 1 in 66 children and youth are diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder. As civil society community groups comprised of individuals and families living with Autism Spectrum Disorder throughout our province (Autism Society Alberta, Autism Society Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo, Chinook Autism Society, Autism Edmonton and Autism Calgary), we are writing to request the rejection of the Interim Funding Manual for School Authorities 2020/21 School Year. The approach is detrimental to students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. More time and iterative collaborative development with cross sectoral stakeholders (especially parents) is required for thoughtful and strategic attention to address diverse learners across a lifelong learning path.

While Alberta enters a period of fiscal restraint, developing strategies to ensure limited public funding has the best possible impact is imperative. The recent funding framework for education imposes restrictions on program delivery for diverse students of all ages that will result in a failure to yield positive educational outcomes.

On Friday March 6, 2020 we accepted an invitation from the office of the Minister of Education to become a contributing partner in advising on the interim funding manual. We are committed to provide thoughtful guidance in this process. However it remains our position that more than one month of community consultation is necessary to ensure the needs of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder and other disabilities are met. Prior work on building the new Education Act took years of iterative consultations to achieve success. Given that this completely revised funding manual guides in direct service program delivery, this process requires equal if not greater consultative development from all stakeholders - families in particular.

We initially focused our attention on the interim funding framework for early intervention. We immediately identified significant and insurmountable barriers to the delivery of evidence based intervention practices in early education. The new funding framework:

- Removes necessary flexibility to balance classroom instruction hours with interdisciplinary professional services, critical for a child with Autism Spectrum Disorder to even cope in a preschool setting,

- Eliminates individualized special education in public Kindergarten classes (prior funds will now be utilized for crisis response across K-12 at the expense of early intervention),
- Restricts the expansion and growth of independent, private and charter schools (this limits fair and equitable access)
- Increases demand on disability services across government ministries (Alberta Health Services and Family Support for Children with Disabilities in particular),
- Adds excessive stress to at-risk families (diminishing their long term emotional and financial sustainability, limiting the years they can assume care of their loved one).

The importance of timely and appropriate early intervention can not be overstated. The proposed redistribution of education funding for early intervention in Budget 2020 is hasty and ill advised. The proposed model will position preschool children with Autism Spectrum Disorder to require more costly intensive services in subsequent years and diminish their quality of life.

As we only begin to evaluate the implications of the interim funding framework on education for elementary, middle and high school students, we are already identifying fundamental problems. Minor changes to this funding framework will be inadequate. With this direction, diverse learners will not be positioned to succeed in an inclusive education setting. As a result more families will seek alternate programs in both public and non public environments. However, the interim funding framework adversely impacts the function and growth potential of these programs.

Alberta's united autism community welcomes all opportunities to work collaboratively with our government across ministries to explore solutions to more effectively support the success and independence of disabled Albertans and their families. While we work towards this goal, it is imperative that we continue to support disabled citizens to prevent escalation of need, support the highest quality of life, and reduce lifelong dependence on more costly systems of support.

In closing, we request the rejection of the Interim Funding Manual for School Authorities 2020/21 School Year. Moreover, we request your commitment to bring the autism community to the table as a collaborative partner at early stages of efforts to optimise program delivery in each ministry. An alarming number of individuals and families (adults and children) living with Autism Spectrum Disorder face barriers to critical services. Hence, we are equally vested in maximising the impact of limited tax dollars and a sustainable future for our province.

On behalf of Alberta's united Autism community,

***Autism Society Alberta,
Autism Edmonton, Autism Calgary, Chinook Autism Society,
Autism Society of the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo***

Jason Scheyen
President, Autism Society Alberta

cc: *The Honorable Adriana LaGrange, Minister of Education
The Honorable Rajan Sawhney, Minister of Community and Social Services
The Honorable Rebecca Schulz, Minister of Children's Services
The Honorable Travis Toews, President of Treasury Board and Minister of Finance
Tony Flores, Advocate for Persons with Disabilities
Neil Pierce, Chair, Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities*