

School districts in a cash crunch

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The Saanich school district's funding crisis is real. Like many school boards around the province, it faces another year of cuts to services and programs at a time when the need for a quality public education system has never been greater.

The provincial government announced funding levels for school districts last week. The government highlighted the increase in spending per pupil, up 2.5 per cent for the coming year.

And for school districts with growing enrolments, that is a good increase. It offers the chance to spend more on reducing class sizes, supporting students with special needs and seeking improved results for all students.

But most districts -- in fact, for every district on the Island save Sooke -- expect fewer students again next year.

Take Saanich as an example. The district projects about 250 fewer students in September, about a 3.3-per-cent decline.

Even with the increase in funding per student, the district's revenue from the provincial government will be effectively frozen for the coming year.

But the district's costs aren't frozen. Most significantly, the existing contracts with teachers and other employees call for a 2.5-per-cent overall wage increase. On top of that, there are mandated pay increases for teachers and others based on years of experience. Like all British Columbians, school districts will pay eight per cent more for electricity and face normal inflationary pressures.

The government's theory is that school district costs should decline more or less in proportion to any drop in the number of students. (There is special funding to protect districts facing enrolment declines, but it falls short of what trustees say is needed.)

In reality, the relationship between the number of students and costs is not so simple. A three-per-cent drop in the number of students does not result in a three-per-cent drop in costs.

In Saanich, again, the expected drop of some 250 students will mean, on average, about 17 fewer students in each of the 14 schools. In some cases, the numbers might work out in September. There will be a decrease in students in a specific grade large enough to allow one fewer class, with resulting savings.

But more often, the reduced enrolment will not allow simple cuts. Losing five students from a grade level in one school doesn't likely mean an entire class and teacher can be cut. And the opportunities for school closures, which do bring savings, have largely been exhausted. Saanich has closed six schools -- and opened a new one -- to try and cope with budget pressures. In any case, the government has told school districts to halt closures in case the spaces are needed for expanded kindergarten.

There are always opportunities for efficiencies. But school districts have taken many of those steps already. The cuts now affect programs, support for students and even services like crossing guards.

The problems are widespread. The Victoria school district is to receive a provincial funding increase of less than one per cent, and faces a 2.5-per-cent minimum increase in wage costs. Even Sooke, with a growing enrolment, will receive only a 2.1-per-cent funding increase.

These are, of course, challenging economic times and the provincial government is committed to limiting deficits.

But quality public education deserves protection. It is an investment, not just in the lives of the students, but in the future competitiveness of the province.

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