



SCHOOL DISTRICT 5

S O U T H E A S T K O O T E N A Y

October 11, 2023

Selina Robinson, Minister of Post-Secondary Education and Future Skills
Room 124 Parliament Buildings
Victoria, BC V8V 1X4

Dear Hon. Minister Robinson,

RE: Neurodiversity Training in Post-Secondary for Teachers, Education Assistants and Early Childhood Educators

On May 31st, 2023, School District 5 (SD5), Southeast Kootenay Board of Education sent the Hon. Premier Eby a letter regarding neurodiversity training for educators, early childhood educators and educational assistants. This letter was forwarded by Hon. Eby to Hon. Rachna Singh, Minister of Education and Child Care (MECC).

Hon. Singh sent a response letter to our Board on July 24, 2023 informing us that the MECC does not set the standard for teacher education programs and that enhancements would need to be discussed with each university. She also informed our Board that the Early Childhood Educator Registry (ECCR) assesses and recommends post-secondary early childhood programs in British Columbia.

As Minister of Post-Secondary Education and Future Skills we understand that your post-secondary focus is on “building a strong, secure and sustainable economy...ensuring British Columbians have the inclusive, accessible and future-focused post-secondary skills...they will need to succeed”.

While our Board appreciates that much of your mandate relates to ensuring access to post-secondary education, including access for new Canadians in British Columbia and international students, we hope you will also consider the importance of ensuring that *all British Columbians are provided with the tools and opportunities* to contribute to a “strong, secure and sustainable economy that works for everyone”.

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• Nicole Heckendorf • Chris Johns • Sarah Madsen • Wendy Turner

To that end, at the School District 5 (SD5), Southeast Kootenay public Board Meeting of September 12, 2023, the Board carried the following motion:

That the Board write a letter in response to the Minister of Education and Child Care's letter of July 24, 2023 regarding neurodiversity training for educators, early childhood educators and educational assistants to the Honourable Selina Robinson, Minister of Post-Secondary Education and Future Skills and copied to the Minister of Education and Child Care.

While we understand that, unlike the Ministry of Education and Childcare, the Ministry of Post Secondary Education and Future Skills, does not mandate the curricular competencies required of universities, we hope that –barring the ability to mandate curriculum—you will consider dialoguing with post-secondary institutions on the merits of embedding neurodiversity training in the curriculum for teachers, education assistants and early childhood educators.

At present, only approximately thirty-three percent (33%) of neurodivergent individuals over the age of fifteen (15) are employed in Canada. Standardized training for educational professionals would redefine how the neurodivergent are included in the classroom and eventually in the community, workplace and society –the ultimate goal of inclusion—enabling them to contribute to a “strong, secure and sustainable economy that works for everyone”.

Enclosed is a copy of the May 31, 2023 letter written by the SD5 Board of Education to the Hon. Premier Eby and the July 24, 2023 response letter received by the Hon. Minister Singh. These letters should provide you with the rationale for the Board's request for neurodiversity training at the post-secondary level and why the MECC is unable to ensure that teachers, education assistants and early childcare providers have the training required to address the needs of neurodivergent students and children in the classroom.

We look forward to your timely response to our request.

Sincerely,



Doug McPhee, Board Chair

Cc*: Hon. David Eby, Premier, Province of BC
Kevin Falcon, Leader, BC United Party
John Rustad, Leader, BC Conservative Party
Doug McPhee (Chair) • Trina Ayling • Bev Bellina • Irene Bischler • Alysha Clarke
• Nicole Heckendorf • Chris Johns • Sarah Madsen • Wendy Turner

Sonia Furstenau, Leader, BC Green Party
Elenor Sturko, Critic for Education, BC United Party
Karin Kirkpatrick, Critic for Child and Family Development & Childcare, BC
United Party
Tom Shypitka, MLA Kootenay East
Carolyn Broady, President, BCSTA
BCSTA for distribution to member Boards of Education
Dawn Lang, President, Kootenay Boundary Branch (KBB), for distribution
to KBB members
Clint Johnston, President BC Teachers' Federation
Laura Ward, President, BCCPAC
Shelley Balfour & Adrienne Demers, CFTA Co-Chairs, for distribution to
staff representatives
Krista Napl SD5 CUPE President
Lies Salvador, DPAC Chair
Aaron Thorn, President, SD5 Administrators' Association
Chris Walker/Corey Bullock, CBC Radio
Dennis Walker, 107.5 Today FM Radio
Wylie Henderson, Rewind Radio 102.9
Jeff Johnson, Wild B104 Radio
Josiah Spyker/Ryley McCormack, 107.5 Today FM
Barry Coulter/Trevor Crawley, Cranbrook Daily Townsman
Ian Cobb, e-know Online News
Joshua Fischlin, Fernie Free Press
SD5 Trustees and District Management

*This correspondence is public and transparent. Please feel free to share and/or
respond with comment.

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• Nicole Heckendorf • Chris Johns • Sarah Madsen • Wendy Turner



July 24, 2023

Ref: 290468

Doug McPhee, Chair
Board of Education
School District No. 5 (Southeast Kootenay)
Email: doug.mcphee@sd5.bc.ca

Dear Doug McPhee:

Your letter of May 31, 2023, addressed to the Honourable David Eby, Premier, regarding neurodiversity training for educators, early childhood educators, and educational assistants, has been sent to me and as Minister of Education and Child Care, I am pleased to respond.

The Ministry of Education and Child Care agrees that schools need to be inclusive environments for students and staff. British Columbia promotes an inclusive education system in which all students are fully participating members of a community of learners. British Columbia educators strive to ensure that all learners are supported to participate in school, develop their individual potential, and acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes they need for a successful personal future.

As you know the Ministry of Education and Child Care sets the K-12 provincial curriculum standard which outlines what students in BC are expected to be able to know, do, and understand. However, the Ministry does not set the standard for teacher education programs or for the professional learning of teachers or educational assistants. The curriculum of teacher education programs is set by the universities offering teaching certification programs. Teacher education programs do typically include coursework and training in inclusion and topics relating to neurodiversity. However, any further requests or enhancements to the neurodiversity training teachers receive would need to be addressed with each university.

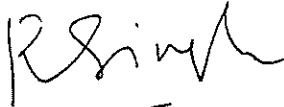
Once teachers are in the field, professional development opportunities are guided by the collective agreements established between the British Columbia Teachers' Federation (BCTF) and school districts, allowing teachers to pursue opportunities of their choosing to support the growth of their professional practice. Locally elected boards of education and districts, like the Southeast Kootenay School Board, have the authority to design and offer professional learning opportunities for all staff in the district, including neurodiversity training. Once again, any requests or enhancements to the neurodiversity training school district staff receive would need to be addressed locally by each school district.

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Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) are certified through the Early Childhood Educator Registry (ECER). The ECER assesses and recommends post-secondary early childhood education programs in British Columbia. The current Standards of Practice and Occupational Competencies are being updated to support inclusion as a pillar as reflected in the ChildCareBC plan. Additionally, professional development opportunities for ECEs include learning about neurodiversity although these courses are not specifically prescribed but selected by each educator. Finally, ECEs are able to take post-basic training which includes neurodiversity education as part of the "Special Needs Educator" certificate.

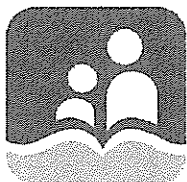
Again, thank you for writing, and for your continued commitment to inclusive learning spaces in British Columbia.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Rachna Singh', with a horizontal line underneath the name.

Rachna Singh
Minister

pc: Honourable David Eby, Premier
Honourable Selina Robinson, Minister of Post-Secondary Education and Future Skills



SCHOOL DISTRICT 5

S O U T H E A S T K O O T E N A Y

May 31, 2023

Hon. David Eby, Premier, Province of BC
Parliament Buildings
Victoria, BC V8V 1X4

Dear Hon. David Eby,

RE: Addition of Neuro-Diverse Training to Curriculms

At the School District 5 (SD5), Southeast Kootenay public Board Meeting of May 9th, 2023, the Board carried the following motion:

THAT the Board of Education write a letter to the provincial government advocating for the inclusion of neuro-diverse training in the curriculum for teachers, education assistants and early childhood educators.

On March 30, 2023, the Canadian Federal Government gave assent to *Bill S-203, An Act respecting a federal framework on autism spectrum disorder*. This Bill recognizes that there is a need for autistic persons and their families to receive direct, timely and ongoing access to financial support, treatment and services.

While this Bill does not specifically address K – 12 education, which is the purview of each provincial government, it is significant in that it acknowledges the distinct needs related to persons within the autism spectrum.

More than **95 percent** of persons on the Spectrum have at least one co-occurring condition (ie: physical condition, language disorder, learning difficulty), and more than **50 percent** have at least one of those conditions *–in addition to autism*.

Simply put, some persons on the Spectrum will have conditions that respond

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best using a medical approach while others will have conditions that respond better to a neurodiverse approach. Many have both.

Medical approaches are often straightforward and easily communicated to the people who employ them. The neurodiverse approach is not.

A neurodiverse approach requires that equal attention be paid to what an individual *can do* rather than disproportionately focusing on what a person struggles with. These variations are intrinsic to an individual's identity and sense of self.

As educators, we need to rethink the language we use (ie: at risk for, deficit in, etc.), stop defaulting to the "autism label" to explain *all* actions or behaviours of an individual and recognize that persons on the Spectrum encounter a range of emotions (just like everyone else), *even if they are unable to express those emotions in a typical way.*

According to a 2019 Scientific American article, *"...in highly social and unpredictable environments some of their [neurodivergent] differences may manifest as disabilities, while in more autism-friendly environments the disabilities can be minimized, allowing other differences to blossom as talents."*

Without the proper education and understanding of those who work with persons on the Spectrum, a neurodiverse student is more easily triggered leading to frustration for the student, classroom disruptions/interrupted learning for other students and, in too many cases, violent outbursts against the professional(s) caring for that student. Neurotypical students who witness such behaviour simply learn to "deal" with it.

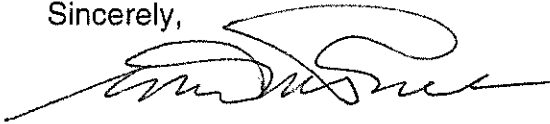
To the other extreme, many neurodivergent students learn to "mask" (ie: forcing eye contact, mimicking gestures, minimizing personal interests or "pushing through" intense sensory experiences) their differences, denying their own identity and sense of self, to "fit in". The long-term consequences of masking have been linked to anxiety, depression, loss of identity, exhaustion and suicidal thoughts.

Inclusion of neuro-diverse training in the curriculum for teachers, education assistants and early childhood educators would reduce the incidents of student-to-staff violence in schools and increase the opportunity for all students to thrive. As these students grow into adulthood, they will begin to positively redefine how neurodiverse citizens are included in the community, workplace and society – which is the ultimate goal of inclusion.

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Education and training *must be built into the curriculum* for teachers, education assistants and early childhood educators. For the safety of our staff, the successful learning environment of our students and the future inclusion of neurodiverse citizens in society, our Board urges you to consider the merits of our request and the tremendous advantages such a small change can reap. We look forward to your timely response.

Sincerely,



Doug McPhee, Board Chair

Cc*: Hon. Selina Robinson, Minister, Post-Secondary Education & Future Skills
Hon. Rachna Sing, Minister, Education and Child Care
Kevin Falcon, Leader, BC United Party
Sonia Furstenau, Leader, BC Green Party
Tom Shypitka, MLA Kootenay East BC
Elenor Sturko, Critic for Education, BC United Party
Karin Kirkpatrick, Critic for Child and Family Development & Childcare, BC United Party
Hon. Katrine Conroy, Minister of Finance
Chris Brown, Assistant Deputy Minister, Resource Management Division
Dr. Allyson Jule, Chair, Association of BC Deans of Education
Violet Jessen, Chair, Early Childhood Educators of BC
Alicia Kroeker, Chair, Education Assistants of BC Society
Carolyn Broady, President, BCSTA
BCSTA for distribution to member Boards of Education
Clint Johnston, President BC Teachers' Federation
Chris Schultz-Lorentzen, President, BCCPAC
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Joshua Fischlin, Fernie Free Press

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