



Submission to Select Standing Committee On Finance and Government Services

June 2020

putting children and youth **first**

#322 – 312 Main Street, Vancouver BC V6A 2T2

604-709-6970 | 1-800-307-1212 | info@firstcallbc.org | www.firstcallbc.org

Contents

Introduction	3
Recommendations	4
Priority 1: Created a task force for child and youth wellness in the pandemic recovery	4
Priority 2: Reduce barriers and enhance income supports for families living in deep poverty.	5
Priority 3: Target and increase investment in infant and early childhood development.	7
Priority 4: Adequately fund public education and accelerate building a quality, public child care system	8
Priority 5: Support youth in and from care and their care-givers, including kinship caregivers.	9
Priority 6: Ensure all children and youth are safe and do not go hungry	11
Conclusion	11
Appendix 1: Our Responsibility to Support All Children’s Rights.....	12
Appendix 2: First Call Coalition Members.....	13

ABOUT US

First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition is a non-partisan, cross-sectoral coalition of 107 provincial and regional organizations, individuals and local community networks who share the belief that children and youth should have “first call” on our province’s resources. We are committed to achieving the following 4 Keys to Success for B.C.’s children and youth:

- A strong commitment to early childhood development
- Support in transitions from childhood to youth and adulthood
- Increased economic equality
- Safe and caring communities

Introduction

Our 2019 BC Child Poverty Report Card included nine recommendations to reduce and eliminate child and family poverty. These recommendations, based on sound data and research, pre-dated the COVID19 crisis.

The COVID19 crisis has exacerbated existing inequities and further marginalized poor children and their families.

In the midst of the COVID-19 crisis, we want to call attention to the heightened need for a clear focus on the well-being of children and youth in the next provincial budget. In an open letter to government on June 17, 2020, First Call and the Basic Health Society urged the government to create a task force to support an evidence-based, equity-oriented strategy for children's wellness in the pandemic recovery. The letter has been signed by over 200 child advocates, physicians, researchers and health care professionals¹.

The letter recommends priorities for the task force to create resilient environments for children and the adults who care for them and stresses:

“Urgent action must be taken to address parallel epidemics of domestic violence and substance use, and dramatic increases in mental health concerns, as parents and caregivers struggle under real fears and pressures during the pandemic.”

In this submission, we highlight six priority areas with recommendations for next year's budget, starting with establishing a task force.

We preface our following recommendations by acknowledging the significant investments made in the 2019-2020 budget in supports for children, youth and families, particularly in the improvements and expansion of the province's child tax credit benefit due to take effect this fall.

While the BC Child Opportunity Benefit has the potential to have real and positive impacts on families we are aware that many eligible families – up to 30%² - are not currently receiving the Canada Child Benefit and so will not have access to the provincial benefit.

Government must also be commended for additional funding for social housing and child care, more support for youth in and from care and their caregivers, greater investment in and coordination of mental health and addictions services for youth and some enhancements to the income assistance regime.

We note that while increased support for kinship caregivers is a step in the right direction, the changes announced will only benefit a small group of families because barriers to enrolling in the programs are prohibitive.

¹ Open Letter [Fhttps://firstcallbc.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/OpenletterforkidsCOVID-19taskforcewebversion.pdf](https://firstcallbc.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/OpenletterforkidsCOVID-19taskforcewebversion.pdf)

² Per The Honourable Ahmed Hussen, Federal Minister of Families, Children and Social Development, May 2020

Lastly, we recognize government's recent efforts to address administrative barriers that prevent people from accessing benefits and services and encourage government to continue this work across all ministries.

Recommendations

Priority 1: Create a task force for child and youth wellness in the pandemic recovery

On June 16, 2020 First Call in partnership with Basics for Health Society issued an open letter to government³ signed by over 200 organizations and individuals calling for the establishment of a **Children's Safety and Wellness Task Force**.

We restate the letter's broad recommendations here.

- **Prioritize funding for crisis supports and programs to support the mental and emotional health of children and families;**
- **address poverty, food and housing insecurity, and systemic racism; and**
- **enhance equitable opportunities for outdoor play, learning and connection.**

Children's social environments have shrunk during the isolation measures, diminishing critical opportunities for co-regulation of emotion and stress through social connection and the support of broader families, communities, and culture. Most adults in children's lives – parents, teachers, and caregivers – are working hard to protect children while carrying an additional burden of stress. Many adults supporting children are under additional financial strain, and a wealth of evidence indicates that this has significant health impacts in the short and long term, including long-lasting impacts on children's biology and health. Furthermore, many organizations have raised concern about parallel epidemics of domestic violence and substance use, and dramatic increases in mental health concerns as parents struggle under real fears and pressures during the pandemic.

Supporting children's well-being is a cross-sectoral, interdisciplinary effort that should not be delayed because of the complexity of the work.

It is important that decisions impacting children and their families be informed by a range of experts and those with lived experience. We propose drawing upon a wealth of expertise in this province that will be amplified in collaboration.

Recommendations:

1. That a collaborative, interdisciplinary Children's Safety and Wellness Task Force be implemented in BC, including governmental and non-governmental representatives, to support work across sectors, and to build resilience and support a healthy recovery for children from the COVID-19 pandemic.

³ Open Letter for Kids, June 2020 <https://firstcallbc.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/OpenletterforkidsCOVID-19taskforcewebversion.pdf>

2. That public health departments provide ongoing transparent communication and direct support to child development and child-care providers, teachers, and organizations providing essential supports to children, including consideration of relative harms and benefits of recommendations to prevent viral transmission.
3. That the task force take direction from Indigenous organizations and communities to ensure that the wellness of Indigenous children in BC are prioritized in the pandemic recovery, including respect for and upholding of self-determination of Nations regarding decisions about their children and families.

Recommended task force priorities:

1. Develop strategies to enhance the protective environment for children and build community resilience, by addressing poverty, food and housing insecurity, and toxic stress in children.
2. Address systemic racism throughout services and programs for children and families, to reverse the cumulative negative impact of systemic violence that is exerted through racism and discrimination, in particular towards Black, Indigenous and People of Colour.
3. Prioritize funding for accessible programs to support the mental and emotional health of children and families while taking into account the diverse needs of children, including increased funding for crisis support, appropriate follow-up, and ongoing mental health care.
4. Enhance access to equitable opportunities for outdoor play, learning and connection for all children in BC, as an evidence-based means of supporting the health and emotional regulation of children.
5. Support health care providers to inquire about and provide support for family experiences of stress, including racism and discrimination, poverty, food and housing insecurity, parental mental health struggles, violence exposure, and inadequate access to essential supports, as outlined in the CPS statement.
6. Support the essential needs of child development and child-care providers, and teachers, including support for financial and work-related stress, personal health needs, and child care, to create resilient environments for children and the adults who care for them.

Priority 2: Reduce barriers and enhance income supports for families living in deep poverty.

- **Work with the Federal Government and the Canada Revenue Agency to reduce barriers that prevent eligible families from receiving the Canada Child Benefit, BC Child Opportunity Benefit, Canada Education Savings Grant, Child Disability Benefit and other income transfers.**
- **Ensure all direct government and contract employees are paid a living wage that allows them to meet their basic needs, properly support their children and avoid chronic financial stress.**
- **Ensure families and youth have access to technology (both hardware and internet access) so that they are able to apply for financial assistance and other supports.**
- **Adjust income and disability assistance rates for families with a child with disabilities to recognize the costs associated with raising a child with extra support needs.**
- **Significantly raise income and disability assistance rates to bring them in line with actual living expenses and index them to inflation.**
- **Do not claw back federal emergency COVID-19 payments from provincial income or disability payments. Do not include emergency benefits when calculating other income tested benefits.**

- **Continue to remove financial barriers for post-secondary students through grants instead of loans and tuition fee reductions.**
- **Ensure no child is apprehended due to family poverty.**

While COVID-19 has worsened family poverty, we know from 2017 data that many families with children in British Columbia were typically living far below the poverty line, based on the Census Family Low Income Measure (CFLIM) after tax.

In 2017, one in five children in British Columbia were still growing up in poverty. 19.1% of children in B.C. lived in poverty representing 163,730 children. This is down slightly from 2016, with 172,550 children and a poverty rate of 20.3%. Included in the total number of poor children, 51,760 were under the age of six.

At 19.1%, child poverty in B.C. was higher than the 18.4% poverty rate for people of all ages. 53% of poor children are living in lone-parent families and, for the first time since 2009, the number of poor children in lone-parent families increased, from 81,960 in 2016 to 86,690 in 2017.

This is the first time we have seen children in lone-parent families make up over half of B.C.'s poor children.

The child poverty rates across British Columbia's regional districts varied from 15.3% in the East Kootenay Regional District to 42.5% in the Central Coast Regional District. Many of the regional districts with the highest child poverty rates were located in coastal areas, particularly along the north and central coastal areas.

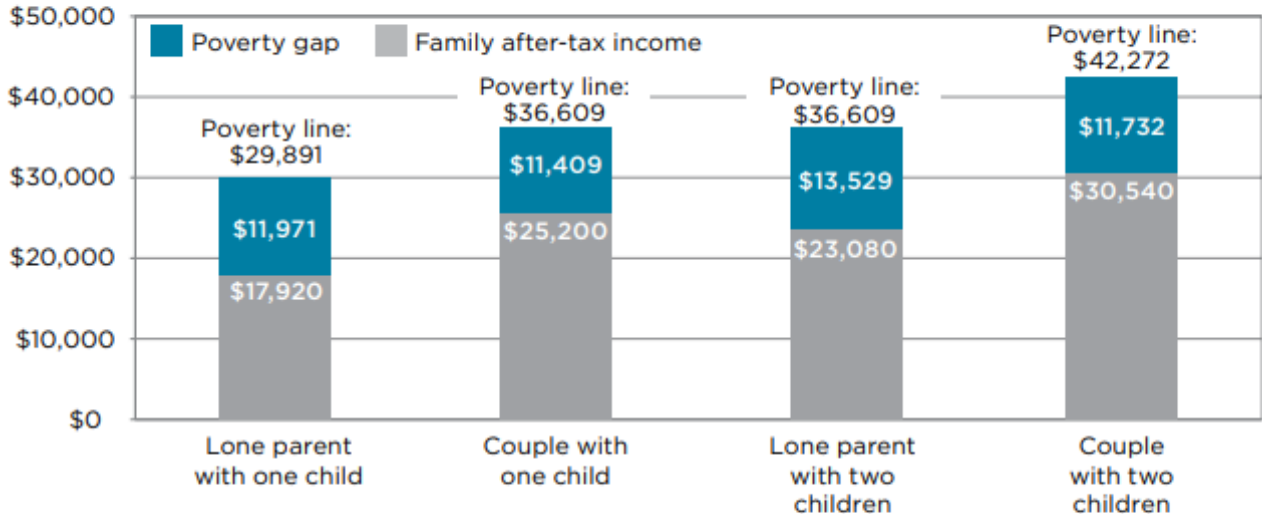
Currently about 25%⁴ of Canadians do not file tax returns and many families are unable to meet the criteria to prove they are eligible for federal or provincial benefits delivered through the tax system.

While the Child Opportunity Benefit is a welcome initiative, it will not be enough to lift families living in deep poverty over the poverty line. Similarly, recent modest increases to welfare and disability rates are not enough to mitigate poverty in those families.

⁴ Per The Honourable Ahmed Hussen, Federal Minister of Families, Children and Social Development, May 2020

In 2017:

Poverty Gap for Poor BC Families with Children, Based on Median After-Tax Income and CFLIM After Tax (Poverty Lines), 2017



Source: For median after-tax family income: Statistics Canada. Table F-20 After-tax low income status of census families (census family low income measures, CFLIM-AT) by family type and family composition, adjusted methodology, 2016. For CFLIM (Census Family Low Income Measure - After Tax) Income Thresholds: Statistics Canada. Technical Reference Guide for the Annual Income Estimates for Census Families, Individuals and Seniors, T1 Family File, Final Estimates, 2017. Table G. P.11.

Unfortunately, the number of children living in households dependent on social or disability assistance has been trending upwards since 2015⁵ in both number and as a percentage of the general population. And, not surprisingly the number of children reliant on social assistance is up by over 7% from April 2019 to April 2020.

Priority 3: Target and increase investment in infant and early childhood development.

All young children and their families must have access to a basic set of Early Childhood Development (ECD) supports and services as needed. This means addressing the specific barriers that face certain families and the systemic barriers that limit the overall availability, affordability and integration of ECD programs.

There must be full inclusion of young children at risk of developmental delay and children with disabilities and complex needs. These children and their families require specific strategies and supports to ensure that they can participate in their local ECD community programs alongside their peers.

Early intervention services for children should not have to rely on short-term funding agreements. Rather they should be an entitlement for all families to access for their young children prior to school entry. When young children with special needs languish on wait lists for assessments and early intervention therapies or access to child care, they are missing irreplaceable developmental opportunities.

⁵ Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction, BC Employment and Assistance Summary Report April 2020 <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/british-columbians-our-governments/organizational-structure/ministries-organizations/social-development-poverty-reduction/bcea-caseload-6page.pdf>

Additionally, increased attention must be paid to maternal and infant health and the existing inequities in access to prenatal and postnatal supports across the province, particularly in light of the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis. There is growing concern from health professionals that increased parental stress from the crisis will have a negative impacts on parent-child attachment and the social and emotional development of young children.

First Call recommends the 2021 BC Budget:

- **Invest in public health initiatives and professionals to support maternal health and healthy infant development, with special attention to all families in low income and those facing other threats to their ability to thrive. Ensure services are available throughout the province.**
- **Quickly increase and sustain funding to non-barriered, free, community-based programs and services for all families with young children throughout the province, including rural and remote areas.**
- **Remove the wait time requirement for medical services coverage for newcomers.**
- **Invest in accessible, culturally safe parent support programs for all types of families.**
- **Invest in tangible, non-barriered mental health supports for families with children and youth.**

Priority 4: Adequately fund public education and accelerate building a quality, public child care system.

First Call is strongly supportive of the provincial investments to date in moving towards building a quality, affordable and accessible publicly-funded system of child care in BC, as outlined in the \$10aDay Plan developed by the Coalition of Child Care Advocates and Early Childhood Educators of BC.

We echo their recommendations for action to include in BC's recovery plan:

- **Move NOW to \$10aDay child care. Government should begin funding the transition of existing and willing child care programs to \$10aDay sites where parents pay a maximum of \$10/day. This funding model is consistent with other public services that British Columbians rely on, like schools and hospitals. The priority should be child care programs located in facilities that are already publicly-owned, such as schools and community centres. This ensures that new public funding goes directly to lower parent fees and raise educator wages rather than to leasing or mortgage costs for privately-owned facilities.**
- **Implement a competitive provincial wide wage grid for early childhood educators. The recruitment and retention crisis that existed in the child care sector pre-pandemic is already predicted to be far worse post-pandemic, due to the current average low wages in the sector. Implementing a competitive publicly-funded provincial wage grid starting at \$20-\$29 per hour will ensure BC has the educators needed to not only reopen existing child care programs but to expand to meet demand.**
- **Expand public child care spaces through infrastructure investments. There remains a chronic shortage of licensed child care spaces with long waiting lists and desperate parents. The immediate goal for new spaces should be a school-age child care program in every BC elementary school and modular child care facilities for children 0-4 years on the grounds of BC hospitals, schools, and post-secondary institution, with each new facility a \$10aDay program.**

With these 3 actions, the benefits of \$10aDay child care for families and educators will be life changing, as they are for families in the existing 50 prototype \$10aDay sites across BC. A significant number of short- and long-term jobs will be created. And, BC will be well on our way to a sustainable and just recovery.

The deficit in public education funding persists. Funding for special education assistants, lost programming in the arts, libraries, counsellors, school psychologists, custodial services, and deferred maintenance, among other areas, still require urgent attention in next year's budget.

Area standards used for new schools are resulting in schools that are 30% smaller than older schools resulting in dramatic restrictions or even elimination of music and arts programming, and no room for non-enrolling classrooms, quiet rooms and other educationally important uses.

The right to inclusive education for students with special needs is still significantly impaired. The lack of supports for children and youth with neuro-diverse special needs in the public school system is of great concern to parents and educators. Some children have had access to speech, physio, occupational or behavioural therapies in their preschool years, that then drop away in the school system. Some enter school having never received the therapeutic services or inclusive child care experiences they would have benefited from because they languished on wait lists. They then wait years for an assessment through the school, only to be told there are few if any services for them in the system.

- **Honor government's commitment to replace high seismic risk schools by 2025/2030.**
- **Ensure Area Standards will accommodate current and future use of schools and are designed to support the educational needs of students in all areas of the curriculum including science and the arts.**
- **Restoring funding for special education assistants, lost programming in the arts, libraries, counsellors, school psychologists, custodial services, and deferred maintenance, among other areas, still require urgent attention in next year's budget.**

Priority 5: Support youth in and from care and their care-givers, including kinship caregivers.

As of April 30, 2020, there were approximately 5,600 children and youth in care in the province, and many more were living outside the parental home in kinship care or on their own with some government support. Approximately 900 children and youth aged out of government care in 2019-20.

The statistics tracking the outcome for this population of young people, while improving, are still cause for alarm. Whether it's lower rates of high school completion and enrollment in and graduation from post-secondary studies, or untimely deaths, we have ample evidence of the still urgent need to invest in more supports for youth in and from care.

We know that these children and youth will need special help to overcome the trauma of their life experiences, and that they have not had the benefit of stability to support their development. We also know that many extended families are willing to help, but they need adequate financial and service supports in order to do so. There are thousands of children in B.C. being raised by their grandparents,

doing their best to keep things on track when the children's parents cannot properly care for them, or are incarcerated.

The current health crisis has only added to the vulnerability of many of these children and youth, especially those who have already transitioned out of care and are living on their own without any family support.

We recognize that government has been responding with increased supports for youth transitions from care with tuition waivers and enhancements to Agreements with Young Adults (AYA) eligibility, and including extending agreements to allow youth to stay in their foster care or other placements until the pandemic is over.

Learning from these efforts, we make the following recommendations for the 2020 provincial budget:

- **At a minimum, maintain the emergency response changes made to the criteria for Agreements with Young Adults and other MCFD initiatives for all young people in or from care, such as continuing the expansion of the Temporary Life Skills program changes that make life skills supports accessible to more youth from care.**
- **Move beyond this minimum to fulfill the promise to implement a comprehensive and universal bundle of supports so all youth from care can have the opportunity to pursue educational, training, therapeutic or life skills programs. This should include removing eligibility barriers such as the age cap and minimum in-care time period for the Agreements with Young Adults and Tuition Waivers programs.**
- **Guarantee equitable access to start-up costs, including counselling, to help make the transition into adulthood a dignified experience.**

Many grandparents raising grandchildren and other kinship care providers are still facing administrative barriers to receiving the support they need, including barriers to federal and provincial income transfers meant to benefit these children.

We recommend that BC:

- **Work with the Federal Government and the Canada Revenue Agency to reduce barriers that prevent eligible families from receiving the Canada Child Benefit, BC Child Opportunity Benefit, Canada Education Savings Grant, Child Disability Benefit and other income transfers.**

Priority 6: Ensure all children and youth are safe and do not go hungry

- **Increase access to in-home supports (e.g. respite, behavioural, interventions) for families raising children with complex needs.**
- **Target efforts to help those who have a higher risk of living in poverty, including children in lone-parent families, immigrants and refugees, Aboriginal children, racialized children, and those living with disabilities.**
- **Ensure programs and housing for women and children fleeing violence are funded and meet current levels of need.**
- **Accelerate building affordable and safe public housing aimed at housing children and their families.**
- **Develop a coordinated, adequately funded, healthy school meals program for children and their families.**

Conclusion

The protection of children’s rights and well-being is a moral imperative for all of us, including for governments. Of course, most children are raised in families, so as we emerge into recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic it is incumbent on us to craft a provincial budget that supports families in all their diversity, in particular those who struggle with poverty, systemic discrimination and other challenges to their physical and mental health.

Eliminating child poverty is critical because we know the impacts of living in deep poverty are devastating for children and youth. They can even have a higher risk of becoming homeless and, potentially, being removed from their families and placed in government care.

Next year’s budget must sustain and enhance investments in the income supports, public and social services that families and communities need to get back on their feet and stay healthy and safe. We have learned that we can do better at taking care of each other and this should be the new normal, not a return to austerity in government spending based on disproven economic theories. Our children and youth are depending on us to support their development and the healing of our communities, and our planet, with the necessary long-term thinking and the public investments required to achieve these goals.

Appendix 1: Our Responsibility to Support All Children's Rights

Canada and BC have both signed the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, promising to uphold their rights to special protections, education, health, housing, nutrition, child care and family supports, and to have their best interests taken into account in all matters affecting them.

Additionally, Government has committed to implementing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Many of these calls to action have direct impacts on Indigenous children, youth and families, while others will have a major impact on their circumstances over time.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the inequities that exist in upholding these rights for all British Columbia's children. This offers us the opportunity, in developing next year's provincial budget, to remediate these inequities as we prioritize investments that will support the well-being of all our children and ensure we do no harm through unintentional consequences of our budget decisions.

Appendix 2: First Call Coalition Members

ACT – Autism Community Training	Children's and Women's Health Centre of BC	PeerNetBC
Adoptive Families Association of BC	Coalition of Child Care Advocates of BC	Phoenix Human Services Association
Affiliation of Multicultural Societies & Service Agencies	Columbia/Kootenay Advocacy and Education Resource Society	PLEA Community Services Society of BC
Alternate Shelter Society	Council of Parent Participation	Progressive Intercultural Community Services Society
Association for Community Education BC	Preschools BC	Provincial Association of Residential & Community Agencies
Association of Neighbourhood Houses of British Columbia	Deaf Children's Society of BC	Public Health Association of BC
Aunt Leah's Independent Life Skills Society	Developmental Disabilities Association	Raffi Foundation for Child Honouring
Autism Society of BC	Directorate of Agencies for School Health BC	Sea to Sky Community Services
Baobab Inclusive Empowerment Society	Dr. C.J. Patricelli, Inc.	Single Mothers' Alliance of BC
BC Aboriginal Child Care Society	Early Childhood Educators of BC	Social Planning & Research Council of BC
BC Association for Child Development & Intervention	East Kootenay Childhood Coalition	Society for Children and Youth of BC
BC Association of Family Resource Programs	Elizabeth Fry Society of Greater Vancouver	SOS Children's Village BC
BC Association of Pregnancy Outreach Programs	Family Services of Greater Vancouver	S.U.C.C.E.S.S.
BC Association of Social Workers	Family Support Institute of BC	Summit Negotiations Society
BC Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils	Federation of BC Youth in Care Networks	Sunshine Coast Community Services Society
BC Council for Families	Federation of Community Social Services BC	Take a Hike Youth At Risk Foundation
BC Council of the Canadian Federation of University Women	Foster Parent Support Services Society	United Way of the Lower Mainland
BC Crime Prevention Association	Five Family Place Partnership – MPFCS	University Women's Club of Vancouver
BC Federation of Foster Parents Association	Health Sciences Association	Vancity Community Foundation
BC Government & Service Employees' Union	Health Officers' Council of British Columbia	Vancouver Coastal Health Authority – Population Health
BC Play Therapy Association	Helping Spirit Lodge Society	Vancouver Community College – Early Childhood Care & Education, Cont. Studies
BC Recreation and Parks Association	Health Sciences Association of BC	Victoria Child Abuse Prevention & Counselling Centre
BC Retired Teachers' Association	Hospital Employees' Union	West Coast Legal Education and Action Fund
BC Schizophrenia Society	Immigrant Services Society of BC	Westcoast Child Care Resource Centre
BC Society of Transition Houses	Inclusion BC	Westcoast Family Centres Society
BC Teachers' Federation	Indigenous Perspectives Society	Western Society for Children
Big Sisters of BC Lower Mainland	Justice Institute of BC	Women Against Violence Against Women
Boys and Girls Clubs of BC	Kamloops and District Elizabeth Fry Society	YWCA Metro Vancouver
British Columbia Federation of Students	Kiwassa Neighbourhood House	
Cameray Child & Family Services	Learning Disabilities Association of BC	FIRST CALL LIAISONS
Canadian Association for Young Children	McCreary Centre Society	BC Representative for Children and Youth
Canadian Mental Health Association BC	Métis Commission for Children & Families BC	Public Health Agency of Canada
Canadian Red Cross – Respect Education	Mom to Mom Child Poverty Initiative	Ministry of Children and Family Development
Capilano Students' Union	MOSAIC	Human Early Learning Partnership, UBC
Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs	National Council of Jewish Women of Canada – Vancouver Section	BC School Trustees' Association
Cerebral Palsy Association of BC	New Westminster Family Place	
Check Your Head: The Global Youth Education Network	OneSky Community Resources	
Child and Youth Care Association of BC	Options Community Services	
Childhood Connections - Okanagan	Pacific Association of First Nations Women	
Family & Childcare Society	Pacific Community Resources Society	
	Pacific Immigrant Resources Society	
	Parent Advocacy Network for Public Education	
	Parent Support Services Society of BC	