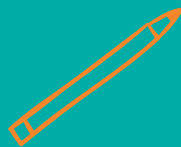


**ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT:  
TOWARD BETTER EDUCATION  
OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN IN CARE**



**October 2017**



**REPRESENTATIVE FOR  
CHILDREN AND YOUTH**



Oct. 26, 2017

The Honourable Darryl Plecas  
Speaker of the Legislative Assembly  
Suite 207, Parliament Buildings  
Victoria, B.C. V8V 1X4

Dear Mr. Speaker,

I have the honour of submitting the report *Room for Improvement: Toward Better Education Outcomes for Children in Care* to the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia. This report is prepared in accordance with s. 6(b) of the *Representative for Children and Youth Act*.

Sincerely,



Bernard Richard  
Representative for Children and Youth

pc: Ms. Kate Ryan-Lloyd  
Deputy Clerk and Clerk of Committees,  
Legislative Assembly of British Columbia  
Mr. Craig James  
Clerk of the Legislative Assembly



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The Representative would like to thank the youth in and from care who shared their voices by completing surveys and providing valuable insight in focus groups. It is through your experiences that we can understand where – and why – systemic change needs to occur.

To the many committed people who work to support the education of children and youth in care, thank you for sharing your knowledge, practices and perspectives by completing surveys and participating in focus groups:

- teachers
- principals and vice principals
- school district staff who work with Indigenous students
- social workers (MCFD and DAAs)
- foster parents.

Special thanks must also go to the many organizations that contributed to the review in various ways, including developing, testing and distributing surveys and facilitating feedback on initial findings:

- McCreary Centre Society and McCreary Youth Research Academy
- BC Teachers' Federation
- BC Principals' and Vice-Principals' Association
- BC School Superintendents' Association
- First Nations Education Steering Committee
- BC Federation of Foster Parent Associations
- Delegated Aboriginal Agencies
- Ministry of Education
- Ministry of Children and Family Development
- Delegated Aboriginal Agencies.

And finally, thanks must go to the project's advisory group who provided valuable input on this report's recommendations: Nella Nelson, Mike McKay, Gina Harrison and Karen Gallagher.



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*"Education . . . beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer . . . the balance-wheel of the social machinery."*

– 19th-century education reformist Horace Mann

Certainly most would agree with the vision that public education, at its essence, should help to level the playing field for children and youth – to provide all young people, no matter their family circumstances or life challenges, with the basic knowledge and tools necessary to thrive.

However, that has not been the general experience for children and youth who find themselves in the care of the British Columbia government. For some time, children and youth in continuing care<sup>1</sup> have realized significantly lower academic achievement in the provincial K to 12 education system than their contemporaries, generally trailing well behind other students on most measures.

The discrepancy in educational achievement is startling. For example, in 2014/15, only 34 per cent of B.C. Grade 7 students in continuing care met or exceeded expectations in numeracy. By comparison, the percentage of all other Grade 7 students who met or exceeded numeracy expectations was more than double that, at nearly 73 per cent.

Major discrepancies between B.C. students in continuing care and those who are not are also borne out when Grade 10 core subject marks are examined. For example, 71 per cent of all other B.C. students had marks of C-plus or better in science in 2014/15, compared to only 39.5 per cent of students in continuing care. The difference between these two groups is nearly as large when it comes to languages and social studies.

Perhaps most glaring are the figures around high school completion and graduation rates. Of B.C. students in continuing care who began Grade 8 in 2009/10, only about 51 per cent graduated within six years. This compares to a nearly 89 per cent graduation rate for all other students in the province.

Such disparities are often exacerbated when the student in continuing care is Indigenous or has a special need. On most measures, the academic achievement of Indigenous children and youth in continuing care is lower than that of non-Indigenous youth in continuing care. Of Indigenous students in continuing care, only

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<sup>1</sup> Continuing care refers to children and youth who have a Continuing Custody Order (CCO) that allows the Director under the *Child, Family and Community Service Act (CFCS Act)* to exercise guardianship responsibilities. Other types of custody orders used by MCFD under the *CFCS Act* include Interim and Temporary Custody Orders. Other types of care agreements under the *Act* include Special Needs and Voluntary Care Agreements.

44 per cent graduated within six years of beginning Grade 8, compared to 61 per cent of non-Indigenous students with the same care status. The gap in school completion is similar between students with a special need who are in continuing care (44.2 per cent) and all other students with a special need (67 per cent).

Data in B.C. on the educational achievement of students who are in care is limited because the provincial government tracks only those in continuing care (with a CCO) and does not break out achievement data for students with Temporary or Interim Custody Orders or those on care agreements such as Voluntary Care Agreements or Special Needs Agreements.

The data that is available leaves no doubt that significant gaps persist between outcomes for B.C. students in continuing government care and all other students. Nevertheless, some students in continuing care do manage to buck this troubling trend. About one in seven students in B.C. with a CCO graduated with honours in 2014/15. As this report states, students in continuing care are not naturally "under-performers."

Nevertheless, in many cases, because of their life experiences, these students do need additional supports in order to succeed academically – supports they too often do not receive.

Troubling gaps in the limited education statistics that are available spurred the Representative to examine how outcomes for all children and youth in care – those in continuing care as well as all other forms of government care – can be improved. The pages of this report identify many supports that, when provided, can help children and youth in care to succeed academically, close the gaps, and make education the true equalizer that Mann envisioned.

Helping this review to identify those supports was the participation of more than 1,200 individuals with experience in the school and care systems, including more than 160 youth in and from various forms of care and nearly 500 teachers. Focus groups and a survey conducted by the McCreary Centre Society with the youth in and from care informed the review. So did surveys of more than 1,000 other stakeholders including teachers, principals and vice principals, Aboriginal Education staff, social workers with both the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) and Delegated Aboriginal Agencies (DAAs) and foster parents.

Through this extensive consultation process, as well as a detailed literature review, the Representative has identified six distinct areas in which more help or changes can make a significant difference for all students in care. These areas include:

- **Stability at home and school, and adequate support for when moves are necessary.** As one student told this review: *"I was doing well in school 'til I started being bounced around in foster homes and group homes."*
- **Positive and consistent relationships both at school and home that support education.** *"Youth in care do not get told by their foster parent: 'when you graduate' . . .,"* offered another youth. *"They say 'if' – there's a big difference in treatment there. There's no talk about college."*



- **Help with school work including flexibility, goal-setting, celebrating success and support for special needs.** *"Being able to go at my own pace [has been helpful], as I get overwhelmed quite easily and it takes a lot to get my focus back on track when something sets me off,"* said one student.
- **Adults sharing information and planning together, with the student, for the student's success.** Said one Aboriginal Education worker: *"The capacity for social workers to engage in the educational growth of students is paramount. If social workers were given more resources to meet with teachers and Aboriginal support people, the support of youth in care would be much more rich."*
- **Mental health needs met and help to heal from trauma recognized and addressed.** *"People think youth in care are bad kids, but it's how we're raised,"* said a youth. *"Abuse and moving, etc. all play a role in how someone grows up."*
- **Support for Indigenous students at school, including Indigenous children and youth in care with their own cultures, participation by elders and Indigenous school staff, and cultural content in class.** *"I feel at our school that our Aboriginal students have become increasingly aware of their identity [positive] and that the more we have done to include and engage them in this piece, the more success we are seeing."* – Aboriginal Education staff member.

This report makes six recommendations to address these key areas – most notably calling for the Ministry of Education to allocate specific funding to each school district based on the number of children and youth in care, funding that would be dedicated to supporting the learning of these students.

The report also recommends that the ministry strengthen its accountability to monitor and improve supports for children and youth in care across the province, as well as tracking and reporting out on educational outcomes for these students in care. And it calls on the ministry to place a specific focus on outcomes and supports for Indigenous children in care, a group that is vastly over-represented in B.C.'s child welfare system.

Two recommendations are made to MCFD. The report calls for the ministry to use an evidence-based approach to assess trauma-related needs for all children and youth coming into care and to consistently implement necessary supports for recovery from trauma across all care settings, including schools. It also calls for MCFD to provide authorization to caregivers to be able to sign permission slips for school and other activities, and for any related liability issues that arise due to this change to be addressed.

The report recommends that the Ministry of Education, school districts and MCFD work together to create positions dedicated to information-sharing, coordination and advocacy in support of education outcomes of children and youth in care, both within school districts and between school districts and local MCFD and DAA services for children and youth in care.

Fulfilling this report's recommendations would go a long way toward levelling the educational playing field for children and youth in care. As the prudent parent of these young people, government should aim for no less.



# PAST RCY INVOLVEMENT IN EDUCATION OUTCOMES

Poor education outcomes of children and youth in care in B.C. and how to improve them have been a consistent concern of the Representative since the Office's inception. In 2007, the Representative's first public report – *Health and Well-Being of Children in Care in B.C.: Educational Experience and Outcomes*, a joint report with the Provincial Health Officer – documented educational experiences and outcomes of children and youth in care and made recommendations for improvement.

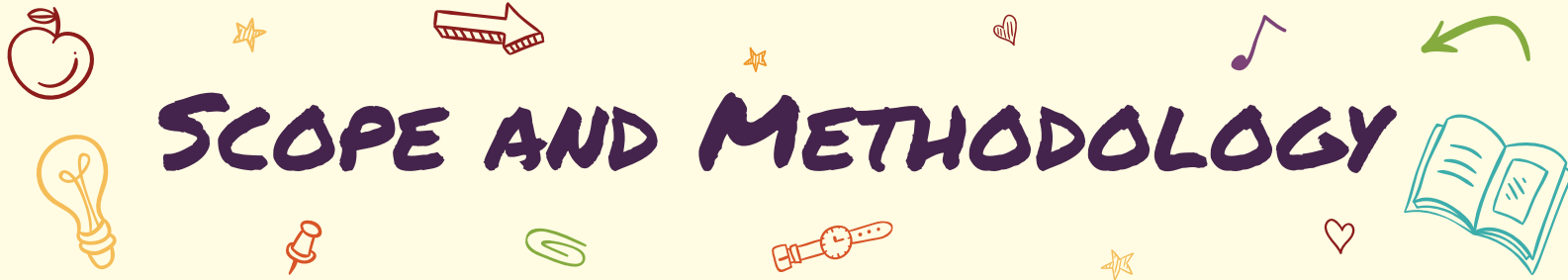
Since that time, three other joint reports (*Kids, Crime and Care* [2009], *Growing Up in B.C.* [2010] and *Growing Up in B.C. – 2015*) by the Representative and the Provincial Health Officer have documented education outcomes gaps between children and youth in care and other K to 12 students, as well as lower outcomes for Indigenous children and youth in care.

From 2007 to 2016, the Representative made 10 recommendations in seven reports calling for specific improvements to K to 12 education supports for children and youth in care, including calls for:

- special needs and mental health supports
- closing the outcomes gap for Indigenous children and youth in care
- improved response to school attendance, and
- reporting on education outcomes.

The Representative has also made recommendations relevant to education outcomes for children and youth in care on topics that include supports for recovery from trauma and co-locating mental health services in schools.

The Representative has also been a supporter of waiving tuition for former children and youth in care at B.C.'s post-secondary institutions – in 2014 challenging these institutions to implement such a program. About half of the post-secondary institutions stepped up voluntarily to offer a tuition waiver and, in August 2017, the B.C. government brought this program in-house and expanded it to all 25 post-secondary institutions. The existence of a province-wide tuition waiver program for former children and youth in care could be a motivator for current children and youth in care to succeed in the K to 12 education system.



# SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

## Scope

This review examines the education outcomes for children and youth who are in the care of the B.C. government, with a focus on what supports are available to help these students, in the province's K to 12 public school system.

The report reviews education supports for children in care in B.C. regardless of their legal status. However, it gives primary focus to supports for children and youth in care who have delegated social workers as their legal guardians. Because most children and youth in care live in foster families, this review also examines the role of foster parents.

Consistent with the 2010 and 2015 *Growing Up in B.C.* reports on child and youth well-being by the RCY and the Provincial Health Officer, this report's section on academic achievement of children and youth in care examines achievement data for all children and youth in care with a Continuing Custody Order (CCO) at provincially funded schools in B.C., including those at private schools.

The parameters of this review are focused on supports for education outcomes of children and youth in care in the K to 12 public education system. Therefore, this review does not address education supports for children and youth in care attending K to 12 private schools in B.C. or children and youth in care attending First Nations schools funded by the federal government.

## Methodology

### Achievement Data

This report presents findings of an analysis of data for seven education measures provided by the Ministry of Education (for technical information on the measures, see the data dictionary in Appendix 2).

Analysis of this data – which is current up to the 2014/15 school year – focused primarily on differences in education outcomes between students with and without a CCO. In some cases, this analysis examined differences in achievement between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students with a CCO, as well as between students with a Ministry of Education special needs designation with and without a CCO.

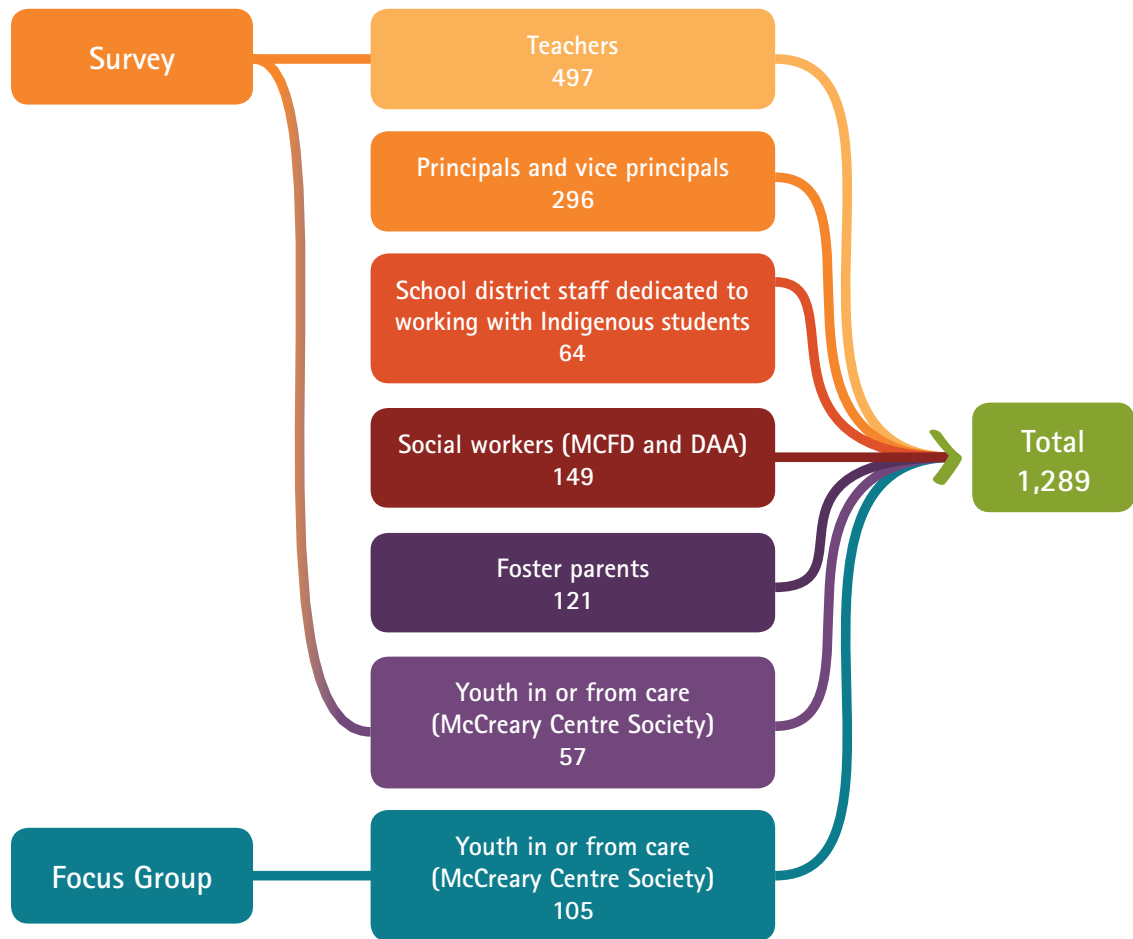
### Surveys and Focus Groups

To gather input for this review, surveys and focus groups were used to look at what is working to support education outcomes of children and youth in care in B.C., what the related challenges are and what needs to be done to improve these supports.

Surveys were completed by adults who work to support the education of children and youth in care, and focus groups and a survey were used to gather input from youth in and from care. In developing these surveys, RCY conducted literature reviews and jurisdictional scans to determine what is happening to support the education of children and youth in care in B.C. and elsewhere, as well as what is considered best practice in terms of these supports. This report shares select literature gathered in the Context section and the Findings and Analysis section. Key stakeholder groups were consulted throughout the process to ensure that themes addressed by the survey questions reflected issues important to them, to test the surveys and to distribute invitations to their members to complete online surveys.

Individuals in five groups that support the education of children and/or youth in care completed online surveys conducted by the Representative's Office (see Table 1 below). The McCreary Centre Society also conducted focus groups with youth in and from care across B.C. and worked with its Youth Research Academy to develop and distribute an online survey completed by youth in and from care.

Table 1 – Completion of Online Surveys



In May and June 2016, the RCY received survey responses from across the province. Responses to all surveys were anonymous. Surveys were received from social workers and foster parents located in each of MCFD's 13 service delivery areas, and from

school and district staff from all but two of the 60 school districts (Stikine and Nisga'a). Responses from school district staff dedicated to working with Indigenous students came from 21 districts.

Also in May and June 2016, the McCreary Centre Society completed 21 focus groups with youth in and from care. Focus groups took place in at least one urban and one rural community in each of the province's five health authorities, with 105 youth participating, 63 per cent of whom identified as Indigenous. An online survey developed and distributed by McCreary's Youth Research Academy, whose members all have experience in government care, was completed by 57 youth in and from care ages 12 to 24. McCreary staff and Research Academy members analyzed data from the focus groups and survey and provided the RCY with this information.

Surveys of adult stakeholder groups conducted by the Representative collected quantitative and qualitative data. The analysis of the qualitative survey data was conducted by a team using well-established methods for the analysis of open-ended qualitative data. Using a constant comparative method, key themes were identified and their validity confirmed by constantly checking and comparing these findings against the data as a whole (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). The team read and re-read the data and created a coding framework that was then applied to the data.<sup>2</sup> The development of the coding framework was guided by the primary research questions, which focused on identifying strengths, challenges and solutions for improving support for education outcomes of children and youth in care, as well as other key themes that emerged from the survey data. This coding framework was then applied to all sources of qualitative data using online qualitative data analysis software so that information could be retrieved and organized by the research team. At this point, coding was compared across researchers to ensure consistency of findings.

Based on the report from the McCreary Centre Society and analysis of the surveys of adults, the Representative's Office identified initial findings regarding supports for education outcomes for children and youth in care. These initial findings were then shared and discussed in sessions with 10 stakeholder groups to confirm and deepen understanding of the issues raised. Feedback from these sessions was integrated into the final analysis and findings of this review. (For a full list of stakeholder groups consulted, see Appendix 3.)

Findings presented in this report are based on quantitative and qualitative data gathered through the surveys and focus groups described above. The analysis of qualitative data identified themes related to positive practice, challenges and suggested solutions for improving supports for education outcomes of children and youth in care. This report's discussion of themes identifies different positions, issues or sub-themes raised by specific respondent groups in order to see both the similarities and the differences in the perspectives on these key issues across different stakeholders. However, as would be expected, views within these groups varied (i.e., not all teachers agreed on all issues). While this report may attribute a theme to a particular respondent group because respondents in that group raised it, this should not be interpreted to mean that all members of the group who completed the surveys uniformly raised the theme in question or agreed with its importance.

<sup>2</sup> Developing a coding framework is the process of attaching labels to lines of text so that the researcher can group and compare similar or related pieces of information.

# ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

## How children and youth in care are doing at school

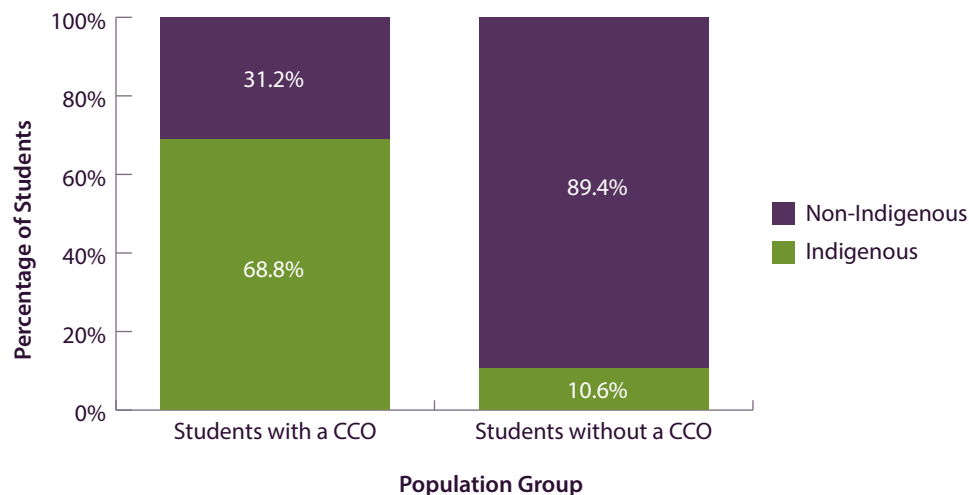
Two joint reports from the Representative and the Provincial Health Officer, *Growing Up in B.C.* and the follow-up, *Growing Up in B.C. – 2015*, documented academic achievement of children and youth in care with a CCO. These reports identified large gaps in school achievement between children and youth in care with a CCO and other students. This report updates data from the *Growing Up in B.C. – 2015* report up to the end of the 2014/15 school year and includes measures not previously examined.

Overall, updated data confirms that large gaps persist between academic achievement of students with a CCO and other students. On most measures, Indigenous students with a CCO continue to have lower levels of achievement than non-Indigenous students with a CCO. And among all students with special needs designations at school, those with a CCO have lower achievement levels than those without a CCO.

### Profile of students with a CCO

In the 2014/15 school year, 633,423 students were enrolled in K to 12 schools in B.C. Of these students, 3,211 were in government care with a CCO, representing less than one per cent of the total student population. Slightly more students with a CCO were boys than girls, and the proportion of students with a CCO was higher for Grades 10 to 12 than for the lower grades.

Proportion of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Students With and Without a CCO, 2014/2015 School Year



Of the students with a CCO, nearly 69 per cent were Indigenous, compared to just under 11 per cent of the student population without a CCO who were Indigenous.

More than half of the students with a CCO also had a special needs designation, in comparison to students without a CCO, 10 per cent of whom had a special needs designation.

Of all students with a CCO, more than a quarter had a physical disability or chronic health impairment designation, 12 per cent had an intensive behaviour or serious mental illness designation, and nearly four per cent had a learning disability designation. For students without a CCO, the two most common special needs designations were learning disabilities (three per cent) and autism spectrum disorders (1.4 per cent). More information on distribution of special needs designations among students with and without a CCO is provided in Appendix 4.

### How students with a CCO are doing compared to other students

As a group, children and youth with a CCO in the public K to 12 school system have lower academic achievement than other students. Some children and youth with a CCO do well at school – about one in seven graduated with honours in 2014/15 – but children and youth with a CCO generally trail well behind other students on all measures examined for this report.

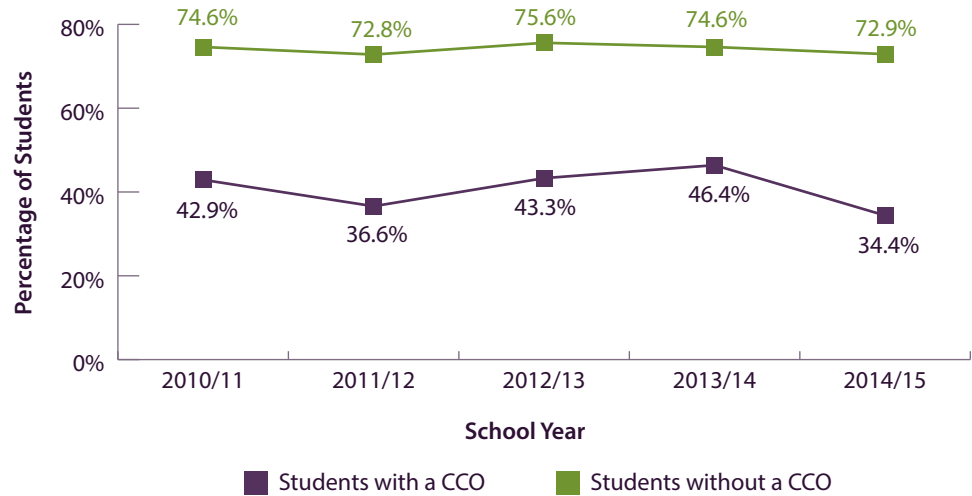
When considering the gaps in achievement described in the following paragraphs, it is critical to avoid stereotyping children and youth in care as “underperformers.” As demonstrated by this and other reports in B.C. and elsewhere, as well as academic research literature, many children and youth in care do succeed academically. It is also important to remember that standardized achievement measures do not take into account success in coping with difficult life situations or progress in non-academic well-being. At the same time, standard performance indicators do tell us something important – that by far the majority of children and youth in care require extra support to succeed academically and to benefit from the many positive outcomes of well-being associated with success at school.

Among all Grade 4 and 7 students who wrote Foundational Skills Assessments (FSAs)<sup>3</sup> in numeracy, reading and writing in 2014/15, fewer children in care with a CCO met or exceeded expectations than children without a CCO. In reading assessments, they trailed other students by about 20 percentage points. For example, 63 per cent of children in care with a CCO met or exceeded expectations in the Grade 4 FSA compared to 82 per cent of other students. This difference was larger for numeracy, with a gap of about 30 percentage points in Grade 4 and almost 40 percentage points in Grade 7.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Foundational Skills Assessments are annual province-wide assessments of B.C. students' academic skills in reading comprehension, writing and numeracy. The skills that are assessed are linked to the provincial curriculum and provincial performance standards. The assessment is administered annually to Grade 4 and Grade 7 students in public and provincially funded private schools.

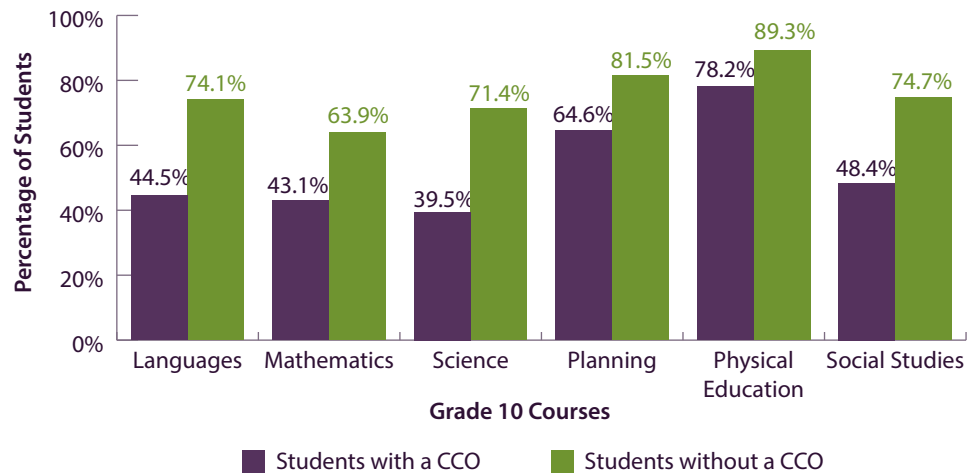
<sup>4</sup> It is worth noting that a consistently higher percentage of children in care with a CCO did not write Foundational Skills Assessments compared to their peers.

Proportion of Students With and Without a CCO who Met or Exceeded Expectations on Grade 7 Numeracy FSA, 2010/11 – 2014/15



Completing Grade 10 courses required for graduation on-time (within two years of Grade 8), as well as achievement in these courses, is another marker of academic progress. Just more than half of students with a CCO took the required Grade 10 courses in languages, science and mathematics on time, compared with almost 90 per cent of students without a CCO. And of those CCO students who took these required courses, far fewer obtained a mark above a C+ than students without a CCO.

Percentage of Students With and Without a CCO who Achieved C+ to A on Grade 10 Courses that they Took on-Time, 2014/15 School Year

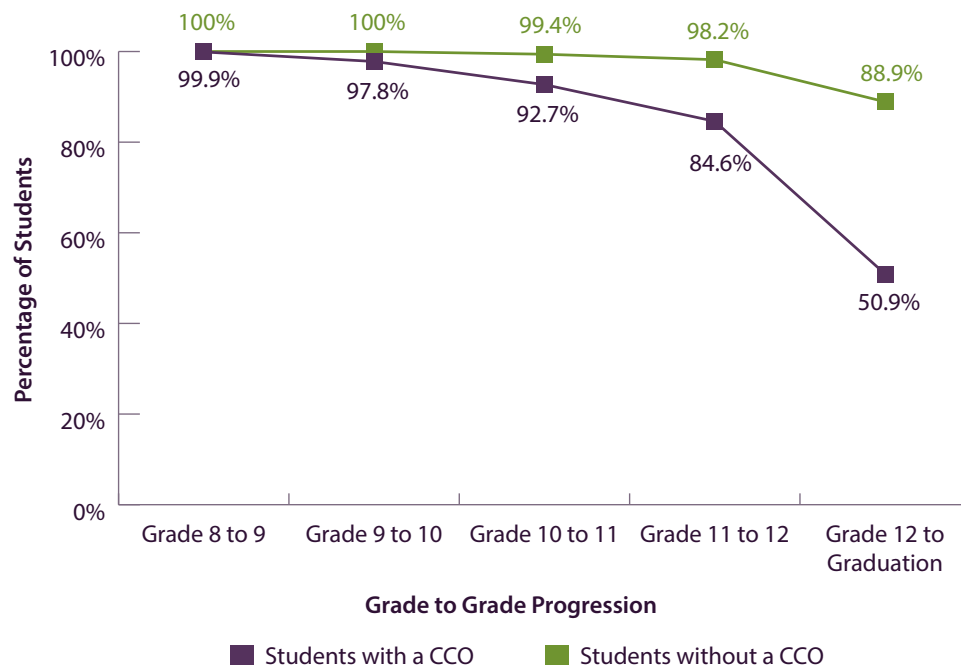


Another way to gauge academic success is to look at how students progress from grade to grade. Among students who started Grade 8 in 2009, almost all students with and without a CCO progressed from Grade 8 to Grade 9. However, a difference in progression rates between the two groups begins in the progression to Grade 10, with fewer students with a CCO progressing from Grade 9 to Grade 10. This difference increases over time with the biggest gap between students with and without a



CCO occurring in the progression from Grade 12 to graduation. While 85 per cent of students with a CCO progressed from Grade 11 to Grade 12 compared to 98 per cent of students without a CCO, just 51 per cent of students with a CCO completed graduation requirements within six years of entering Grade 8 compared to almost 90 per cent of students without a CCO.

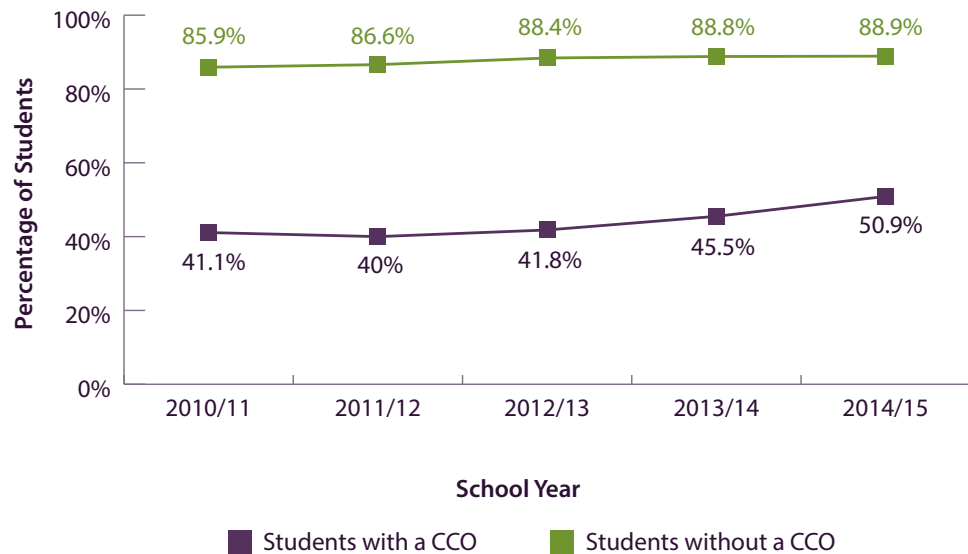
Percentage of Students With and Without a CCO from the 2009/10 School Year who Progressed from Grade 8 to Graduation



The six-year high school completion rate for students with a CCO increased from about 40 per cent in the period from 2010/11 to 2012/13 to approximately 50 per cent in 2014/15. However, this continues to be well below the six-year completion rate for students without a CCO, which was close to 90 per cent in 2014/15. Additionally, 2015/16 data released by the Ministry of Education suggests that this upward trend for students with a CCO may not be continuing.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Due to differences in how the data for this report and Ministry of Education's updated 2015/16 data were compiled, they cannot be directly compared.

Six-Year Completion Rate, Students With and Without a CCO, 2010/11 to 2014/15



### School Completion Certificate

In B.C., the Ministry of Education allows some students with special needs to complete Individual Education Plan (IEP) goals and receive a school completion certificate – the Evergreen Certificate<sup>6</sup> – rather than a graduation certificate.

This credential is intended to recognize the work and accomplishments of students with special needs who are unable to meet graduation requirements due to their special need. The

#### Individual Education Plan

An Individual Education Plan (IEP) is a written plan developed for a student with special needs that describes individualized goals, adaptations, modifications and the services to be provided to the student. An IEP also includes measures for tracking achievement.

Evergreen Certificate is not a graduation credential, and students with Evergreens cannot transition directly to post-secondary studies.

From 2010/11 to 2014/15, the rate of students with a CCO who had no special needs and yet received an Evergreen Certificate increased from just below one per cent to three per cent, while the rate of students without a CCO who had no special needs but received this certificate was steady at about 0.2 per cent. In other words, in 2014/15, students with a CCO who had no special needs were 15 times more likely to receive an Evergreen Certificate than other students with no special needs.

In February 2016, the Ministry of Education responded to concerns raised by B.C.'s Auditor General in her 2015 audit of the education of Indigenous students in the B.C. school system about the disproportionately high numbers of Indigenous students receiving Evergreen Certificates. The ministry stated that B.C. schools will no longer be allowed to issue Evergreen Certificates to students unless they are classified as having special needs and have an IEP.

<sup>6</sup> This certificate is discussed further in the Appendix 2 section of this report.

## How Indigenous students with a CCO are doing compared to non-Indigenous students with a CCO

Since about two-thirds of students who are in continuing care are Indigenous, it is important to look deeper at how students in this group fare when compared to their peers. Academic outcomes have improved in some areas for Indigenous children and youth in continuing care. However, consistent with past findings, on most measures the academic achievement of Indigenous children and youth in care with a CCO is lower than that of non-Indigenous students with a CCO.

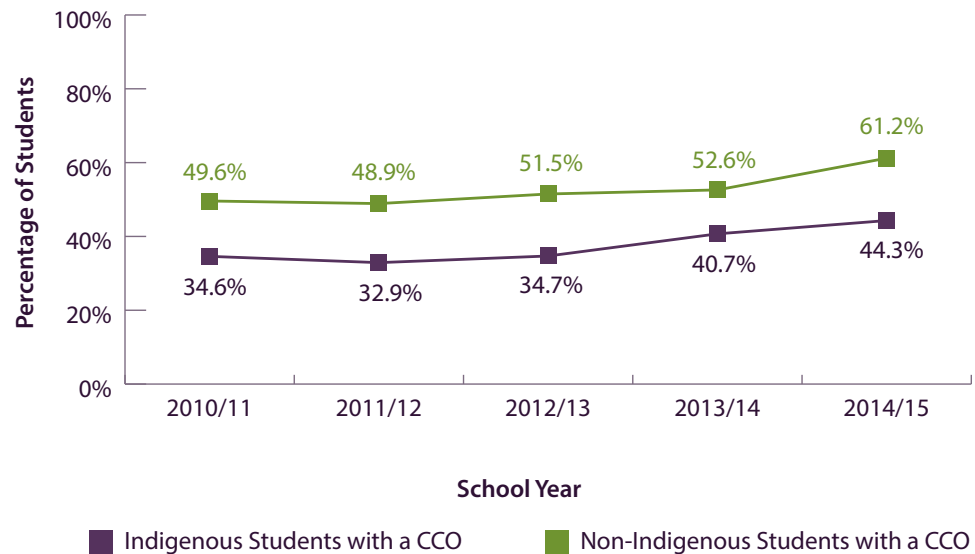
In the 2014/15 school year, fewer Indigenous students with a CCO took Grade 10 courses within two years of Grade 8 than non-Indigenous students with a CCO. For Indigenous students with a CCO who did take these courses on time, the percentage who received a C+ or higher (indicating they were on track to graduate) varied greatly among courses. The majority of Indigenous students with a CCO received a mark of C+ or higher in physical education and Planning 10. However, for all Grade 10 courses that include provincial exams, as well as Grade 10 social studies, fewer than half of Indigenous students with a CCO received a C+ or higher.

Among students with a CCO who started Grade 8 in 2010/11, fewer Indigenous students progressed from grade to grade and to graduation, with a gap in progression rates between the two groups increasing at each grade:

- 81 per cent of Indigenous students with a CCO progressed from Grade 11 to Grade 12, compared to 90 per cent of non-Indigenous students with a CCO
- 44 per cent of Indigenous students with a CCO graduated from high school within six years of starting Grade 8 compared to 61 per cent of non-Indigenous students with a CCO
- In 2014/15, 11 per cent of Indigenous students with a CCO graduated with honours compared to 19 per cent of non-Indigenous students with a CCO.

The six-year completion rate for Indigenous students with a CCO increased from 35 per cent in 2010/11 to 44 per cent in 2014/15, which is still 15 to 17 percentage points lower than non-Indigenous students with a CCO. Data for the 2015/16 year, released in the Ministry of Education's *How are we Doing?* report, suggests that this gap increased in that year.

Six-Year Completion Rate, Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Students with a CCO, 2010/11 to 2014/15



### How students with a CCO and special needs are doing compared to other students with special needs

When reporting on the academic achievement of students with special needs, the Ministry of Education reports only on the achievement of students with specific special needs designations where all of these students are expected to be working towards graduation:

- visual impairment
- deaf or hard of hearing
- learning disability
- intensive behaviour intervention/serious mental illness
- moderate behaviour support/moderate mental illness.

Information available from the Ministry of Education when data for this review was received indicated that the above groupings reflect those students who are working towards a certificate of graduation and for whom the ministry's student achievement measures are most meaningful. Groupings of special need designations for performance reporting are currently under review by the ministry.

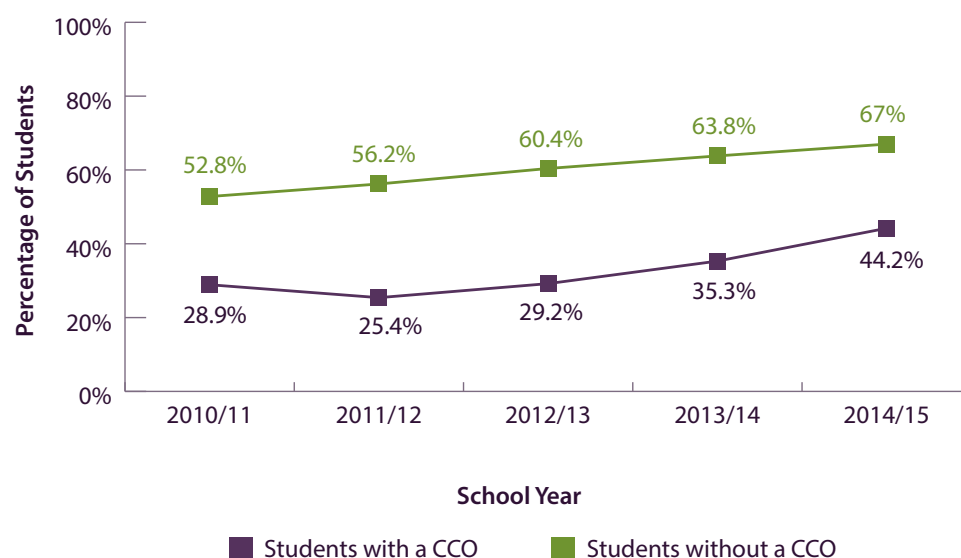
The ministry does not report on achievement of students with gifted special needs designations or on achievement of students with special needs designations where some or all students are not expected to graduate, including Physically Dependent, Deafblind, Moderate to Profound Intellectual Disability, Physical Disability or Chronic Health Impairment, Autism Spectrum Disorder and Mild Intellectual Disability.

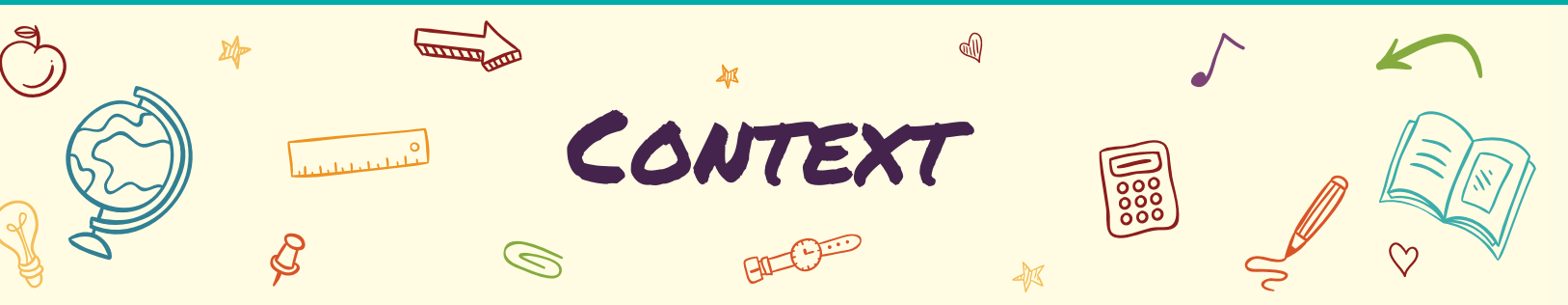
Information provided in this report on achievement of students with special needs is consistent with the Ministry of Education's reporting.

Key differences between students with and without a CCO who have special needs include:

- In 2014/15, fewer students with a CCO and special needs took Grade 10 courses required for graduation on time than students without a CCO who had special needs.
- Among students who took Grade 10 courses required for graduation on time, a lower percentage of students with both special needs and a CCO achieved a grade of C+ to A in social studies, language arts, and science than students with special needs but without a CCO. For example, in Science 10, 27 per cent of students with both special needs and a CCO achieved a grade between C+ and A compared to 42 per cent of students with special needs but no CCO. However, this gap in achievement did not exist in planning, physical education or math where performance between groups was similar.
- There is also a gap in six-year completion rates between students with a CCO and special needs and students with special needs without a CCO. The 2014/15 six-year completion rate (for students who started Grade 8 in 2010/11) was 44 per cent for students with a CCO and special needs compared to 67 per cent of students with special needs but without a CCO. The difference between these two groups has been more than 20 percentage points each year since 2010/11.

Six-Year Completion Rate, Students with Special Needs, with and without a CCO, 2010/2011 to 2014/2015





Child welfare and K to 12 education are the two public service areas in B.C. with the greatest impact on the educational outcomes of children and youth in care. Both service areas have important roles in supporting the overall well-being of children and youth in care, which contributes to engagement and success at school, and for supports specifically relevant to education. Social workers in the child welfare system are the legal guardians of most children and youth in care, while foster parents and staffed residential services provide homes and day-to-day care. Most children and youth in care attend public schools staffed by principals, teachers, counsellors and teaching assistants who have the task of supporting the learning of all the children and youth in their schools. An understanding of the child welfare and K to 12 public education systems provides a point of reference for the findings and conclusions of this report.

### Child Welfare

MCFD is responsible for the delivery of child welfare services in B.C. *The Child, Family and Community Service Act (CFCS Act)* defines child welfare services, including the legal steps necessary in order for children and youth to be taken into care. Children and youth in care can be any age up to their 19th birthday, from any ethnic or socio-economic group, and can come into care with MCFD or a Delegated Aboriginal Agency (DAA) for many different reasons and under different legal statuses. The legal status of a child or youth and the legal rights of his or her parent(s) differ according to the type of MCFD care.

Most children and youth who come into care in B.C. do so through child protection services that respond to concerns about child safety. Others come into care through a Voluntary Care Agreement (VCA) when their parent or parents are temporarily unable to care for them, or through a Special Needs Agreement (SNA) when parents are unable to meet the special needs of a child. With a VCA or SNA, parents continue to be involved in decisions affecting their children while they are in care. This report focuses mainly on supports for those children and youth in care for whom MCFD social workers are the delegated guardians. (See Appendix 5 for further information on differing legal statuses of children and youth in care.)

The *CFCS Act* requires that each child or youth in care has a regularly updated care plan that takes into account the child or youth's unique abilities and needs, and details how the child or youth will be supported to meet appropriate developmental goals. Among the legislated rights of children and youth in care spelled out in the *CFCS Act* are the rights to "be informed about their plans of care" and to "be consulted and to express their views, according to their abilities, about significant decisions affecting them."

Responsibility for front-line implementation of the *CFCS Act* is ultimately delegated to social workers who work for MCFD or a DAA. There are 24 DAAs in B.C. funded by MCFD. DAAs serve about 42 per cent of the approximately 4,400 Indigenous children and youth in care in B.C.

Individual social workers working at either MCFD or DAAs provide guardianship services for children and youth in care. Some social workers are dedicated to guardianship services, usually for children and youth with a CCO, while others have duties that can include child protection or services for children and youth with special needs.

While the *CFCS Act* is the legislative framework for child welfare services to children and youth in care, MCFD and DAAs provide further guidance for social workers and caregivers through practice standards. MCFD standards, practice directives and guidelines apply to services delivered by MCFD. *Aboriginal Operational and Practice Standards and Indicators (AOPSI)* apply to DAAs and are supplemented by MCFD guidelines on topics not addressed by AOPSI.

An initial care plan is created when a child comes into care, and a complete care plan is required within six months. According to MCFD standards (MCFD, 2017a), the implementation of a child's care plan should achieve the best possible outcomes in the following areas:

- permanency
- identity
- health
- behavioural development
- education
- social/recreational activities
- self-care and independence skills.

A care plan should identify specific goals, strategies for achieving them and individuals responsible for following through on planned supports. The plan should be created with input from the child or youth according to his or her ability, and acted on by the adults on the child's care team who are actively involved in the child or youth's care. Examples of care team members include guardianship and resource social workers, family members, caregivers, Indigenous community representatives, adoptive parent(s), mental health clinicians, teachers, health professionals, youth probation officers and others who are significant to the child or youth (MCFD, 2015).

An MCFD or DAA social worker with guardianship duties for a child or youth is responsible for creating a meaningful relationship with the child or youth in care, and for involving them and considering their views in planning and decision-making. The social worker is also responsible for ensuring that a care plan is created and implemented, including a section on education/social recreational activities. The *Care Plan Practice Guide (2014a)* and *Care Plan User Guide (2014b)* indicate that social workers should meet with school personnel and that this section of the care plan should include focusing on safety and belonging at school, supporting optimal learning and educational success, ensuring that school district staff know about the child, meeting with school personnel, focusing on belonging and stability, decreasing

unanticipated school transitions, and supporting transitions and addressing grief and loss related to those transitions when they do occur.

When children or youth come into care, they are placed with a caregiver. Caregivers for most children and youth in care are foster parents who care for children and youth in their homes. Some children and youth are cared for by staff of contracted residential services, such as group homes. In both cases, caregivers receive funding from MCFD or a DAA to care for children and youth. The *CFCS Act* specifies that, when possible, a child should be placed *"in a location that will allow the child to continue in the same school."*

A child or youth's caregiver also has a critical role in supporting both general well-being and participation and achievement at school. While social workers have the legal responsibility of guardian, foster parents are responsible for providing a home for children or youth in care and for day-to-day care, including:

- physical care such as clothing, food and shelter
- emotional care, including love and inclusion in a family
- nurturing of both intellectual and emotional development, and
- guidance and supervision.

Specific to education supports, MCFD's *Standards for Foster Homes* (2017c) require that a caregiver:

- encourage, assist and support children to achieve educational performance that matches their abilities
- ensure children have the necessary materials and an appropriate setting for study and homework
- provide children with help with homework, and
- participate in school events and meetings.

Standards for staffed residential services stipulate that staff encourage and support children and youth in care in their educational goals and provide an appropriate space to study, but standards do not require that staff of the resource help children with their homework or attend school meetings.

The MCFD *Foster Family Handbook* (2013) also lists a number of roles that a caregiver may play in relation to education, as determined by a child or youth's care plan, including enrolling the child in school, telling the teacher that the child is in care while respecting confidentiality, signing report cards and supporting the child or youth to adjust and stay connected with staff at the previous school if their placement with the foster parents required a change in schools.

Foster parents are responsible for the cost of school supplies required by the school and for all school activities for which a fee is charged. In exceptional cases, additional funding may be available from MCFD through a "one-time-only" grant. MCFD, at its discretion, may also provide additional funds for private tutoring. Though children in care typically go to public schools, MCFD may authorize attendance at a private school when there is a clear need or benefit to the child.



MCFD is required to report publicly on quality assurance audits and performance measures, which are in place to evaluate and monitor how the ministry is performing on behalf of its children and youth in care. Quality assurance audits of guardianship services are to include reviewing whether care plans for children and youth in care have been completed. However, the audits do not specifically assess whether guardianship services are meeting education-specific expectations for care plans or other aspects of service. While audits have been conducted of DAAs in recent years, no audits of guardianship services delivered by MCFD have been conducted since 2011. MCFD's 2016 quality assurance standards require audits to be conducted every three years. The ministry's performance management reports include indicators of educational achievement for children and youth in care, including grade progression, placement in age-appropriate grade, performance on FSAs and high school credential rate. It is worth noting that, while this review reports on achievement measures consistent with reporting from the Ministry of Education, MCFD uses some different measures. For example, the MCFD measure for high school credential provides information on the rate at which youth in care receive a high school credential, including a non-graduation Evergreen Certificate, by the time they turn 19.

## K to 12 Public Education

While MCFD and DAAs are responsible for providing homes, guardianship and parenting to children and youth in care, the purpose of the K to 12 school system is to enable all school-age children and youth in B.C. to *“develop their individual potential and to acquire the knowledge, skills and abilities needed to contribute to a healthy society and a prosperous and sustainable economy.”* (Ministry of Education, 2017a)

The Ministry of Education co-governs the K to 12 education system with 60 boards of education. The ministry provides *“leadership and funding to the K to 12 education system through governance, legislation, policy and standards,”* while boards are responsible for delivering K to 12 public school services within the policy and funding set by the ministry.

Each school board is governed by elected trustees and administered by a school superintendent who acts as the chief executive officer of the board. Public school boards operate mainstream, alternative and distributed (distance) learning schools and provide support for home schooling. Private schools operate outside of school boards while meeting the requirements of the *Independent School Act* and ministry regulations.

The Ministry of Education provides funding to school boards per student enrolled in each district, and school boards are responsible for managing and allocating their funds based on local spending priorities. Private schools receive either 35 per cent or 50 per cent of the per-student funding that is received by public schools and charge fees to parents.<sup>7</sup>

Some First Nations students live on-reserve but attend school off-reserve. For these

<sup>7</sup> The level of provincial funding for a private school depends on whether the school's per-student operating cost is higher than the per-student operating grant issued to the local public school district. If it is higher, the independent school receives 35 per cent of the per-student grant received by local public schools; if it is lower, the independent school receives 50 per cent of the public school per-student grant. (Ministry of Education, 2017d).

students, federal funding is provided to school districts or private schools to pay for education services. Local Education Agreements – agreements between one or more First Nations and a school district or private school – define the provision of education services for these students. These agreements enable First Nations to influence how education services are delivered to their children and youth. The agreements also allow federal funding for education to flow through First Nations, who then pay for education services directly.

The ministry also provides funding supplements for a variety of geographic and demographic factors. Most relevant for children and youth in care are funding supplements for Indigenous students, students with certain special needs designations and vulnerable students.

Funding for Indigenous education is particularly relevant for the almost 70 per cent of children and youth in care in the provincial K to 12 school system who are Indigenous.<sup>8</sup> In 2016/17, the ministry provided \$1,195 for each student who had self-identified as being of Indigenous ancestry to support their educational achievement. Targeted Indigenous education funding requires school boards and local Indigenous communities to work together to develop and deliver Indigenous education programs and services that integrate academic achievement and Indigenous culture and/or language. The delivery and outcomes of these programs and services must be documented in each school district, preferably through an Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreement, which is a working agreement between a school district, all local Indigenous communities and the ministry that is designed to enhance the educational achievement of Indigenous students.

More than half of children and youth in care have a special needs designation at school. While school districts are expected to meet the needs of most students with special needs through their core funding, districts receive extra funds annually for each student with one of the following designations (*Ministry of Education Operation Grants Manual*, 2016b):

- Physically Dependent or Deafblind (\$37,700)
- Moderate to Profound Intellectual Disability, Physical Disability or Chronic Health Impairment, Visual Impairment, Deaf or Hard of Hearing, Autism Spectrum Disorder (\$18,850)
- Intensive Behaviour Interventions or Serious Mental Illness (\$9,500).

Supplemental special needs funding is provided to school boards to support the needs of students within their districts and is not targeted to specific students.

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<sup>8</sup> This does not include students who are attending First Nations schools funded by the federal government.

School boards also receive resources from the ministry to support vulnerable students through its CommunityLINK funding and a further supplement that tops up CommunityLINK funds. These supplements are provided to some school districts based on a formula that includes the number of children and youth in care in the district. In 2016/17, the ministry provided a total of \$63 million to B.C. school districts to support vulnerable students. School districts allocate CommunityLINK and supplemental funding at their discretion on a wide variety of programs and services including breakfast, lunch and snack programs, academic supports, counselling, youth workers and after-school programs.

The ministry does not provide funding specifically dedicated to children and youth in care, but it does provide guidance to school boards regarding supports for children and youth in care. In 2009, the ministry acted on a 2009 recommendation from RCY to require that “... every school in British Columbia assign a single staff person to oversee education planning, monitoring and attainment of the children in care that attend their school” (*Kids, Crime and Care: Youth Justice Experiences and Outcomes*, 2009). MCFD’s intranet site includes a list of these school contacts across the province.

## Communication and Collaboration Across Systems

Apart from their respective policies that relate to children and youth in care, the Ministry of Education and MCFD also have joint guidelines for communication and collaboration at the local level to support children and youth in care.

The *Joint Educational Planning and Support for Children and Youth in Care: Cross-Ministry Guidelines* were created in a collaboration between the Ministries of Education and Children and Family Development in 2008 and state that they “will improve information-sharing practices, joint planning and communication among schools, child welfare workers, caregivers and families.” The joint guidelines provide high-level suggestions for both information-sharing and collaborative planning, particularly when children or youth in care are experiencing transitions into care, between care placements or between schools. The guidelines address information-sharing among social workers, school staff, caregivers, parents and other relevant professionals (e.g., doctors, psychologists etc.), as well as a general overview of actions to be taken by these individuals in collaboratively supporting the education of children and youth in care when they are experiencing transitions in school or living arrangements. The guidelines include a number of appendices with additional information including a list of ways to enhance protective factors that increase the likelihood of school success for children and youth in care, relevant MCFD and Ministry of Education policies and legislation, and suggested strategies and checklists for when a child or youth in care changes caregiver placements and schools.

These guidelines have recently been updated and distributed, with a goal to begin implementation in the fall of 2017. The revised guidelines include new up-to-date information relating to graduation requirements as well as relevant legislation, policies, and programs such as ERASE.<sup>9</sup> New language has also been added regarding

<sup>9</sup> The ERASE program (Expect Respect and a Safe Education) is the Ministry of Education’s strategy to reduce bullying in schools and focuses on components such as promoting positive mental health and wellness, increasing school connectedness and supporting positive social behaviour in students. For more information, see <http://www.erasebullying.ca/index.php>

using trauma-informed practice with children and youth in care, supports for transitions such as aging out of care or moving on to post-secondary education, as well as best practices for promoting and monitoring attendance. The guidelines now also include new tip sheets for school-based teams, educators and caregivers that provide practice examples of how they can best support children and youth in care.

Apart from the cross-ministry guidelines, MCFD has a guide to multi-service case management (formerly known as integrated case management) that calls for inclusion of school supports and activities in a coordinated case plan to support children and youth in care, and suggests school staff as potential members of multi-service teams. For youth in care with special needs, there is also a *Cross-Ministry Transition Planning Protocol for Youth with Special Needs* that guides collaboration aimed at supporting the transition to adulthood for youth with special needs. In some B.C. communities, Services to Adults with Developmental Disabilities, a program of the Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction, also provides staff who act as "navigators" to help teenagers, including youth in care who qualify for adult services from Community Living BC, in their transition. For eligible youth in care, these navigators involve school district staff, social workers and caregivers in planning and supporting the transition to adulthood.

## Changes in Progress

Service systems are not static, and important changes are taking place in both the K to 12 education system and the child welfare system. These changes include:

- New funding that will affect supports for children and youth in care: The 2016/17 provincial budget increased MCFD's funding by \$287 million over three years. Also starting in 2016/17, annual funding to school districts increased by \$376 million to address a November 2016 ruling of the Supreme Court of Canada that found that the B.C. government failed to respect teachers' right to collective bargaining and requires the government to meet the provisions of the 2002 collective agreement with the B.C. Teachers' Federation. The reinstated funding includes \$330 million to fund teacher and specialist salaries and benefits, as well as \$46 million for other related expenses. It has resulted in a return to reduced class sizes and should provide better support for children with special needs and better access to specialist teachers, including counsellors and librarians.
- Changes in Indigenous child welfare. There is broad consensus that fundamental changes are needed to child welfare and related services. The calls to action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015) include several for child welfare (see Appendix 6), and a legally binding ruling of the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal (2016) found that low federal funding for Indigenous child welfare services is discriminatory and equity must be achieved. In B.C., Grand Chief Ed John's 2016 report to government on Indigenous child welfare, *Indigenous Resilience, Connectedness and Reunification – From Root Causes to Root Solutions*, makes 85 recommendations that government has committed to implementing.
- Revised standards that guide social workers in providing guardianship services to children and youth in care: The new MCFD standards, called *Child and Youth in Care Policies* (MCFD 2017a), came into effect June 2017.

- Changes underway to the B.C. K to 12 curriculum that will affect all students: The new B.C. school curriculum is meant to allow for greater flexibility in learning environments and increased personalization in student learning through focusing on deeper understanding of concepts and the building of competencies, rather than a more rigid prescription of facts and information to be learned in each subject and grade. The implementation of the new curriculum is ongoing, using a gradual roll-out process that began with the K to 9 curriculum in September 2016.
- In 2015, the Auditor General released a report entitled *An Audit of the Education of Aboriginal Students in the B.C. Public School System* that addresses the B.C. context and references the federal Truth and Reconciliation Commission's calls to action on education (see Appendix 6). This report concluded that the Ministry of Education had not provided leadership for improving education outcomes of Indigenous students. The report's first recommendation states that the Ministry of Education "*collaborate with boards of education, superintendents, and Aboriginal leaders and communities to develop a system-wide strategy with accountabilities to close the gaps between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal student outcomes.*" The Ministry of Education is currently developing an Aboriginal education strategy in response to the Auditor General's recommendation.
- A new K to 12 student information management system that is relevant for children and youth in care. My Education BC is currently being used by 56 of the 60 public school districts in B.C. to manage student records. My Education BC allows schools to identify students with either a CCO or Temporary Custody Order (TCO),<sup>10</sup> giving administrators and teachers the ability to generate lists of all students on either a CCO or TCO as well as view contact information for their social worker and caregiver (provided up-to-date information has been given to the school and updated in the system). My Education BC also includes a parent portal that gives social workers and foster parents the ability to access information on children and youth in their care – as long as an individual school is using this portal and individual teachers have entered this information into the system. The information that could be available includes attendance, grades or details about assignments.
- Significant changes to accountability and improvement systems for K to 12 education: The Ministry of Education has highlighted children and youth in care, along with Indigenous students and students with special needs, as populations of students to be supported by the draft provincial *Framework for Enhancing Student Learning*. Though the framework has not yet been formally implemented as policy, the Ministry of Education is working closely with school districts on implementation of the draft framework. The draft framework includes requirements for school district and school planning and reporting that are aimed at improving student outcomes in B.C.'s public school system. In the draft framework, which was developed in collaboration with education partners, districts must develop plans that consider and communicate new efforts to support children and youth in care. School districts and the Ministry of Education will report on these plans at least annually for children in care.

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<sup>10</sup> There is currently not an option to identify students on other care agreements, such as VCAs or SNAs.

- New reporting on academic achievement data: The Ministry of Education has launched a new website that shares information on student outcomes at the provincial and school district levels. The website includes academic achievement data for all students, Indigenous students and students with special needs. The site does not yet include achievement data for children and youth in care because there are relatively low numbers of children and youth in care in some school districts and providing this data risks identifying information about individual children and youth. The Ministry of Education plans to work with stakeholders, including MCFD, to develop alternative forms of reporting that will enable inclusion of information about children and youth in care on the website.

### What the Literature Tells Us

This report, including the development of stakeholder surveys and interpretation of findings, was guided by reviews of what academic literature and other jurisdictions tell us about supporting education outcomes of children and youth in care. Adding context to the findings of this review, Appendix 1 summarizes academic literature on:

- the importance of education outcomes to well-being
- what gets in the way of positive education outcomes for children and youth in care, including challenges with collaboration across sectors, and
- what supports positive education outcomes for children and youth in care.



# FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

As previously noted, 2014/2015 achievement outcome data from the Ministry of Education demonstrates that children and youth in care continue to experience gaps in their school achievement when compared to students who are not in care. These gaps exist throughout their K to 12 education: fewer than 35 per cent of children in care with a CCO met or exceeded expectations on their Grade 4 Foundation Skills Assessments in numeracy, compared to 73 per cent of children not in care with a CCO; and only 51 per cent of children in care with a CCO graduated from high school within six years in 2014/2015 compared to almost 90 per cent of children not in care.

The results of surveys and focus groups conducted as part of our review and presented on the following pages offer a look at how well children and youth in care in B.C. are being supported to improve these outcomes, what challenges exist, and how supports can be improved to help narrow these significant gaps in academic achievement.

Reviewing and analyzing the surveys, focus groups and literature review conducted for this report made it clear that, in order to help children and youth in care do well in school, more focus must be placed on a number of supports that are not now consistently available across B.C. These supports can be broken into a number of themes:

- stability and transitions
- connecting with indigenous communities and cultures
- mental health and emotional well-being
- communication and collaboration
- supportive relationships
- learning supports
- special needs.

In each of these areas, strong supports can be found for children and youth in care in some B.C. schools and communities, with excellent examples of good practice and services to draw on. However, it is clear that there is a lot of room for improvement in this province.

## A note on these findings

Surveys for this review included open-ended questions that enabled survey participants to express their insights about supports for the education outcomes of children and youth in care. The analysis of this qualitative data described in the Methodology section identified important themes to consider when working to improve these supports. Where this report attributes thematic findings to specific stakeholder groups, it is to help the reader understand the perspectives shared, rather than to suggest that all members of a stakeholder group (for example, youth, principals or social workers) raised the point in question or agreed with its importance.

# KEY REPORT

## WHAT CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN CARE



### INDIGENOUS CULTURAL SUPPORT

- Indigenous content in classes
- Indigenous school staff
- Connection to own culture
- School Elders

### MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS MET

- Quick access to mental health services
- Adults who know how to respond
- Help to heal from trauma



FOR SUCCESS  
CHILDREN  
IN CARE

### ADULTS WHO WORK AS A TEAM

- Involve youth in planning
- Plan together for success
- Share information with each other





# FINDINGS: THE NEED FOR SUCCESS AT SCHOOL



## STABILITY

- To live in the same place; not to be moved around
- Stay in the same school
- Support for home or school moves

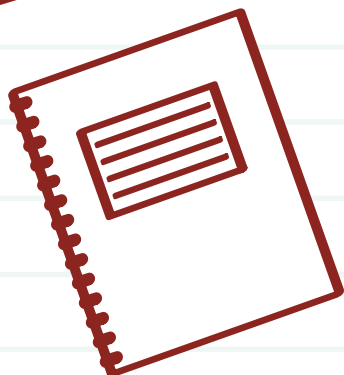
## POSITIVE AND CONSISTENT RELATIONSHIPS

- To connect often with a caring adult at school
- School staff who understand what it is like to be in care
- Social workers and foster parents who support education
- Peer support



## SUPPORT WITH SCHOOL WORK

- Flexibility
- Special needs supports
- Adults who believe youth can succeed
- To set goals
- To celebrate successes



AT SCHOOL,  
AND YOUTH  
NEED...

### Youth Voices

*"Being moved from place to place is like, 'great, another broken home.' It takes a lot to open up to someone, then it gets taken away so fast. It will crush kids."*

*"I was doing well in school 'til I started being bounced around in foster homes and group homes."*

*"You don't get to connect, so you just don't try. [You're] going to move again anyway. You forget how to make friends and [make] small talk."*

*"I don't have friends at my new school – I don't even try to make friends because I change schools so often. [I would love] to be able to go to school and have a friend in class instead of having to just talk to teachers all the time."*

*"If I'd stayed in the same school, it would have been a lot different."*

## Stability and Transitions

### Finding: Too many home moves for children and youth in care can impact success at school.

Although it may be in the best interest of a child, being removed from his or her family and placed to live with strangers is a huge upheaval and transition and, for many children and youth in care, this is not the end of their moves. Many children and youth have more than one placement while in foster care, and some experience many placements. In March 2016, more than 30 per cent of children and youth in care in B.C. had moved one or more times within the first 12 months of their current episode of care.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, children and youth with a CCO who had been in care for a minimum of one year as of March 2017 moved anywhere from zero to 29 times during their total time in care.<sup>12</sup> Changes in placement often lead to a change in school as well. The disruption of having to change schools is one of the barriers to educational success experienced by children and youth in care.

School can become less of a priority for children and youth who are dealing with the turmoil and change of having to get to know new foster parents and a new neighbourhood. Youth surveyed for this report spoke about the emotional instability they felt when they moved into government care or they changed placements. Stability was also a concern among adult stakeholders, who said that more needs to be done to ensure that children and youth remain in stable homes with consistent adults in their lives.

Changing schools makes it hard for youth to develop and maintain social connections. Youth spoke about their sadness at losing touch with old school friends and how daunting it feels to have to try to make a new group of friends. For rural-based youth, there was also often the added challenge of having a long commute to their new school.

The process of changing schools often results in youth missing a large part of the curriculum at their new school and needing to repeat work or a grade they have already completed. This leaves them feeling stressed and overwhelmed as well as embarrassed and isolated in class. Some youth surveyed for this report spoke about becoming so overwhelmed and disillusioned by the process of changing schools that they stopped going to school altogether.

Youth feel it is important for teachers and peers to be proactive and reach out to new students, as it is hard for a new person to be the one making the approach. Female participants, in particular, spoke about the role peers had played in making their transition to a new school more successful, especially if they had been able to develop new friendships quickly. Youth who had an orientation to a new school done

<sup>11</sup> MCFD (2016). *Performance management report: Volume 8 March 2016*. Retrieved from: [http://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/family-and-social-supports/services-supports-for-parents-with-young-children/reporting-monitoring/00-public-ministry-reports/volume\\_8\\_draftv7.pdf](http://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/family-and-social-supports/services-supports-for-parents-with-young-children/reporting-monitoring/00-public-ministry-reports/volume_8_draftv7.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> Email from MCFD received March 7, 2017. Number of placement changes included placements with primary caregivers/contracted resources and excluded respite care and residential treatment when the child in question returned to the primary caregiver/contracted resource.

by a fellow student said that this was comforting and gave them a point person to approach. They felt that such friendships, although manufactured, helped ease the tension of starting at a new school.

School changes can also result in delays in the registration of children and youth in care and attendance gaps before they start classes at new schools. Concern about these delays was common among adults surveyed for this report, who described children and youth in care as missing out on classroom instruction and timely opportunities for them to connect with school staff and their peers.

Principals said that delays in starting in new schools were caused by a number of factors, including lack of notice to the new school, time required to set up meetings with social workers and time required to arrange for appropriate learning supports for students with special needs, particularly when students arrived at a new school after available special needs resources had already been allocated to other students. Some principals also suggested that efforts to enrol students at the start of a term, rather than the middle, could make a real difference in ensuring that appropriate supports are set up for new students. Principals, teachers, youth and others flagged delays in transferring records from one school to another – or in some cases the loss of records altogether – as a barrier to a child or youth in care receiving timely, appropriate supports at a new school.

Delays in starting at a new school after a move can be particularly pronounced for children or youth with special needs. It is often a challenge for students to access supports, or even courses, that they need part-way through the school year. Foster parents, in particular, said that it was common for there to be an extended delay (e.g., up to 20 days) while the school waited to receive information from prior schools or they took time to plan for how to accommodate a student's needs.

### Youth Voices

*"I had moved schools and was struggling to enrol in a new one. It shouldn't have taken that long. I was so behind, I was stressed and the work kept piling up."*

### Stability and learning – What the literature says

Research suggests it is likely that placement and school stability for children and youth in care can have a positive effect on their educational experience. A U.S. study of 1,087 foster youth in care showed that decreasing the number of moves experienced by children and youth in care resulted in an increased chance that they would complete high school (Pecora et al., 2006).

In another U.S. study, although school changes did not have a direct measurable effect on academic achievement for children in foster care, the research showed that school stability is important for mental health outcomes of foster children (Leonard & Gudino, 2016) and school stability is a concern raised by youth in care (Evans et al., 2016; Schroeter et al., 2015; Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2016).

In a study that asked youth currently or formerly in care to provide their feedback on a number of different programs or strategies aimed at improving education supports for children in care, youth said that these often don't address the larger structural issues that really act as barriers to educational success, such as the instability of their care and educational placements, as well as the instability of their adult relationships (Evans et al., 2016). In that study, the intervention that received the most support from youth was the "education liaison" model in the U.S., which involves adults who advocate for youths' educational rights around things such as school stability (Evans et al., 2016).

### Strategies to improve school stability or minimize disruptions of school moves

A number of strategies that contribute to educational resilience among foster youth and to improved school stability are recommended in the literature on this subject. For example:

- Children should remain in their original school if at all possible and services (e.g., rides to school) should be provided to facilitate this (Ferguson & Wolkow, 2012).
- To minimize the disruption caused by school changes that are deemed necessary:
  - home schooling should be provided if there is a delay in being registered for a new school (Emerson & Lovitt, 2003), not moving a child in the middle of the school year (Martin & Jackson, 2002)
  - schools should be informed that a child will need to be un-enrolled so that plans can be made for the child's transition and classmates have the opportunity to say goodbye (Emerson & Lovitt, 2003)
- Attendance and school engagement should be monitored (Trout et al. 2012; Zetlin et al. 2010), and high expectations should be maintained surrounding attendance (e.g., Martin & Jackson, 2002)
- Clear boundaries and schedules should be set, and additional supports should be available in the classroom pre- and post-transition (Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2016).

## Connecting with Indigenous Cultures and Communities

### Finding: Indigenous children and youth in care need more opportunities to connect with their culture at school as this improves academic success.

In the 2014/15 school year, just 44 per cent of Indigenous youth in care with a CCO graduated from high school within six years, compared to 61 per cent of non-Indigenous youth in care with a CCO. It has been clear for some time that special attention must be placed on education outcomes for Indigenous youth in care. The review heard that when Indigenous children and youth in care learn about their culture, traditions and history as part of the regular school curriculum, they are more successful at school. While there has been some progress in supporting cultural connections, it varies from school to school.

Indigenous youth in and from care who participated in this review felt that Indigenous perspectives should be incorporated in all aspects of school, and that non-Indigenous youth also need to learn about Indigenous history and be exposed to Indigenous culture within the school setting. One youth stated: *"Aboriginal youth need to be connected to their culture. Their mind will feel more complete and their bodies will feel more natural when connected to their ancestors. And once you feel like you belong somewhere, you'll succeed."*

School district staff dedicated to supporting Indigenous students (referred to here as Aboriginal Education staff), and some principals, teachers and foster parents also recognized the importance of connection with culture, community and the land to support the development of identity for Indigenous children and youth in care and their success at school and in life more generally.

Aboriginal Education staff also noted that offering culturally based lessons and activities in which a whole class or school is allowed to participate can help Indigenous children and youth in care *“feel a sense of pride and belonging [to] their Aboriginal culture.”*

Reviews of promising practices for supporting academic achievement in Indigenous students likewise highlight the importance of strong Indigenous language and cultural programming that is supported by well-trained teachers and relevant and culturally congruent curriculum and resources (Alberta Education, 2008; Bell, 2004; Pelletier, Cottrell, & Hardie, 2013).

Most Indigenous youth in care would like the opportunity to learn their native language and more about their specific nation instead of learning general Indigenous history. For youth who had not had the opportunity to learn about their own culture from their family as a result of being in care, incorporating specific cultural knowledge and curriculum in school was particularly important. In consultation on this report's findings, some Indigenous youth with experience in care also noted that it can be very emotional when first reconnecting with their cultures and youth can require extra support at this time. Principals, foster parents and Aboriginal Education staff also underscored the importance of culturally specific connection for children and youth in care, and some noted that this connection can be challenging when a child or youth lives far from their home community and/or members of their biological family.

Opportunities to connect with Indigenous adults at school are another avenue for strengthening identity and cultural grounding. Youth said that Aboriginal Education staff are one such a point of connection for many youth. However, some school staff said that there were too few Aboriginal Education staff available, especially in smaller schools.

While Aboriginal Education staff are valuable supports for many Indigenous youth in care, and for some non-Indigenous youth in care as well, it is also important to increase the number of Indigenous school staff in other roles.

Opening schools to the participation of members of Indigenous communities who are not school staff, including elders, and taking students to participate in cultural activities in the community are also important ways for Indigenous youth in care to connect with culture. Principals and foster parents noted the importance of building relationships to enable these community connections, and Aboriginal Education staff are often the point of connection for these relationships. Some principals also noted the importance of being able to connect Indigenous children or youth in care with mentors from their own specific community or culture.

Literature also highlights the critical importance of fostering strong engagement of families and communities in the school to effectively support the education of Indigenous students (Alberta Education, 2008; Bell, 2004; Pelletier et al., 2013).

### Voices of Aboriginal Education Staff

*“For Aboriginal children, connection to land and community is also [vital] to success as individuals.”*

*“The main strategy that I find to be the most effective is making a connection with these students. Building a trusting relationship so that they feel safe is a necessary foundation.”*

*“The best thing we have done is to provide nutritious food and tutoring support, in a spirit of unconditional love and acceptance: harsh discipline does not work. Suspensions, expulsions, detentions, etc. are the wrong way to go. When we build school community as a type of extended family support, as a rock-solid place you can always come to for support and help, then it works.”*

*“[I] share my Tsimshian culture with them and relate to them as an Aboriginal person and relate to their experience, as I was also in care. And so we can talk about that if they want and when they are ready.”*

*“I try to provide my students with a safe and open place to ask questions and facilitate them to seek answers, be this [by] allowing them access to resource books, authentically sourced online media, [or] regularly bringing [in] community cultural presenters. The more connections they can build, the stronger their identity as an Aboriginal person will be.”*

## PROGRAM EXAMPLES

**Aboriginal Education Initiatives:** These program examples are aimed at connecting Indigenous students with their culture, language and community, and work to ensure that Indigenous children and youth in care are identified and receive appropriate supports.

- **Children in Circle of Caring**

In 2016, Langley School District 35 initiated its *Children in Circle of Caring* program, following Recommendation 4 in the RCY report *Paige's Story* and resulting from an Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreement. Placing the child at the centre of the circle, this collaboration is between SD 35 and community partners such as Xyolhemeylh (Fraser Valley Child and Family Services), mental health supports, the child development centre, The Fraser Valley Aboriginal Society and three First Nations. Their first task was to identify the Indigenous children and youth in care with a Temporary or Continuing Custody Order. The school district hired an Indigenous support worker to liaise between the partners and ensure Indigenous children and youth in care, their caregivers, and their schools receive the supports and services necessary for the student to be academically successful. Schools track these students' attendance and report it to their Xyolhemeylh social worker and the district principal. Because this program is just one-year-old, it is working toward measuring its success.

The *Circle of Caring* also runs an Aboriginal Parents (including foster parents) as Literary Supports (APALS) program. While this program does not specifically target children and youth in care, many foster parents keep returning with successive foster children and it has been a significant part of many children's learning experience.

- **Aboriginal Education Department**

Prince George School District 57's Aboriginal Education Department recognizes the diverse needs of students and has employed social workers as part of its on-going dedication to best practice. Thirty per cent of the student population self-identifies as having Indigenous ancestry and, of those, approximately 45 per cent are involved with MCFD or a DAA (Carrier Sekani Family Services and Nezul Be Hunuyeh Child and Family Services Society). A 2016 district report identifies key factors to furthering Indigenous student success and further promoting connectedness to school: cultural safety, Indigenous knowledge and social emotional learning, and reconciliation. One of the roles of the Aboriginal School Social Worker is to continually build relationships with students and families to mitigate the external barriers that often prevent success at school and provide opportunities in creative and culturally safe ways. Since 2009, the graduation rate of Indigenous youth in the Prince George School District has increased from 35.5 per cent to 61 per cent.

Though this review heard positive examples of connecting Indigenous children and youth in care with Indigenous cultures, some Aboriginal Education staff said that racism and resistance to strengthening Indigenous education persist among some school staff. Some Indigenous youth in care also said they experienced racism from teachers and said this experience had made school difficult for them. Some youth also felt that racism they experienced outside of school had led to increased contact with the police and criminal justice system and this, in turn, impacted school attendance and engagement.

Foster parents can play an important role by connecting Indigenous children and youth in care with culture and community. A number of foster parents who completed surveys spoke to the importance of weaving cultural identity into education supports for Indigenous children and youth in care, and some Aboriginal Education staff spoke about the importance of involving foster parents in cultural activities. At the same time, Indigenous youth and Aboriginal Education staff said that placement in a non-Indigenous foster home can also be a barrier to building cultural connections if this is not prioritized by the foster parents.

Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreements between school districts and First Nations and district-wide efforts to engage Indigenous students are also having a positive impact for some Indigenous children and youth in care – a point highlighted by some Aboriginal Education staff and principals.

## Mental Health and Emotional Well-Being

**Finding: Mental health and emotional well-being are key to success at school for children and youth in care, yet many of these students are not receiving the supports they need.**

Both youth and adults who participated in this report's survey listed mental health supports as being crucial to learning, but too often in short supply. Said one teacher: *"These young people are not able to focus on education if they don't have their mental health needs met."* A number of factors were identified that have negative effects on the mental health and well-being of children and youth in care and thus negatively impact schooling:

- **Stress**

The level of stress experienced by many youth in care can directly affect their mental health, and therefore how well they do in school. Stressors noted by participants in this review include the challenges of entering care, changing foster placements and schools, worrying about the well-being of their biological families, and of the approach of their 19th birthdays and aging out of care. These issues can make it hard to attend or concentrate at school and to build relationships with teachers and classmates who either do not know about their situation or do not understand it. These stressors in the lives of children and youth in care were also acknowledged by school staff. *"School-aged children who know they will have all supports removed very soon do not cope well with keeping up with school work,"* said one teacher. *"They are too busy worrying about necessities that adults should be providing for them."*

An Aboriginal Educator added:

*"When a child [in care] is going into [his or her] last year of high school, it is not uncommon for them to have a lot of anxiety towards their future. I have often seen them self-sabotage and/or isolate themselves. Some of the conversations I have with them are around their uncertainty of the future, of aging out, of not having the skills needed for employment, and of independent living. From the Grade 10 age and on, I have noticed the lack of drive for many. I hear a lot of comments regarding, 'Why try? It's not like I can do anything after I graduate.'"*

### Voices of Aboriginal Education Staff

*"There needs to be supports for those who become foster parents who are non-Aboriginal; they need to take cross-cultural awareness programs and be aware of colonial effects that may have detrimental effects on in-care Aboriginal children."*

*"I find at our school that our Aboriginal students have become increasingly aware of their identity [positive] and that the more we have done to include and engage them in this piece, the more success we are seeing. We have a good Enhancement Agreement that is cross-referenced with our District Strategic Plan and school plans. With all of these layers of connection, the district focus has definitely strengthened."*

### Youth Voices

*"[There were] changing adult figures and I didn't know who to listen to, so I didn't listen to anyone."*

*"Instead of punishing [youth], ask, 'Why are you using drugs or alcohol? What's going on with you?'"*

*"If a kid comes in angry, then don't send them away straight away; try to figure out why they're angry. Don't assume, and give them time."*

*"People think youth in care are bad kids, but it's how we're raised. Abuse and moving, etc. all play a role in how someone grows up – they're defending themselves so they don't keep getting hurt, they're not just being a brat."*

*"They judge me before they know my story. It made me angry."*

### • Trauma

Teachers, principals and Indigenous education staff see the impact that early trauma often has on the ability of children and youth in care to engage and succeed in school. Several noted that schools are not well-equipped to support students who have experienced trauma, and that training on trauma and how to better support students affected by it would be beneficial for school staff. Only 19 per cent of teachers said that they had received in-service or professional development on trauma-informed teaching. However, of those who had received this training, 90 per cent said that it had a moderate to large positive effect on their ability to effectively support the education of children or youth in care. *"Trauma in personal lives sometimes prevents these students from fully engaging in the supports we offer,"* said one Aboriginal Education staff member.

One principal added:

*"Trauma does not appear to be recognized as a mental health problem that impacts educational success, at least by the Ministry of Education – it is unfunded – and yet many of our students in care are struggling to succeed in school partially because of trauma-related behaviour problems."*

### • Challenging behavioural needs

Challenging behaviour and substance use, which often stem from difficult pasts, can impact school success and well-being of children and youth in care. Youth participants in this review spoke about the effect of these things on school. Some had been suspended or expelled from school as a result of these challenges and said that missing school had further exacerbated their mental health conditions, especially when they did not have a supportive adult in their life who could advocate for their return to school. Anger management problems, which youth attribute to negative experiences with adults in their lives and with moving from placement to placement, are also barriers to educational success.

Social workers expressed concerns about how some schools lack the capacity to appropriately respond to the behaviour needs of many children and youth in care. For some children and youth, this may result in their being removed from school rather than properly supported to attend. Foster parents and social workers spoke about the importance of being able to advocate for children and youth, however only 13 per cent of foster parents and six per cent of social workers received any training or professional development on regulations regarding suspensions or expulsions from school.

### • Bullying and discrimination

Children and youth who are bullied or face discrimination often do not feel safe at school and tend to have difficulty focusing. Youth participants in this review shared stories of being physically or emotionally victimized at school, with some also acknowledging being the perpetrators of such behaviour. Youth say they often will not attend school if they fear being bullied, and this fear results in a lack of connection to school.

Some male youth spoke about the link between violence and reduced feelings of connection to school. They felt that the threat of violence was a constant distraction from their school work and from engaging in positive activities at school.



## PROGRAM EXAMPLES

### Complex Care and Intervention Program

MCFD has contracted with Complex Trauma Resources to provide the Complex Care Intervention (CCI) program in some areas of the province. CCI aims to improve outcomes of children and youth in care in B.C. who have experienced complex trauma. The program trains coaches who support the adults involved in individual children's lives to assess their specific needs and develop tailored, trauma-informed ideas of low-cost supportive interventions that can be used consistently in home, school and community settings.

Coaches work with teams of adults that can include a child's social worker, foster parents, school personnel, community service providers, day care workers, counsellors and mental health clinicians, extended family members, birth parents and adoptive parents. The CCI manual and training is being adapted to include Indigenous cultural perspectives and culturally relevant tools for participants. A child's CCI care team meets monthly for 12 to 18 months to review and adapt interventions, discuss important milestones and make key decisions collaboratively. The CCI coach works with the care team until the care team has built enough internal capacity to continue to work without intensive coaching support.

In June 2016, there were 96 children being supported through the CCI program and there were 108 coaches trained in the CCI model. Initial evaluation of the CCI program indicates positive outcomes for children and youth in care with complex needs that include the impacts of trauma. Independent evaluation of the program would provide valuable evidence regarding its effectiveness.

Feeling unsafe and unsupported in school because of sexual or gender identity was a barrier for some participants, who have felt discriminated against by teachers and students. Youth who identified as transgender spoke of being rebuked or suspended for wearing clothes that did not match what the school considered to be appropriate for their biological sex. Some youth also stated that homophobia or transphobia was the reason they had disengaged from school.

In addition to issues that negatively affect the mental health and emotional well-being of children and youth in care, this review identified a number of factors that can contribute to students' resilience and school success. These include:

- **School Counsellors**

School counsellors often offer children and youth in care personal points of contact. They also help children and youth in care set positive goals and deal with stress and behaviour issues. These roles are highly valued by youth and school staff who participated in this review. However, both youth and school staff also recognize that there are too few counsellors available to appropriately support children and youth in care and other vulnerable students.

### Youth Voices

*"Youth in care get picked on more than anyone else."*

*"I dropped out of high school at the first opportunity due to bullying and other stresses in my life."*

*"Being in care, when I was in 4th Grade this kid was like 'No wonder your Mom doesn't want you.'"*

*"[Feeling safe at school is] pretty important because if you are stressed and you feel bad, it's hard to concentrate."*

*"If you're connected to school, you don't need to worry about that safety stuff."*

*"I got into too many fights, so I got kicked out."*

*"If you're going to stereotype me, I might as well make the stereotypes true."*

### Youth Voices

*"You can't come out in high school as trans. You get jumped, called horrible names."*

*"You can't go to the females' or males' washrooms because it's not safe. You have to pretend you have a disability to use the disabled washroom."*

### Youth Voices

*"If I'm having a really bad day, I talk to the counsellor."*

*"My counsellor in high school, who always believed in me, helped me the most to succeed with my education."*

### Teachers' Voices

*School counselling has been cut... so we cannot provide anything more than a check in."*

*"The school counsellor only works one day a week in a school with high needs. She sees some children on her caseload as little as once a month. It is like she is always putting out fires and never has the time for individual or small group counselling sessions. I have had a child in care from another province for two months [one of two siblings], who has not even seen the counsellor once, because she is perceived to be doing better than many of the other students."*

*"The level of counselling and other mental health services that schools currently provide is tragic considering what research has shown us in regard to how trauma affects the young brain,"* said one principal. *"The current model of expecting teachers, principals and other school staff to do more will not allow us to adequately support these students to be successful. We need adequate counselling at each school to all students."*

### • Safe Places in Schools

Having a place to go that is open to youth at all times contributes to them feeling safe while at school. Youth in care feel it is important to have places within a school that they can access when they are struggling or need a break. Some youth focus group participants who are currently in school were able to identify safe spaces within their school such as a counsellor's office, the art room, or the Aboriginal Education room. These spaces feel safe because they are open to all throughout the school day, feel physically and emotionally welcoming and non-judgmental, and are places where youth can connect with a supportive adult (usually a counsellor, Aboriginal Education worker, or other staff member).

*"Before recent funding cuts, we had a space for students to come when overwhelmed and, in that space, kids were able to vent and find a consistent success coach,"* said one teacher. *"They also met other students who also faced similar issues and were able to talk to someone they trusted. Often these students are in the care of a group home or foster parents who are not necessarily like a family and run things as though an institution. [These students] need this consistent person as they often have a new social worker, new placement and are often not from the community to begin with."*

Youth suggested that after-school clubs (e.g., homework clubs) could offer a safe space to bring youth together to support one another. In one focus group, participants suggested that having free activities, such as karate classes, would provide a safe space for youth in care to release frustration if they were dealing with anger issues. LGBTQ2S+<sup>13</sup> youth spoke of the need for Gay Straight Alliance clubs in every school and more safe spaces where sexual and gender minority youth can feel accepted and supported.

### • Mental Health First Aid

When teachers have some knowledge of mental health challenges, they better understand how to deal with issues when they arise. Youth in focus groups for this report gave examples of experiencing a mental health issue such as a panic attack or self-harming at school and adults not understanding what was going on or how to deal with it. This resulted in an adult calling the police instead of supporting the youth more appropriately. As a result, mental health first aid training was recommended by many youth as particularly beneficial training for teachers to complete.

<sup>13</sup> Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual, Transgender, Queer, Two Spirit. The plus sign acknowledges the evolving aspects of sexual identities.

A survey conducted by the Canadian Teachers' Federation (2012) revealed that nearly seven in 10 teachers who participated reported not having received professional development to help them support mental health issues in schools. In the same survey, almost all teachers (97 per cent) reported that additional knowledge and skills training in recognizing and understanding mental health issues in children were an important need.

### • Clinical Mental Health Services

As previous reports from the Representative's Office have found, there are challenges accessing clinical mental health services in a timely fashion in B.C., particularly Child and Youth Mental Health (CYMH) services provided by MCFD and contracted service providers. Foster parents and social workers who participated in this report echoed previous report findings, recognizing the importance of mental health supports for children and youth in care and the difficulty accessing them. With a focus on the mental health needs of Indigenous children and youth, the 2016 RCY report, *Tragedy in Waiting: How B.C.'s mental health system failed one First Nations youth*, recommended the co-location of CYMH services in schools. MCFD reports that it now has 24 school-based CYMH clinicians throughout the province.

In the Vancouver Foundation's *Fostering Success* report (Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016), youth in and from care identified the need for ready access to mental health counselling and other supports in light of the fact that a high percentage of youth in care experience trauma and mental health challenges. This report highlights wrap-around approaches as a promising practice, such as the co-location or coordination of education programs and child welfare workers so that youth in care have easy access to mental health and other services they need.

#### Youth Voices

*"You aren't questioned about why you're there and the teacher is understanding."*

*"A place with 'good energy' is positive, while a hostile environment makes it a lot harder to learn."*

**Youth Voices**

*"In those meetings, teachers and social workers talk first. They don't ask me."*

*"People ask your opinions but make decisions for you. It makes me angry and then I need to leave the room before I freak."*

*Youth in care do well in school when . . . "foster parents meet with principals and teachers with the foster child present and let him/her have a voice."*

**Communication and Collaboration****Finding: Information-sharing and proactive collaboration between the adults who support children and youth in care are critical for their success at school, yet are inconsistent practices in B.C.**

Many people with diverse roles contribute to success in school for children and youth in care, but their contributions are more effective when they understand each other's roles, share information appropriately and come together to create support teams that include children and youth in decisions about their learning and lives. This review confirms the importance of strong communication and collaboration that can strengthen support for children and youth in care.

**Youth Voice**

Most youth in care want to be communicated with instead of communicated about. Almost all the youth who participated in this review want to have a voice in decisions about their education, in conjunction with individual adult supporters and teams working together for their benefit.

When youth are included in meetings between teachers, social workers and/or foster parents, many feel that they do not have a voice in those conversations, and are not meaningfully included in the decisions made, including what classes they take or the grade in which they are placed.

Some youth also feel disempowered when teachers contact their foster parents if they skip school or fall behind in school work. They want to be approached first and given a chance to explain what happened and then, only if it is still necessary, the teacher could connect with the foster parent.

Youth who experience adults outside and inside of school working together are more likely to feel that adults care how well they are doing at school, that they are supported to do well academically and receive extra help with their school work when they need it. Many examples exist of strong collaboration in support of the education outcomes of children and youth in care. Both youth and adult participants in this review shared examples of how and where this works, speaking of the success of integrated teams that include the social worker, foster parent and school staff that maintain open lines of communication and follow through on plans made for a student's success.

**Inconsistent Communication and Collaboration**

There are mixed views on how well educators, social workers and foster parents work together to support the education outcomes of children and youth in care. Of teachers and foster parents – the adults who spend the most time with children and youth in care – less than half of those surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that these adults are working well together to support children and youth in care. About two-thirds of principals and three-quarters of social workers agreed or strongly agreed that these adults are working well together. Teachers spoke in surveys about being frustrated with how information held within schools is often not shared with them.

They pointed out that they know the students best, and need to know important information about them in order to properly support them. The 2008 *Cross-Ministry Guidelines* outline policies for collaboration and information-sharing between MCFD and the Ministry of Education, but do not specify which school staff should participate – the term “educator” is used.

### Workload and Turnover

Social workers' workloads and staff turnover are common barriers to communication and collaboration with schools, as was found in two recent RCY reports, *The Thin Front Line* (2015) and *Delegated Aboriginal Agencies: How resourcing affects service delivery* (2017). Teachers and principals noted that high workloads most likely made it difficult for social workers to communicate and meet with school staff, and the workload of teachers and school counsellors was also identified as a barrier to meaningful collaboration.

Turnover among social workers sometimes means that a social worker who is new to working with children or youth in care does not know them well enough to share relevant information or participate meaningfully in support team meetings. Adults' concerns about high workload and turnover among social workers parallel input from youth that these conditions result in lack of contact with their social workers.

### Making Contact

While some participants in this review experience good communication between schools and social workers, other principals and teachers have a hard time just making contact with social workers. Their challenges include not knowing who the social worker is (which can be amplified by turnover among social workers), delays in responses to phone messages and not having other modes of contact available, such as email or texting. Some social workers also do not know who to contact in the school system regarding a child or youth in their care.

### Permission Slips

Too often, children and youth in care are not able to participate in class outings and extracurricular activities because permission slips for these activities are not signed by social workers. It is unacceptable that children and youth in care are unnecessarily excluded from learning and social activities and experience stigma as a result.

There is confusion over who and how permission can be given for children and youth in care to participate in these activities. When a social worker is acting as the guardian of a child or youth in care, MCFD policy is that only the social worker, or another social worker acting under appropriate delegation, can sign school permission slips. However, despite this policy, in some cases foster parents sign permission slips for children and youth in care to expedite the process so that the child or youth does not stand out. Principals and teachers said that they would like foster parents, and not just social workers, to be able to legally sign permission slips for field trips. Said one principal: *“I would like foster families to have the permission to sign field trip forms. Nothing makes a child stand out more than not being able to get a field trip form signed.”*

### Principals' Voices

*“I have worked with many well qualified, caring social workers who are just too overtaxed to attend meetings that are not at a crisis level.”*

*“Social workers don't know the child as many just receive files but haven't developed a relationship with the child.”*

### Voices of Aboriginal Education Staff

*“The capacity for social workers to engage in the educational growth of students is paramount. If social workers were given more resources to meet with teachers and Aboriginal support people, the support of youth in care would be much more rich.”*

*“The barrier I encounter most is the social workers' high turnover, and the workload of the individual social workers ... It's extremely difficult to arrange meetings with social workers when needed.”*

### Teachers' Voices

*"We need to get information from the social workers. My experience is that they often want to get information from the teachers but are not willing to reciprocate. It should be a partnership. Privacy needs to be clear on what can be shared by both parties."*

*"Information-sharing about a child in care between school administrator(s) and teacher(s) does not happen at times when it should, perhaps because it is not clear to the administrator what information can be shared; however, this lack of information-sharing negatively impacts the child in care's progress at school across all domains of functioning."*

Another teacher added: *"[It's] difficult to get social workers to return calls and sign permission forms; would be helpful if some forms could be signed by foster parents only [e.g. field trips]."*

Other jurisdictions have legislation or policy in place that can give foster parents authority to provide permission for school activities. For example, Alberta social workers can delegate this authority to foster parents and other caregivers on a case-by-case basis so long as permission does not include waiver of liability (Alberta Human Services, 2017). Washington State conforms to U.S. federal law that supports normalcy for children and youth in care with state legislation that gives caregivers authority to consent to most activities, including school outings and extracurricular activities of less than 72 hours (Washington State Department of Social and Health Services, 2016).

### Information-sharing

There is a need to clarify which information should be shared about children and youth in care, and who it should be shared with. While some systems for sharing information between and within schools and child welfare services are working well, this review found many examples of gaps in information-sharing. It is also important to ensure that school staff respond appropriately when they learn that a child or youth is in care.

Identifying that a child or youth is in care is a basic level of information-sharing. By Ministry of Education policy, each school should have a staff person responsible for monitoring and supporting education outcomes of children and youth in care. To do so, that person, who is most often the school principal, needs to know which students are in care. However, it was common for principals who participated in this review to express frustration that they do not know which students in their school are in care or find out in roundabout ways. Some teachers also do not learn in a timely fashion that a student is in care – at times this occurs when other school staff have this information but do not share it with teachers.

Youth in and from care who participated in this review are themselves divided on whether teachers should know that they are in care. Some have experienced being judged or stereotyped, including being *"lumped in with troubled youth"* and do not want teachers or peers to know they are in care. Other youth think that knowing they are in care can help teachers to better understand them and their behaviours. Youth often want to have a say on what information about them is shared with school staff, and it is vital that sharing information that a child or youth is in care is a pathway to appropriate supports and will not result in stigma, discrimination or the low expectations described in this report's findings on Learning Supports.

Across stakeholder groups, participants in this review described examples of effective information-sharing to support children and youth in care, but this was inconsistent at best. For example, some principals are concerned that they are not informed about who is guardian for a child or youth in care – a parent can remain a child's guardian when he or she is in care through a VCA or SNA. Some teachers said that they do not receive information from other school staff or from social workers that would enable them to provide better support for children and youth in care. At the same time,

some foster parents also felt that they do not receive enough information from social workers and/or school staff to provide appropriate support to the children and youth in their care.

*"Social workers do not provide foster parents with background/history info on the children," said one foster parent. "Foster parents are not given clear information on what is allowed to be shared, when information is given."*

### PROGRAM EXAMPLES – B.C.

**Information-Sharing and Coordination** – examples of collaborative processes underway to identify children and youth in care and coordinate appropriate educational supports:

1. Chilliwack School District 33 and MCFD have jointly developed a protocol to guide how they share information. The process begins with MCFD identifying children or youth in care within the district. They also initiate a Children in Care Monitoring Plan that has two sections. In one section, MCFD, with parent or guardian permission, provides relevant information concerning the child. In the other section, the school district tracks attendance and outlines expectations and goals, supports needed and received and extracurricular activities. At year-end, schools send these plans back to MCFD, which monitors the content of the forms and the child's progress and identifies gaps to be addressed the following year. The partnership is working on fully integrating this tracking system and measuring successes.
2. In Sooke School District 62, three MCFD school-based social workers receive a weekly list from MCFD of new children and youth in care registered in the district. These social workers meet with children and youth in care as needed to learn how they are doing and what they need to be successful. These meetings are dependent on individual need, the situation and what other services are in place for the child. School-based social workers also work with the Aboriginal Education department as well as mental health and community liaison workers to build relationships, connect and offer support for children and youth in care. Schools are developing strategies to support children and youth in care, including having a school champion check in with each child or youth daily. The school district is working with researchers to develop a tracking system and methods to measure their success.
3. Since 2009, Kamloops Thompson School District 73 has had a monitoring system in place that includes contacting MCFD and Secwepemc Child and Family Service Agency, the local DAA, to ensure the school district is aware of all children and youth in care in their schools. For each child and youth in care, schools document whether there is an IEP or care plan in place, attendance, report cards and strengths and needs, sending reports to the school district twice a year. The case manager (either the IEP case manager or the school counsellor who oversees the care plan) follows up on attendance, grades or other issues through a school-based team process, which involves problem-solving with the student's school and caregiving team.

### PROGRAM EXAMPLES – United States

Several initiatives in the United States aimed at improving educational outcomes for children in foster care involve cross-system liaisons who act as educational advocates for children and youth in care, or educational specialists who work to increase educational understanding among child welfare agencies. One example of this model is the Education Initiative Project, a collaborative project conducted jointly by a large child welfare agency, a local education agency, and a small non-profit law organization in a county in California. A major component of the project is the placement of educational liaisons in child welfare agency offices to help social workers address educational problems of children on their caseload. These problems include inability to obtain school records, refusal of a school district to enrol a child in school, inappropriate denial of special education services or school placements, and suspension or expulsion of a child.

One of the primary goals of the initiative is to provide assistance and training to social workers to help them to become more aware of children's educational problems and needs. The educational liaisons, who are former high school counsellors, vice principals and special education teachers, assist social workers through individual guidance or direct intervention on a case as well as through training. An initial evaluation conducted 18 months into the project revealed increases in the knowledge and involvement of social workers in the education of children in care. In addition, there was preliminary indication that the project has resulted in better academic outcomes for children and youth in care in participating regions (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Kimm, 2004; Zetlin, Weinberg, & Shea, 2006).

The educational liaison model was considered most "acceptable" by youth in an Evans et al. (2016) study that examined youth perspectives on interventions designed to support education outcomes for children and youth in care, since it offered a strong, independent voice to advocate for them and to ensure they were receiving the supports and services that they required.

Added one principal, *"The priority for our staff is to ensure that these children feel safe at school. If a child can trust their environment, he/she is able to be more successful in all aspects of their academic and social education. When we are provided with information regularly, we can achieve this."*

The need for improved information-sharing also figures prominently in literature on improving education outcomes for children and youth in care. A U.S. study that surveyed child welfare, education, court, and other child-serving professionals working with children in care, indicated a need for specific information about the needs of the individual child to better support their educational well-being, as well as more timely access to educational records (Garstka et al. 2014). Participants in another study called for clear guidelines in law or regulation on what information should be shared (Altshuler, 2003), and results of other studies called for shared databases that could be accessed by both schools and child welfare agencies to allow schools and agency workers to monitor the academic progress of foster children.



## Support Teams

Teamwork in support of success at school can make a big difference for children and youth in care. Participants in this review saw value in regular communication and support team meetings. This includes school-based teams of school staff working with children and youth in care and teams that include youth, foster parents, social workers and other relevant adult supports from outside school. Some review participants described successful teams they have been involved with, while others did not have well-functioning teams in place but recognize that such teams would benefit children and youth in care. Strong teams were described as proactive, with regular meetings that identify student strengths and needs and discuss and coordinate possible strategies to best support them to be successful. This contrasted with the experience of many youth and adults, who said that adults supporting youth in and from care only come together once there is a problem with grades, behaviour or attendance.

Teachers and foster parents who were not invited to participate in support teams felt that they should be included more often because they know children and youth in care well and have valuable perspectives and support to contribute. Short notice of fixed meeting times can be a barrier to participation for social workers, a point echoed by comments from principals who identified giving enough notice and being flexible with meeting times as important ways to build respectful professional relationships and to enable social workers to participate.

It is important to note that while youth generally recognize the benefit of support teams made up of school staff, foster parents and social workers, some older youth feel that too much communication occurs between professionals such as social workers and their school. They feel that they are old enough and independent enough to sort out their own problems and make their own decisions. While the level of team support that youth want varies, most youth want to express their own voice when adults do meet about their schooling.

## Point Person and Liaison

A "point person" is key to successful collaboration in support of children and youth in care. Other jurisdictions in Canada, the U.S. and the United Kingdom have formalized point person and liaison roles to support collaboration. While B.C.'s Ministry of Education requires each school to have a child in care contact person, the ministry does not provide specific guidance on what the role entails, including how it could support collaboration.

Some participants in this review described instances where individuals took the lead to enable team work in support of children and youth in care. However, other participants said that they did not have these roles in place but would benefit from them.

It is important that the people taking the lead on enabling communication and collaboration have enough time for these important functions and are not doing them off the sides of their desks. Said one teacher: *"Our school counsellors work extremely hard to get the families, social workers and school learning support staff to provide as much of a wrap-around model as possible. Our school counsellors are over-worked and overwhelmed."*

### Voices of Aboriginal Education Staff

*"Having one point person [case or program manager] to work on behalf of the student and help advocate for supports they need [has worked especially well]."*

Added one principal: “[It should be] an MCFD system that is set up in zones, where social workers connect with certain schools so that relationships are established with school personnel for wrap-around support. This way, adults can work more effectively and collaboratively.”

### Provincial Cross-Ministry Guidelines and Child in Care Contact in Schools

This review examined whether policies introduced by the Ministries of Education and Children and Family Development that are designed to improve the education outcomes of children and youth in care were clearly communicated to relevant individuals and have a positive impact on those outcomes. Survey questions examined awareness and perceptions of the *2008 Cross-Ministry Guidelines* and the Ministry of Education’s policy that every school have a child in care contact person. As described in this report’s Context section, both of these tools are intended to enhance communication and collaboration in support of children and youth in care.

As Table 2 indicates, awareness of the *2008 Cross-Ministry Guidelines* is low and varies considerably across stakeholder groups. Awareness of what the guidelines are and how they are relevant ranges from 19 per cent of teachers to about 30 per cent of foster parents, to about 50 per cent of social workers and principals. Even fewer survey respondents were both aware of the guidelines and thought they were effective.

Table 2: Awareness of Cross-Ministry Guidelines and Perceptions of Their Effectiveness

Stakeholder Group	Teachers	Principals	Social workers	Foster parents
Aware of guidelines and understand how they are relevant	19.3%	54.0%	46.3%	32.5%
Aware of guidelines, understand their relevance and agree that they have had a positive impact on collaborative planning	6.2%	28.5%	27.5%	15.8%

Regarding the child in care contact person, the Ministry of Education requires that “... every school in British Columbia assign a single staff person to oversee education planning, monitoring and attainment of the children in care that attend their school.” This role is most commonly filled by principals. As indicated in Table 3, of the principals who completed the survey, 88 per cent reported that there was a child in care contact person in their school – either themselves or someone else. However, only 23 per cent of teachers were aware of who the contact person is in their school and the tasks that person performs. Over half of social workers and foster parents were aware of who holds this position in the schools attended by children and youth in care for whom they are responsible. Among those who knew who the relevant child in care contact person was, 70 per cent of teachers agreed that people in these roles are actively involved in supporting the academic success of the children and/or

youth in care in their school, while just over half of foster parents and social workers aware of who the child in care contact was in schools agreed that this role has a positive effect on the education of children or youth in care.

**Table 3: Awareness of Child in Care Contact Person**

Principals who say that there is a child in care (CIC) contact person in their school	88.4%
Teachers who know who the CIC contact person is in their school and understand which tasks they perform	22.7%
Social workers who know who the school CIC contact person is for all or most of the children and youth in care on their caseload	55.7%
Foster parents who know who the school CIC contact person is for all or most of the children and youth in their care during the past five years	52.6%

### Youth Voices

Youth in care say they do well in school when they:

- "... are supported by adults, when adults show [us] that they care."
- "... have adults that can offer advice and understanding."
- "have that one trustworthy super helpful person that [we] can count on for the support [we] need."

## Supportive Relationships

### Finding: Children and youth in care need stable positive connections with adults and peers to do well in school.

Instability in the lives of children in care often makes it difficult for them to develop and maintain social connections and relationships. At the same time, connections to others, including both peers and adults, helps make the experience of transitions, such as to a new school, more positive.

Support from adults in their lives is a key component to the success of children and youth in care at school that has been identified in the research literature. Although many youth in care experience challenges relating to the frequent rotation of adults through their lives, and some have spoken about adults hindering rather than helping their educational performance, supportive relationships can be very significant in increasing overall motivation, perseverance and success (Driscoll, 2013). This has also been found in previous RCY reports, including *On Their Own: Examining the Needs of B.C. Youth as They Leave Government Care* (2014).

### Support from Adults

Support from adults includes the importance of adults helping young people with encouragement and celebrating the positive elements in youths' lives, including their successful achievement of goals. Youth surveyed gave examples of adults helping with practical things such as homework, transportation or navigating school administration. Said one youth: *"The best thing adults can do to support [youth in care] is listen, try to understand and be engaged, and help youth advocate for themselves."*

### Voices of Aboriginal Education Staff

*"Students in care need someone to fight for them. If we leave it to foster families, then they miss out on a lot. They need strong, young role models to work as partners with the school district. A lot of the time, they may not sign up for events because they worry about money, rides and special equipment that they may be afraid to ask for. They need people who will encourage them to join sports teams and leadership roles... they need to be assured that they don't have to worry about rides and extra costs."*

At times, youth in care have to contend with adults in the school system who are unaware or unsupportive of the additional challenges youth in care face, and do not make efforts to include them in school life. Youth and some teachers surveyed want school staff to have a better understanding of what it's like to be in care and how being in care can affect learning and behaviour at school. Said one teacher: *"[We need to learn] to be sensitive to the challenges faced by children in care. Most educators simply don't realize what some of the realities and knowledge gaps are for these children."*

The importance of having consistent, supportive, reliable and easily accessible adults in the lives of youth in care cannot be over-estimated. In many studies and reports, youth in care have identified the role of a committed, consistent adult or mentor in their lives as being instrumental to their educational success (Del Quest et al., 2012; Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016; Schroeter et al., 2015; Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2016).

In a study in the U.K., children and youth ages 10 to 18 currently in foster or residential care said that sometimes, even though teachers tried to support them, a lack of understanding on the part of a teacher with regard to what it means to be in care was a barrier to their educational progress. Some of those children suggested that it would be helpful to train teachers to better understand the problems that children in government care might face, including reasons why a young person might not be able to concentrate fully at school. Some also felt that teachers sometimes negatively labelled them as a result of being in government care, or that teachers could make erroneous assumptions, such as thinking they were in care due to delinquent behaviour (Harker et al., 2003).

While youth provided examples of supportive adults in many roles, their teachers, school counsellors and Aboriginal support workers stand out as being particularly helpful.

#### • Teachers

Youth in every focus group conducted for this review spoke about the important role that teachers can play in supporting them to succeed at school. They noted they were more likely to ask questions and seek help from teachers who are friendly and interested in chatting to students. They felt it was important for teachers to be relatable and approachable.

Youth participants across different focus groups felt there was too much expectation placed on teachers. They felt that teachers often do not have time to work with youth one-on-one or to undertake specific training and, without this, it is hard for them to support youth in care in the way they would like to. Said one youth: *"Teachers are sometimes overworked and underpaid; they're burned out."*

Literature also highlights the importance of supportive teachers. In a series of interviews in the U.K., youth in care most frequently mentioned teachers when asked to name individuals who fulfilled a supportive role for them in their education (Harker et al., 2003; Harker et al., 2004). Similarly, youth in government care who participated in the Vancouver Foundation project, Fostering Success, spoke about supportive teachers and social workers who helped them to continue in school (Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016). Youth in care who contributed input to *Growing Up in B.C.* – 2015

#### Youth Voices

*"A teacher can be there for you, can clap you on the back when you do something right, not just when you do badly."*

*"[A good teacher is] someone who engages with you . . . someone you can rely on."*

also wanted adults to act as positive role models who value school, more and earlier support from school staff such as counsellors, and extra help and encouragement from their teachers (Representative for Children and Youth and Office of the Provincial Health Officer, 2015).

#### • School counsellors

School counsellors are important for connecting with and supporting children and youth in care. Youth, teachers and principals all agree that school counsellors are in short supply and often cannot meet the needs of vulnerable students. One youth in care surveyed said: *"My counsellor in high school, who always believed in me, helped me the most to succeed with my education."*

#### • School Aboriginal Education staff

A number of staff positions in B.C. school districts are dedicated to working with and advocating for Indigenous students. These include Aboriginal support workers, Aboriginal education enhancement workers, advocates, teachers and elders. Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth who participated in focus groups, as well as teachers and principals who responded to surveys, noted the importance of roles such as Aboriginal support workers who take holistic approaches with students. Such approaches include offering food, being interested in what's happening in the students' lives outside of school and connecting at a personal level as well as providing academic support. Some school staff also said that there are not enough of these positions, especially in smaller schools. Said one youth: *"I had an Aboriginal support worker [who] balanced culture and work with school. It helped me survive as a student and as a person . . . helped me graduate."*

#### • Foster parents

Foster parents can contribute in many ways to success at school for the children and youth in their care. However, it was more common among youth surveyed for this report not to get the support they desired from foster parents than to get that support. Youth want foster parents to know what is happening for them at school, but most youth surveyed feel that foster parents and social workers are not well-informed, interested or involved in their education

Those youth who received support from their foster parents highly valued it. In this review, some foster parents spoke about being supportive of the education of children and youth in their care by speaking to children and youth about their educational goals and progress, checking on and helping them with their homework, encouraging their attendance and school involvement, and setting up children and youth to succeed each day by making sure they have a good breakfast and that they have a lunch for school.

#### • Social workers

As the legal guardians of most children and youth in care, social workers also have a vital role to play in supporting education outcomes. But for the most part, youth who participated in this review described social workers who are not available to them,

#### Teachers' Voices

*"Experienced grade counsellors meet regularly with these youth sometimes weekly or more frequently to assist with their social-emotional well-being, practical life skills and to check on them. This level of care has fostered their attendance at school and improved their educational performance and outcomes."*

#### Aboriginal Education Staff Voices

*"I talk to them. I don't go straight to the books because how can they focus on school if they are hungry or upset? I see if they need a snack or give them something for later, let them discuss their weekend. Talking has helped and the kids feel comfortable."*

*"If there are no strong relationships, then the kids in care get ignored."*

#### Youth Voices

*"I had a foster family I was able to count on – besides them, though, there wouldn't be anyone else."*

*"It's kind of cool to have a foster parent to talk to about school."*

### Teachers' Voices

*"[Youth in care need] daily contact with a counsellor or teacher who is available to them... this kind of contact needs to be funded and supported and organized, or it won't happen."*

### Youth Voices

*"Friends were my protection at school. That's the only reason I went to school."*

*"Encouragement from my best friend, it really helped me. Every morning when I felt like giving up, my friend was always there to talk to me."*

*"Not having friends means getting depressed and being alone all the time and then not wanting to come to school."*

*"I felt like the only people I could talk to were my counsellors at lunch, and that my peers did not understand or empathize with me, rather believing I was too different to be friends with, or not trying to understand my situation."*

*"I feel awkward around kids. I don't have interest in what they say. I skipped that part of my life."*

with youth and many adults across stakeholder groups noting that social workers are limited by heavy workloads. This concern about social workers' availability also arose in a recent report from the Federation of B.C. Youth in Care Networks, the *2016 Youth speak report: The top issues facing BC's youth in and from government care today*. The report notes that *"Many young people liked and valued their social workers, but felt they were too busy to meet youths' needs."*

As was the case with foster parents, some youth had very positive experiences with social workers. Social workers who participated in this review spoke about how they supported children and youth in care by being present in their lives and demonstrating interest in their school subjects and extracurricular activities.

#### • Mentors at school

Mentors at school can have a positive impact on children and youth in care. About 18 per cent of teachers surveyed and 46 per cent of principals reported that their school uses staff members as designated navigators or mentors for children and youth in care. Of those who reported having these programs, more than 90 per cent said that it has a positive impact on education outcomes. Said one principal: *"If we can, we find an adult that they connect to, to be their go-to person in the building."*

#### • Peer connections

Having friends and a positive social network can contribute to aspects of school success such as attending regularly and feeling safe and happy at school. For some youth in care, school is their social hub where they feel safe and supported, and experience respite from the challenges in their lives. Other youth in care felt lonely and disconnected from peers at school.

Teachers and principals recognized the importance of peer relationships when it comes to feeling connected and welcome at school and for social-emotional learning. They also emphasized the importance of extra-curricular activities and peer mentors, and most said that they take active steps to facilitate positive relationships between children and youth in care and their peers.

Though few teachers and principals reported in surveys that their school assigned peer mentors or buddies for children and youth in care, of those who said that these programs were available at their school, three-quarters of teachers and nearly 90 per cent of principals felt that mentors had a positive impact on education outcomes of children and youth in care. Said one teacher: *"... [a] small group, multi-age program with older student mentors supports the children to build positive relationships/attachment to another educator in the school. It also facilitates the children to develop relationships with other children in the school community. The small group size enables the educator and children to practise pro-social skills, explore their learning from their passions and sparks."*

### What the Literature Says about Peer Connection

Research suggests that peer relationships can have important positive or negative influences on educational engagement and motivation of children and youth in care.

Youth who participated in a U.S. study on factors that helped foster educational resilience spoke about the positive experience of observing other youth take initiative to pursue educational opportunities post-high school, and how they were positively impacted by the motivation and modeling of these peers (Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2016). When interviewed as part of a study on factors that allowed youth in government care to be academically successful, former youth in care spoke about the importance of ensuring that children in care are able to participate in activities in and outside of school to help build relationships with peers (Martin & Jackson, 2002). Participants in the Vancouver Foundation's Fostering Success spoke about how the feeling of belonging is an important component in school motivation and success, and that things such as peer relationships, or belonging to clubs, can often help increase school attendance for children and youth in care (Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016). Current and former youth in care in a study in Wales spoke about how they preferred group-level to individual-level interventions, and they particularly appreciated programs that gave them opportunities to interact with other children in care (Evans et al., 2016).

Youth in care have also spoken about the negative effect that peers can have on their educational progress, including the role that friendship groups that don't value education can have on their school behaviour. Youth spoke about how a lack of understanding or bullying on the part of their peers can have a negative impact on their educational progress (Harker et al., 2004). Additional research suggests that friends are possibly less associated with school engagement for children in care than for their peers not in care, potentially due to the frequent school changes experienced by foster children (Tilbury et al., 2014).

## Learning Supports

### Finding: Learning supports for children and youth in care are not always accessible or available.

This report finds that important supports for children and youth in care have not been given the same weight across the B.C. public education system.

Supports such as positive connections with adults and peers and stability at home and school are important to the overall well-being of children and youth and affect achievement at school, while other supports are more focused on academic learning. These academic supports that help children and youth in care do well at school include:

- positive expectations
- flexibility and the ability to work at own pace
- extra help with school work.

### Youth Voices

*"Most of the time, the people you live with don't care about you or how you do in school."*

*"I got pushed a lot by my foster family. I got pushed too hard and I took offence to it."*

*"They expect you to do well but then they set their standards so low. It makes you feel bad about yourself."*

*"The teachers helped me as much as they could, but they didn't expect me to do anything. They were just happy if I was well behaved. It was all they could expect."*

*"Youth in care do not get told by their foster parent 'when you graduate,' it's not talked about like we were their own child. They say 'if – there's a big difference in treatment there. There's no talk about college."*

*"The amount of encouragement I received in school was life changing. School staff seemed to see in me a potential I was almost scared to believe existed. They connected me with opportunity after opportunity."*

Those surveyed for this report provided a mixed response as to the availability of these supports for children and youth in care. For some students, it largely depends on the individual adults in their lives, where they live and which school they attend as to whether or not they will receive the support they need.

### Positive Expectations

Youth who participated in this review were clear that success at school is important, and that the idea of success should fit with their needs. For example, they said that graduating from high school at their own pace is important, and that accomplishments that might be taken for granted for other students should be recognized and celebrated, including making it to school regularly, being engaged and keeping up with course work.

Youth were also clear that others believing in their ability to succeed at school helped them to believe in themselves, although some said there was too much pressure on them to achieve in high school so they could go on to other opportunities after graduation, and that this was counterproductive. Unfortunately, it is common for youth in care to have encountered adults in their lives who don't expect much from them academically, which affects what they believe is within their reach at school. While low expectations is a familiar experience among youth, most adults who completed surveys for this review believe that they and other adults communicate high academic expectations to children and youth in care always or most of the time. At the same time, some adults did identify the need to have higher academic expectations of children and youth in care.

Research literature confirms that adults who believe that children and youth in care can succeed at school, and tell them so, are vital for children and youth themselves to believe they can do well and set goals accordingly. Youth in care in the U.K. spoke about the importance of foster and residential caregivers communicating high expectations in terms of their schooling, acknowledging their efforts, and praising them for their achievements (Harker et al., 2004). Further studies and reviews have similarly highlighted the importance of both educators and foster parents maintaining high expectations in a child's ability to do well in school and encouraging them academically (Jackson & Cameron, 2012; Martin & Jackson, 2002; Schroeter et al., 2015; Zetlin et al. 2010).

### Flexibility and Working at Own Pace

To accommodate the different life circumstances of children and youth in care, it is important that schools offer these students a variety of options for learning. Youth in focus groups for this review spoke about the importance of being able to work at their own pace – and among youth who responded to this review's online survey, 94 per cent said that learning this way is a factor that helps youth in care do well at school. They also noted that alternative programs, which often have self-paced learning, can be a good fit for some youth. Youth said that, regardless of the type of school, it is important that adults try to adapt their teaching to the individual needs of their students.



Many teachers surveyed indicated that their schools offer flexible learning options that are available to children and youth in care, including opportunities for distance learning, a modified timetable, flexible assignment formats and deadlines, or allowing students to complete entire credits over multiple school years. However, during a session with principals on this review's initial findings, some principals confirmed the practice of supporting students to complete courses over multiple school years, but others were unaware that this was possible.

### Help with School Work and Catching Up

Getting help with school work when needed is important for every student, and critical for those children and youth in care who have fallen behind because of missing school, changing schools or gaps in learning at an earlier age. Youth and adults surveyed for this report gave examples of help with school work taking place at school, at home and through private tutoring.

When asked which supports from adults help youth in care succeed at school, 90 per cent of youth surveyed said *"help with school work/preparing for tests."* Nearly two-thirds of youth (62 per cent) identified not getting enough help with homework as a barrier to graduating from high school.

Youth spoke often of experiences with foster parents that did not support their education, although some youth received positive support with school work from foster parents. Almost all foster parent survey respondents indicated that a place to complete homework was available for children and youth in their care.

Literature also highlights the importance of support from foster parents and other caregivers. In a Welsh study that asked youth in care for feedback on different interventions designed to improve education outcomes for children in care, youth in and from care spoke about the importance of relationships with primary caregivers in supporting educational development. They expressed a preference for interventions delivered by their caregiver (instead of in a school setting or with an outside professional), since this would help them to form a positive attachment with their caregivers and would increase a sense of normalcy in their lives (Evans et al., 2016).

Youth participants in this review said the main factor who would help them do well in school is having one-on-one support, particularly if they had missed a lot of classes or were new to a school. Youth who had experienced positive transitions between schools also said that they had received extra assistance at school and that this helped. About 60 per cent of teachers indicated that they generally offer additional academic support such as help after school to children and youth in care. Indigenous youth and some principals identified Aboriginal Education staff as important one-on-one learning supports for Indigenous students. Youth in rural areas or in alternative schools with smaller class sizes were more likely to report receiving this extra help than youth in large urban schools and, as a result, these youth expressed feeling more able to succeed at school.

This report finds that more learning support in schools is needed that isn't only tied to special needs designations. Both social workers and foster parents who participated in this review were concerned that the current system means that there are children and youth who are not receiving the support they need. Said one social

#### Youth Voices

*"Being able to go at my own pace [has been helpful] as I get overwhelmed quite easily and it takes a lot to get my focus back on track when something sets me off."*

#### Teachers' Voices

*"We need resource teachers to spend more time with these kids who have usually missed school and have significant learning gaps."*

### Social Workers' Voices

*"Tutoring support should be a given. I should not have to request and justify funding for tutoring every time I assess that need for a particular child."*

*"Get tutoring for kids coming into care, as often they are far behind their classmates due to poor attendance, etc. If they can catch up to grade level, they feel like they can succeed."*

worker: *"[There should be] better supports within the school system to support our [children in care] as they often have learning difficulties and childhood trauma that interferes in learning."*

About one-quarter of teachers and 37 per cent of principals said that an after-school tutoring program or homework club was available at their school, with the majority saying that where such a program was in place it had a large or moderate positive impact on the education outcomes of children or youth in care. Some teachers also identified tutoring during lunch hours as something their school did well to support education outcomes of children and youth in care.

Private tutoring can also have a role in providing extra help with academics to children and youth in care. However, access to private tutoring for children and youth in care is inconsistent. Some social worker and foster parent survey respondents indicated that they have arranged tutoring outside school and that it has been very helpful for children and youth in care. Other foster parents and social workers indicated that they have not been able to get funding for private tutoring that would benefit children and youth in care.

## PROGRAM EXAMPLES – United Kingdom

### Virtual Schools

The Virtual Schools approach in the United Kingdom involves working with children and youth in care that are spread across different schools in a district as if they were actually in a single school. This includes a Virtual School Head (VSH) – a school head is the equivalent of a B.C. principal – in each individual school district along with a virtual school team. Roles of the VSH/team include: monitoring the progress of children in care; supporting schools in developing Personal Education Plans; coordinating services; training and advocacy; arranging for networking of designated teachers ('point of contact' teachers in each school designated to oversee progress of children and youth in care); acting as a resource for social workers and foster parents, including providing toolkits and training; and providing funding for children and youth in care for things such as transportation to schools, private tutoring, computers and learning materials. VSHs also often meet with designated teachers at each school, maintain relationships with external partners such as educational psychologists and visit group homes. VSHs are responsible for managing "pupil premium" funding for the children they look after and for allocating it to schools.

The goals of the approach are to raise educational attainment, improve attendance and improve school stability for children and youth in care. An evaluation of the pilot project found evidence of improved educational outcomes, increased attendance, and reduced numbers of school suspensions (Berridge, Henry, Jackson & Turney, 2009; Ofsted, 2012). Evaluations have also identified key components of the initiative that contribute to positive outcomes. These include: strong leadership and clout of VSHs; effective multi-agency collaboration, communication, and joint training; robust data management; and high standards for children and youth in care reflected in Personal Education Plans. UK Department for Education policy makes VSHs required in all districts.

## Special Needs

**Finding: Being in care can make it harder for children and youth with special needs to receive the supports that they need in school, with many not receiving educational services such as timely assessments of their learning needs and tailored individual supports.**

In addition to the things that all children and youth in care need, such as adult understanding and feeling safe and engaged in school, children and youth in care with special needs often require more one-on-one support than other youth, as well as access to teacher assistants, learning aids, and IEPs. Teachers, principals, social workers and foster parents underscored the importance of the extra support provided by education assistants and learning support teachers, and all said that there were not enough of these supports available.

Said one social worker: *"[We need] better supports within the school system to support our CIC as they often have learning difficulties and childhood trauma that interfere in learning. [They need education assistants] that they don't have to share with other children."*

This review heard that youth want teachers to understand their personal special needs and to adopt a flexible approach based on their learning needs (e.g., allowing breaks when they are overwhelmed, or working at their own pace). Whenever possible, extra support should be provided in a way that is not segregating or apparent to youths' peers, due to risk of isolation, embarrassment and stigmatization. Youth who participated in this review also stressed the importance of patience and of not giving up on youth with special needs, and some suggested having peer support groups so that youth with special needs can provide each other with encouragement and learn from one another about how to handle challenging school situations. Said one youth: *"Don't give up on us. If someone has a learning disability, keep on trying with them."*

Children and youth in care who have special needs are more likely to have complex challenges compared to other students with special needs. Most special education teachers and principals noted that children and youth in care are more likely to have complex needs that require educators to have specialized skill sets.

## Challenges Identifying and Assessing Special Needs

Missed school days and changes in school supports resulting from school moves sometimes make it difficult for school staff to identify special needs of children and youth in care. School moves, which are more common among children and youth in care, also delay psychoeducational assessments that are used to diagnose learning disabilities.

This review found that specialized special needs assessments are often only available for children and youth with the highest needs and that long waits to access assessments mean that many children and youth in care go without added supports

### Youth Voices

*"[We need] one-on-one and a lot of other supports as sometimes school can become a lot more complicated when living with special needs."*

*"Customized classes [are needed] to work with individual learning styles; a lighter course load."*

### Foster Parents' Voices

*"Sometimes there are too many high-need children in one school, so, even though a child is a concern, they are not severe enough to be given extra supports."*

*"These children frequently require a 1:1 support person and there just is not any funding for these kids so they routinely fall through the cracks. They have severe learning disabilities but no designation so therefore no extra funding."*

that can follow assessment. This review heard that when schools are faced with difficult decisions on which students will access assessments, sometimes children and youth in care are less likely to be assessed due to the likelihood that they will no longer be in the same school the following year. Said one foster parent: *"I find that through the years of children in care, they tend to fall through the cracks because no assessments have been done and they are not receiving the extra help needed or a modified program that they are capable of being able to achieve."*

Across stakeholder groups, many adults expressed concerns about this lack of timely access to appropriate assessments of special learning needs for children and youth in care. The Ministry of Education's manual for special education services (Ministry of Education, 2016c) outlines a process for identifying and responding to special needs that begins with the classroom teacher and draws on other levels of expertise as required, including specialized assessments conducted by school psychologists, medical doctors or mental health clinicians when schools need extra support. Participants in this review were concerned about timely specialized assessments often referred to as psychoeducational assessments. While these specific assessments are used to identify learning disabilities, in consultations stakeholders sometimes used the term psychoeducational assessments to include other types of assessments, such as specialized behavioural assessments, that can also identify special needs and guide learning supports.

In a limited number of cases, MCFD provides funding for private psychoeducational assessments where there is an urgent need to put in place appropriate learning supports for a child or youth in care, or when the lack of an assessment is a barrier to proceeding with an adoption. Several social workers and foster parents who participated in this review did not seem to be aware that this funding was sometimes available, and said that MCFD should pay privately for assessments more often since the wait times for assessments are often unacceptably long.

It can be difficult to identify underlying learning disabilities among children and youth in care when they are struggling with effects of trauma, instability or mental health challenges. As described in this report's section on mental health, survey respondents were concerned about lack of access to clinical mental health supports, which are necessary for assessing and diagnosing mental illness. Others highlighted that there are not appropriate tools, special needs designations or funding for supports related to learning challenges resulting from trauma.

In sessions discussing this review's initial findings, some education stakeholders cautioned that, while psychoeducational assessments play an important role, not having had a specialized assessment completed should not prevent schools from putting required supports in place for children and youth when it is evident that supports are required. However, this review found that there are children and youth in care who are not receiving learning supports that they need, regardless of whether or not a psychoeducational assessment is required.

For their part, social workers and foster parents want a better understanding of special needs supports and designations in the school system so that they can better advocate for children and youth in their care. In this review, they expressed frustration about not being able to access needed supports for children in their care, either because a psychoeducational assessment was needed but wasn't available, or that the children have more complex learning, behavioural, or mental health needs that weren't adequately addressed by special needs criteria and supports offered through the school system.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

## Recommendation 1

That the Ministry of Education allocate specific funding to each school district based on the number of children and youth in care, funding that would be dedicated to support the learning of these students. This should be a priority of the ministry as it undertakes a review of the K to 12 education system's current funding formulas.

**Ministry of Education to implement specific funding to school districts for children and youth in care by September 2018.**

## Recommendation 2

That the Ministry of Education strengthen its accountability to improve and monitor supports for children and youth in care across the province, as well as tracking and reporting out on educational outcomes for these students.

**Ministry of Education to present Representative with draft plan to strengthen accountability for education of children and youth in care by January 2018.**

**Ministry of Education to begin reporting publicly on educational outcomes of children and youth in care by September 2018.**

## Recommendation 3

That the Ministry of Education implement the Auditor General's 2015 recommendation that the ministry "*collaborate with boards of education, superintendents, and Aboriginal leaders and communities to develop a shared, system-wide strategy with accountabilities to close the gaps between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal student outcomes,*" and that this strategy includes specific actions to improve education outcomes of Indigenous children and youth in care.

## Recommendation 4

That the Ministry of Education, school districts and MCFD work together to create positions dedicated to information-sharing, coordination and advocacy in support of education outcomes of children and youth in care.

**Ministry of Education and Ministry of Children and Family Development to have positions in place by September 2018.**

### **Recommendation 5**

That MCFD ensure that an evidence-based approach is used to assess trauma-related needs for all children and youth coming into care and that, based on assessed needs, supports for recovery from trauma are implemented consistently across all care settings, including schools.

**Ministry of Children and Family Development to have assessments and subsequent supports in place by September 2019.**

### **Recommendation 6**

That MCFD facilitate by legislation or other means the authorization of caregivers to make decisions involving the participation of children and youth in care in age- and developmentally appropriate activities, including school activities that require written permission. This authorization should apply a reasonable and prudent parent standard and protect caregivers who follow this standard from liability.

**Ministry of Children and Family Development to have this change made by September 2018.**



Every child or youth – whether in the care of the government, or not – deserves to be as successful as possible in school, both academically and socially, to enjoy that success and have a strong foundation for future learning, employment and well-being. The gaps in academic achievement between children and youth in care and other students detailed in this report are alarming. The public K to 12 education system is expected to be a pillar of equity in our society.

Some of the most important supports for success identified by this review are inconsistently delivered across B.C. These are supports that could make a huge difference in the present lives and futures of vulnerable children and youth.

General improvements to the child welfare and education systems, as outlined in the Context section of this review, should have some positive impact on education supports and outcomes for children and youth in care, and the revised Joint Educational Planning and Support for Children and Youth in Care: Cross-Ministry Guidelines should help inform those working directly with children and youth. However, the findings of this review suggest that much more can and needs to be done to improve supports for children and youth in care to ensure these students experience success.

This review found that inadequately addressed impacts of trauma on children and youth in care can often be a major barrier to learning. While MCFD's introduction of general trauma-informed practice guidelines is welcome, training on trauma-informed practice is also needed for educators. More can and should be done to help children and youth recover from trauma. Developmental assessments that take into account the impact of trauma and, more importantly, specific trauma-informed supports, would prioritize the positive development of children and youth in care and their capacity to engage and learn from the beginning of their time in care. Assessments and supports related to trauma must be consistent with and supportive of the cultural connections and identities of Indigenous children and youth in care.

Another key area needing attention is stability for children and youth in care – for both home life and school. While permanency is critically important for children and youth in care, it is clear that minimizing residential moves and school changes is also foundational to educational success as are a child's emotional state and mental health. MCFD's multi-year action plan (MCFD, 2017b) identifies improvement to the residential system of care as key to improving outcomes of children and youth in care – but this plan must turn into action.

It is also apparent that improvement is necessary in how the education and child welfare systems work together to support children and youth in care. Those working directly with children and youth need more than guidelines; they need school districts, MCFD service delivery areas and DAAs to share information and support collaboration. Education liaison positions dedicated to children and youth in care, which exist in other jurisdictions, can



support the development and functioning of system supports that enable timely identification of children and youth in care, timely registration in school and collaborative care teams.

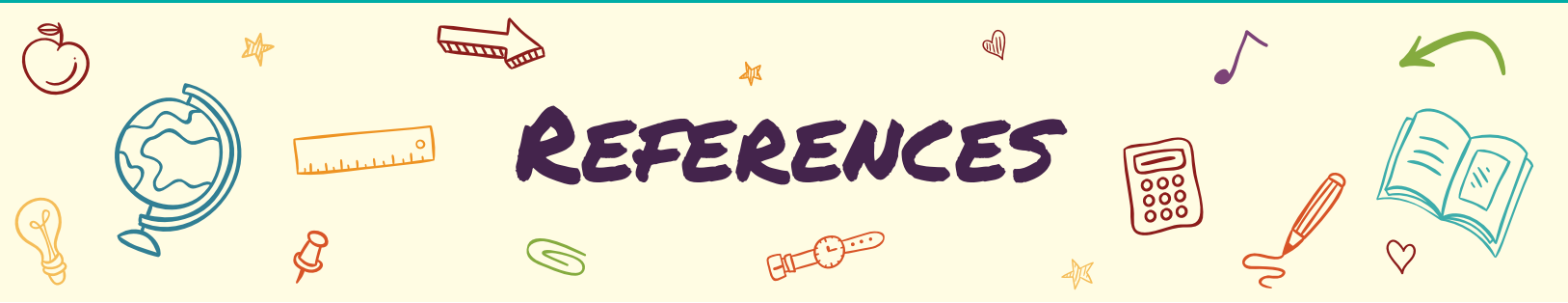
This review raised the issue of children and youth in care who are unable to participate in school activities because permission slips have not been signed by delegated social workers. Youth in care consulted for this review described how this reinforces for them that they are not living normal lives, and that when they do not receive permission and are left out of school-related activities, it is stigmatizing and hurtful. That's why this report recommends that authority be given to their caregivers to give permission for some activities – as is done in other jurisdictions.

Turning to the K to 12 public education school system itself, there is a need for resources dedicated to meeting the learning needs of children and youth in care to end the inequitable gaps in achievement that they experience as a group. Simply put, resources need to be dedicated specifically to meeting their distinct learning needs, as is already done for both Indigenous students and students with certain special needs designations.

Leadership for positive change in the K to 12 education system is another key ingredient for improvement, as was highlighted in the Auditor General's 2015 report on Aboriginal education (*An Audit of the Education of Aboriginal Students in the B.C. Public School System*). Improved accountability is also needed to ensure that the learning needs of all children and youth in care are met. The Ministry of Education's draft *Framework for Enhancing Student Learning* identifies children and youth in care among priority student populations. It remains to be seen what leadership is put in place to make elements of the plan a reality.

Many voices have been calling for change to the delivery of services that support Indigenous youth. A number of the federal Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action are focused on child welfare (see Appendix 6) and the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal has issued a legally binding ruling that the federal government end discrimination resulting from inequitable funding for First Nations child welfare services. Grand Chief Ed John's November 2016 report on Indigenous child welfare in B.C. – *Indigenous Resilience, Connectedness and Reunification – From Root Causes to Root Solutions* – includes 85 recommendations, which the B.C. government has committed to implementing. While not the focus of this review, these initiatives hold promise of improved lives, including educational outcomes, for Indigenous children and youth.

It is crucial to remember that children and youth in care are at the centre of the findings, conclusions and recommendations of this review. We owe it to these youth, to ensure that school is a place where they realize their potential and become ready for healthy, productive lives as adults. From this review we know that school has been a game-changer for some children and youth in care, but also that too many fall behind at school unnecessarily and do not catch up, graduating in numbers far lower than their counterparts. As the legal parent of children and youth in care, government must see to it that those who arrive at school with extraordinary challenges that get in the way of learning get extra support to ensure that they experience as much opportunity as students who experience fewer challenges.



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# APPENDICES

## Appendix 1: Literature Review – Adding Context

### Importance of education outcomes to well-being

Education is an important foundation for a range of positive outcomes in adulthood. The development of key foundational skills such as reading, writing and numeracy, as well as the successful completion of high school, all contribute to increased employment, social status and better health in later life (Morrisroe, 2014; Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2013). Education can also play an important role in helping children in government care build skills to offset the negative effects of issues such as childhood neglect and abuse or other difficult life circumstances. Being successful in school has been identified as a factor that can contribute to better adult outcomes for children and youth from care (Jackson & Martin, 1998). School can also provide opportunities to build supportive relationships with adults and social networks, and to experience success with academics or extracurricular activities, which can all act as positive turning points in the lives of young people in or from care (Drapeau, Saint-Jacques, Lépine, Bégin, & Bernard, 2007; Driscoll, 2013; Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000).

### What gets in the way of positive educational outcomes?

The following describe some of the challenges that can limit school success for some children and youth in care:

- **Abuse and neglect:** The majority of children who come into government care have experienced some form of abuse or neglect. Adverse childhood experiences such as complex trauma (e.g., ongoing abuse) and neglect can impair a child's ability to learn.<sup>14</sup> Abuse and neglect have been shown to affect self-regulation, socio-emotional development and cognitive development (Gabowitz, Zucker, & Cook, 2008; Marcus & Sanders-Reio, 2001; O'Neill, Guenette, & Kitchenham, 2010).<sup>15</sup> Children who have experienced disrupted attachment (typically a frequent result of neglect) can display less creativity and problem-solving skills, as well as experience delays in language and lower IQ scores (Cook et al., 2005; Gabowitz et al., 2008; Marcus & Sanders-Reio, 2001). For children and youth in care, pre-care experiences such as maltreatment can have a detrimental effect on academic outcomes (O'Higgins, Sebba, & Luke, 2015).
- **Special needs:** Children in care are over-represented among children requiring special education services. Data included in this report shows that in B.C. more than half of children and youth in care have a special needs designation compared to less than 10 per cent of the general school population.

<sup>14</sup> The term complex trauma describes “both children’s exposure to multiple traumatic events, often of an invasive, interpersonal nature, and the wide-ranging, long-term impact of this exposure” (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, n.d.). One key example of complex trauma experienced by some children in government care is the frequent and ongoing periods of victimization by adults who were living in the home prior to the children coming into care.

Students with a Ministry of Education special needs designation are entitled to supports in their learning and school environment in order to meet their needs (Ministry of Education, 2016c). Students who require intensive behaviour intervention, for example, are entitled to supports such as a classroom-based intervention, placement in a specific program or ongoing instruction in the development of social skills and behaviour strategies. Children and youth with a special needs designation are also entitled to an IEP that outlines goals and objectives, any necessary adaptations or modifications and specific strategies, and provides an indication of how progress will be measured.

- **Frequent placement and school changes:** Children and youth in care often experience frequent placement changes and school changes, which can be a hindrance to academic success (Del Quest, Fullerton, & Powers, 2012; Ferguson & Wolkow, 2012; Harker, Dobel-Ober, Lawrence, Berridge, & Sinclair, 2003; Mehana & Reynolds, 2004). School changes can result in gaps in foundational academic skills such as reading, writing and numeracy. These gaps can contribute to students falling behind at school. Students can have problems with keeping up with homework due to placement changes. Delays in the transfer of records between schools or missing or incomplete records may delay enrollment, or force students to repeat a class or lose credits (Evans, Hallett, Rees, & Roberts, 2016; Pecora, 2012; Schroeter et al., 2015; Strolin-Goltzman, Woodhouse, Suter, & Werrbach, 2016; Tilbury, Creed, Buys, Osmond, & Crawford, 2014; Zetlin, Weinberg, & Luderer, 2004).

The problem of school changes can be even more challenging for students with special needs, who may face delays in the transfer of assessment information, requirements that new schools repeat assessments, or lack of availability of special needs supports (McPhee, MacIver, Pickens, & Dubray, 2007 as cited in Ferguson & Wolkow, 2010; Stone, D'andrade, & Austin, 2006; Zetlin et al., 2004).

- **Stigma and low expectations:** Youth in care have reported that educational success can be hampered by stereotypes and by low expectations for academic success (Evans et al., 2016; Martin & Jackson, 2002; Tilbury et al., 2014). Youth also report that bullying by peers can be a barrier to educational progress (Harker, Dobel-Ober, Akhurst, Berridge, & Sinclair, 2004).
- **Racism:** Racism in school settings is a key barrier to academic success for Indigenous students (Friesen & Krauth, 2012). Indigenous students can face low expectations and differential expectations and treatment from educators (Auditor General of B.C., 2015; Good & Brophy, 1974; Riley & Ungerleider, 2012). A 2015 report from B.C.'s Auditor General highlighted potential negative consequences of racism in the classroom: Indigenous students were about twice as likely as their non-Indigenous peers to take courses at school that limited their education options after graduation, and Indigenous students with special needs were more likely to be steered toward a lower academic credential (i.e., a school completion certificate rather than a certificate of graduation), affecting their future opportunities.

In order to minimize racism and discrimination in the classroom and promote educational success for Indigenous students, the Auditor General (2015) recommended that the Ministry of Education *“address obstacles to ensuring safe, non-racist, culturally relevant learning environments through teacher professional development, cultural awareness training, and strategies to hire the best people to work with Aboriginal students”* (p.15).

## Challenges with cross-sectoral collaboration and communication

Education and child welfare systems must work effectively together to ensure academic success for children and youth in care. Some of the barriers to effective inter-sector communication and collaboration include:

- **Challenges with information-sharing and understanding:** includes confusion or disagreement around which information can be shared, both between social workers and schools, but also within schools (Altshuler, 2003; Day, Somers, Darden, & Yoon, 2015; Stone et al., 2006; Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016; Zetlin, MacLeod, & Kimm, 2012; Zetlin, Weinberg, & Shea, 2010). Teachers and school administrators may not have information that they need about a child or youth in care to be able to best support them, such as whether they are in care, access to their IEPs, or insights from past teachers. Teachers may not recognize the impact of trauma on learning or have the tools to respond effectively and social workers may be unfamiliar with school rules such as regulations on suspensions or available educational supports (Day et al., 2015; Stone et al., 2006; Zetlin et al., 2010).
- **Lack of resources:** Due to workload pressures, teachers and social workers may not have sufficient time to work collaboratively. Education and child welfare initiatives to support cross-sector collaboration may be hindered by lack of leadership and lack of time as well as an absence of clearly articulated roles and responsibilities. (Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016; Zetlin, Weinberg, & Kimm, 2005).

## What supports positive educational outcomes?

Factors that can support educational success for children and youth in care include:

- Minimizing placement changes to promote positive engagement with school and better mental health. School stability can also be improved by providing supports to stay in one school over time or not moving a child in the middle of the school year, and ensuring that schools and teachers know when a student is moving so that classmates can say goodbye and paperwork can be transferred quickly (Emerson & Lovitt, 2003; Ferguson & Wolkow, 2012; Leonard & Guidino, 2016; Martin & Jackson, 2002; Pecora et al., 2006; Schroeter et al., 2015; Strolin-Goltzman, et al., 2016)
- Learning to read early and fluently (Buchanan & Flouri, 2001; Jackson & Martin, 1998)
- Caregivers and teachers who communicate high expectations, value education or provide help with school work (Flynn, Marquis, Paquet, Peeke, & Aubry, 2012; Harker et al., 2004; Jackson & Cameron, 2012; Martin & Jackson, 2002; Zetlin, Weinberg & Shea, 2010)
- Relationships with supportive and engaged adults. Youth in care identify committed, consistent adults or mentors as key to their educational success. Youth also note the role of supportive teachers in their educational success (Del Quest et al., 2012; Harker et al., 2003, 2004; Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016; Schroeter et al., 2015; Strolin-Goltzman et al, 2016)
- Participation in school activities such as clubs and extracurricular activities that help build peer relationships (Martin & Jackson, 2002)
- Friends who are motivated to do well at school (Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016; Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2016)
- Expectations that students attend school regularly, monitoring school attendance and positive school engagement (e.g., positive teacher-student and peer relationships, and future-oriented goals and expectations for education) (Martin & Jackson, 2002; Trout, Tyler, Stewart, & Epstein, 2012; Zetlin et al, 2010)
- Tutoring programs, and programs that provide structured, individualized supports to address learning gaps (Forsman & Vinnerljung, 2012; Tordön, Vinnerljung, & Axelsson, 2014).

### Organization-level factors that can support academic success include:

- **Training and professional development for teachers and social workers:** professional development opportunities for teachers focused on the challenges faced by youth in care; opportunities for cross-training for educators and child welfare staff (Altshuler, 2003; Day et al., 2015)
- **Policies on information-sharing:** clear guidelines around information-sharing about school changes, the needs of individual children and youth, and more timely access to school records (Altshuler, 2004; Garstka, Lieberman, Biggs, Thompson, & Levy, 2014)
- **Creating team approaches:** including foster parents, social workers, teachers, and, where appropriate, biological parents, in a team approach to planning and monitoring educational plans for children and youth in care (Day et al., 2015). Creating and supporting formal joint protocols on information-sharing and coordination (Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016)
- **Point person:** Appointing a support person to oversee educational progress of children in care, advocate on their behalf or facilitate their school transitions (Shea, Zetlin, & Weinberg, 2010)
- **Create positive learning environments at home:** This issue most acutely applies to children and youth who live in group homes. Staffed residential services need to support educational success, rather than focusing on behaviour and compliance, and ensure that physical spaces are available to children and youth to complete their homework (Gallagher, Brannan, Jones, & Westwood, 2004; Gharabaghi, 2011, 2012; Harker et al., 2003; Martin & Jackson, 2002).

### What factors can contribute to supporting positive educational outcomes for Indigenous students?

- Parent and community engagement; Indigenous language and cultural programming; well-trained teachers and opportunities for professional development; strong supports for Indigenous learning, including relevant curriculum and adequate resources; and, individual student supports (Alberta Education, 2008)
- Holistic approaches to integrating Indigenous knowledge in schools, providing mentorship supports for Indigenous students, and fostering strong community/parent relationships (Baker, 2008)
- Strong leadership and governance at schools; setting high expectations for Indigenous students; focusing on long-term student success; building a secure and welcoming school climate for both children and their families; and respect for Indigenous cultures and traditions (Bell, 2004).

## Appendix 2: Academic Achievement Data Dictionary

### K to 12 students with special needs designations

Analyses examined the proportion of K to 12 students in the 2014/15 school year who have been designated under one or more Ministry of Education special needs categories.

#### Ministry of Education Special Needs Categories

Category A – Physically Dependent

Category B – Deafblind

Category C – Moderate to Profound Intellectual Disability

Category D – Physical Disability / Chronic Health Impairment

Category E – Visual Impairment

Category F – Deaf or Hard of Hearing

Category G – Autism Spectrum Disorder

Category H – Intensive Behaviour Interventions / Serious Mental Illness

Category K – Mild Intellectual Disability

Category P – Gifted

Category Q – Learning Disability (formerly Category J)

Category R – Moderate Behaviour Support / Mental Illness  
(formerly Categories M and N)

For the purposes of this report, only the performance of students who have been designated as having Sensory Disabilities (Categories E and F), Learning Disabilities (Category Q), and Behaviour Disabilities (Categories H and R) were included in the analyses. Information available from the Ministry of Education when this data was provided to RCY indicated that these groupings reflected those students who are working towards a Certificate of Graduation and for whom the ministry's student achievement measures are most meaningful. Groupings of special need designations for performance reporting are currently under review by the ministry.

More information about all existing categories can be found in the Special Education Services: Manual of Policies, Procedures, and Guidelines, Section E.

#### Age-appropriate grade

Analyses examined whether K to 12 students were enrolled at a grade level that was typical of their age. For example, a student attending Grade 11 when they were 16-years-old would be considered appropriate. Students who were not in their age-appropriate grade may be behind their typical grade level (i.e., they have been held back a grade) or ahead of their grade level (i.e., they have skipped a grade).

### Grade 4 and Grade 7 Foundational Skills Assessment scores

Analyses examined student performance on the Grade 4 and Grade 7 Foundation Skills Assessment (FSA) in Reading Comprehension, Writing and Numeracy. The FSA is an annual province-wide assessment of B.C. students' academic skills in reading comprehension, writing and numeracy. The skills that are assessed are linked to the provincial curriculum and provincial performance standards. The assessment is administered annually to Grade 4 and Grade 7 students in public and provincially funded independent schools.

The Ministry of Education expects all students to participate in the FSA. Results for students who made no attempt to participate in the FSA or have no marks entered for the FSA are categorized as "Unknown." Results for students who wrote the FSA (referred to by the Ministry of Education as "writers") are categorized on a three-point scale (Exceeds Expectations, Meets Expectations, Not Yet Meeting Expectations). Calculations used to determine the proportion of students in each of these three categories included only students who are "writers" in the denominator.

### Progression from Grade 8 through to Grade 12 completion for students who entered Grade 8 for the first time in 2009/2010

Analyses examined the grade-to-grade progression from Grade 8 to Grade 12 and then to graduation for a cohort of students, limited to only those who entered Grade 8 for the first time in 2009/10. Grade to grade progression is calculated using a six-year model, which provides students an additional year to reach each grade, and is adjusted for migration out of British Columbia.

### Six-year high school completion rate for students who entered Grade 8 for the first time between 2005/06 and 2009/10

Analyses examined the cohorts of students enrolled in Grade 8 for the first time between 2005/06 and 2009/10, and the proportion of students who graduated with a B.C. Certificate of Graduation (Dogwood Diploma) or B.C. Adult Graduation Diploma (Adult Dogwood), adjusted for migration out of British Columbia. A six-year rate provides students with an additional year beyond the five years required to move through Grades 8-12.

#### From the Ministry of Education Website:

There are two different graduation programs that lead to a graduation certificate from the K - 12 system:

- Certificate of Graduation (Dogwood Diploma): Secondary school graduation for most students in B.C. comes after acquiring 80 credits.
- Adult Graduation Diploma: Learners who are 18 years of age or older can combine credits earned at both secondary and post-secondary schools towards either a B.C. Adult Graduation Diploma (Adult Dogwood) or a regular B.C. Dogwood Diploma.

### Proportion of students with a B.C. School Completion Certificate who entered Grade 8 for the first time between 2005/06 and 2009/10

Analyses examined the cohorts of students enrolled in Grade 8 for the first time between 2005/06 and 2009/10, and the proportion of students who completed high school within six years with an Evergreen Certificate (School Completion Certificate), adjusted for migration out of British Columbia. A six-year rate provides students with an additional year beyond the five years required to move through Grades 8 to 12.

#### From Ministry of Education website:

The School Completion ("Evergreen") Certificate is intended to celebrate success in learning that is not recognized in a Certificate of Graduation (Dogwood Diploma). It is used to recognize the accomplishments of students with special needs and an Individual Education Plan, who have met the goals of their education program, other than graduation (and not all students with special needs should be in an Evergreen Certificate Program.) The Evergreen Certificate is not a graduation credential; students who receive an Evergreen have not graduated. It is important that students and their parents clearly understand that the Evergreen represents the completion of personal learning goals but does not represent graduation.

### Graduating with honours for students who entered Grade 8 for the first time between 2005/06 and 2009/10

Analyses examined the cohort of students who enrolled in Grade 8 for the first time in the years 2005/06 through to 2009/10, and the proportion of students who graduated from high school with a Dogwood or Adult Dogwood Diploma with the phrase "Achievement with Honours" on their transcripts within six years from the first time they enrolled in Grade 8, adjusted for migration out of British Columbia. In order to be eligible to receive this designation on the transcript, a student must satisfy provincial graduation requirements; and obtain a better than 'B' average in the best 80 credits for required courses and elective credits.

### Achievement in Grade 10 courses required for graduation for students who entered Grade 8 for the first time in 2012/2013

Analyses examined a cohort of students enrolled in Grade 8 for the first time in 2012/13 that subsequently took Grade 10 courses required for graduation "on time," and the proportion of students that received final grades of lower than C-(fail); C-(pass) to C; and C+ (good) or higher. Courses required for graduation include:

- English 10 or English 10 First Peoples or Français Langue Première 10
- Math 10 Foundations of and Pre-Calculus or Math 10 Apprenticeship and Workplace
- Science 10
- Social Studies 10
- Planning 10
- Physical Education 10

Students considered to have taken Math, Science and Language Arts courses "on time" were those who took the Grade 10 courses and wrote the provincial exams within two years after their Grade 8 year. Students who took the course and wrote the exam in the summer of their Grade 10 year may also be included.

Students considered to have taken Planning, Physical Education and Social Studies courses "on time" were those who completed the Grade 10 courses and received a final mark on the course within two years after their Grade 8 year, or in the summer of their Grade 10 year.

The final marks are based on the blend of a student's best course mark and best exam mark (see the Ministry of Education Glossary of Terms for more information).



## Appendix 3: Stakeholder Engagement on Survey Findings

After completing an analysis of data from surveys and focus groups conducted for this review, the Office of the Representative presented and discussed initial findings with the following groups. Stakeholder engagement at this stage of the review helped to confirm and refine the findings presented in this report.

<b>Youth in and from Care</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Presentation to Youth Research Academy, McCreary Centre Society (Members of the academy are youth in and from care who participated in gathering and analyzing input from youth in and from care for this review)</li> </ul>
<b>Teachers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Presentation to Provincial Specialist Associations Council, BC Teachers Federation</li> <li>• Online Meeting (hosted by BC Teachers Federation)</li> </ul>
<b>Principals and Vice Principals</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Plenary Session, Provincial Conference of BC Principals and Vice Principals Association</li> </ul>
<b>School Superintendents</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Presentation to Executive, BC School Superintendents Association (BCSSA)</li> </ul>
<b>Aboriginal Education Staff</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teleconference (invitation distributed through BCSSA)</li> </ul>
<b>Ministry of Education</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Presentation</li> </ul>
<b>First Nations Education Steering Committee</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Presentation</li> </ul>
<b>DAA Social Workers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teleconference (invitation distributed through DAAs)</li> </ul>
<b>Foster Parents</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teleconference (invitations distributed through Federation of Foster Parent Associations)</li> </ul>
<b>MCFD Executive Directors of Service</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teleconference</li> </ul>
<b>MCFD Provincial Office</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Presentation</li> </ul>

## Appendix 4: Prevalence of Special Needs Among Students with and without a Continuing Custody Order (CCO)

Prevalence of special needs among students with and without a CCO

	Special Needs Categories	CCO #	CCO %	Non CCO #	Non-CCO %
EFOHR	E - Visual Impairment	6	0.2%	335	0.1%
	F - Deaf Or Hard Of Hearing	16	0.5%	1,249	0.2%
	Q - Learning Disability	113	3.5%	19,921	3.2%
	H - Intensive Behaviour Interventions or Serious Mental Illness	395	12.3%	7,162	1.1%
	R - Moderate Behaviour Support/Mental Illness	101	3.2%	5,666	0.9%
	<b>EFOHR Subtotal</b>	<b>631</b>	<b>19.7%</b>	<b>34,333</b>	<b>5.5%</b>
Other special needs	A - Physically Dependent	28	0.9%	556	0.1%
	B - Deafblind	8	0.2%	71	0.0%
	C - Moderate to Profound Intellectual Disability	76	2.4%	1,811	0.3%
	D - Physical Disability or Chronic Health Impairment	875	27.3%	8,031	1.3%
	G - Autism Spectrum Disorder	97	3.0%	8,649	1.4%
	K - Mild Intellectual Disability	54	1.7%	2,143	0.3%
	P - Gifted	0	0.0%	5,757	0.9%
	<b>Other Subtotal</b>	<b>1,138</b>	<b>35.6%</b>	<b>27,018</b>	<b>4.3%</b>
	No special needs designations	1,442	44.9%	568,861	90.3%
	<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>3,211</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>630,212</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Note:** The Ministry of Education currently reports on the academic performance of students in the following select Special Needs Categories only:

Category E – Visual Impairment

Category F – Deaf or Hard of Hearing

Category Q – Learning Disability

Category H – Intensive Behaviour Intervention/Serious Mental Illness

Category R – Moderate Behaviour Support/Mental Illness

Information available from the Ministry of Education when this data was provided to RCY indicated that these groupings reflected those students who are working towards a Certificate of Graduation and for whom the ministry's student achievement measures are most meaningful. Groupings of special need designations for performance reporting are currently under review by the ministry.

In this report's section on academic achievement, the term "student with a special need" refers to students who have one of the designations listed above (i.e., categories E, F, Q, H, or R) unless otherwise specified.

## Appendix 5: Legal Status of Children and Youth in Care<sup>16</sup>

Children and youth in care can be any age (up to 19 years) and from any ethnic or socio-economic background. They may come into care with the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) or with a Delegated Aboriginal Agency (DAA) for many different reasons and under different legal statuses. As of April 2017, 62.8 per cent of children and youth in care are Indigenous.

The legal status of a child or youth and the legal rights of the parent(s) differ according to the type of care agreement or custody order. For example:

- Special Needs Agreements and Voluntary Care Agreements provide for day-to-day care of the child or youth with caregiver(s) and allow the parent(s) to retain control over the child/youth's personal information and decision-making regarding the child/youth's health care, and Care Agreements (Voluntary Care Agreement or Special Needs Agreement) provide for day-to-day care, etc.
- Custody orders (Interim, Temporary or Continuing Custody Order) allow the director under the *Child, Family and Community Service Act (CFCS Act)* to exercise guardianship responsibilities such as consenting to health care and making necessary decisions about the child/youth's education. When a child or youth is in care under a *CFCS Act* custody order, the director delegates the authority to make decisions pertaining to the health care and education of the child or youth to the child welfare worker, while the caregiver(s) are authorized to provide day-to-day care for the child or youth.

The authority to make decisions on a child/youth's daily activities and needs depends on the type of care or custody agreement that is in place. In some cases, the child/youth's caregiver(s) are able to make some decisions; however, depending on the child/youth's legal status, either the parent(s) or the child welfare worker can be the legal guardian and therefore the decision-maker for the child or youth. For example, under a *CFCS Act* custody order, the child welfare worker signs waivers for school field trips, while under Voluntary Care Agreements or Special Needs Agreements, the parent(s) sign the waivers.

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<sup>16</sup> Excerpt from *Joint Educational Planning and Support for Children and Youth in Care: Cross-Ministry Guidelines*. 2017

## Appendix 6: Calls to Action on Child Welfare and Education, Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada

### Child welfare

1. We call upon the federal, provincial, territorial, and Aboriginal governments to commit to reducing the number of Aboriginal children in care by
  - i. Monitoring and assessing neglect investigations.
  - ii. Providing adequate resources to enable Aboriginal communities and child-welfare organizations to keep Aboriginal families together where it is safe to do so, and to keep children in culturally appropriate environments, regardless of where they reside.
  - iii. Ensuring that social workers and others who conduct child-welfare investigations are properly educated and trained about the history and impacts of residential schools.
  - iv. Ensuring that social workers and others who conduct child-welfare investigations are properly educated and trained about the potential for Aboriginal communities and families to provide more appropriate solutions to family healing.
  - v. Requiring that all child-welfare decision makers consider the impact of the residential school experience on children and their caregivers.
2. We call upon the federal government, in collaboration with the provinces and territories, to prepare and publish annual reports on the number of Aboriginal children who are in care, compared with non-Aboriginal children, as well as the reasons for apprehension, the total spending on preventive and care services by child-welfare agencies, and the effectiveness of various interventions.
3. We call upon all levels of government to fully implement Jordan's Principle.
4. We call upon the federal government to enact Aboriginal child-welfare legislation that establishes national standards for Aboriginal child apprehension and custody cases and includes principles that:
  - i. Affirm the right of Aboriginal governments to establish and maintain their own child-welfare agencies.
  - ii. Require all child-welfare agencies and courts to take the residential school legacy into account in their decision making.
  - iii. Establish, as an important priority, a requirement that placements of Aboriginal children into temporary and permanent care be culturally appropriate.
5. We call upon the federal, provincial, territorial, and Aboriginal governments to develop culturally appropriate parenting programs for Aboriginal families.

## Education

6. We call upon the Government of Canada to repeal Section 43 of the Criminal Code of Canada.
7. We call upon the federal government to develop with Aboriginal groups a joint strategy to eliminate educational and employment gaps between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians.
8. We call upon the federal government to eliminate the discrepancy in federal education funding for First Nations children being educated on reserves and those First Nations children being educated off reserves.
9. We call upon the federal government to prepare and publish annual reports comparing funding for the education of First Nations children on and off reserves, as well as educational and income attainments of Aboriginal peoples in Canada compared with non-Aboriginal people.
10. We call on the federal government to draft new Aboriginal education legislation with the full participation and informed consent of Aboriginal peoples. The new legislation would include a commitment to sufficient funding and would incorporate the following principles:
  - i. Providing sufficient funding to close identified educational achievement gaps within one generation.
  - ii. Improving education attainment levels and success rates.
  - iii. Developing culturally appropriate curricula.
  - iv. Protecting the right to Aboriginal languages, including the teaching of Aboriginal languages as credit courses.
  - v. Enabling parental and community responsibility, control, and accountability, similar to what parents enjoy in public school systems.
  - vi. Enabling parents to fully participate in the education of their children.
  - vii. Respecting and honouring Treaty relationships.
11. We call upon the federal government to provide adequate funding to end the backlog of First Nations students seeking a post-secondary education.
12. We call upon the federal, provincial, territorial, and Aboriginal governments to develop culturally appropriate early childhood education programs for Aboriginal families.







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