

School Counsellors and Bill 22: Caution! Danger ahead...

Thanks to the Liberal government, there is a huge pothole on the highway called BC Public Education, and we are all heading for it in September. Like all road hazards, it is far better to be prepared and know what dangers lie ahead than continue on blindly, having to react suddenly as you approach things.

As most of you know, Bill 22 was passed this spring in response to our job action and withdrawal of services in March. This Bill combines the bargaining issues with the government's response to Justice Griffin's April 13th, 2011 decision which found that the government's 2002 stripping of teachers' collective agreements was "unconstitutional and invalid". The bill makes it easier to create large classes with unlimited number of special needs students and erodes the minimal protections that were contained in the class size and composition legislation. Finally, it eliminates consultation with teachers on class size and composition, meaning there is no accountability on these issues.

Bill 22 strikes at the heart of the work school counsellors do in the province of British Columbia and flies in the face of good practice as we know it. Beginning with class size being eliminated in many elective areas, many school counsellors will now be faced with placing students in classes over 30, or deciding who will be placed in which class. Counsellors have worked hard to place students within class size limits set by Bill 33, respecting teacher workload through being aware of class composition, and now we will be in a position where we are placing kids into already full classes. In addition, the removal of the class size average means that there can be very large classes. This was one of the features in the class size provisions used previously that forced districts to keep the number of classes that were over 30 under some control and it has now been removed.

At risk students need support, and providing them an educational experience that cannot support their needs is unethical at best; a recipe for failure at worst. Under Bill 33, counsellors did not make the decision to overload classes, administration did. With Bill 22, the placement of students beyond 30 in designated classes will be in the hands of the counsellor because there will be no choice in some cases. This places the counsellor in the position of having to create an untenable work situation for their colleagues, while also placing students in a less than desirable learning environment. And we still don't know the full extent of Bill 22's effects. The following courses are "exempt" from the class size limit of 30 students at the secondary level:

- An adult or continuing education class
- A class conducted by means of distributed learning
- A class that is part of an alternate program
- A class that meets for the purpose of work study or work experience program

- A class that is limited to students enrolled in a special academy, as defined by section 82.1 of the Act
- A music class, including band, choir, instrumental music and orchestra
- A performing arts class including drama and dance
- A Planning 10 class
- A board authorized leadership course

While the regulation refers to the list of courses, there is no limit on the type of categories of classes the “no limit” clause may affect. Although the Minister has said this refers to band, planning, technical education and drama classes, his power to establish classes in this category is unlimited.

By removing the reference to a limit of 3 students with an IEP, an unlimited number of students with a designation can be placed in a class without teacher consultation under Bill 22. This has direct implications for school counselors as many of our students deal with mental health issues such as anxiety, depression and school avoidance. Some of these students are designated on the 1701, some are not. All of these students look to us, their school counsellors to be their advocates. According to the Child and Youth Mental Health Plan...

Mental illnesses now constitute the most important group of health problems that children suffer – superceding all other health problems in terms of the number of children affected and the degree of impairment caused. Currently, one in seven (more than 140,000) children in British Columbia are estimated to have a mental illness serious enough to cause significant distress and impair their development and functioning at home, at school, and in the community. The majority of these children (and their families) do not receive the services they need, with the result that impairments often continue, causing increased suffering and affecting productivity and functioning in adulthood. (BC Mental Health Plan for Children and Youth, MCFD, 2003)

School counselors are seeing more depression and anxiety in our students than ever before. Students struggling with these disorders often need a separate setting and adaptations in the classroom to be successful. They also need a calm learning environment that is as stress free as possible. Loading students into classes based on economics and not educational principles is hardly what is best for these vulnerable students. This basic belief is echoed in the government’s own document:

Individuals with developmental disabilities and mental health problems have unique service and support needs. They may require additional educational, medical/health and social/environmental support to enhance or improve their health, development, learning, quality of life, and community participation. (Healthy Minds, Healthy People, BC Mental Health Plan, 2010)

To make matters worse, Alternate programs, which were often the safe haven for our at risk students who could not be successful in the regular school setting, have also been affected. As

they are on the list of classes and programs that will have limits removed, Alternate placements are no longer going to be a guarantee that our students will have the small teacher student ratio, giving them the attention they need to succeed.

As school counselors, we know that resilience, or the ability to withstand adversity, is thought to occur as a result of certain protective factors being present. According to the Mental Health Plan cited earlier, several protective factors have been associated with resilience, including long term supports from at least one consistent caregiving adult. This relationship of advocacy and support is crucial to our students and yet, Bill 22 puts this at risk. Many at risk students connect with their resource and/or classroom teachers in a way that is supportive and meaningful, especially in the elective areas. This often provides the incentive to come to school for our at risk kids, and is a source of job satisfaction for teachers. These relationships will become more difficult as our classes get larger and the classroom more impersonal.

The result of Bill 22 will be stressed teachers and frustrated students. *Occupational stress is a growing public health problem that is largely preventable. Defined as the combination of high job demands and low job control, it predicts physical and mental health problems, particularly depression in women, cardiovascular disease, and increased absenteeism, employee turnover and workers' compensation costs.* (Healthy Minds, Healthy People, BC Mental Health Plan, 2010) Teachers are already stressed and struggle with burnout...this will only make it worse. Counsellors often work to support our colleagues who are struggling with current class composition issues as they strive to meet the needs of kids who have learning challenges already...with more students in classes and no limits on the number of special needs kids, the level of burnout will increase.

As the level of burnout increases, there is a risk that teachers will leave that area of teaching and transfer areas or retire earlier, leaving younger teachers who are less experienced in highly specialized jobs that require experience in both life and pedagogy. Younger teachers will leave the profession because they are not able to be mentored or manage the programs due to lack of preparation and experience. Those that do stay will lose their idealism and be in a state of survival teaching. Often in this situation, teachers are unable to set up at risk students for success and the student may stop attending class, feeling unwelcome or unsuccessful. This is a no-win situation for all concerned, except the government, who will save money by hiring younger teachers and having more students go to online learning. As a profession, we already face a shortage of qualified specialist teachers in many areas...would you encourage your son or daughter to enter our profession under these circumstances?

It's time to take a stand on Bill 22...engage your colleagues in discussion about the implications outlined here, talk to parents about the impact of the bill, and consider using your LSA to put on a presentation to PAC's and trustees through your Local Union office. We need to close the hole in the road before our most vulnerable students end up as victims of these policies and we as counselors lose our way.

By Connie Easton, BCSCA Publications Editor and Audrey Pfitzenmaier, Alternate Education PSA

