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We have all had experience with children in care in our schools. These are children who are in the care of government represented through the services of the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD). Sometimes children are in care for a short period of time and, in other cases, MCFD assumes the role of guardian for an entire childhood.

Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond is the Representative for Children and Youth. Last week she released a report to the Chair of the Select Standing Committee on Children and Youth, MLA Katherine Whittred. The report is entitled Health and Well-Being of Children in Care in British Columbia: Educational Experience and Outcomes. This report is of great interest to me as it makes suggestions as to how we as educators may better meet the needs of our students who are in care.

The report examined 17,000 BC students, in the care of MCFD over the course of several years. You have heard me advocate for improving school completion rates from the current level of 79%. While that is an excellent level of success that compares very favourably with other jurisdictions, we have levelled off at that rate for the past four years. We want to move that rate up. According to the report, the school completion rate of children in care is only 21%. I am sure that you agree that this level of success is not good enough. What are the causes and what can be done about it?

The report notes, "Like all children, children in the care of government have hopes, dreams and aspirations; many have the resilience to overcome the obstacles they face and live happy and healthy lives. However, children in care are known to have generally poorer outcomes than children who have never been in care."

We must be mindful that children in care are often our most vulnerable. They often face multiple disadvantages and have complex needs, which are why they came into our care. That being said, we shouldn't paint all children in care with the same brush – many are talented, intelligent, and make valuable contributions to society.

The study reports some interesting information about children in care. It notes that more than 51% of children in care are reported as having special needs as compared with 8.4% in the overall population. By the time children in care reach age 16, 74% of the males and 47% of the females are reported as children with special needs, most often as severe behaviour challenges or suffering from mental illness.

The study finds that children in care change school far more frequently than other students. We know the challenges caused by transitions, and these vulnerable students face these challenges more often. Not surprisingly, our FSA results show significant gaps between children in care and the general population. Children in care often enter Kindergarten without the appropriate degree of readiness, fall behind in primary and intermediate years and are not fully prepared for high school.

Ms. Turpel-Lafond notes, "We also found that, increasingly, vulnerable groups such as Aboriginal children and children in care are not being assessed by the FSA". This is addressed later in her recommendations as it is important to have information and data about children in care to provide for their needs, individually and systemically.

The Representative for Children and Youth will convene a children's forum in 2008 to provide the opportunity for the Ministry of Education and other child-serving ministries to respond to her recommendations. So... what were the recommendations that affect the Ministry of Education, School Districts and Schools?

- "Implement the Early Development Instrument for every child in British Columbia at initial school entry, whether in Kindergarten or Grade 1." *This fits well with our approaches to early identification and intervention. We will know more about many of our students through the growing StrongStart programs when they first enrol in school.*
- "Assess all children in the province on their reading, writing and numeracy skills." *The report gives strong support for the FSA program and encourages us to ensure that students from vulnerable groups are all assessed. Ms Turpel-Lafond advocates the census rather than sample approach to assessment so that we have information about each child.*
- "Report the Foundation Skills Assessment results for the total number of children at each grade level, not just for those who wrote the assessment." *As you know, this change is currently under consideration. It would mean the level of participation in the FSA would affect the number of children reported as meeting or exceeding standards.*
- "Mitigate the adverse effects of school moves by working with sending and receiving schools when school moves are unavoidable, so that the child is supported and assisted in the new school." *This calls on us to be strategic and purposeful in planning for transiency among children in care and working with MCFD and perhaps our district transportation services to avoid school movement when possible.*
- "MCFD: Take the lead in ensuring that a common education plan is developed with the Ministry of Education for each child in care...". *We need to work with our colleagues, foster parents and other professionals to give careful attention to the programs of children in care.*

- "Establish a protocol between (MCFD and Ministry of Education) to ensure that report cards for all children in care are sent to MCFD and that MCFD follows up with schools as required to ensure that all children in care are meeting targets and expectations...". *When MCFD is acting in the place of the parent, we need to become accustomed to expecting that MCFD personnel fill that role as a parent. We need to include MCFD in plans and interventions to provide for each individual's success.*
- "Devise a strategy using the enhancement agreement that takes into account the higher number of Aboriginal children who have been in care...". *The success of Aboriginal children in general is of great concern to all of us, but the results for Aboriginal children in care particularly show that they are in need of our support and attention. Only 15.5% of Aboriginal students in care successfully complete grade 12 within 6 years of entering grade 8. We need to improve our overall Aboriginal completion rate of 47%, but we really need to focus on this group who fall far short of the overall rate.*

This report gives us reason to pause and reflect, and more importantly to take action to help give all BC children – especially our most vulnerable, such as those in government care – the best chance to succeed.



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