

Deputy Minister's Bulletin

Ministry of Education and Child Care



Student and Family Affordability Fund – Updated Questions and Answers

March 22, 2024

What is the purpose of the fund?

- Government recognizes that British Columbians have been struggling with rising costs for a range of goods and services.
- A replenishment of funding for the Student and Family Affordability Fund of **\$18.9 million** will go to public school districts and **\$1.1 million** to independent schools to directly support parents and guardians of K–12 students with costs associated with going to school that they may be struggling to pay.
- The aim is to make life more affordable for families who are temporarily facing financial challenges and need temporary assistance with the current costs of school supplies and education-related fees.
- The replenishment of the Student and Family Affordability fund is not intended to support school food programs now that districts have Feeding Futures funding to support these initiatives.

Who qualifies for this funding?

- School districts already have existing hardship policies, and the fund was created with the aim of working within those policies.
- The ministry expects the fund will be provided in a manner that is as flexible, private, and stigma-free as possible. In some cases, school districts may need to update their hardship policies accordingly.
- The decision to provide supports through this fund will be made at the local level, reflecting the knowledge that teachers, counsellors, and principals have of the local student population and their families.

How do I access this funding?

- School districts are very different with distinct geographies, local communities, and student populations.
- School districts will administer the fund in a manner that best reflects those operational realities, and consult with Indigenous Rightsholders, Indigenous Education Councils, District Parent Advisory Councils (DPACs), and other equity deserving groups to ensure their hardship process is best able to support students, guardians, and parents.
- The ministry expects that the funding will be provided in a manner that is as flexible, private, and stigma-free as possible. In many cases, local teachers, principals, and staff will be aware of students and families who may have need and support them accordingly.
- School districts have existing hardship policies and procedures, and we expect that those be utilized where possible.

What can this money be used for?

The funding can be used to:

- Directly off-set costs to parents, guardians, and students, such as school supplies or other cost pressures they are facing using existing mechanisms such as hardship policies.
- Spending by the district must directly offset costs for parents, guardians, and students and be **additional** to any planned or budgeted spending for hardship or family supports and to use existing processes where possible.
- Funding use includes, but is not limited to:
 - Goods:
 - Providing basic school supplies that might otherwise be purchased by parents, guardians, and students (e.g., pens, paper); and
 - Supporting with clothing/footwear required for school sports or other school activities.

- Fees
 - Waiving education-related fees (e.g., additional supplies for shop, culinary and craft classes, workbooks, camps, field trips, relevant cultural events, other student society meetings including those related to equity, diversity, and inclusion, and instrument and equipment fees or other fees charged by school districts); and
 - Fees for school sports and other school activities.

Why are you giving the funding to school districts?

- School districts are already meeting a variety of needs in local areas for their local student populations and have existing hardship policies and processes to support families in need potentially facing financial hardship.
- School staff are often connected with students and families who may need extra support. School districts, schools, local teachers, and staff are best positioned to ensure that supports reach those students most in need within a process that reduces stigma.
- As a result, this is a fast, effective means to meet a range of needs within the time frame.

Why didn't you give parents the money directly?

- The ministry has no way of determining which students and families are facing financial hardship and so who should be receiving support.
- This fund provides a means of reaching diverse populations needing financial support with the costs of participating in school that may otherwise be missed. It allows for a more targeted approach to reach students most in need.

Is it a special purpose fund?

- Yes, this is a special purpose grant issued under Section 115.1(a) of the *School Act* and should be treated as a Special Purpose Fund on your financial statements.

When will we know how much we get?

- The ministry has calculated the amounts and districts have been made aware of their funding allocations for 2023/24. The online tables with all special grants will be updated later this spring.

What strings are attached to the funding?

- The instructions published in the Deputy Minister's Bulletin of Friday, March 22, 2024, are clear about the requirements and criteria for the funding.
- If you have specific questions that you need answered, please feel free to send them to us and we will answer them and send out an updated document to address those questions.

When will we get a copy of the reporting tool?

- The ministry will provide the reporting tool to school districts as soon as possible so it will be easier for staff to gather the necessary information as the funding is used.
- School districts will be required to return a completed report to the ministry by July 31, 2024 outlining how funds were spent in 2023/24 and plans for 2024/25.
- A high-level interim report will also be required in December 2024.

Can the funding be used over multiple years? For example, if we have \$800,000, can we plan to spend \$200,000 per year on school supplies for the next four years?

- It is anticipated that many districts will be unable use the full replenished Student and Family Affordability Fund in the 2023/24 school year. In this case, it is acceptable for districts to carry over funding to the 2024/25 school year.

How will we be able to sustain these supports in subsequent years?

- This is a replenishment of the Student and Family Affordability Fund, recognizing the historic levels of inflation across the world.
- Inflation in Canada as a whole has started to drop, and no-one is able to foresee what the needs will be in a year's time.

Can we buy computers or provide funds for internet service with this fund?

- The intent is to expand existing processes and practices at the *school level* where they can have the most impact rather than in purchasing capital items and equipment.

Can we offset school bus fees with this funding?

- School districts should not be using the Student and Family Affordability Fund for this purpose.
- School districts should already have processes in place to support students with transportation costs and should use these avenues to support students with bus fees that the districts are choosing to charge.

Can we pay fees for students to attend community sports and after-school activities?

- The funding is intended to support school-related activities and sports only. Providing support for a student to participate on the school soccer team, for example, is permitted, but paying fees to play on a community soccer team is not.

Could the school district buy gift cards or provide some funding to a local food program via a third party to increase the amount of food provided to families with students in the school district?

- The ministry recognizes that there is a significant range of supports, services, and providers across the province. Different places, families, and students may require different means to access and receive the necessary support.
- This fund is intended to provide a means of reaching diverse populations needing financial support with the costs of returning to school that may otherwise be missed. It allows for a more targeted approach to reach those students most in need.
- The ministry encourages school districts to administer the fund in a manner that best reflects those operational realities, and to engage with Indigenous rightsholders, Indigenous Education Councils, District Parent Advisory Councils (DPACs), and other equity-deserving groups to ensure that school districts can find a range of means that will be effective for local students, families, and communities.
- This may mean a gift card in some cases, innovative new partnerships with community agencies in others, or expanding programs that may already be provided in the local school.

Who do I contact if I have more questions?

- Please contact ECC.schoolfood@gov.bc.ca