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Why Liberals switched to per-student funding

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Abstract (Abstract): Those are the recurring themes in a fascinating nine-page document I obtained Friday, the day Education Minister Christy Clark announced the government's new "funding formula" for B.C. schools. With total education funding now frozen -- or "protected" in the Liberals' language -- the document warns the cabinet: "Given government's direction that education funding will be flat over the next three years, the current program-and-cost funding formula will not work.

One curious line in the document reveals that the government will "remove caps on spending on administration." Big bonuses for school board administrators who knuckle under and do the Liberals' dirty work, perhaps?

Full text: There's nothing like a secret cabinet document to reveal the truth about a government's real agenda. And when it comes to public-school funding in this province, the bottom line is this: Despite their election promise to "protect" education spending, the Liberals are actually cutting funding to many B.C. school districts. Some may have to close schools as a result. And the Liberals want to shift the blame for underfunding schools away from themselves and on to locally elected school boards.

Those are the recurring themes in a fascinating nine-page document I obtained Friday, the day Education Minister Christy Clark announced the government's new "funding formula" for B.C. schools. It's entitled "Cabinet Decision Document," stamped "CONFIDENTIAL" and signed by Clark. The document reveals the reasons behind Friday's move to per-student funding and away from the old system, known as "program-and-cost" funding.

The document, signed by Clark on Jan. 25, explains that the old formula obligated the government to "meet or manage each increase in cost or each new service offered by school boards."

But with total education funding now frozen -- or "protected" in the Liberals' language -- the document warns the cabinet: "Given government's direction that education funding will be flat over the next three years, the current program-and-cost funding formula will not work.

"The Ministry will be called upon to make decisions about which programs to cut or reduce in order to offset unavoidable cost increases. Responsibility for reductions will thus rest with the Ministry, not with the local school boards."

The document details the political peril of sticking with the old funding formula. Under the heading "Disadvantages" (of the status quo), it says: "The province will be seen as responsible for funding all costs. With overall flat funding and rising costs, this option would require the minister to decide annually which programs and services should be cut throughout the province."

Uh-oh! Christy Clark taking responsibility for cutting education programs? Can't have that!

The solution? Scrap the old system and bring in a new one based on student population.

The key? Funding is tightly capped and individual boards decide where to cut, making them the bad guys.

Tying school-board funding to the number of students in each district means some boards -- count on mainly rural ones -- will lose the population lottery.

"Some school districts will be affected by redistribution and their funding will decrease," the document reveals. Then there's this little poison pill: "If enrolment unexpectedly increases, it may be necessary to reduce the per-pupil amount . . ."

The Liberals realize this zero-sum game is a pretty flimsy disguise for offloading costs and political damage on

to school boards.

Under "Disadvantages" of the new system, the document says: "Boards . . . will criticize government for not adequately funding their costs. Some boards may make poor decisions about how to allocate funds."

One curious line in the document reveals that the government will "remove caps on spending on administration." Big bonuses for school board administrators who knuckle under and do the Liberals' dirty work, perhaps?

And what if locally elected school trustees don't want to go along with all this?

I predict the government will simply fire them. Period.

Catch Michael Smyth every Sunday at 9:45 a.m. on Global's BCTV News.

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