# PUF PROJECT

August 2023 - April 2024

edmonton SOCIAL PLANNING COUNCIL

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

**Written by: Janell Uden - Research Services and Capacity Building Coordinator**

For a copy of this report, please visit
**www.edmontonsocialplanning.ca**

This report is published by Edmonton Social Planning Council.
Any errors, omissions and opinions are strictly those of the author.

# INTRODUCTION

Program Unit Funding (PUF) is provided to school authorities/private operators for children with a severe disability or language delay who need more support than is offered in a regular early childhood services (ECS) program (Government of Alberta, 2023). Schools/operators apply for funding on the parent's behalf which differs on age and years of eligibility dependent on if a child attends a public or private program. In a public program, funding is available for a maximum of two years between the ages of 2 years, 8 months to 4 years, 8 months during pre-kindergarten years. In private programs, funding is available for a maximum of three years between 2 years, 8 months to 6 years during pre-kindergarten and the kindergarten year. The intention of PUF is to help prepare children with disabilities for a successful transition into their kindergarten/elementary years. PUF requirements as described above is how the program is today in terms of eligible ages and time frames schools/operators can receive funding for children. However, it was not always this way.

In 2020, Alberta Education implemented a new funding model that changed these eligible ages and time frames for which children could receive funding, reduced base funding for some types of disability codes and changed how enrolment for funding purposes is calculated by introducing a weighted moving average projection (WMA). Before this, to calculate funding an actual student count was used, and funding was provided the same school year. However, under the new WMA funding, it projects enrolment based on 50% of the year ahead, 30% of the current enrolment at the budget time in February and then the previous year's enrolment at 20% (Teghtmeyer, 2020). In 2020, the Alberta Teachers Association's President Jason Schilling, stated that "the government is downplaying the effect of [the PUF cut], but teachers know that these kids benefit greatly from early interventions that will no longer be there. This cut is simply immoral" (Teghtmeyer, 2020). Several other changes occurred in 2020, one of which was the elimination of funding for the program for children entering kindergarten in public schools. For private ECS operators and schools, children can still access the third year of funding that must be used during the kindergarten year.

Another change in 2020 was that Alberta Health Services would no longer provide families with assessments, forcing families or childhood care/school operators to pay for private assessments. This change occurred due to the Alberta Government dissolving the Regional Collaborative Service Delivery (RCSD) which coordinated services between the departments of Education, Health, Children's Services, and Community and Social Services. This had a significant impact that further strained the limited resources available to children, often requiring specialists to divert time, previously spent working directly with children, toward the significant task of assessment and additional report preparation. Other changes, such as coding criteria, funding amounts, and eligible supports will be discussed later in this report.

# BACKGROUND/PURPOSE

There was a $30 million cut to the PUF program in 2020 (from $39.5 million to $9.5 million) in Edmonton Public School Board (EPSB) alone, closing 26 early learning locations when the funding changes rolled out in 2020 (Stolte, 2020). In addition to the impact these cuts had on EPSB, Edmonton Catholic reportedly had to close 42 sites (Stolte, 2020). There were quite a few changes to funding amounts and criteria in the provincial budget announcement in 2020 that affected schools and private ECS operators. Subsequently, one operator reached out to the Edmonton Social Planning Council in late August 2023 to inquire if anyone has investigated how these changes have impacted other organizations and the children they help.

The Executive Director of this organization expressed a number of specific worries. The first was related to the changed and restricted minimum hour requirements linked to funding amounts. The concern was that the hour requirements are not always developmentally appropriate based on a child's age or disability. Before 2020, funding was allocated based on the exact number of hours, up to $25,000 per child. However, in the 2020 budget, hours were restricted to either half day or full day (the hours required for a half day are dependent on the age of the child) and the amount of funding a child is eligible for is dependent on both the hours, as well as which disability code they fall under. The funding linked to which disability code a child falls under was another concern, as it didn't seem to make sense that certain codes would receive less money for the same hours.

Another concern raised was the reduction in peer modelling that occurred in classrooms due to less funding availability. This means that more children are now grouped together in disabled classrooms rather than being placed in a regular classroom setting with an Educational Assistant (EA) with each child. This change limits interactions between children with and without disabilities, which often benefits them and further prepares them for a more seamless transition to K-12 programming.

# RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Based on the Executive Director's specific concerns surrounding the separation of children into delay classrooms and "regular" classrooms, a literature review was conducted to see if the research supports whether the concerns are justified. To try and get a picture of how these cuts/funding model changes have impacted children, an analysis of the quantitative data surrounding how many children were classified under each code was conducted. Lastly, to get an idea of how other organizations like the one who requested this project responded to these changes, emails and phone calls were conducted to reach all of the early childhood care providers and private schools for children with disabilities in Edmonton, and conversations with both EPSB and Edmonton Catholic School Boards were completed. A total number of eight interviews were conducted: five private schools/ECS operators, a representative from each school board, and with an organization that did a great deal of advocacy work during the time of these changes. To make sense of all of the changes mentioned in the interviews, it became clear that a deep look into everything that has changed regarding PUF since the 2018/2019 school year would be necessary to fully understand the impact.

The research questions are as follows:

1. What changed in the PUF program funding and requirements since 2018/2019 school year?
2. Based on the literature reviewed, is the separation of children into developmental delay classrooms and "regular" classrooms concerning?
3. What are the quantitative differences in the number of children receiving funding since the cuts in the 2020/2021 school year?
4. How did these changes affect other organizations who use PUF programming and how did they respond to these changes?

# METHODS

A variety of methodologies were used to address these questions. For the first question, a content analysis was conducted to review the changes since the 2018/2019 school year in the funding manual for school authorities' code books. All funding manuals between the school years 2018/2019 to 2022/2023 were reviewed to analyze two years before the changes were implemented and two years after the major changes were implemented. The attached Excel sheet, under the tab "Significant Changes since 2018/2019" gives a clear look into changes that have happened over this period.

For the second question, descriptive research was conducted through a literature review to situate the research in existing bodies of work to determine whether the separation of children in developmental delay classrooms is concerning. A total of twenty-four articles were reviewed, all of which were published between the years 1990 and 2016. The literature reviewed extends further into the past due to a lack of recent research on segregation of children with disabilities in classrooms. Keywords used to find relevant literature included "disability," "special education," segregation," "inclusion," "benefits," "disadvantages" and "concern."

To answer the third question an open data source provided by the Government of Alberta (the Student Population Statistics tab of their website) was reviewed.

Quantitative analysis was done on the number of students classified under each disability code between the school years of 2017/2018 and 2022/2023. The attached Excel sheet shows the relevant raw data as well as the graphs representing the notable changes in these numbers.

The fourth question was addressed by interviewing private ECS private schools/ operators in a semi-structured format. Interviews usually lasted between 45 to 60 minutes in length and were conducted mainly via online Zoom/Microsoft Teams calls. Notes for each question were taken while the interview was ongoing and reviewed after for clarity. An inductive content analysis was performed to summarize and connect themes across organizations. Questions in these interviews aimed to assess the following:

- The overall impact the cuts/changes have had on the organization
- How have these cuts/changes impacted staff
- If and how have these cuts/changes affected programming
- How has the change to WMA affected the organization
- How has bridge funding provided in the meantime affected the organization
- How the changes have affected programs/services the organization can provide to the children they serve.

Notes for each question were taken while the interview was ongoing and reviewed after for clarity. An inductive content analysis was performed to summarize and connect themes across organizations.

# RESULTS

1. What changed in the PUF program funding and requirements since 2018/2019?

*Please see the excel file under the tab “Significant changes since 2018/2019” as a reference for this section*

To properly understand the changes that have impacted the PUF program, a review of the Funding Manual for School Authorities for the two school years before the major changes in 2020/2021 (2018/2019 and 2019/2020) was completed. Results include changes for the disability codes in the PUF program as well as the Mild/Moderate Disabilities/ Delays, Gifted and Talented Funding in order to get a look at how disability funding has changed overall during this period.

In the school years 2018/2019 and 2019/2020, the hours required to receive funding and funding amounts were the same, and the age of eligibility to receive funding was nearly the same. To receive funding, a child with a severe disability/delay under (codes 41-47) in 2018/2019 and 2019/2020 had to be between the ages of 2 years, 8 months – less than 6 years as of September 1. Children were eligible for funding for a maximum of three years. The maximum funding amount was $25,051.20 per school year and the hours were based on school/centre programming hours and/or a combination of family programming sessions. The difference between these two school years lies in the age requirements for 2019/2020 for mild/moderate delay children classified under Code 30. In 2018/2019, the age minimum was set at 3 years, 6 months, but in 2019/2020 this increased slightly to 3 years, 8 months. Across both school years, the funding amount for this code stayed the same at $2,486.76 per school year, and no information was found surrounding hours required for this funding.

In 2020/2021, there were significant changes across multiple areas of disability funding, primarily to the PUF program. The eligible age, eligible disabilities, funding amounts, and hours required all changed, and these depended on type of disability, as well as if a student was attending a public/ private school or program. For children enrolled in a public school/program, a child could receive funding between the ages of 2 years, 8 months – 4 years, 8 months as of September 1 for a maximum of two years. This is both a change to age eligibility as well as the number of years eligible compared to previous school years. The eligible disabilities for this funding also changed to only include codes 41-46 and does not include code 47 like previous years. Codes 41-46 were eligible for either $15,000 or $25,000 per school year depending on if a child was in a half day (400 hour) or full day (800 hour) program.

During the 2020/2021 school year, code 47 was to be classified and funded separately, and the funding amounts per school year decreased to $10,000 for a half day (400 hours) or $17,000 for a full day (800 hours). For children enrolled in a private school/ program, a child could receive funding between the ages of 2 years, 8 months – 6 years of age as of September 1 for a maximum of three years. This is a longer time period of age eligibility and a longer period to receive funding than the children enrolled in the public schools/programs. The eligible codes and funding amounts in relation to those codes changed compared to previous years as well, but changed to the same parameters as the public schools did. For this school year, there was the removal of family-oriented programming hours counting in meeting PUF hour requirements. Family programming allows teachers, child development specialists, or teaching assistants to visit a child's home to deliver an individual, and developmentally appropriate learning plan. During these family-oriented programming sessions these specialists would help parents by providing coaching, information, resources skills and strategies to facilitate the child's development (Government of Alberta 2019). For codes 30 and 80, the maximum amount of years children could receive funding was reduced to two years, one of which must be kindergarten.

In 2021/2022 for both public and private schools/programs the changes from the previous year all continued across age eligibility requirements, funding amounts, and hour requirements for codes 41-46, 30 and 80, however there was the addition of code 48. Code 48 is the code for a moderate language delay, which like code 47 has different ages of eligibility and maximum years a child can receive funding between public and private schools/ programs. For children in public schools/programs to be eligible they must be between the ages of 4 years, 8 months and less than 6 years as of September 1. They are eligible for only one year of funding. The age of eligibility in private schools/programs is between the ages of 2 years, 8 months to 6 years as of September 1, and children enrolled in this type of program are eligible for up to three years of funding. The amount of funding that a child is eligible for in either type of program is a maximum of $4,000 and the hour requirements are not clearly specified. This new addition of code 48, it's age eligibility requirements and maximum funding amount remained the same for the 2022/2023 school year, as did all other changes prior to this one.

2. Literature review: Is the separation of children into developmental delay classrooms and “regular” classrooms concerning?

After reviewing the literature and comparing the potential points for and against the separation of children in special education classrooms, it can be determined that inclusive education benefits all students in ways that integrated/segregated education does not. Inclusive education for children with disabilities means including students of all needs in the same physical spaces, the same social spaces and the same opportunities for students to develop and explore in these spaces (Dixon, 2005). This is not the same as the current, more typical method of educating children with disabilities, which is integration.

Integration is the placement of a student with disabilities partially in a special education program and partially in a “regular” environment, as long as the general education program allows. Integration is favoured by school programs as children with disabilities do not experience the complete marginalization of being segregated full-time, but they still get the expertise and individual attention of a special education teacher for part of their day (Dixon, 2005). However, studies conducted in 1990 by Roberta Schnoor and Kathie Snow in 2001 highlight that integrated settings do not give the impression to other students that children with disabilities belong in their classrooms. The children in those studies expressed that the students with disabilities “aren’t actually” in their classrooms or “never stay” (Schnoor, 1990; Snow, 2001).

The other type of education for children with disabilities is segregation. Some critics would support segregated education for children with disabilities, as those teachers and staff are specially trained, they provide more individualized attention, the children are not pressured to “keep up” with other students, and it is cheaper than integrating students with disabilities into a regular classroom (Dixon, 2005). However, when students with disabilities are marginalized in other classrooms, it focuses on the student’s disabilities, focusing specifically on their deficits where experts work on their brains and bodies to “help children reach their full potential” (Snow, 2001). Another disadvantage to segregated education is typical students lose out on what their fellow students with disabilities have to offer them.

Dixon states that “students with disabilities offer their individual strengths to students in regular education [and] having a diverse mix of students will better prepare all students for life in a diverse society,” (2005) teaching kids how to respectfully interact with people different than themselves as they age. Students with disabilities also miss out on learning through observing and interacting with their abled peers (Dixon, 2005).

Integrated and segregated education are the “easy” answers to offer education to children with disabilities, without having to interrupt the current education system. It is important to remember, though, that children with disabilities become adults with disabilities, and there are no separate workplaces for adults with disabilities. Many adults with disabilities are unemployed and receive support from the government to cover expenses that are not sufficient to maintain a good quality of life. Molloy and Vasil address the spectrum of normal social behaviour and offer an example highlighting an important point. If a child is obsessed with Thomas the tank engine, bus timetables, or astronomy, this may be considered tiresome and abnormal. However, if this child matures into a world expert in the Kuiper belt, then it is difficult to see how an obsessive interest is in itself a disability (2002). Another example along the same wavelength by Barrow asks us to consider if there are differences between different types of impairment. For example, those who have less than perfect vision requires glasses to see and read, but we would never separate children with glasses into a classroom for children with glasses (2001). If one’s eyesight cannot be helped by glasses, but instead, they require Braille, then why are they put into a classroom with other students who need Braille texts? The reason why the support of eyeglasses and braille are different is based on what is socially acceptable or considered a disability (Molloy & Vasil, 2002).

Integrated education and segregated education for children with disabilities has been the main method for education as discussed because they do not disrupt the current education system. Some of the negative effects and lapses in logic for both types have been discussed, and now the attention will be turned back to inclusive education.

Teachers already have full classrooms, including students with diverse needs. Often, these teachers and perhaps those teachers do not have the knowledge or capacity to meet the special requirements of children with disabilities.

Although this is what immediately comes to mind when inclusion is suggested, inclusion does not necessarily mean placing students in regular classrooms as the classrooms are right now, or without support. Supports can include full time aides, planning and collaboration with other teachers, specialists such as speech and language pathologists (SLP's), occupational therapists (OT's) and psychologists, modified curriculum and resources, administrative support, and ongoing emotional support (Sapon-Shevin 1996). A reconceptualization of special education teachers and educational assistants would be needed, where they would act more as co-teachers or resources. This would reconfigure special educators as a resource rather than a place to send children with disabilities (Sapon-Shevin 1996).

Many services provided by special educators, such as occupational therapists, can take place in regular classrooms, in the natural setting where working on that skill would make sense. Having special education teachers, assistants and specialists in a resource/ co-teacher role would change the dynamic and understanding that those teachers educational assistants or specialists are the only ones responsible for children with disabilities in the classroom. There is the notion that the teacher or educational assistant is only responsible for that child/ those children with disabilities, but the main teacher in the classroom is not. Additionally, there is also the misconception that the special education teacher/assistant assigned to the children with disabilities cannot help other children because it would "take away" from the children with disabilities. This strict dichotomy is unnecessary, and professional development would be needed to ensure that teachers and practitioners get the knowledge, skills and support needed to implement inclusion effectively (Odom, 2002, National Professional Development Centre on Inclusion (2009) and Buyesse Hollingsworth, 2009).

Adapting teaching strategies and curriculum adaptation would be required to implement an inclusive education program. According to Armstrong et al., research evidence supports the view that curriculum adaptations made for children with disabilities would also work well with all the other children in the school (2010). Practices adopted for teaching and evaluation for inclusive education may benefit the general education of other children as well.

3. What are the quantitative differences in the number of children receiving funding since the cuts in the 2020/2021 school year?

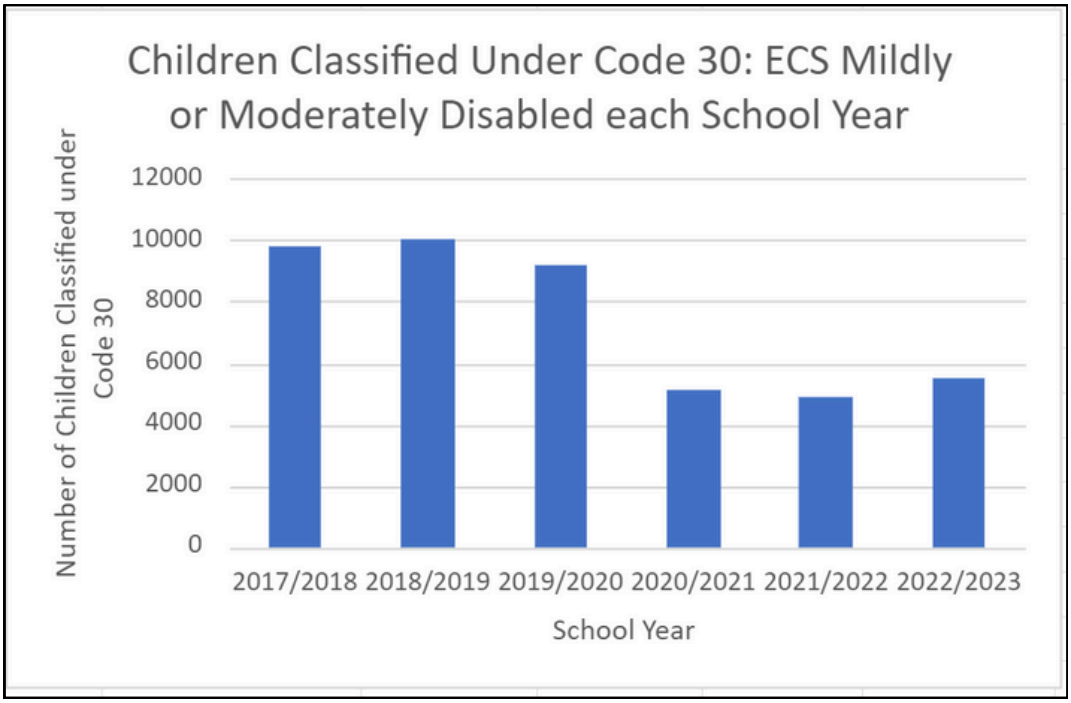


**Chart 1: Government of Alberta Student Population Statistics**

There are some variations in the number of children classified under each code over the school years between 2017/2018 and 2022/2023.

In chart 1, the first graph on the mild/ moderate tab, the number of children classified under code 30 (Mild/Moderate intellectual disability, emotional/behavioural disability) dropped by 44% in the 2020/2021 school year. The following school year, in 2021/2022, the number of children under this code dropped another 4.5%. In 2022/2023 there was a 6.7% increase compared to 2020/2021.

The first graph in the severe tab (chart 2) shows the number of children classified under code 47 (ECS Severe Delay Involving Language) broken down by each school year. The graph shows just under 10,000 students classified under this code for 2017/2018 and just over 10,000 students classified under this code for the next two school years as well (2018/2019-2019/2020). This number is nearly halved in 2020/2021 and drops down to over 5,000 students classified under this code. In 2021/2022 and 2022/2023 the number of students classified under this code increase to just over 6,000.

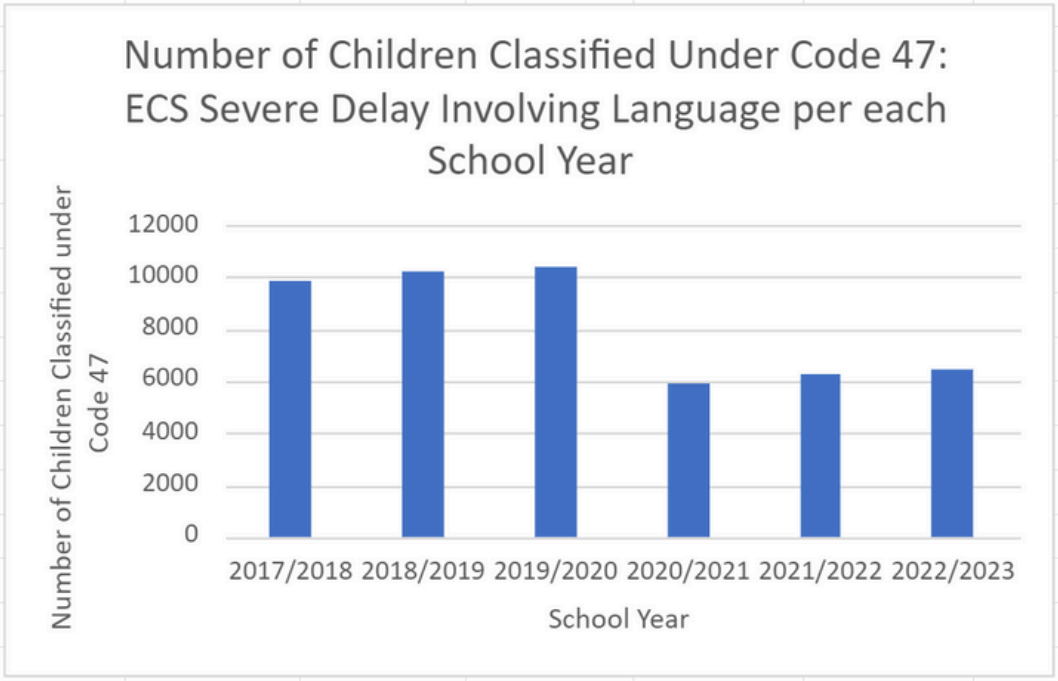


**Chart 2: Government of Alberta Student Population Statistics**

The second graph on the severe tab (see chart 3) shows the total number of students classified under each type of severe disability code per school year from ECS to Grade 12. To note from this graph is that the number of students classified under code 44, which is severe physical or medical disability, has steadily increased each school year by a minimum of around 500 students per year and a maximum of nearly 1,700 students per year. Code 47's changes were previously discussed, however on this graph it is easy to see the drastic change compared to other codes across all years. Code 48 is for ECS Moderate Delay Involving Language and was not implemented until 2021/2022 after removing all funding in 2020/2021 for moderate language delays and has increased by nearly 2,000 students since the first year it was implemented in 2021/2022. While this graph shows information from ECS to grade 12 unlike the others, it was the only way the data was available for this comparison and could not have been restricted to only PUF ages.

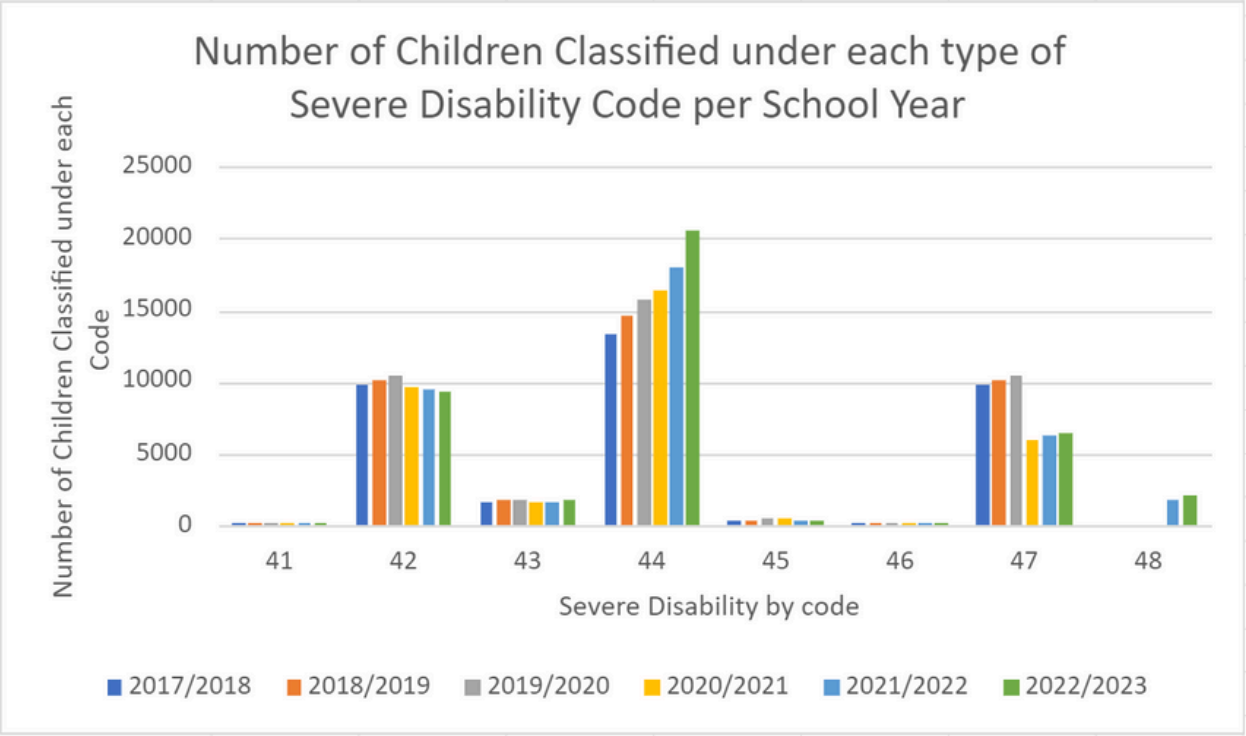


**Chart 3: Government of Alberta Student Population Statistics**

4. Qualitative interviews with Private ECS Operators/ Childcare providers/ Private Schools

Five interviews were conducted with private ECS operators/ childcare providers/ private schools in the Edmonton area. Based on the notes taken during the interviews, areas of impact typically fell into one of three categories: staff, finances, children.

Staff were impacted at all organizations as a result of the changes to the PUF program in 2020. One organization reported that they had to cut half of their staff (forty staff members) and two other organizations reported having to reduce staff hours to less than full time work. Three out of the five organizations reported that staff morale is lower, and burnout has increased. Four organizations reported they are encountering staff turnover issues, either because of inadequate compensation, burnout or no reason was given. One organization reported they did not have to cut any staff, as their funding was not as impacted as heavily as other organizations due to the children they support and the codes they fall under. One organization reported that they had to increase their staff numbers to change to a site-based program, as opposed to the community-based program they were running before.

As expected with a funding model change, every organization reported that their finances were impacted. All organizations reported that using the WMA is unpredictable and confusing. Two organizations explained that WMA forces them to run a deficit to try and grow the organization or accept more children into the program, since they only fully get paid for a child's programming three years later. One organization reported that the funding cuts to PUF affected their program by $1.4 million. Another organization reported that they had to implement fees for families to help cover the difference, and they had to exclusively fundraise to get enough resources to purchase medical equipment for the children they support. One organization reported that upon the funding changes, they tried to adapt to an 800-hour program to receive full funding. However, this proved as not developmentally appropriate for children, so they changed back to receiving half day funding for 400 hours. Although, this organization does not only provide 400 hours of programming, they are providing just over 500 hours, and have to "eat" the remainder of the costs to pay staff and run programming.

Due to the dissolution of the Regional Collaborative Service Delivery (RCSD), one organization explained that now sometimes they will pay for assessments for children trying to enter their program and hope that family will choose to place their child with them. Another organization reported that due to the dissolution of the RCSD they now have to not only pay for assessments for children, but also pay for an interpreter for many assessments due to the kind of children and families they support.

Bridge funding was provided to organizations for each school year between 2020 and 2023 to help with the funding model transition. Organizations reported that although the bridge funding was insufficient, it did help with costs for transportation while those funds were unavailable during that time, to help towards staffing costs, or to help save it and budget it out to smoothen the transition for later years when it stopped coming.

Every organization reported that children are more complex now than ever before. Two organizations reported they believe the children they support are not making progress as quickly or as much progress as before 2020. Two organizations reported that there are less staff hours spent with children due to lower staff numbers and hours. The elimination of family-oriented programming hours as part of the PUF program has negatively impacted children and their families according to two organizations. One organization explained that the inability to combine two or more codes for children has impacted the services and support those children can receive, as many children who are disabled have more than one type of disability. This organization stressed that only allowing for one code means that children are only getting support for the type of disability they are classified for on paper, and either not getting support for the other or the support they are getting for the other is not monitored, funded and up to individual staff decisions. An organization reported that children are waiting upwards of a year and a half to be assessed and that this is impacting how long they can receive funding for, as the funding windows in line with age eligibility is already so constrained. They have noted that this affects children greatly, as not receiving funding and therefore not being able to access programming, even for six months during these crucial years is harmful.

# DISCUSSION

There are a couple of key findings to take away from the research done for this project. The first is that there have been changes since 2018/2019 and 2019/2020 compared to when the new funding model was implemented in 2020/2021 in terms of funding, age eligibility requirements and that these particular changes sometimes differ between public/ private programs. It is clear to see that because of funding cuts, some disability codes now receive less money (Code 47 used to receive 25,000, now a maximum of either $10,000/$15,000 for a half day or $17,000 for a full day). Code 48 established in 2021/2022 only receives $4,000. These changes are specifically only for these codes around language delays.

Specialized staff such as speech pathologists warrant full-time hours and competitive pay, as education and a great deal of knowledge are required to provide support to these children. Reducing the funding available for children coded under language delays may be correlated with the drastic reduction in the number of children coded under code 47 in the quantitative data shown. It raises questions such as, are these children being coded as something else? Are these children receiving support at all? Given the rapid population growth Alberta has seen in recent years, it is unlikely that there are simply 4,000-5,000 less children who have language delays since 2020/2021 compared to previous years.

Some of the age limitations have changed and those children who used to be eligible in public school programs to be included in PUF for Kindergarten, are now included in Specialized Learning Support Grants (SLS). In 2021/2022 and 2022/2023 this grant offers similar amounts of funding as they did in the PUF program for codes 41-46 only. However, the SLS Grants are for the entire school jurisdiction to provide various services and support to students in an inclusive learning environment (Government of Alberta, 2020). SLS grants for codes 47 and 48 receive similar funding levels to PUF codes 47's and 48's. The reduced funding for children with language delays for this age group and this funding line is problematic for the same reasons as discussed above. There is also no way to ensure that SLS grants are being used for the children who need them the most.

The funding for children classified under code 30 (mild/moderate disabilities/delays) has maintained the rate of $2,486.76 since 2018/2019 which as shown in the data the number of children classified under that code has significantly decreased since 2020/2021. Although the rate has stayed the same but yet there are roughly half the amount of children being classified under this code, it again raises the question, are these children being classified under a different code? Are they not receiving support at all? It is also unlikely that 4,000-5,000 less children who are mild/moderately disabled or delayed compared to previous years. Additionally, were less children classified under this code so the rate could be maintained? Unlike code 47, this rate did not change.

Another key finding is that based on the interviews with the five private ECS operators/schools, common themes emerged across the three categories of interest. Many of the organizations stated that in terms of staff they are experiencing high turnover, are having trouble hiring due to a lack of adequate compensation, their staff are experiencing more burnout, or they have had to reduce staff hours or pay due to the changes in 2020/2021. In terms of funding, organizations expressed that the change to the weighted moving average (WMA) way of funding is confusing and complicated, limits growth for the organization, and forces them to run a deficit.

Organizations also expressed that the hard limitations of having to run either 400-hour programs or 800-hour programs in order to receive funding were not practical in terms of hiring and keeping staff, or they had to change their programs entirely to adapt to these hour requirements. Before 2020, hours were based on a formula and could be flexible depending on programming or children's needs. Lastly, the funding change resulting in Alberta Health Services no longer doing the evaluations for children means that organizations or families have to pay for them or be placed on waitlists that have been reported up to take about year and a half before being able to get in for an assessment. This is not practical, considering the limited ages that children can receive funding, long waits take time away from the support these children are able to get. In terms of how changes in 2020 have affected children, organizations also expressed these hard hour limitations were not always developmentally appropriate for children, and sometimes it was too many hours for kids with certain disabilities at certain ages.

The funding changes have also affected how much time children get with staff or how many children have access to a staff member. Organizations also reported that the inability to combine different codes and programs to make up hours has disadvantaged children. They also reported that cut to providing family programming has negatively impacted children and families. Organizations have reported that children's needs are getting more complex, and that in some cases children are not making as much progress as they were before.

Organizations also made mentions of the loss of the PUF information session where all PUF operators would come together, invite families, and talk about what their programs were like. This gave the opportunity for families and other organizations to better understand the options in the area and see where children fit best. The loss of this has resulted in many organizations reporting that families come to them feeling like that organization is their last option. If all organizations reported that they feel that hearing families being turned away from organizations and that they are the last option, it may be because of a lack of awareness of what options are available or going to the wrong place to begin with.

# FUTURE RESEARCH

While the findings for this project have provided initial insights into the questions posed, they concurrently gave rise to additional questions for future research. For example, considering these organizations have reported that they have had to make changes to the number of staff or staff hours available for each child it raises the question of has the same thing happened with special education programs in the public and Catholic schools? If so, how have they had to change their programming or staff available for each child? Organizations also reported that children are not making as much progress as quickly, this raises the question of do teachers who teach children with disabilities in public and Catholic schools notice the same thing?

Organizations also reported that in some cases children are having to wait up to a year and a half for to get an assessment in order to be coded. If children have to wait a year and a half for an assessment, are they in regular classrooms in the meantime? Additionally, how many children are not receiving funding for all years that they are eligible due to wait times for assessments?

Based on the information in the literature review, it was determined that the best practice for children with disabilities to be in inclusive environments in schools. If the most common way of educating children with disabilities was an integration approach in schools before the funding cuts/model change, has this approach stayed as an integration approach or moved more towards a segregation approach due to lack of staff? Another area of future research and action is how can education in Alberta change to an inclusive environment, and what would have to be implemented to accomplish this?

The quantitative data shows a drastic reduction in the number of children coded under codes 47 and 30 after 2020. A question for future research should ask “Why has there been a reduction in the number of children coded under codes 30 and 47 since 2020?” The difference in number of children registered under these codes also begs the question, are these children being classified under different codes so that schools/operators can receive more funding?

Or perhaps, are schools/operators not accepting children under codes 30, 47 and 48 because they cannot receive as much funding for them, so are they in regular classrooms?

The cut to certain disability codes, primarily those that are mild/moderate and language delay related does not seem to make sense after speaking with operators. This was an initial concern at the beginning of this project and the impact of this is not in scope to answer in this project. To further investigate the implications of this future research could include answering "has this reduction in funding affected children under this code, if so how?" Additionally, it would be interesting to find out why was the decision made to reduce funding specifically only for these codes.

Lastly, there is a stark difference in the number of years a child is eligible for funding as well as the eligible age ranges for children receiving funding in public vs. private schools/ programs. Further research should look into why private schools are getting more government funding compared to public schools, and what the potential implications this has had/ will have moving forward.

# CONCLUSION

This report has explained what the PUF program is, how some of the funding requirements and amounts have changed since the funding re-model in 2020 and explored some of the impacts these changes have had on private ECS operators/schools. Additionally, the quantitative data surrounding the number of children classified under each type of disability code was portrayed with changes highlighted and as a result of these findings more research would be required to fully understand the impact of these changes. A literature review was conducted to investigate if the separation of children into developmental delay classrooms and "regular" classrooms is concerning and found that it is more beneficial to both students with and without disabilities to learn in the same environment, with the proper supports. Based on the results to the questions posed by the Executive Director who requested this project, it appears that the funding model change and cuts to the PUF program are concerning and should be revisited by Alberta Education.

Alberta invests the lowest amount per student compared to other provinces, so this divestment in the PUF program is not limited to only children with disabilities. However, the cuts to this program have seemed extreme to operators, nonsensical in practice, and confusing on paper. Returning to simpler eligibility criteria, re-instating funding to its previous amounts before the cuts, using the funding structure and payment format before WMA was implemented, allowing for family- oriented programming to be covered under funding, as well as keeping the funding uniform across all disability codes were recommendations heard from all operators consulted through the interviews. It would be our recommendation that future research is done to dive deeper into the questions posed by this project and that it is used for advocacy moving forward.

# REFERENCES


Barrow, R. (2001). Inclusion vs. Fairness. Journal of Moral Education, 30(3), 235–242. https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240120077237

Clapham, K., Manning, C., Williams, K., O'Brien, G., & Sutherland, M. (2017). Using a logic model to evaluate the kids together Early Education Inclusion
Program for children with disabilities and additional needs. Evaluation and Program Planning, 61, 96–105. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evalprogplan.2016.12.004

Dixon, S. (2005). Inclusion — Not Segregation or Integration Is Where a Student with Special Needs Belongs. The Journal of Educational Thought (JET) /Revue de La Pensée Éducative, 39(1), 33–53. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23767481

Edwardson, L. (2020, February 29). "A step backwards": parent advocates say changes to PUF will lead to segregation of special needs kids. CBC News. Retrieved September 2023, from https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/program-unit-funding-specialized-learning-support-1.5481009.

Edwardson, L. (2020, November 28). Alberta school boards lobby to reinstate funding program for children with disabilities and delays. CBC News. Retrieved September 2023, from https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/alberta-school-boards-association-puf-program-children-disabilities-learning-delays-1.5819561.

Ferguson, E. (2023, January 15). Special education "in crisis" as CBE faces $47-million deficit for vulnerable students. Calgary Herald.

Ferguson, E. (2024, February 28). Alberta spent least on public education in Canada: statcan. Calgary Herald. Retrieved April 2024, from https://calgaryherald.com/news/local-news/alberta-spent-least-public-education-statistics-canada.

French, J. (2020, March). Funding inadequate for Edmonton public schools, board chair says. CBC News. Retrieved September 2023, from https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/edmonton-public-schools-funding-alberta-1.5493391.

Government of Alberta. (2019, March 19). Funding manual for school authorities 2018-2019. Funding manual for school authorities - Open Government. https://open.alberta.ca/publications/1485-5542

Government of Alberta. (2019, October 24). Funding manual for school authorities 2019-2020. Funding manual for school authorities - Open Government. https://open.alberta.ca/publications/1485-5542

Government of Alberta. (2020, October 2). Funding manual for school authorities 2020-2021. Funding manual for school authorities - Open Government. https://open.alberta.ca/publications/1485-5542

Government of Alberta. (2021, October 13). Funding manual for school authorities 2021-2022. Funding manual for school authorities - Open Government. https://open.alberta.ca/publications/1485-5542

Government of Alberta. (2022, October 24). Funding manual for school authorities 2022-2023. Funding manual for school authorities - Open Government. https://open.alberta.ca/publications/1485-5542

Government of Alberta. (2018, April). Special education coding criteria 2018-2019. Special education coding criteria - Open Government. https://open.alberta.ca/publications/2368-3627

Government of Alberta. (2019, June). Special education coding criteria 2019-2020. Special education coding criteria - Open Government. https://open.alberta.ca/publications/2368-3627

Government of Alberta. (2020, April). Special education coding criteria 2020-2021. Special education coding criteria - Open Government. https://open.alberta.ca/publications/2368-3627

Government of Alberta. (2021, March). Special education coding criteria 2021-2022. Special education coding criteria - Open Government. https://open.alberta.ca/publications/2368-3627

Government of Alberta. (2022, July. Special education coding criteria 2022-2023. Special education coding criteria - Open Government. https://open.alberta.ca/publications/2368-3627

Government of Alberta. (n.d). Student Population Statistics. Alberta.ca. https://www.alberta.ca/student-population-statistics

Graves, P., & Tracy, J. (1998). Personal Viewpoint Education for children with disabilities: The rationale for inclusion. Journal of Paediatrics and Child Health, 34(3), 220–225. https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1440-1754.1998.00210.x

Hanline, M. F., & Correa-Torres, S. M. (2012). Experiences of Preschoolers with Severe Disabilities in an Inclusive Early Education Setting: A Qualitative Study. Education and Training in Autism and Developmental Disabilities, 47(1), 109–121. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23880566

Hebbeler, K., & Spiker, D. (2016). Supporting Young Children with Disabilities. JSTOR, 26(2). https://www.jstor.org/stable/43940587

Hebbeler, K., Spiker, D., Bailey, D., Scarborough, A., Mallik, S., Simeonsson, R., Singer, M., & Nelson, L. (2007). (rep.). National Early Intervention Longitudinal Study (NEILS) (pp. 1–116). Menlo Park, CA: SRI International. Retrieved September 2023, from https://www.sri.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/neils_finalreport_200702.pdf.

Hehir, T. (2002). Eliminating ableism in education. Harvard Educational Review, 72(1), 1–33. https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.72.1.03866528702g2105

Hornby, G. (2014). Inclusive special education: The need for a new theory. Inclusive Special Education, 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4939-1483-8_1

Hundert, J., Mahoney, B., Mundy, F., & Vernon, M. L. (1998). A descriptive analysis of developmental and social gains of children with severe disabilities in segregated and inclusive preschools in Southern Ontario. Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 13(1), 49–65. https://doi.org/10.1016/s0885-2006(99)80025-8

Maciver, D., Rutherford, M., Arakelyan, S., Kramer, J. M., Richmond, J., Todorova, L., Romero-Ayuso, D., Nakamura-Thomas, H., ten Velden, M., Finlayson, I., O'Hare, A., & Forsyth, K. (2019). Participation of children with disabilities in school: A realist systematic review of psychosocial and environmental factors. PLOS ONE, 14(1). https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0210511

Madan, A., & Sharma, N. (2013). Inclusive Education for Children with Disabilities: Preparing Schools to Meet the Challenge. Wright State University, 3(1). https://corescholar.libraries.wright.edu/ejie/vol3/iss1/4/

Kauffman, J. M., Anastasiou, D., & Maag, J. W. (2016). Special education at the Crossroad: An Identity Crisis and the need for a scientific reconstruction. Exceptionality, 25(2), 139–155. https://doi.org/10.1080/09362835.2016.1238380

Ng, S. L., Lingard, L., Hibbert, K., Regan, S., Phelan, S., Stooke, R., Meston, C., Schryer, C., Manamperi, M., & Friesen, F. (2015). Supporting children with disabilities at school: Implications for the advocate role in professional practice and education. Disability and Rehabilitation, 37(24), 2282–2290. https://doi.org/10.3109/09638288.2015.1021021

Odom, S. L., Buysse, V., & Soukakou, E. (2011). Inclusion for young children with disabilities: A Quarter Century of Research Perspectives. Journal of Early Intervention, 33(4), 344–356. https://doi.org/10.1177/1053815111430094

Rosenberg, S. A., Zhang, D., & Robinson, C. C. (2008). Prevalence of developmental delays and participation in early intervention services for young children. Pediatrics, 121(6). https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2007-1680

Rous, B., Hallam, R., Harbin, G., McCormick, K., & Jung, L. A. (2007). The transition process for young children with disabilities: A conceptual framework. Infants & Young Children, 20(2), 135–148. https://doi.org/10.1097/01.iyc.0000264481.27947.5f

Stolte, E. (2020, October). UCP says no cut to PUF, but fine print decimates early learning programs: groundwork. Edmonton Journal.

Stolte, E. (2020b, December 2). These kids won't magically catch up. ucp cuts eliminate years of progress on early education. Edmonton Journal.

Stolte, E., & Joannou, A. (2020, December 2). How education cuts collided with the covid-19 pandemic to hit students with disabilities hard: groundwork. Edmonton Journal.

Szulevicz, T., & Tanggaard, L. (2014). Inclusion and budget cuts – the contours of educational psychology in the Marketplace. Nordic Psychology, 66(1), 36–52. https://doi.org/10.1080/19012276.2014.885762

Teghtmeyer, J. (n.d.). ATA news. The Alberta Teachers' Association. Retrieved March 12, 2024, from https://legacy.teachers.ab.ca/News%20Room/ata%20news/Vol54/Number-10/Pages/Budget-2020-restores-some-cuts-but-still-leaves-boards-short.aspx.