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June 30, 2020

Attention: Honorable Adriana LaGrange, Minister of Education

Dear Ms. LaGrange,

We, as members of the Alberta Speech-Language Association of Private Practitioners (ASAPP), are writing this letter to voice our strong concerns regarding the 2020 Budget “Making life better for Albertans”. The UCP government writes: “the Budget 2020 continues to focus on helping those in our communities who are most in need” and “we’re refocusing how dollars are spent to make sure services get to the people they’re meant to serve”. However, the reduction in pre-K PUF grants and unequal access to PUF grants in kindergarten will clearly not be helping those most in need.

In this letter we draw your attention to two key documents that, when implemented, will have significant, negative ramifications for young Albertans with speech, language, fine/visual motor, gross motor and literacy delays and disorders and their families.

Specifically, we draw your attention to these key documents: *Funding Manual for School Authorities 2020-2021* and *Special Education Coding Criteria 2020/21 Early Childhood Services to Grade 12 (Alberta Government, 2020)*.

Within the *Funding Manual: Services and Supports Grants: PUF (pre-K)* we note overall drastic and austere funding shortfalls as well as uneven access to programming. These cutbacks to Early Childhood Services (ECS) dramatically affect school jurisdictions' abilities to operate high quality programming, provide equal access and optimize learner outcomes. The Alberta Government's document: "*Let's talk about the Early Years*" (2011) speaks to the growing body of evidence that indicates the importance of the first five years of development. In the references of this letter, we draw your attention to additional pertinent educational (Alexander; Ignjatovic, 2012), scientific and socio-economic research (Heckman, 2020) that demonstrate that the earlier a child with disabilities/delays receives intervention, the greater the long-term outcome.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2016),

"childhood development is an important determinant of health over a person's lifetime. Early developmental opportunities can provide a foundation for children's academic success, health, and general well-being. Preschool-aged children experience profound biological brain development and achieve 90 percent of their adult brain volume by age 6. This physiological growth allows children to develop functional skills related to information processing, comprehension, language, emotional regulation, and motor skills. Experiences during early childhood affect the structural development of the brain and the neurobiological pathways that determine a child's functional development."

Robust early learning opportunities during the first five years take full advantage of this critical period of development. Reducing educational supports and services for children under five is neglectful and short sighted. It will also cost much more in the long-term to that child as an individual, to their family, to society (Heckman, 2020) and to the economy (Alexander, Ignjatovic, 2012). Could you **share research that supports reducing, and in some cases eliminating, early intervention a viable education strategy**? We would be interested in learning of any research that is contrary to the

research listed below. We are also interested to learn **how you anticipate that this new funding model will prepare today's children to be the adults of tomorrow.**

We are also greatly concerned that access to kindergarten PUF grants will not be equally available to all children in Alberta because according to the funding manual, only children in a private kindergarten ECS program will have access to PUF grants. This is discriminatory, based on a family's socio-economic status. Parents with the financial means to pay for private school tuition (typically between \$8,000 and \$18,000 per year) will be able to access significantly more publicly funded educational supports for their child with disabilities/delays compared to those parents who cannot afford tuition and must enroll their child in a public school jurisdiction. **How does the UCP reconcile this?** The private schools will be able to apply for PUF grants for individual students and then direct those dollars to support the individual needs of that child. Public school jurisdictions, on the other hand, will receive a Specialized Learning Support (SLS) grant to be divided among all K-12 students needing support in an entire school division. Clearly, there will not be enough money to adequately support each student's unique learning challenges. It is exceedingly likely that dollars will be directed towards children who pose the greatest physical risk to the school community at the expense of other disadvantaged learners. **What mechanisms will be put in place to ensure all learners have an equal opportunity for support?**

We are also concerned about children with severe language disorders that will not be eligible for pre-Kindergarten PUF grants due to changes in the special education coding criteria. This change will mean that children with language disorders involving two or more areas of moderate delay, or with severe expressive speech/ fluency and moderate language disorders will no longer have access to the intervention that supports their abilities to communicate their needs, display their knowledge and socialize with peers. Many of these children have typical cognitive abilities but require augmentative and alternative communication supports to access the curriculum and succeed academically. Children with multiple moderate disorders will not be able to access the supports they require from speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists or

educators. We are very concerned about the impact these decisions will have on a child's academic success and **ask you for the justification to these revisions to the coding manual.**

In closing, we know that investment in Alberta's young citizens will pay future dividends. We look forward to your prompt response to our questions and welcome the opportunity to meet with you in person.

Sincerely,

Simone Rambaransingh, R.SLP, Chair of ASAPP



Bonnie Chappell, R.SLP, former Chair of ASAPP



Liane Nickel, R.SLP, Secretary of ASAPP



Connie Romaniuk, R.SLP, Treasurer of ASAPP



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