

COMMUNITY, CONVERSATION AND CONNECTION:

CASTLEGAR AND SURROUNDING AREAS

Findings from the Community-Led Collaboration Project
in Castlegar and surrounding communities

We acknowledge the ancestors and knowledge keepers from the First Nations, Métis, Inuit and Urban Indigenous Peoples who live throughout these lands.

Image of Castlegar, Photo Destination BC, Kari Medig

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Project Background	1
The Approach to Engagement.....	2
Safe Spaces for Dialogue.....	4
About Castlegar.....	6
What We Heard in Castlegar	7
Solutions Table Summary.....	11
Final Steps of Engagement	14
Report Summary	15
With Thanks	18

PROJECT BACKGROUND

In fall 2021, the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) announced a new framework for service delivery to Children and Youth with Support Needs (CYSN) in British Columbia. The announcement of the CYSN framework was met with confusion and fear by many across the province. It was also met with calls for greater consultation.

Across the province, individuals and organizations demanded that any framework changes be better informed by the experiences and perspectives of families and children and youth with disabilities or support needs.

The Community-Led Collaboration Project defines children and youth with disabilities or support needs as those who are 0-19 years of age, have a disability, diagnosed or undiagnosed, need support, and/or have a possible developmental delay.

Shortly after the announcement, the BC Association of Aboriginal Friendship Centres (BCAAFC), BC Association of Child Development and Intervention (BCACDI), the Federation of Community Social Services and Inclusion BC came together to:

- Identify the potential of the proposed framework.
- Raise concerns that the changes ahead would effectively respond to the needs of children and youth, their families, the organizations that support them and the communities where they live.
- Present a proposal to MCFD to carry out a provincial engagement—from a community development perspective—to better inform the changes coming to B.C.'s system of services and supports.

In response, MCFD gave the organizations (referred to in this report as the Provincial Working Group) a grant to conduct a provincial engagement that would inform the transformation of CYSN services in B.C. The engagement, known as the **Community-Led Collaboration Project**, launched in Fall 2022.

This report details the challenges, hopes and expectations for services and supports that families and community service providers **expressed in conversations in Castlegar and surrounding communities**, one of six initial communities engaged in the first year of this project.

THE APPROACH TO ENGAGEMENT

The Community-Led Collaboration Project's Provincial Working Group partnered with B.C. communities to design a thoughtful, inclusive, culturally safe, and accessible approach to engagement. To guide their work, the group established four project principles:

- **Collaboration.** Engagement is co-designed with community members to inform how B.C. communities can create better networks of services and support for children and youth with disabilities or support needs, and their families.
- **Community-driven change.** The project builds upon the strengths of B.C.'s current system and names the changes needed to best support children and youth with disabilities or support needs and their families.
- **Reconciliation & Decolonizing.** Reconciliation and decolonization guide the project's approach to community engagement, which is designed to be inclusive, accessible, and culturally safe, with an appropriate approach that makes space for historically excluded voices and perspectives.
- **Transparency and Timeliness.** Timely engagement summaries are circulated to keep participants informed and help ensure the perspectives most important to the community are captured.

Inclusive communities are healthier communities. Building inclusive communities is a **shared responsibility**.

The Community-Led Collaboration Project took place over two phases between September 2022 and December 2024. In the first phase, The Provincial Working Group and their community partners worked together to facilitate in-person and hybrid engagements in:

- Campbell River, Gold River, and surrounding communities
- Castlegar and surrounding communities
- Kamloops and surrounding communities
- Port Alberni and surrounding communities
- West Coast Vancouver Island communities
- Richmond

In each of the six initial communities, the Provincial Working Group and its community partners also conducted a six-step engagement (see Figure 1 below) to:

Understand the strengths, gaps, and the changes needed when it comes to services and supports for children and youth with disabilities or support needs in B.C.

Explore what truly collaborative and connected networks of support can achieve for B.C. children and youth, and their families.

Implement engagement that considers the specific circumstances of a community, the young people, and families in need of support, and importantly, the voices of people historically excluded.



Figure 1

In the second phase of the project, the Provincial Working Group:

- Shared outcomes and approaches from the initial community engagements and worked with communities to develop solutions to issues raised.
- Offered up to thirty grants for additional B.C. communities to conduct their own community engagements.

SAFE SPACES FOR DIALOGUE

In Castlegar, The Provincial Working Group built partnerships with local community organizations, including Arc Programs, Circle of Indigenous Nations Society (COINS), Family Support Institute of BC, Kootenay Boundary Community Services Co-operative, Kootenay Family Place, and Pivot Point Family Growth Centre.

These partnerships informed approaches to engagement that best reflected the needs of the community. Local families, youth and service providers were invited to facilitated sessions in several ways, including:

- Information posters (put up in community centres and coffee shops).
- Dedicated community website and registration page.
- Emails sent directly to families receiving supports and service providers.
- Community service providers sharing event details directly with organizations and families in their networks.
- Local Facebook groups.



In Castlegar, families and caregivers connected and shared during an Indigenous Talking Circle hosted by COINS.

Throughout the planning and implementation of engagements in Castlegar, steps were taken to ensure cultural safety and accessibility. Participants were offered:

- Childcare honorariums and onsite supported childcare options.
- Support for transportation.
- Quiet space on site and follow-up support for participants.
- Food and gift cards for all participants.
- A variety of session formats and locations to enhance safety and inclusion (for example, in one session, families and caregivers participated in an Indigenous Talking Circle at Circle of Indigenous Nations Society (COINS)).
- Hybrid session formats for those who preferred to participate remotely via Zoom.

In each session, participants were asked three questions:

- 1 What services and supports for children and youth with disabilities or support needs are working well in Castlegar?**
- 2 What gaps in services and support exist?**
- 3 What does a better network of services and supports look like in Castlegar?**

In addition to exploring these questions in hybrid sessions, families and service providers were provided a survey link, phone number and email address to share further ideas.

ABOUT CASTLEGAR



Image: Tyler Hadikan from Stacked Films

Castlegar is centrally located in the West Kootenay region. We acknowledge the ancestors and knowledge keepers from the First Nations, Métis, Inuit and Urban Indigenous Peoples who live throughout these lands. Castlegar is the second largest municipality in the West Kootenay/Boundary region, with a population of nearly 9,000.¹ Children up to the age of 14 make up 14.7 per cent of the population of Castlegar; 1 per cent of the population are of single Indigenous ancestry, of which 60 per cent are First Nations, and 40 per cent are Métis.² According to the Early Development Instrument (EDI), a research tool used by the Human Early Learning Project (HELP) at the University of British Columbia (UBC) to help understand healthy child development in British Columbia, childhood vulnerability rates vary significantly across the province, ranging from 21.8 per cent in some B.C. communities to 72 per cent in others.³

In School District 20, which includes Castlegar, 33 per cent—or 204 of 615 children—are vulnerable on one or more scales of the EDI upon entry to kindergarten.⁴ This compares to 32.9 per cent of all kindergarten children across B.C. being vulnerable on one or more scales.⁵ Early Development Instrument research in Castlegar further indicates that the **social and emotional needs of children in kindergarten are higher than their needs in other areas of development**, such as physical health, well-being, language, cognition, communication, and general knowledge.⁶ Children are considered vulnerable on the EDI if, without additional support and care, they are more likely to experience challenges in their school years and beyond. Why is this important? Understanding healthy child development—and what is influencing healthy development in your community—provides a starting point for conversations and actions that are local, specific to the needs of the children in your community, and led by community champions.⁷

1. Statistics Canada. 2023. (table). Census Profile. 2021 Census of Population. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 98-316-X2021001. Ottawa. Released March 29, 2023, online: <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/dp-pd/prof/index.cfm?lang=E>

2. Ibidem.

3. This statistic is sourced from the Early Development Instrument (EDI) which is composed of five measures of vulnerability in children entering kindergarten in British Columbia. The EDI is the tool that has been used by the Human Early Learning Project (HELP) at the University of British Columbia for over two decades to monitor children's development at school entry.

Early Development Instrument for School District 20, Castlegar, Fruitvale, Robson, Rossland, and Trail, online: <https://earlylearning.ubc.ca>

4. Early Development Instrument, online: <https://earlylearning.ubc.ca>

5. Ibidem.

6. Ibidem.

7. Human Early Learning Partnership. Early Development Instrument [EDI] report. Wave 7 Community Profile, 2019. Kootenay - Columbia School District (SD20). Vancouver, B.C.: University of British Columbia, Faculty of Medicine, School of Population and Public Health; February 2020, online: http://earlylearning.ubc.ca/media/edi_w7_communityprofiles/edi_w7_communityprofile_sd_20.pdf

WHAT WE HEARD IN CASTLEGAR

Engagement in Castlegar took place in June 2023. Working in partnership with local organizations, Arc Programs, Circle of Indigenous Nations Society (COINS), Family Support Institute of BC, Kootenay Boundary Community Services Co-operative, Kootenay Family Place and Pivot Point Family Growth Centre the community hosted:

- A session with **four local families** at Kootenay Family Place on Thursday, June 15, 2023.
- A session with **17 local community service providers** at Kootenay Family Place on Friday, June 16, 2023.
- A second family session with **eight local family members/caregivers** who participated in an Indigenous Talking Circle at COINS on Saturday, June 17, 2023.

“Funding is very rigid. If (parents) don’t tick the right boxes and receive the right diagnosis, you get nothing.”

– Local service provider

“There needs to be fewer hoops (to jump through) – trust parents more, they know their children best.”

– Local family member/caregiver

In all sessions, participants shared what is working well, opportunities for improvement and the ideal vision of what support should look like for families in Castlegar and surrounding communities. In response to the question **“What is working well in Castlegar and surrounding areas?”** participants shared:

- Flexible funding is working for some families.
- The Castlegar Rec Centre is inclusive and adaptable, and there are several inclusive recreational opportunities that are excellent.
- There are many outside funding opportunities from non-profits like Cops for Kids. There are also good support groups like the Autistic Family Connection Group.
- Local organizations, such as Kootenay Family Place, Kootenay Kid's Society, and Boundary Family Services, offer many services to families.
- Resources like the Autism Funding Unit (AFU) and Set BC are helpful for families who have them.
- There is "decent medical and dental care" available.
- There are many established relationships in community that allow service providers to work together to deliver services.

The following table details participants' thoughts on opportunities for improvement and ideas for meaningful change in Castlegar and surrounding communities.

Conversation themes	Supporting details
<p>CONSISTENCY/ STAFFING/TRAINING</p> <p>"No consistency year to year at school. Might have a great year and then the following year it's a new teacher/new EA."</p> <p>— Family member/caregiver</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Families want more consistency of staff. That means fewer staff changes and turnover among the people who support them and their child/ren. • Service Providers say there is not enough money to compensate staff appropriately. • Service Providers also find it hard to attract applicants with the necessary (and inflexible) credentials - for example, some service providers talk about the challenges of getting people with Master's Degrees to apply for jobs.
<p>REGIONAL/ TRANSPORTATION CHALLENGES</p> <p>"You live in Castlegar, you don't qualify for services in Trail. The boundaries are confusing but very specific regarding service access for families."</p> <p>— Local service provider</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some families travel outside of Castlegar to access services. In some instances, families have moved to or travel regularly to Alberta to access supports. • Families find service boundaries confusing and one service provider mentioned that service delivery areas "...don't match how families move around the region." • HandyDART does not provide transportation outside of the community for families who need to access those supports. • One family talked about how the At Home Program will pay for them to receive supports in Nelson, but not Trail as Trail is not "far enough away."
<p>BELONGING IN COMMUNITY</p> <p>"Community should lift each other up."</p> <p>— Family member/caregiver</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Families dream of a community that is safe, supportive, and nurturing, and where community members lift each other up. • Families want to feel heard and listened to in their community: "Everyone has something important to say." • Families also want to establish more opportunities for children, youth, and families to connect with one another in community. • One parent said, "Use Talking Circle format - focus on welcoming and belonging to get [families] to know one another better." • Families suggest listening and consulting people with lived experience when making decisions within the community.

FUNDING

"We shouldn't be pitting families against one another over a small pot of money. We need to increase the pot of money."

- Family member/caregiver

- Families must fight to access funding or services. When they do get them, dealing with the required paperwork is an administrative nightmare.
- Community service providers talk of rigid funding policies that prevent dollars from being allocated in the ways that better support families, children, and youth.
- When it comes to individualized autism funding, some families recognize it as helpful, while others are challenged by the work that is required to apply for and manage autism funds.
- "The At Home Program needs to be looked at. There is poor communication with families/parents and there are always details that are changing which aren't communicated. You can get the autism funding, but there are so many barriers to access the funding."

MORE EARLY YEARS SUPPORT IS NEEDED

"No one told us that when (my child) entered kindergarten, the services she received as a preschooler would no longer exist."

- Family member/caregiver

- Families and service providers expressed a need for more staff and therapists to service children from birth to five years old.
- Families expressed concern over misinformation about the supports available when transitioning from early years to school.

NAVIGATING THE SYSTEM

"Not all service providers are aware of the tips and tricks, leaving parents to be their child's case manager. Layered onto the fact that they are dealing with diagnosis, parenting etc. "

- Local service provider

- Families are exhausted dealing with the administrative process required to access funding.
- Families want simplified information and accessible forms and policies.
- Families want one place where they can easily access information about what services and supports are available.
- There have been informal avenues for families to get information about their community but the local Facebook group was taken down, leaving parents with a local knowledge gap.
- Service providers want a coordinator to help families navigate the system and understand where to go for support.
- One family said they dream of a "medical system that doesn't require them to bring an advocate for their child to get proper medical attention."
- Parents are exhausted from navigating and sharing their stories every time they change service providers or healthcare professionals.
- There is a confusion and conflict of geographical boundaries. Some qualify for one location even if another is more convenient.

MORE SERVICES NEEDED

“Everyone is operating at a bare-bones status due to lack of investment in services. Trickle-down effect of lack of funding. More with less.”

– Local service provider

- Families need access to respite in their community.
- Parents want access to trauma-informed care, as well as more personalized support.
- Families talked about the lack of local services – and specifically, lack of Physical Therapy (PT), Occupational Therapy (OT), and Speech-Language Pathology (SLP). “Even if you want to hire privately, there isn’t anyone here.”
- One family suggested that more families could get access to the supports they need if there was a “lending library” for parents to borrow equipment (equipment with long waitlists to purchase) that can support their children’s social, physical, and emotional growth.
- Parents/caregivers are looking for more local mental health supports for their children.
- Families want access to neurodiverse-affirming practices.
- There is an expressed need for more flexibility around the hours and days of potential services.

NEEDS-BASED FUNDING (NOT DIAGNOSIS-BASED)

“There are many children with support needs who haven’t achieved a diagnosis and who therefore don’t qualify for ANY service.”

– Family member/caregiver

- Some participants talked about how children and youth may not have a diagnosis, but they still need supports.
- Families want more programs that are needs-based vs. diagnosis-based.
- A local service provider shared, “Support dollars are tied to diagnosis in school age. If they don’t tick the right boxes and receive the right diagnosis, there is nothing available for those families. Funding is very rigid.”

SCHOOL YEARS ARE CHALLENGING

“Children fall off the radar as soon as they hit school and the case loads are so big at school that the children don’t really get assistance there either.

– Family member/caregiver

- Families want more trained Education Assistants (EAs) in their schools.
- One family talked of having to move to a new community to prevent their child from being bullied on the bus to school.
- A family with a child with complex need was told their son can’t attend the local school as they don’t have medical supports for them.
- Schools pool funding and, therefore, kids do not get individualized support.
- Some children are missing out on sharing experiences with their peers. One parent shared that “My child gets pulled out of class to receive supports and rest of class gets a ‘fun activity’ to create sense of fairness. Then my child misses out on fun activities.”
- Families want teachers to work more closely with caseworkers.
- Families want more access to OTs, PTs, SLPs, Pathologists, and Counselors for school-aged children within the school system so parents don’t have to pay privately.

SOLUTIONS TABLE SUMMARY

During the in-person engagements in Castlegar, attendees explored what is working well in their communities and what are the opportunities for change. They also spent time discussing their hopes for the future and what an ideal network of services and supports for children and youth with disabilities or support needs in their communities could look like for them.

In the sessions, participants shared the following visions for the future of their communities:

- There is more trauma-informed training for caregivers and more personalized support.
- There is an online place for families to access and receive information about local supports and services.
- New families are welcomed into the community with information on local services and supports.
- There is support for the professional development and collaboration of local service providers and community opportunities for families to connect with local supports and organizations.
- There are free mental health services for families, for both children and parents, that don't require a crisis to access. "Mental health supports for children (including siblings) so that we have fewer adults with mental health support needs." - Family member/caregiver.
- Funding is based on need, not diagnosis.

On July 2, 2024, parents, caregivers, family members, community service providers, and community members from Castlegar were invited to an online session to discuss solutions for change. At the meeting, they had the opportunity to explore and workshop a vision of the future, based on in-person feedback gathered in their communities, including:

- The information they need to make meaningful and informed decisions about their children's lives.
- The support to navigate the systems and processes to ensure their children thrive.

VISION FOR CASTLEGAR

All families in Castlegar and surrounding communities can access the information they need to make meaningful decisions about their children’s lives. Families also have the support they need to navigate the systems and processes to ensure their children thrive.

WHAT BOLD STEPS OR SOLUTIONS ARE REQUIRED TO ACHIEVE THIS VISION?	WHO MUST BE INVOLVED TO BRING THESE SOLUTIONS TO LIFE?
<p>There is an online database where families and service providers can easily access information about local supports, services, and family groups. This database is updated and managed by a Community Facilitator or Navigator in a dedicated, paid position.</p>	<p>The collaboration of multiple provincial ministries including Health, Finance, Children and Family Development, and Education and Child Care.</p>
<p>More transportation options are available, especially for families in rural areas or without access to a vehicle. This could include a medical taxi driver or private transportation options.</p>	<p>The collaboration of the Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure and the Ministry of Children and Family Development.</p>
<p>There are incentives available for people to study and work in support roles in Castlegar and surrounding communities.</p>	<p>The collaboration of post-secondary institutions and multiple provincial ministries, including Advanced Education, Education and Childcare, and Children and Family Development.</p>
<p>Parents, caregivers and community members are included in the decisions of policy and funding.</p>	<p>The collaboration of ministries of Children and Family Development, Education and Child Care, Health, Finance, and Mental Health.</p>
<p>Service providers hold regular community meetings to connect and discuss community updates, such as funding and accessible services.</p>	<p>A collaboration of community service providers and all organizations that offer services to children and youth.</p>

Families can connect through inclusive playgroups and playgrounds, fostering more face-to-face interaction within the community.

The City of Castlegar and community service providers.

There is a secure, centralized system of information where families, service providers, and other public bodies can add or access information about a child that documents the child's support needs and facilitates their access to supports and services. Instead of having to prove every time that the child has a disability or support needs.

The collaboration of multiple provincial ministries including Health, Finance, Children and Family Development, Education and Child Care, Social Development, and Poverty Reduction.

Local businesses are trained and educated on inclusivity and support needs within the community, creating more awareness and education about community services.

This would be a proactive effort led by the City of Castlegar and the Castlegar Chamber of Commerce.

Service providers and specialists frequently travel to Castlegar and surrounding communities to help alleviate the travel costs currently imposed on families.

The collaboration of the ministries of Children and Family Development and Finance.

There is an increase of support workers in daycares.

The collaboration of the ministries of Education and Child Care, Post-secondary Education and Future Skills and Children and Family Development.

Families have access to services and supports as they navigate the system and waitlists.

The Ministry of Children and Family Development



FINAL STEPS OF ENGAGEMENT

Throughout 2024, the Provincial Working Group shared preliminary results and project updates with the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD). In January 2025, the summary reports from the 23 community engagements, including those from community engagement grants and the six initial community engagements, will be submitted to the MCFD. Community contributions have been instrumental in shaping these reports.

In all cases, the outcomes of the Community-Led Collaboration Project will belong to the communities. The hope is that participants' ideas and experiences will serve as a tool for B.C. communities as they work to build and advocate for better networks of services and supports and make changes in their community to best support children and youth with disabilities or support needs and their families.

Please share this report widely - it is not just a reflection of your community, but a catalyst for the change needed in your community. We believe it holds the potential to inspire a future where every person can thrive and to contribute to a transformation of the Children and Youth with Support Needs (CYSN) program and other programs and services that better responds to the needs of B.C. communities and, most importantly, of the young people at the center of this work.

For more ideas and tools to share this report, please visit <https://inclusionbc.org/clcp-castlegar/>.

IN SUMMARY

Please find a plain language summary of the Castlegar key discoveries on the following pages.

What We Heard In

CASTLEGAR

Acknowledging the ancestors and knowledge keepers from the First Nations, Métis, Inuit, and Urban Indigenous Peoples living throughout these lands.

The Community-Led Collaboration Project held conversations in Castlegar in June 2023. The first session was with four local families. A second session was with 17 local community service providers at Kootenay Family Place. Then, a final family session took place with eight local family members/caregivers who participated in an Indigenous Talking Circle at COINS. Together, we talked about the struggles, hopes, and expectations for services and supports for children ages 0-19 with disabilities or support needs.

What's Working Well

- Flexible funding works for some families.
- The Castlegar Recreation Centre has some excellent and inclusive recreational opportunities.
- There are lots of outside funding opportunities from non-profits.
- Resources like Autism Funding Unit (AFU) and Set BC are helpful for the families who receive these supports.
- Kootenay Family Place, Kootenay Kid's Society, and Boundary Family Services, offer many services to families.
- Service providers work well together.

Opportunities For Change

Funding

Families said they are exhausted with the paperwork and process to get funding. Some people talked about how kids might not have a diagnosis but still need supports and funding. Families also said they want more programs that are based on needs, not diagnosis. With individual autism funding, some families said it was helpful and others said applying for and managing autism funds was a lot of work. They said they are also frustrated the funding is often tied to diagnosis for kids ages five and older.

Connection

Families said they dream of a community where people "lift each other up." They also said they wanted to be heard and listened to, and have more opportunities to connect with each other inside the community.

Getting around

Some families said they have to travel outside of Castlegar for services, sometimes need to go all the way to Alberta. Families and community service providers said the boundaries for services are confusing and don't match up with how people move around the area.

Figuring out the system

One family said they dream of a “medical system that doesn’t require them to bring an advocate for their child to get proper medical attention.” They said they want simplified information, forms and policies, all available in one place. Service providers said they want a coordinator to help families understand where to go for support.

“Not all service providers are aware of the tips and tricks, leaving parents to be their child’s case manager, layered onto the fact that they are dealing with diagnosis, parenting, etc.”

– Local service provider

Early years and school-age challenges

Families said they want more Education Assistants (EAs) in schools and more staff and therapists to service children from birth to 5 years old. Schools pool funding and, therefore, kids not getting individualized supports. Some families said their kids miss out on fun activities with other students because they’re being pulled out of class.

More services

Families talked about needing more local respite and support services, like physiotherapists, occupational therapists, and speech and language pathologists. Parents said they want more personalized support and more local mental health supports for their kids. One family suggested creating a “lending library” for parents to borrow equipment that have long waitlists to buy. Families also want access to neurodiverse-affirming practices.

Training

Families want the people who support their kids at school to be consistent, with less turnover. Service providers said there isn’t enough money to pay staff properly. They highlighted it’s hard to get people with Master’s Degrees to apply for jobs.

“[There is] no consistency year-to-year at school. Might have a great year and then the following year, it’s a new teacher/new EA.”

– Family member/caregiver

Community vision

All families in Castlegar and surrounding communities can access the information they need to make meaningful decisions about their children’s lives. Families also have the support they need to navigate the systems and processes to ensure their children thrive.

Solutions that serve this vision:

- Secure, centralized online information systems for service providers and families.
- Local education on inclusivity.
- Incentives to attract specialized workers.
- Inclusive playgroups and playgrounds.
- Regular community meetings where families/caregivers can be more involved in policy and funding decisions.
- Service providers and specialists travel often to Castlegar and help families save on travel expenses.
- More support workers in daycares.
- Families have access to services and supports while on waitlists.

WITH THANKS

The Community-Led Collaboration Project would like to deeply thank everyone who shared their time, ideas, experiences, concerns and hopes with us.

Their words have made all the difference as Castlegar and surrounding areas look to best support children and youth with disabilities or support needs so they can thrive now and into the future.

Image of Castlegar, Photo Destination Castlegar.