

# Back to School:

## Prevalence of Students with Disabilities and Learning Exceptionalities in British Columbia, Canada, during the COVID-19 Pandemic (2019 – 2022)

**Jennifer Baumbusch, RN, PhD**

Professor  
School of Nursing  
University of British Columbia

**Jennifer E.V. Lloyd, PhD**

Research Associate  
School of Nursing  
University of British Columbia

***Supporting Progressive Inclusive Child-centred Education (SPICE) Research Lab***

*SPICE Principal Investigator: Jennifer L. Baumbusch, Ph.D., R.N.*

### Suggested citation:

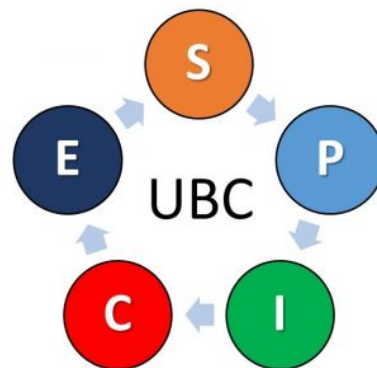
Baumbusch, J.L., & Lloyd, J.E.V. (September 20, 2022). *Back to School: Prevalence of Students with Disabilities and Learning Exceptionalities in British Columbia, Canada, during the COVID-19 Pandemic (2019 – 2022)*. Vancouver, BC: Supporting Progressive Inclusive Child-centered Education (SPICE) Lab, School of Nursing, University of British Columbia.

**Report available at:**

<http://spice.nursing.ubc.ca/>

**Inquiries:**

spice@nursing.ubc.ca



## Executive Summary

Starting in March, 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic caused many disruptions in the delivery of education for students with disabilities and learning exceptionalities (also known as BC Ministry of Education inclusive education ‘designations’) in British Columbia (BC), Canada.

With public and independent (private) students grouped together (province total):

- Anecdotally, many parents considered ‘pulling’ their children from in-person learning during the 2020/2021 school year. However, this does not appear to have occurred in large numbers, as the provincial number of students with disabilities and learning exceptionalities (designations) actually increased (+1073) between the 2019/2020 and 2020/2021 school years.
- The increase in students with designations between 2020/2021 and 2021/2022 was higher than in a typical (pre-pandemic) year (+4482).
- The three designations with the greatest increases between 2019/2020 and 2021/2022 were Autism Spectrum Disorder (+3950), Learning Disabilities (+1053), and Moderate Behaviour Support/Mental Illness (+819).
- The three designations with the greatest decreases between 2019/2020 and 2021/2022 were Intensive Behaviour/Serious Mental Health (-255), Moderate to Profound Intellectual Disability (-155), and Gifted (-67).

## Introduction

At the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, families of students with disabilities and learning exceptionalities were confronted with a rapid shift to online/virtual learning, which evolved into periods of hybrid learning (that is, a combination of in-person and online/virtual learning), and eventually moved into mostly in-person learning.

During the three school years of the pandemic so far (2019/2020; 2020/2021; and 2021/2022), there have been fluctuations in the number of students with disabilities and learning exceptionalities. In this brief report, we explore the prevalence of students with disabilities and learning exceptionalities (a.k.a., BC Ministry of Education inclusive education ‘designations’) in British Columbia, Canada.

## Methodology

This report was prepared using data publicly available from the Government of British Columbia’s “DataBC” web site.

Those interested in learning more about the specific data holdings analysed in this report, and also about other open data available, are invited to visit DataBC’s web site (<https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/data/about-data-management/databc>).

From this web site, we made use of an open data file called “student\_headcount\_by\_special\_needs-1991\_92-to-2021\_22”, which is freely available for download (<https://catalogue.data.gov.bc.ca/dataset/student-headcount-by-special-needs-category>).

Where possible, we have presented this information for the whole province, and also separated into public school students and independent (private) school students.

The BC Ministry of Education does not include homeschooled students in their student statistics, such as those presented in their open data. Therefore, this report does not include students who are homeschooled.

We use the term ‘designation’ to refer to the broad categories of need determined by the BC Ministry of Education.

Please note that, we created an additional designation, called ‘Designation Z’. This represents all A-R designations described in Table 1, grouped together.

**Table 1: BC Ministry of Education’s Inclusive Education Designations**

<b>Code</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>A</b>	Physically Dependent
<b>B</b>	Deafblind
<b>C</b>	Moderate to Severe Profound Intellectual Disability
<b>D</b>	Physical Disability or Chronic Health Impairment
<b>E</b>	Visual Impairment
<b>F</b>	Deaf or Hard of Hearing
<b>G</b>	Autism Spectrum Disorder
<b>H</b>	Intensive Behaviour Interventions/ Serious Mental Illness
<b>K</b>	Mild Intellectual Disability
<b>P</b>	Gifted
<b>Q</b>	Learning Disabilities
<b>R</b>	Moderate Behaviour Support / Mental Illness
<b>Z</b>	<i>All designations combined (researcher-created)</i>

For more about these designations, we refer readers to:

**BC Ministry of Education’s Special Education Services: Manual of Policies, Procedures, and Guidelines:** [http://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/education/administration/kindergarten-to-grade-12/inclusive/special ed policy manual.pdf](http://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/education/administration/kindergarten-to-grade-12/inclusive/special_ed_policy_manual.pdf)

## Prevalence of Students with Disabilities and Learning Exceptionalities over Three School Years during the COVID-19 Pandemic

In March, 2020, a public health emergency was declared due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Most schools closed for a period of time in Spring, 2020, and later restarted with a combination of in-person, hybrid, and online/virtual learning.

With public and independent (private) students grouped together (province total), in 2019/2020, there were 77,232 students with designations in BC.

In 2020/2021, there were 78,305 students with designations in BC. Many schools began the school year using a hybrid format, increasing to mainly in-person learning.

- 1073 increase in students with designations between 2019/2020 and 2020/2021.

In 2021/2022, there were 82,787 students with designations in BC. Most schools were only offering in-person learning.

- 4482 increase in students with designations between 2020/2021 and 2021/2022.

Between 2019/2020 and 2021/2022, the three designations with the greatest increases were:

- Autism Spectrum Disorder (+3950)
- Learning Disabilities (+1053)
- Moderate Behaviour Support/Mental Illness (+819)

Between 2019/2020 and 2021/2022, the three designations with the greatest decreases were:

- Intensive Behaviour/Serious Mental Health (-255)
- Moderate to Profound Intellectual Disability (-155)
- Gifted (-67)

**Table 2: Designations with the Greatest Prevalence Change between 2019/2020 and 2021/2022**

School Type	Greatest Increase	Greatest Decrease
<b>Public</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Autism Spectrum Disorder (+3136)</li> <li>• Learning Disabilities (+1028)</li> <li>• Moderate Behaviour Support (+749)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intensive Behaviour/Serious Mental Health (-297)</li> <li>• Moderate to Profound Intellectual Disability (-144)</li> <li>• Gifted (-112)</li> </ul>
<b>Independent</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Autism Spectrum Disorder (+814)</li> <li>• Moderate Behaviour Support (+70)</li> <li>• Physical Disability/Chronic Health Impairment (+61)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Moderate to Profound Intellectual Disability (-11)</li> <li>• Visual Impairment (-7)</li> <li>• Deaf/Hard of Hearing (-2)</li> </ul>
<b>Province total</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Autism Spectrum Disorder (+3950)</li> <li>• Learning Disabilities (+1053)</li> <li>• Moderate Behaviour Support/Mental Illness (+819)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intensive Behaviour/Serious Mental Health (-255)</li> <li>• Moderate to Profound Intellectual Disability (-155)</li> <li>• Gifted (-67)</li> </ul>

## A Closer Look: Designations with the Greatest Prevalence Increases

Figure 1: Prevalence of Designation Z: All Designations Combined

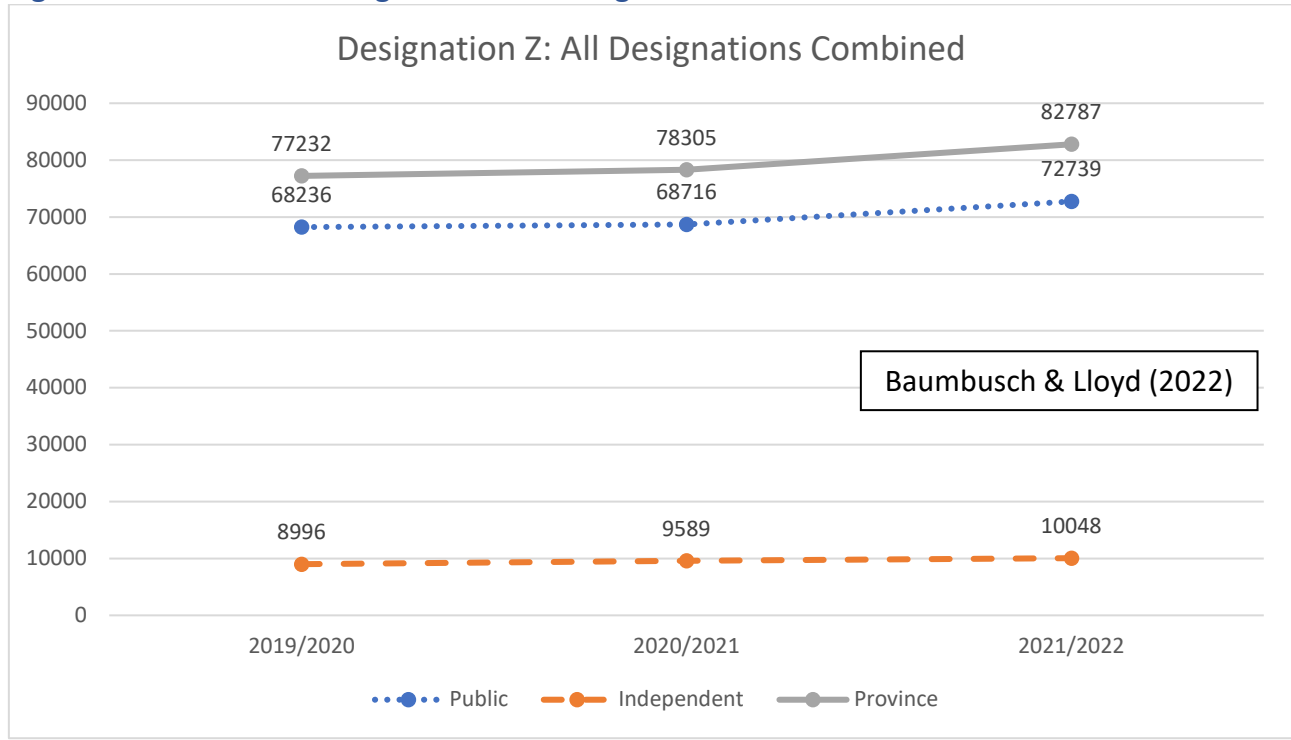
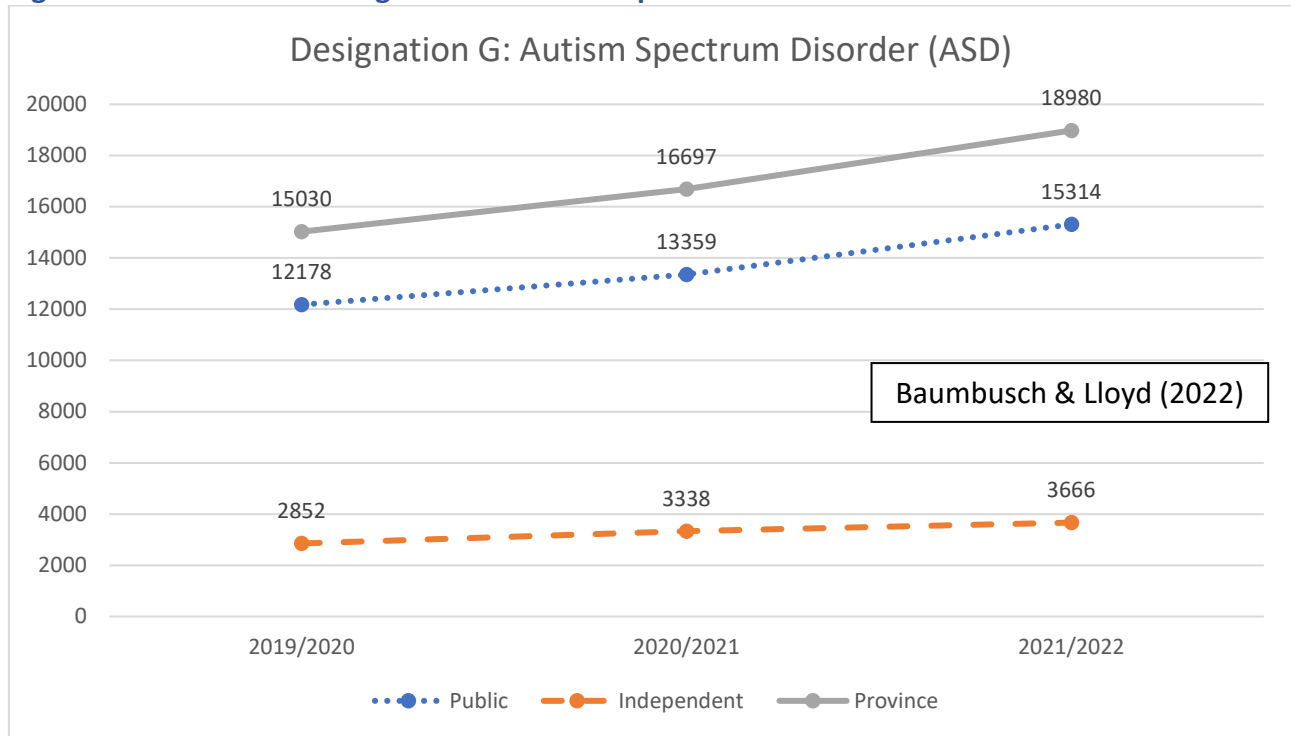
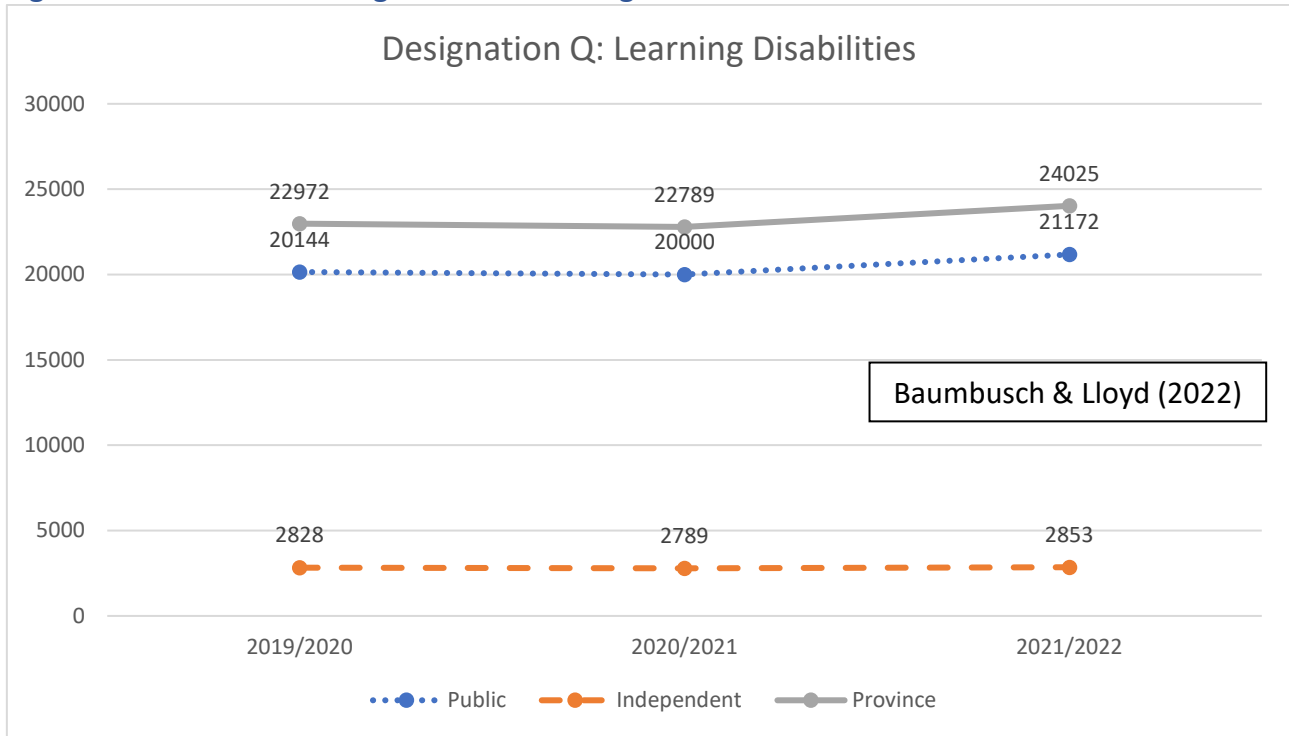


Figure 2: Prevalence of Designation G: Autism Spectrum Disorder



**Figure 3: Prevalence of Designation Q: Learning Disabilities**



**Figure 4: Prevalence of Designation R: Moderate Behaviour Support/Mental Illness**

