

# BC Education Coalition – Stop BC Education Cuts

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## Brief to the Vancouver Board of Education on the 2010-2011 proposed budget

*Presented by Dawn Steele, April 21, 2010*

**About us:** I'm a Vancouver parent and ours is a growing ad hoc group (over 4,000 and counting) working locally around the Province to stop another destructive round of education cuts happening around the province.

We want the Province to fully fund education. We want the Minister and the Premier to stop picking on anyone who defends public education. We want everyone to work together for stronger public schools that can serve all students. We want trustees who understand their job is not just to balance the books and take flack for the Minister. We want respect for teachers, staff and parents and we want everyone to put the students front and centre.

**Public education** is not just about our own children's success. It's the foundation of a stable, peaceful, productive and wealthy society. So we need to cover public education costs before all the other provincial adventures that are being given higher priority.

**Special adviser:** I was as surprised as anyone to see Vancouver singled out with this appointment, and puzzled as to why the Minister would be interested in Board management capacity and budget development processes for Vancouver in particular. An independent audit could resolve challenges that have plagued BC's public schools for years, but only **IF** the terms of reference provided for:

A) Objective assessment of funding vs. costs and expectations and critical assessment of how best to manage resources to achieve the full mandate of public education.

B) Commitment from all parties to honour the results by ensuring that all BC students benefit from any lessons learned.

To get the answers we need, the Special Adviser would have to be charged with asking the right questions. She'd have to test spending, funding, management and efficiency against the right yardsticks. This requires far more than just looking at accounting systems and trustee resumes. It includes considering:

- **Premier Campbell's stated goal of making ours the best-educated, most literate jurisdiction on the continent.**
- **Objectives of public education:** It's not just the 3 R's, cramming students with dusty old facts or preparing them for employment. Provincial policies and expectations demand that public schools impart broad knowledge and skills that prepare students to be full, productive citizens.
- **Equity principles:** Public schools are required to offer all BC children equitable opportunities to learn and grow. Addressing underfunding via user fees or private fundraising, or ignoring the students being left behind violates core principles.
- **The complex process of teaching and learning:** As parent to a special needs child, I know we all have unique learning and teaching styles. Education isn't delivered like single vaccine doses or cafeteria portions. The routes to individual success are varied. We need complex systems that employ a variety of strategies if we want to get every child to the finish line.

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- **The diversity of our students:** Every year I listen to budget presentations and marvel at the incredible diversity of Vancouver's students. Chaperoning a school band trip last weekend, my son who has autism accompanied ESL and gifted kids, refugees from Africa, sophisticated international students, some who needed bursaries and others who were extremely wealthy.

**No child left behind?** These kids are a microcosm of what our adult world should look like – if the rest of us did as good a job as our public schools. But not all students are thriving. We're leaving many vulnerable children behind and will abandon many more if we cut \$18 million. Evaluating performance and priorities therefore requires a hard look at who is being left behind.

**Impossible choices:** A complex task and a diverse population require a complex system. Such systems are holistic, with interconnected parts that build and rely on each other. We need to constantly prune and refresh, but when the Province asks us to choose between administrators and counsellors, between Aboriginal and ESL kids, between mini schools and inner city schools, or between band and Special Ed, it has utterly failed to grasp what public education is all about.

**Cuts hurt kids:** The Provincial government is forcing the doctor to ask the patient to choose between saving his heart or his brain – and it has sent us an inspector to see if the surgical knives are clean. We're all saying these choices are impossible – if the yardstick is the mandate of delivering a public education that allows all Vancouver students a reasonable opportunity to achieve their potential.

**Pay now, pay later:** If the objective is simply to run public schools on the cheap, then fine: kill music and mini schools, close the gyms, abandon the fragile kids, run our public schools into the ground and let everyone pay their way privately. Just warn BC's taxpayers that we'll be spending exponentially more than we've saved, by creating huge social costs and lost productivity.

**Conclusion: The Minister's directions to the Special Adviser omit the key questions that need asking at this pivotal watershed moment, taking a mean, small view of education that's akin to thin, watery gruel. The Minister has entirely ignored the needs of students and how we can achieve the Premier's stated goals for education, focussing instead on irrelevant minutia that misses the forest for the trees – a costly, wasteful and time-consuming distraction.**

**We need a vision.** The Premier has a great vision, at least on paper. The Education Ministry has gutted itself and is now pressuring local boards to gut their own administrative and leadership capacity. Since the Minister clearly doesn't get it, we need you to be more proactive in defining what the Premier's vision means and outlining the strategies we need to get there. So I'll add what may be the only vote in this process supporting the need to maintain administrative capacity on top of everything else, if this board and others are to fill the gap and provide the leadership we need.

We need you to explain to the bean counters in Victoria what public education is all about and how important it is to do it right.

Thank you!