

June 17, 2010 Brief presented by DPAC Chair Julianne Doctor to VSB Budget meeting

Re: Special Adviser's report and Ministry directive on a VSB compliance budget:

DPAC and district parents have been deeply disappointed and confused by the impositions (intervention?) of the Ministry of Education on the Budget process for the Vancouver School District.

There is little in the Special Advisor's report that addresses the concerns of Vancouver parents, whose primary interest is the ability of our schools to deliver appropriate programs and services that meet the educational needs of students. DPAC has heard repeatedly from parents that they are alarmed and frustrated, as every year the quality of their children's education is diminished by the difficult decisions that the VSB is required to make to reduce the costs of services and programs. These decisions are driven by financial necessity. They are being made because the Provincial government's priorities have not included full financial support to cover the rising costs of delivering public education.

At this time, provincial underfunding is the key challenge facing Vancouver, like many other districts, and yet consideration of this challenge and its impacts on students was specifically excluded from the mandate of the Special Adviser. This ignored the key recommendation on Education in the 2009 report of the BC Legislature's bipartisan Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services, which was that the "***the provincial government work with boards of education to conduct a comprehensive review of the education funding formula.***"

The Special Adviser's report includes criticism that the VSB faces financial challenges because of past choices the Board has made to support Vancouver's students. As parents and citizens, we applaud the efforts of our elected board for its current and past efforts to mitigate the impacts of provincial underfunding by consulting with parents and other education partners to ensure that insufficient provincial funding is allocated to maximize student benefits.

Other concerns raised by the report and the Minister's response:

- Forcing VSB to present a balanced budget for 2010 without additional funding will threaten many critically-important services and programs, including music, special education, libraries and counselling, supports for ESL, Aboriginal and disadvantaged Inner City students, supports for gifted students and Mini Schools (what did I miss?). This contradicts the provincial government's Great Goal #1, which is "*to make British Columbia the most literate, best-educated jurisdiction in North America.*"
- The Comptroller General found that Vancouver was not over-spending on administration, hiding assets, mismanaging its finances or "crying wolf" about the serious deficit facing the district for 2010, all of which the Education Minister has repeatedly alleged in the media. The Minister has not acknowledged or explained these contradictions, leaving parents anxious and confused.
- Proposed increases in rental fees will make after-school care programs unaffordable, forcing many parents to choose between earning a living and their children's safety. This contradicts the Premier's commitment to promoting community partnerships that better utilize school facilities through the Neighbourhoods of Learning program.
- Proposed increases in rental fees will make children's sport and fitness programs unaffordable for many, which conflicts with the Province's mandate to promote healthy living and to tackle childhood obesity.
- Forcing VSB to cancel early intervention programs for at-risk children will jeopardise student success and create far higher long term costs. This is inconsistent with the Premier's Great Goal #3, to "build the best system of support in Canada" for children with special needs and those at risk."
- Forcing VSB to curtail its public board committee processes will eliminate the opportunity for district parents to provide ongoing advice on important issues to ensure that

management plans allocate resources in ways that best meet the needs of students. It also contradicts the Premier's commitment to creating open, transparent and accountable government.

- A number of the Special Adviser's key recommendations are vague, with no evidence of their feasibility or guaranteed savings and no consideration of the negative impacts on student learning.
- A number of the Special Adviser's most troubling allegations - e.g. around the Board's integrity, are unsupported in the report by any evidence. DPAC urges the Minister to either provide evidence to substantiate these allegations, or to ask the Comptroller General to withdraw them.
- The Comptroller General's recommendation that the VSB present a less conservative budget than that recommended by the District's own professional accountants could lead to severe disruption and mid-year cuts, as has occurred in previous years, if unforeseen costs arise. The board's primary responsibility to promoting improvements in student achievement requires a careful balancing of the risks to students of too much or too little caution in budgeting.
- Concerns have been raised that it is inappropriate for the Comptroller General, as a non-independent provincial employee, to challenge the Board's political activities. Vancouver parents have differing political views, and DPAC believes that political questions are best left for the ballot box.
- The Minister's directive issued in response to the Special Adviser's report was heavy-handed and unhelpful. The VSB has already presented a draft budget that would offset the expected deficit for 2010, albeit at an extremely high cost to Vancouver's students, and neither the Minister or her Special Adviser have provided solutions that would avoid punishing students.
- Vancouver parents wish to see both sides in this dispute turn down the rhetoric, sit down and work together, and focus on what is best for students.

The cuts proposed for the 2010/11 VSB budget are not consistent with Premier Campbell's 2009 promises to protect education. Having reviewed the Special Adviser's report, DPAC does not believe it provides solutions that would negate the need for deep cuts inconsistent with the protection of education. Vancouver parents want the Provincial government to honour its promises to protect education by fully funding our students' educational needs, including new costs and requirements imposed by the provincial government for 2010, as well as ensuring that available funds are spent most effectively.

Our schools are being asked to deliver an increasingly broad mandate to promote the physical, social, emotional and educational wellbeing of K-12 students. It is a daunting task, especially considering the broad spectrum of socio-economic, cultural, learning and linguistic diversity in Vancouver. If we are to maintain and build on the quality of education delivered by Vancouver's schools and work towards promoting success for every student, consistent with the goals outlined by the Province, adequate resources are required to carry out that task, and all education partners must work together in good faith to find the best possible solutions. The VSB's efforts to raise awareness of what is lacking and what is at stake for our students should be applauded, not chastised, by a provincial government that is committed to the educational success of Vancouver's students.

We therefore urge the Minister to act urgently, either by sitting down with the VSB to help find ways to present a balanced budget for 2010 that does not negatively impact student services, or to seek the advice of an independent arbitrator or authority who can show what is needed to accomplish this. Such efforts must explicitly address the adequacy of the current provincial funding formula, as recommended by the provincial Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services.