

Students across BC face school closures and cuts on their return to school in September. Vancouver's trustees have been particularly vocal in calling foul, so it was predictable that BC's Education Minister targeted them by asking the provincial Comptroller General to see if they were maximizing education dollars and directing savings to students. Her report could have offered welcome clarity. But glaring blind spots, contradictions, errors and missed opportunities have only inflamed the tense stand-off.

There are positive suggestions, though akin to rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic. The report explicitly avoided the critical challenge facing all boards: how to avoid cuts that will hurt student learning. Prince George, for example, with an enrolment drop of 200, closed 9 schools and still faces a \$6.2 million budget gap.

Simple math

While the Provincial government, their chief accountant and the media are all blaming the school budget crises on local governance failures, it's simple math. Education was 26% of the BC budget in 1991. It's 15% today. Relative to GDP, it's shrunk 14% since 2001 (enrolment dropped 6%). Education spending isn't out of control. After adjusting for inflation and enrolment, it's down. The BC Liberals keep giving teacher pay increases they're unwilling to fund and then asking students to pay the price. BC's class sizes are now among Canada's highest and September's cuts will again cut critical services like school libraries and special education.

While acknowledging that trustees' first responsibility in the School Act is "improvement of student achievement," the report did not recognize this as a legitimate driver of their financial decisions. Vancouver's financial management failures thus include funding full-day kindergarten for at-risk students and saving classroom teachers instead of investing in information technology. She is also silent on how deep cuts and school closures will impact students.

While the Minister had accused Vancouver of excess administration and hiding assets, the Comptroller General found administrative costs reasonable (below Surrey's) and no hidden assets. She found Vancouver balances its books annually, has no debt, has solid budget planning processes and maintains healthy cash flow. The report offers modest savings, including from school closures, higher fees, more foreign students and shared services – areas the board is already pursuing. Other suggestions, for example seeking union concessions, require analysis but offer rich irony in faulting Vancouver for not anticipating the need to offset the Province's failure to fund its own concessions (pay and benefit increases) to unions.

The most useful advice concerned long-term planning – good practice for any organization – but one stymied by uncertainty from shifting Ministry policies and unpredictable funding, the report said.

The deficit is real

Most importantly, the Comptroller General confirmed the district's deficit is real. She and VSB accountants differ by \$5 million (1% of the budget) on how conservatively to plan for the unexpected. But when all is tallied, she agrees Vancouver must cut at least \$11 million next year, despite stable enrolment.

She says the shortfall is Vancouver's fault: had trustees cut programs and services in past years, they'd be cutting less next year. It's hard to see how students would have benefited from the board cutting more than the \$50 million that was already cut in recent years – and on that the report is resoundingly silent. Yes, life would have been easier for the accountants this year. But is this the right lens to evaluate board choices?

The report deals extensively with governance structures and competence, which doesn't help school boards' budget crises, though it's already supporting the Province's push to reform local governance. The conclusions are harsh: elected trustees are unqualified; too much advocacy, meddling and consensus. Trustees don't understand their jobs or how professional boards operate.

Critical errors

This devastating condemnation is built largely around a fundamental mistake – one of several that could have been avoided through the normal courtesy of allowing subjects to review draft findings. The Comptroller General said Vancouver's requirement for consensus decisions with stakeholders dilutes board accountability, gives employees undue influence and impedes progress. Fair criticism, if true, but Vancouver's governance committees don't require consensus and stakeholders don't vote. This error isn't trivial. It has fuelled shrill headlines and far-reaching proposals to reform local boards. Vancouver, like most local boards, could certainly make improvements, but if core processes were misunderstood, how useful are these recommendations?

The Comptroller General rated trustees using her standard lens for assessing career bureaucrats. But trustees, like Ministers, are not bureaucrats. They're elected to reflect the values of their communities, the Comptroller General's distaste notwithstanding. Professional competence rests with professional staff, and Vancouver's managers were found competent. Voters, not bureaucrats, must decide if trustees' and ministers' political activity is appropriate.

Local governance is a cornerstone of Canada's public education systems. For generations, locally-elected trustees have successfully governed schools acclaimed as among the world's best. Like all systems, regular tune-ups to local and provincial components can ensure funds are spent wisely and students are well served. But that requires asking the right questions. And this enquiry was largely a lost opportunity to do so.

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