



VICTORIA  
CONFEDERATION  
OF  
PARENT ADVISORY COUNCILS  
556 BOLESKINE ROAD, VICTORIA, BC V8W 2R1  
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March 7, 2023

Dear Board of Trustees,

I am writing to express the strong concern of families in our District about the priorities for your 2023/24 budget. We firmly insist that any required cuts should be as far from student programs and supports as possible. Our members have shared several critical areas that need immediate attention, which I briefly shared with you last night at the committee meeting. Here are more details to support your decision-making:

### **Education Assistant Staffing, Recruitment and Retention**

Education Assistant (EA) funds and funds for support staff that the district was unable to spend in 2022-23 have been taken out of that budget line item and returned to 'general coffers'. At the February 27 Board meeting, the amount cited was approximately \$1.2 million.

We would like to ensure those funds are not adjusted to be removed from these line items in the 2023/24 budget. These staff play a vital role in supporting students with disabilities and diverse abilities. The Board of Education goals state that the district is committed to creating "*an inclusive and culturally responsive learning environment that will support all learners' physical and mental well-being.*" Without adequate EAs and support/specialist teachers, the District is not meeting its obligations to all students in our learning community. This is a human rights issue that is of the highest priority. We cannot afford to compromise on this.

We suggest flexibility to redirect these funds to those efforts where it makes sense, and to fund specific initiatives.

Last night, Human Resources gave a detailed report on current actions as well as some options around the clear recruitment and retention crisis. With failure to fill 50 or more EA roles per day, we are in support of their suggestion to extend the 30 hour a week positions to 5 more schools, which would require additional budget for this action. We would further urge you to consider adding funds for some of these positions to high schools who are also in great need of more EA support.

Other suggestions, many raised at the February Education Policy and Directions Committee meeting:

- Differentiated positions/rates of pay based on experience and skill set
- More and ongoing in-service training opportunities for EAs
- Opportunities for collective training and engagement of Teachers and EAs



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- Showing EAs that they are valued staff members - providing digital devices, prep time, involving them in planning

We understand that the District has not been idle on this issue. We feel that they need support and funding from the Board to be able to prioritize this work to begin to alleviate the crisis.

While we are highlighting the EA recruitment and retention issue, we are aware that there is a similar concern in teaching positions and especially specialist positions that the District needs to address as well. We are also aware that recruitment and retention in K-12 education is a province-wide concern. We need to do whatever we can in our District to address these issues locally for students and staff.

### **Mental Health Support**

One of the biggest issues we hear about from our families is that there is not enough mental health support for students in our schools. This is particularly urgent since we are coming out of a pandemic, and many students continue to struggle.

As noted at the Student Budget Symposium in January, where trustees and District Staff heard directly from middle school and high school students in our learning community, counselling and mental health support was the issue that was raised again and again. Students feel that teacher counsellors spend the majority of their time on academic advising and are not available to help students with mental health concerns.

It seems that filling the counselor positions is not enough and we need to do more to specifically address mental health support. VCPAC would value a targeted discussion around this with students, and District rights holders and stakeholders, with some funding attached to implement solutions.

### **Anti-Racism, Anti-Oppression**

According to the BC Adolescent Health Survey:

14 percent of racialized students reported experiencing discrimination because of race, ethnicity or skin colour. Three in five (58 percent) of BC students say they have seen other pupils insulted, bullied or excluded based on their race.

Youth with a physical or sensory condition experienced barriers to fully participating in their family, school, and community. They were more likely than youth without a condition to report



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they lived in poverty, felt unsafe at school and in their home, experienced violence and abuse, and missed out on needed mental health services.

Among youth with a physical or sensory condition, female and non-binary youth were more likely to experience discrimination and other barriers to enjoying their human rights.

We are concerned that the Ministry of Education and Child Care have not provided specific and additional funding for the Indigenous course graduation requirement and the K-12 Anti-Racism Action Plan; nevertheless these programs need specific attention and funding support from the District.

VCPAC hears from parents, teachers, and administrators that there is racism, ableism, and gender, specifically transphobia and cisnormative harassment and even violence at many SD61 schools. As a human rights issue, this needs to be highlighted and confronted. All students deserve to have a safe place at school, and we strongly urge SD61 to provide more training, support and prep time for the people who spend the most time with our children to work toward this goal.

### **Custodial Support and Capital Planning**

VCPAC fully supports the restoration of ten custodians that were cut in last year's budget. We hope that these positions are not short term but will be added to next year's budget. These positions are absolutely necessary to providing our students a safe, healthy and clean place to learn. VCPAC also supports the cost-free implementations (such as one trash can per classroom by the door, one rug per classroom, classrooms that are free of clutter) that will allow our custodial staff to do their jobs more efficiently.

We recognize the necessity of urgent spending on technology updates because this expenditure has been put off for several years. Teachers need updated devices and EAs should also have access to dedicated devices if possible. We have heard reports from some of our secondary schools that the WiFi has been insufficient when students are writing provincial assessments. This clearly needs immediate attention.

Some possible considerations are prioritizing accessibility needs for students, and we hope that you are working with teachers to consider needs at different grade levels.

### **Equity To Access Choice Programs**

Music: Over the past two budget cycles, we have seen how, despite universal support from families and the community, the District continues to look for ways to cut elementary and middle school music from our district's schools. This action is particularly concerning because it has been



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proven in numerous studies that music education benefits go beyond the provincial curriculum. Music education, particularly learning an instrument, has many emotional and mental health benefits. It's been made clear by District parents and the community at large that especially since we are coming out of a pandemic, the District should not be cutting student programs that offer our students a safe place to go, the opportunity to connect with other students and the community and a reason to be at school.

Please see VCPAC's comments to the Budget Committee for our input about the current music models being considered for the 2023-24 budget. Whatever options are chosen by the trustees, we expect that they will be inclusive and accessible to all students in our learning community.

Late French Immersion: Parents came to present to the Board about inequity of access to Late French Immersion with the closure of the program at Cedar Hill Middle School. They note that removing this option has left students in the Late French Immersion catchment without equitable access because of significant transportation challenges to the replacement catchment schools. For Rogers Elementary students, there is no safe public transit or active transit route to the new catchment school, Shoreline Community Middle School. Lakehill Elementary and Braefoot Elementary students also face impractical transport options to Arbutus Global Middle School.

These are all crucial services that directly impact the mental health and well-being of our students. We wish to remind the trustees that according to the Framework for Enhancing Student Learning, the Human and Social Development focus that the Board of Education has voted to implement is as follows:

- Continue to be explicit with the philosophy and pedagogy required in culturally responsive learning environments that *increase student connections, engagement and achievement.*
- Increase staff knowledge and understanding of trauma sensitive approaches through the *implementation of social emotional learning and mental health programs and resources.*
- *Increase the number of students who indicate that they feel school is a place where they belong.*

We have seen significant negative impact on students due to cuts in these areas in past budgets, and it will be difficult to see improvement in these areas if the District continues to make cuts in the areas of music, counselling and EA support.

It is disheartening to note that the District spent a considerable amount of money on legal fees and services last year. In addition, the District incurred staffing and severance costs due to the unnecessary suspension of trustees, which led to increased legal costs in responding to a subsequent judicial review. of which the financial costs are still unknown to the school community. We urge you to be mindful of this expenditure when making decisions on the allocation of funds



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for the next budget for the students in our district; the decision to suspend trustees and respond to a judicial review should not mean that students should go without required supports and services.

We recognize there are difficult decisions to be made as you are faced with a deficit that needs to be addressed. We also support you in advocating strongly to the provincial government for coverage of inflationary costs, general increases to district funding, and specific requirements for which no additional funds have been provided.

It is our role to remind you that your responsibilities and obligations are first to Rights holders, including Indigenous students, and also disabled students and other students from protected classes under the BC Human Rights Code, the School Act, the Accessible BC Act, the Canadian Human Rights Act, and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the Convention on the Rights of Persons With Disabilities, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

As a public institution, it's imperative that the District ensure all students have equitable access to education. We urge you to prioritize the needs of students who are rights holders and those belonging to protected classes, keep cuts away from all of our students, and allocate funds accordingly. We look forward to your response and to continued collaboration towards ensuring a quality education for all students in our district.

Sincerely,

Tracy Humphreys  
President, Victoria Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils