

BC school boards at crossroads

System decay—not decline—inevitable unless boards and all their provincial partners step up to the plate

By Noel Herron

School boards now find themselves in an untenable situation as the pressure mounts to balance their books with virtually frozen budgets, increased inflationary costs, declining enrolments, new HST taxes, and the scrapping of an across-the-board multimillion dollar facilities grant by the provincial government.

Prior to this, with previous rounds of cuts (2001–03) many boards somehow managed to weather the financial storms and scrape by, but not this time round, as current cuts, or looming cuts, are too broad, too deep, and threaten the very integrity of our public school system.

Up to now many boards, especially Liberal-friendly boards, appeared to look the other way by making a variety of cuts here and there while sadly allowing the provincial government to uphold the fiction that it was “protecting public education” with adequate funding.

But now it’s a different ball game, as many boards will face a doubling, if not tripling, of their shortfalls over the next two or three years, as a cash-strapped Victoria continues to put the squeeze on them.

The process of destabilizing boards of education in this province is well under way.

The mask falls off the misleading BC Liberal claim that it is adequately funding education when one examines the attached shortfall listing of 27 boards by the Centre for Civic Governance. And especially, when one realizes that Victoria has refused on three occasions since coming to power in 2001 to provide inflationary allowances. This latter strategy amounted to an annual, built-in, cut to programs and services.

But the real wake-up call to recalcitrant school boards now comes with this year’s massive, last minute, across-the-board cut of

\$110 million to school maintenance and repairs.

Take the case of the Liberal-friendly Surrey Board of Education (a previous Surrey board chair is the current Liberal Minister of Children and Family Development) with this year’s \$9.53 million budgetary shortfall. The Surrey board lopped six days off the school calendar this year and initiated the new position of *elementary principal/custodian* for the daytime emergency cleaning of schools, in order to meet Victoria’s budgetary cutbacks. It now finds itself with a rain-soaked Johnston Height’s Secondary School after the province abruptly cancelled a previously approved \$3.5 million grant.

The board’s concerns were dismissed by our new education minister, Margaret MacDiarmid, with an arrogant, “This government clearly has its priorities right.”

The Surrey situation is replicated in a variety of ways across this province as boards scramble to make last minute adjustments to their budgets.

Vancouver for example was forced to cancel a \$400,000 fire extinguisher check that is required by municipal regulation as well as its ongoing asbestos removal program, while the Okanagan Skaha School District has issued layoff notices to 50 staff members as a result of a \$1.3 million cut to its budget.

At the heart of this particular aspect of the debate are the issues of health, safety, and security of students in the midst of an H1N1 era.

Practical, day-to-day, problems and questions related to a combination of cleanliness, hygiene, upkeep, and maintenance are now being raised in many school communities.

Some of these are:

- Who, for example, will do the clean-up of vomit in a Grade 2 classroom, or the urine-splashed floor of a school’s washroom, if the daytime “principal/custodian” is not available in a Surrey elementary school? And how about the forcing of elementary principals to do snow removal as well?

- Who is going to provide the in-class support for high-needs, special education students in North Vancouver now that this board will not provide substitutes for teacher assistants?

- Who will explain to Johnston

Heights Secondary School students in Surrey why they will have to spend another winter with water dripping into their school?

- Who is going to explain to Vancouver parents that the safety check on their school’s fire extinguisher will not be done this year and, sorry, we also had to cancel the asbestos removal program in your school as well?

Certainly not the BC Liberals who have taken this province’s school boards in hand, as you would a lemon, and seem determined to squeeze the last ounce of vitality and creativity out of them as the following cross-section of cuts demonstrate:

- The BC competitive sports cut of \$130,000 for secondary school athletes, widely criticized by the general public.

- Parent advisory council cuts that impact negatively on hundreds of programs in almost every school district in areas such as funding for school playgrounds, school equipment and supplies, computers, field trips, school clubs, and in some instances, school textbooks. A marked increase in parental fund-raising is anticipated as Victoria now relies more and more on parents to fund the system. This also accentuates inequality between schools.

- Cuts to intensive autism programs for children under six on the pretext that more money (a very small amount) would go to more children as a result—this cut was later rescinded.

- A cut of \$150,000 to the Premier’s Awards program, which offered scholarships to high-achieving secondary students.

- Cuts to small capital grants for childcare centers from \$5,000 to \$2,000 affecting the safety of physical space for young children.

- Delaying for four years the introduction of all-day Kindergarten programs with the consequent loss of progress for thousands of students plus the long-range negative impact on the provincial economy.

- Cuts to community-based supports and services to schools, i.e., childcare workers, performing arts groups, and pre-school literacy programs.

- The cut to boards’ facilities grants will, however, have the most far-reaching and multiplier effect. This will involve staff layoffs, program downsizing or cancellation

(depending on how tightly squeezed the board in question is) in areas as diverse as learning assistance, special needs, regular classroom support (no teacher on call or substitute for classroom assistants when they are ill), English-as-a-second-language, counselling programs, and especially professional development workshops and in service.

The list goes on and on, as do the cuts—some large, some small—with a full listing of PAC cuts not available publicly until July 2010. Stealth, reversals, and obfuscation have characterized the two-month release of information by various ministries.

The key question now remains: will we be able to maintain the quality, world-class system we currently offer, or will we let the system decay continue, thus endangering the economic and social future of this province.

Where do we go from here?

With one, two, and possibly three more years of cuts, increased taxes, continued downloading, and post-Olympic debt, not forgetting the cumulative effect of previous cuts, the situation appears grim indeed.

What if Victoria continues with the false economy of withholding next year's facilities grant from school boards? This would amount to deeper cuts to core programs and services for students with irreparable damage to their future.

Faced with today's mounting problems and the darkening horizon ahead, there is an urgent need for strong advocacy in tough times by the provinces five key stakeholder groups. These groups are: BC Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils, BC Teachers' Federation, BC Principals' and Vice-Principals' Association, BC School Superintendents' Association, and the BC School Trustees Association.

The impact of the recent unprecedented letter from provincial parents, teachers, school support workers, and trustees' association outlining the negative impact of cuts on public schools will be examined in the next issue of *Teacher*. Our current, one-size-fits all, provincial funding system urgently needs to be adjusted to meet changing needs and unshackled from its rigid centralized control.

All of these groups have not just a professional but moral obligation to

step up to the plate and speak out on behalf of the half million students currently in our K-12 systems. They also have to pointedly remind this provincial government that its spring campaign slogan to "Keep B.C. Strong" should have both meaning and substance if it is to retain its rapidly vanishing credibility within the education community.

Make no mistake about it; we are facing not just decline, but decay, of one of this province's key institutions, namely, our public school system.

Noel Herron is a former Vancouver school principal and school trustee.

A second article on school boards will appear in the next issue of *Teacher*.

2009-10 Preliminary budget shortfalls in 27 boards of education

8 (Kootenay Lake)	\$600,000
20 (Kootenay-Columbia)	\$476,500
22 (Vernon)	\$2.7 million
23 (Central Okanagan)	\$3 million
33 (Chilliwack)	\$4 million
36 (Surrey)	\$9.3 million
37 (Delta)	\$3 million
38 (Richmond)	\$4.2 million
39 (Vancouver)	\$7.12 million
40 (New Westminster)	\$3.147 million
41 (Burnaby)	\$1.75 million
42 (Maple Ridge- Pitt Meadows)	\$3 million
43 (Coquitlam)	\$4.141 million
44 (North Vancouver)	\$3.2 million
45 (West Vancouver)	\$1.3 million
51 (Boundary)	\$910,000
57 (Prince George)	\$2.2 million
61 (Greater Victoria)	\$500,000
62 (Sooke)	\$800,000
63 (Sanich)	\$3.644 million
67 (Okanagan-Shaha)	\$1.74 million
68 (Nanaimo-Ladysmith)	\$2 million
70 (Port Alberni)	\$753,000
71 (Comox Valley)	\$726,397
73 (Kamloops Thompson)	\$4.3 million
79 (Cowichan Valley)	\$1.6 million
83 (North Okanagan Shuswap)	\$950,000

The above list of shortfalls in 27 boards of education was compiled by the Centre for Civic Governance. It was compiled from school board documents and reports in local newspapers and filed as of May 5, 2009.

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