

June 23, 2014

The Honourable Minister Fassbender
Minister of Education
PO Box 9045 Stn. Prov.Govt.
Victoria, BC
V8W 9E2



Dear Minister Fassbender,

Re: Education Financing

Recently our Board of Education met with MLAs Doug Bing and Marc Dalton to review our financial situation and to make a number of requests of government. The intent was to provide our local representatives with the information they would need so that they may contribute meaningfully and frankly to the Liberal Caucus and any other forums addressing education financing in which they might find themselves. Our purpose in forwarding this letter is to follow up on that meeting and to forward the requests we made of our MLAs also to your Ministry.

The first item we reviewed at our meeting was the impact of the budget reductions we have had to make over the past several years. That impact goes well beyond the adjustments required as a result of declining enrollments.

Prior to the 2013/14 budget year this School District reduced its budget in a number of areas including the closure of six schools, the elimination of several resource and administrative positions (reducing support to teachers) and the reduction of maintenance to minimal levels. In 2013/14 the budget adjustments we implemented included (among other things) increasing class sizes, reducing teacher librarians in secondary schools by 50%, reducing financial staffing classifications and implementing increased rental fees for community use to cost recovery levels.

Our 2014/15 preliminary budget document, which outlines the cause and outcomes of our current fiscal reality, is enclosed along with all of the written feedback we received through our budget consultation process. As you review the feedback we received, please note we did make adjustments to our budget based on all the feedback we received after our initial consultations. We are providing this information to demonstrate the depth of our work on our budget each year and to highlight the specific challenges we are facing.

One of these challenges is class size. Class sizes in our district have been increased in each of the last two years, and are now very close to the maximum allowable levels. While we have seen research on both sides of this issue being identified at bargaining, the fact remains our teachers are dealing with more students – a challenge further complicated by composition issues. We are now at the upper end of the Ministry's own benchmarks.

On a related point, we have made great progress with trades training by collaborating with BCIT, VCC and other post-secondary institutions. Like many school districts, we offer first year trades apprenticeship programs in our schools taught by instructors from these institutions. Interestingly, the maximum class size BCIT and VCC will allow is sixteen. We aren't sharing this to suggest that is an attainable goal for the public education system, but to illustrate the degree to which our post-secondary institutions feel the number of students in this type of program is relevant to student success. We recognize the fiscal constraints we all need to deal with as we wrestle with this subject, but the fact remains: our class sizes are increasing and we are concerned about the impact of those increases in the long term.

Unless something changes, we will have to make further budget reductions over the next two years beyond what is required as a result of the decline in enrollment (which is beginning to level off in this district). We introduced school bussing fees this year at the upper end of fees being charged for bussing by other districts. This was an appropriate adjustment given the alternatives, but none of us relish the thought of the next conversation, considering whether or not to eliminate the service altogether. Unfortunately, given our location on the outer edges of Metro Vancouver, the transit authority is unable to address the need for several busses to be available at two very specific times a day in our rural area. Regardless, with very few options available these are the kinds of service we may not be able to continue.

The next question we addressed with our MLAs is what we cannot do as a result of our fiscal constraints.

First, to state the obvious, we cannot pay as much attention to students as we have done in the past. Following this year's cuts, special needs assessments will be delayed even further than they have been. Career planning support will be less. Larger classes will mean less individual attention. Reduced clerical support throughout the organization (by as much as 30% in some locations) will mean administrators having to complete routine clerical functions. That coupled with fewer school administrative staff will mean less time available for proactive interventions, teacher growth planning, etc. With this kind of strain on the system, we cannot begin to address the goals of the BC Education Plan with any great effect.

Fine arts and physical education programs are inconsistent in our elementary schools given the lack of resources to hire specialists in these areas. We cannot move ahead with new schools in developing areas as quickly as we should since the additional overhead costs of a new site would have to come from our existing funding envelope.

While the need for a new elementary school has been established and other adjacent schools are suffering from overcrowding, it would be very difficult indeed to add the overhead cost of \$375,000 for a new elementary school to our budget when we have been cutting over \$4M a year from the system over the past two years.

So here is what we have requested of our MLAs and are requesting of government:

1. Acknowledgement that we are managing our resources very carefully in a fiscally responsible manner, and that we have done so for many years. We are elected officials accountable to the citizens who elect us. We take an oath of office which requires us to adhere to the School Act and submit balanced budgets (which we do every year despite the significant challenges involved in doing so).
2. Acknowledgment that the cuts we are having to make now (and have made in the past few years) will have a negative impact on student success in the long term. Some budget adjustments we've made represent continuous improvement and reductions in doing something less critical so we could do more of something we collectively believe is more important. These choices have been made to move the system forward. However, we are now making budget choices based on which alternatives will have the least negative impact on student success. All of the choices we are making now have some negative impact on students and families. It is important for us to know that government understands that is the case. Not acknowledging that impact would demonstrate considerable disrespect for the work of those whose positions have been eliminated, suggesting their efforts had little value. We know that is not the case.
3. A commitment to encourage other Ministries to step up to meet their obligations to the children and families of this Province in terms of health assessments, social service needs, drug education, family intervention, child poverty, transportation etc. We know fiscal restraint has impacted all Ministries in their ability to respond to citizens, but school districts see the results of delayed responses by a variety of Ministries every day and deal with the consequences. We are literally trying to find the resources to feed hungry kids and we cannot do it all.
4. A commitment to:
 - a. fully fund additional costs over which Boards of Education have no control (like labour contract settlements and pension plan increases) and
 - b. cover inflationary increases (like BC Hydro rates).
5. A commitment to review and revise the current system of holding back funding budgeted by the Ministry for School District operations in concert with the BC Association of School Business Officials and the BC School Trustee Association. We need a commitment that government will not use that funding for anything other than rationalizing the distribution of funding due to the differences between projected and actual enrollment numbers. Boards of Education cannot adequately plan with any sense of certainty without that commitment.

6. A commitment to review and revise the current funding formula in concert with BCASBO and BCSTA to ensure the fairest possible distribution of available funding.

7. A commitment to review and revise the current system of capital planning in concert with BCASBO to allow for better long term planning of such major undertakings as the land acquisition, design and construction of new school facilities.

8. A commitment to review government's tax policy with respect to school property taxes. Municipalities have long understood that implementing a 0% property tax increase in an inflationary environment means cutting the services citizens have come to expect. It appears school property taxes have stayed constant over time while Municipal property taxes have increased considerably over the past ten years. We pass no judgments on the level of Municipal taxation, however, at the very least School property taxes need to be increased by inflationary amounts every year to generate additional government revenues for their intended purpose – education.

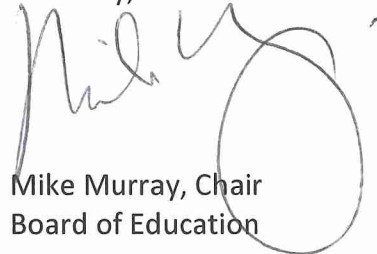
Despite the controversy involved in any discussion of increasing taxes, we believe government should have a courageous conversation with the public on this subject, with a view toward generating the resources required to sustain the essential services citizens need, achieve the goals of the BC Education Plan and maintain a healthy economy.

Please know the undersigned education partners share the concerns expressed in this letter by the Board of Education and are in full agreement with the requests we have made.

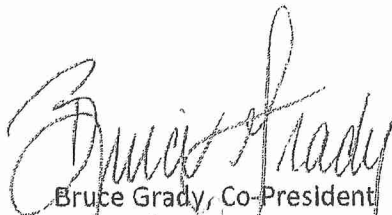
In closing, let me thank you and our MLAs for your attention. We need to have more direct and detailed conversations like these to fully understand the issues we need to address and the challenges both levels of government are facing. Of course we would be happy to continue this dialogue in person at your convenience.

As you have said yourself, maintaining the status quo is not acceptable in a changing world. Nor is sliding backwards. We are concerned we may be headed in that direction without some bold leadership and intervention. We look forward to your response.

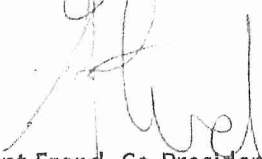
Sincerely,



Mike Murray, Chair
Board of Education



Bruce Grady, Co-President
Maple Ridge Principals' and Vice Principals' Association



Grant Frend, Co-President
Maple Ridge Principals' and Vice Principals' Association



Kellie Marquet, Chair
District Parent Advisory Council

Cc:
The Honourable Christy Clark, Premier
Mr. Doug Bing, MLA
Mr. Marc Dalton, MLA
Board of Education
Ms. Laurie Meston, Acting Superintendent of Schools
Ms. Flavia Coughlan, Secretary Treasurer
BC School Trustees' Association