

February 25, 2015

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

Dear Minister Fassbender,

Re: 2015/16 Budget

Last June, our Board of Education sent you a letter that

1. outlined the impacts of \$8 million in service level cuts in our school district over the past two years;
2. described what funding sources we felt should be explored to provide a more appropriate level of funding for public education; and
3. requested a meeting to review our concerns.

Naturally, the length and intensity of the teacher labour negotiations and local elections took precedence over our request to hold a meeting. It has now been three months since the election, however, and we would still appreciate the opportunity to meet with you and the Deputy Minister. The meeting we requested has become even more urgent in light of government's recent release of the provincial budget.

We note with great concern that the budget will lead to even more funding cutbacks for public education. The required administrative savings identified in the provincial budget translate to an estimated \$1.3 million reduction over the next two years in this school district. This reduction represents a significant cut to an area we have already reduced over several years. In fact we have reduced our administrative costs by 8% in the last two years alone. The administrative reductions required by the government are over and above cuts necessitated by unfunded increases in MSP, BC Hydro costs and inflationary pressures in other areas. We anticipate further reductions due to insufficient funding for teacher increments and other benefit increases negotiated in previous contract settlements.

We also understand the freeze on exempt staff wages remains in place and that no additional funding for appropriate compensation adjustments will be provided despite BCPSEA's report, which identifies how significantly undervalued these staff have been for several years. Management staff in other core government services were granted an increase last year; the lack of a similar increase for exempt staff in the education sector is absolutely unfair. While we appreciate last year's labour settlements have been fully funded, we find the required cutbacks and lack of additional funding for cost pressures beyond our control extremely disheartening given the recommendations of the select standing committee on government finance and services.

We have enclosed a copy of our June 2014 letter (and attachments) for your convenient referral along with a copy of the budget implementation feedback report we have recently received. The latter is the first step of our new budget development process. Since we have had to make such significant operational cuts over the past two years (over \$8 million in service reductions), we did think it appropriate to determine the impacts of those cuts before we begin the next round of budget discussions. Unfortunately, we must advise (as described in the report) that the morale in the District is lower than any of us can remember, and that this blow to morale is the direct result of ongoing budget cuts. We cannot imagine the effect the next round of adjustments will have, or if such adjustments are even possible without compromising the safety and educational experience of our students.

Our exempt staff are working far more overtime than is reasonable, and they are doing so without the Board being able to offer compensation packages that reflect the realities of the 2015 workplace. Our clerical support staff, whose hours have been reduced by 23%, are pressed to the limit. To ensure all administrative details of running a school are addressed, principals are stepping in to take on responsibilities that have normally been undertaken by clerical staff.

Our teachers are dealing with larger class sizes, and we have over 67 secondary school core courses that exceed 30 students. Because we lack sufficient funding to address all of the class composition issues brought to our attention, we are seeing an increase in reported teacher stress issues.

Our responsiveness to parents and students is being compromised. Our support staff hours have been reduced and, as a result, homework clubs and other supports these staff previously provided have been reduced. In this same vein, critical teacher - support staff conferencing time to determine appropriate strategies for special needs students is also limited.

During our review of budget reduction impacts, parents expressed concern about the cuts we have had to make, about the delays in having students assessed for special needs, about the District's growing reliance on PAC groups to raise funding for basic supplies, and about the introduction of school bussing fees. For the 2015-2016 school year, there is a possibility we may have to eliminate school bussing altogether.

Most importantly, our students are expressing concern about the quality and availability of learning resources and attention available to them from Career Planning Assistants and Counsellors.

You will see from the attached documentation that we have turned over every possible rock to generate efficiencies, and that we are now cutting into vital areas that should not be touched.

The corner stone of educational transformation is continuous professional development. If we are required to make additional budget cuts, we will no longer be able to maintain current levels of professional development and this will directly affect the pace of educational transformation in our school district. There are pockets of innovation in schools throughout our school district and they are reliant on sufficient district funding. We need to expand these opportunities to meet the needs of our learners not reduce them to meet continuous budget challenges. Government simply cannot ask us to cut administrative budgets and justify the cuts based on shared centralized services that may or may not produce savings. Reducing these costs in response to actual savings makes sense, but a formula-driven approach does not. As BCSTA President Teresa Rezansoff stated, any savings that are achieved should be reallocated within district budgets to help school boards address funding shortfalls.

We cannot be asked to continue covering increased costs beyond our control without the necessary government funding support. Such downloading of costs creates ongoing funding shortfalls that even a staggering \$8M in budget cuts cannot address. We certainly cannot be asked to cover increased New Generation Network costs within our already seriously compromised funding envelope.

Minister, we know the government values innovation, and you know this District has an amazing record on that front. We will not be able to continue to progress, however, without adequate funding. We know our District is not alone in holding that point of view. We are copied on letters addressing education finance forwarded to you by Boards of Education across this province every week.

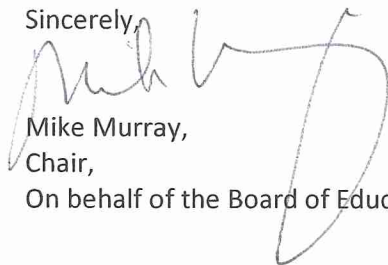
So what do we need from government?

1. We need the pressure to be released, not – as this budget has done – increased.
2. We need any extra costs generated by the Ministry in support of technological advancements (NGN) and good labour relations (exempt staff salary increases) to be fully funded.
3. We need your government to look carefully at the level of core funding for education in this province. The aim of this exercise should be to establish the level of funding necessary to achieve the goals we both believe are important for our students and the economy.

Why is the government not listening? We can only conclude that government decision-makers do not understand the challenges involved in the front line delivery of public education. We believe a more robust and detailed dialogue about what it takes to achieve the results we all want is needed between the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Finance, and Boards of Education in this province. Co-governing the public education system demands detailed and ongoing dialogue, as well as mutual understanding and respect. Only once we have taken this approach to co-governance can we ensure the needs of our students are met.

Thank you for your attention. We look forward to having an opportunity to talk about the questions we identified in our letter last June and the 2015/16 provincial budget at your earliest opportunity.

Sincerely,



Mike Murray,
Chair,

On behalf of the Board of Education of School District 42

cc:

Trustees, Board of Education of School District 42
The Honourable Mike De Jong, Minister of Finance
Mr. Marc Dalton, MLA
Dr. Doug Bing, MLA
Ms. Sylvia Russell, Superintendent
Ms. Flavia Coughlan, Secretary Treasurer
BCSTA (for distribution to all Boards of Education)
BC Association of School Business Officials
BC Schools Superintendents Association
Mr. Rob Fleming, MLA, Education Spokesperson, BC NDP
Canadian Union of Public Employees
District Parent Advisory Council
District Student Advisory Council
Maple Ridge Principals' and Vice Principals' Association
Maple Ridge Teachers' Association