

Maple Ridge Teachers' Association

Board Budget Presentation

April 16, 2014

First, I would like to thank the Board of School Trustees, School District #42 (Maple Ridge-Pitt Meadows) for once again putting themselves in this extremely difficult position of having to sit there and listen to the devastating impact the cuts you are being forced to make will have.

I believe it was the previous Board that first stated that the cuts they were having to make were not of the "trimming fat" category but instead, cuts that are directly impacting the students in our district. And that was four years ago. And here we are again, and here we will be again next year – I am sure.

I would like to commend the Board and specifically Flavia for a budget document that is extremely detailed and informative yet easily understood, it is much clearer than last year's.

You will hear from various teachers talking about how the cuts will impact students in a variety of ways, obviously I echo all of what will be shared.

I would like to focus my presentation on a couple of key elements in the budget document.

A. First, I want to outline the importance of our court victory (for a 2nd time) around the unconstitutional stripping of our Collective Agreement class size and composition language. While I am happy to see that more and more people are now seeing that the stripping of our contract was always about cost savings and not the "flexibility" that is always portrayed. I ask you, sarcastically of course, do you feel you have a lot of flexibility under this system, a system of underfunding that forces you to cut services to students year after year. Our class size and composition, while not perfect, forced government to fund education at a reasonable level. And if they didn't, we would grieve it and keep them accountable, how successful have you been in keeping government accountable for funding? Instead, government has tried to sell the LIF (Learning Improvement Fund) as an alternative to our contract language. I hope you can all see that the LIF has become the pot of money that is used to simply boost staffing back up to what it should have been. It is being used to supplement the increases to class size and support teacher time that you are cutting (again) for budget reasons. When we went on strike back in 2011, the LIF fund was government's answer to our concerns around large class sizes and the lack of support for students with special needs. It was supposed to be additional funding, not replacement funding as it is being used.

We should be all hoping that government comes to their senses and honours our Collective Agreement when they lose in court for the third time in October.

B. The second aspect of the budget I would like to talk about is to provide some information that the BCTF has put together using data from the Ministry of Education.

While we have heard ad nauseum from government that most school districts, like SD42, are in declining enrolment, it is important to note that Maple Ridge-Pitt Meadows has since 2012, the fifth highest reduction of FTE classroom teachers in the province. The reduction of classroom teachers far exceeds the level of declining enrolment experienced in our district. Furthermore, I do not see how this board can say they have tried to keep the cuts as far away from the students and the classroom when many other districts, also in declining enrolment have not cut classroom positions to the same level.

The second aspect of this research report that is important to point out is regarding support teacher time. While I acknowledge that this district has always tried to maintain high levels of support for students with special needs, I believe mostly due to Laurie's passion in this area, the data is still not flattering.

Despite having fewer students with special needs back in 2001-02, prior to our contract being stripped, there were still more support teachers in our district than there is now. Once again, this year like last year, the district has decided to cut critical support teacher time in schools, support teacher time that is critical for our most vulnerable students. But then again, you are also being forced to contemplate cutting bussing for special needs students so maybe it is all a moot point since they may not be able to get to school in the first place.

Lastly, I want to talk about what keeps erroneously being called a two week spring break, and suggest that we be honest and call it a one week spring break and one week school closure due to budget shortfall. Even the budget document produced by the district, Flavia describes it as,

“The proposed calendar was recommended primarily as a cost saving measure.” p. 23 of Proposed Preliminary Operating Budget 2014/15.

Three years ago the district entered into discussions with both the MRTA and CUPE about this cost saving proposal. As this proposal financially impacted both sides, TTOCs for teachers and many CUPE workers, agreements were made so that all groups were in agreement moving forward. Three years later, the district is renegeing on these agreements. This is akin to our Liberal government's common practice of tearing up agreements. Worse than the money that the district is taking directly out of the pockets of CUPE members and TTOCs in doing this, is the fact that it breaks any trust. On an annual basis, partner groups are asked to come and work with the district on various issues/projects/initiatives, as we all know that when we work together and agree on something the chances of success increase tremendously. Breaking such a significant agreement between partner groups and the district simply makes it impossible to work together since we cannot trust that two or three years later the district will, for whatever reason, renege on what was agreed to.

So my last comment regarding the proposed budget is two-fold:

1. I do not believe this budget captures the supposed desire to keep cuts as far away from the students as possible.

With cuts as deep as this, to exclude any impact on Senior team and school-based

administrators, illustrates clearly that the focus is not the students.

2. I do not believe this budget captures the intent that I have heard over and over again, which is that cuts should be equitable across all groups and areas of the organization.

With cuts as deep as this, to exclude any impact on Senior team and school-based administrators, illustrates clearly that “sharing the pain” was not the priority.

I want to conclude with a poem that a primary teacher sent me that I think captures a lot of what you have heard from teachers tonight:

No Help

Desperate young minds
Searching, straining, screaming for knowledge
In a system gone mad, there’s no help to be had.
Small school? Big classes; combine the masses!
Three grades together, that will be better!
Needs don’t matter, just say there’s no money
Unteachable? That’s okay,
The teachers make it sweet like honey.
They always do, always have, always will.
No worries that bedlam reigns,
We’ll make those financial gains
On the backs of the young, the dedicated,
And the ones we blame.

Criminal, calculated, cuts where they hurt
Library, secretary, custodian, support,
Who needs them?
Brass get the booty and education gets the boot.
I’m fighting for you, little one, and me,
And for my colleagues,
And for our future.
Who cares enough?
Stand up; fight with me!
Answer the call.
Let me say “Yes” when I hear...
“Teacher, can you help me?”

George Serra,
President,
Maple Ridge Teachers’ Association