

# Vancouver School Board Unions

News Release

Friday March 10, 2017

## **Vancouver School Board Unions reject allegations in Roslyn Goldner Report that representatives “engaged in a disrespectful, verbally abusive manner”; No unions were interviewed yet were criticized; VSB Unions also support Trustees asking hard questions, defending public education and want by-elections May 9.**

VANCOUVER – Unions at the Vancouver School Board today rejected allegations in the Roslyn Goldner Report that claim that representatives of unionized employee groups “engaged in a disrespectful and verbally abusive manner” as unfair, unsubstantiated and appearing to be politically motivated, as no union was interviewed by Goldner yet as a group they were criticized.

And the unions also support VSB Trustees asking hard questions, defending public education and opposing provincial government demands to close schools, as they were elected to do.

The VSB unions are calling on Education Minister Mike Bernier to hold by-elections to return to an elected Vancouver School Board instead of a single unelected BC government appointee – and to hold them in conjunction with the May 9 provincial election to save costs.

Goldner’s report to the VSB is striking in its repeated criticism of stakeholder groups, specifically the unionized employee groups of the Board. The beginning of the report states:

*“...Many District employees, [redacted], agreed to participate in the investigation. Several representatives from various stakeholder groups who had personal experience working with the Board, with Trustees and with District employees also asked to be interviewed in the course of the investigation.”*

But this is inaccurate. Teachers, the largest VSB employee group, were not interviewed. Nor were any other unionized employee groups representing clerical support staff, building engineers and maintenance workers, trades workers or other employees – yet these were the specific groups named as participating in “harassment”. And this allegation was made despite the fact that all unionized employee group representatives regularly attend all Committee and Board meetings.

What we find most egregious is the Goldner report’s statement that representatives of unionized employee groups (teachers, support workers, maintenance workers etc) engaged in a disrespectful and verbally abusive manner. Any report that does not interview those whose behaviour it impugns while using unnamed “witnesses” as credible sources of information is seriously lacking in integrity and appears politically motivated.

As employees named in a report, but given no opportunity to respond to such serious accusations, we question the independence and validity of this report.

Further, we welcome a frank appraisal of our behaviour and specific comments or actions that could be characterized as disrespectful or abusive.

Asking hard questions of a publicly funded system does not equate disrespect or verbal abuse. Asking

questions about programs and directions of the Board is a duty of representation outlined in law.

*"Many witnesses stated that the disrespectful conduct of the Board emboldened some stakeholder participants, particularly those representing the various trade unions, to be disrespectful and verbally abusive toward staff in committee meetings".*

For the record, representatives of VSB Unionized Stakeholders believe School Board Trustees' job is to ask hard questions and to represent their constituents. Public Education is a political undertaking and to suggest that it should be otherwise is deeply disturbing and naive. Furthermore, the VSB Unionized Stakeholders ask questions regardless of the political stripe of the Trustees. We ask questions that our members want us to ask.

The real culprit here is sustained and destructive provincial underfunding – after fifteen years of inadequate funding, a siege mentality sets in which sets the stage for potential conflict.

Trustees, senior managers and employees alike struggle to provide a thriving public school system in the absence of adequate funding from the Provincial Government.

This in turn sets the stage for an ever-spiraling series of cuts whereby harder and harder questions are asked. The notion that asking politely worded and courteous questions on hard and uncomfortable topics equates to bullying and harassment is a mechanism to silence democratic voice and has all the hallmarks of the opposite of a democracy.

Representatives of Vancouver School Board unionized workers witnessed difficult conversations about a school system in crisis, but did not witness "bullying and harassment".

Also of note is that the report echoes the Ernst & Young report of June 2015, which suggests that Committee meetings should be held *in camera*, away from possible questions from the public, as it is in other districts. This, in a school board which is **publicly funded with politically elected Trustees**:

*"These meetings are public meetings in the VSB while in other districts the sub committees meet in camera and report back to the Board. Witnesses also noted that the VSB practice of gathering stakeholder input through Committees differs from the practice in other districts where the gathering of stakeholder input is a management function and the information is reported to the board."*

The parallels between this report and the Ernst & Young report and the failure to interview all stakeholder groups suggest that this report is politically motivated and does not meet the bar of a thorough and objective report.

The VSB unions include the Vancouver Secondary Teachers' Association, the Vancouver Elementary School Teachers' Association, the International Union of Operating Engineers Local 963 and the Canadian Union of Public Employees Local 15 and Local 407.

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