

Voter Suppression Alive and Well in Vancouver (Op Ed)

BC Liberals a no-show at VSB all-candidates meeting

On April 25th, the Vancouver District Parent Advisory Committee hosted an all-candidates meeting at the VSB. Both the provincial NDP and Green parties sent two representatives to this special event, while the governing BC Liberals, unfortunately, were a no-show, despite several requests from the parents' group to send speakers.

The empty Liberal seats sadly spoke volumes about the governing party's lack of commitment to a return of the democratic process to city schools and to the public accountability of their electoral platform.

Last year, having arbitrarily fired the 9 duly elected school trustees, on the eve of the adoption of a balanced budget, education minister, Mike Bernier, repeatedly refused to reinstate the Vancouver board or call a school board election.

This, from the perspective of many Vancouver voters, is an affront not only to local democracy but an abuse of provincial power.

The governing party's ongoing and antagonistic approach to Vancouver through a revolving door of 7 education ministers since 2001, to date, has included all of the following: the imposition of a "special advisor" accompanied by an 8-person government "audit" team on, not one, but on two occasions, plus, the continuity, even to this day, of an unceasing stream of cuts to basic programs and services.

All of this came to an abrupt and grinding halt, last November, when the Supreme Court of Canada handed the Liberals a humiliating defeat, in a twenty-minute landmark dismissal, of Victoria's attempt to ride roughshod over BC teachers' constitutional bargaining rights.

Now the VSB is left with a single government appointed "trustee", purporting to replace the board's 9 elected Liaison-trustees, in a city with over 100 diverse school communities. This single "trustee" is faced with a host, and increasing number, of mounting problems that are beyond the capacity of any one individual, no matter how talented, despite the repeated, and bogus, assurances of the province's current education minister that all is well, when, in fact, the exact opposite is true.

What follows is a partial list of the ongoing and emerging difficulties that would overwhelm any single individual, in a system originally designed to function within a participatory democratic framework, much less someone foisted on schools by an intransigent government.

Here is a partial list of the cumulative problems, all of which have their origin in chronic provincial underfunding. Even more outrageous is the Liberals' claim (page 73 of the BC Liberals' 2017 election platform), that they will "maintain", despite their dubious record, the province's "world-leading" education system.

We start with the highly emotional threatened closures of neighbourhood schools, made worse by the arbitrary and changing, mid stream, of provincial eligibility criteria; followed by the urgent need for professional development in-service for over 100 new teachers in a depleted pro d. landscape; add to this, a totally destabilized environment as it relates to special needs, aboriginal education, arts and music, race relations, gifted students and learning assistance/skill development programs; the

reinstatement of the original, negotiated class size and composition criteria , (province–wide, there were ,according to a recent ministry of education report , an astounding 4,186 crowded classrooms with 7 or more special needs kids); plus the reinstatement of the board’s two specialized Teaching and Evaluation Centres , unique to Vancouver; the decimation of programs and services related to English-as-a-second language programs (cynically renamed “English language learning”(ELL), to disguise deep, ESL cuts at elementary, secondary and post- secondary schools), is high among the many shortfalls in our massively multicultural city; and the very unfair shrinkage to a single centre, within the past few weeks, of the board’s fine adult ed program, (a rally, in front of the VSB, protesting the closure of two of three remaining adult ed centres was held the day before the VSB all-candidates meeting on April 24th); also, the collapse of essential community outreach initiatives to local parent groups made worse by over a decade-long delay in seismic upgrading of ageing school buildings, all of which is anchored in parental safety concerns.

Lastly, topping the above list, is the sad, and incomprehensible, squeezing of support for the most marginalized and vulnerable students in inner-city schools, as documented in detail by the *Vancouver Sun’s* Adopt-a-School series and frequent other articles .

Our public schools should not have to depend on the kindness of strangers.

The unaddressed backlog of issues emerging from battered services and programs seems to grow with each passing month.

It boggles the mind to even begin to suggest, as Mike Bernier has done, that the VSB with a single, appointed “head”, and a controversial senior management team, can successfully navigate the expanding problems and multiple difficulties in the province’s second largest school system.

Against this uncertain and turbulent background, to continue to insist, on voter suppression, or alternately, the failure to announce the date of an upcoming school board election, as the BC Liberals have done, is an insult to students, parents, teachers, support staff, and principals in city schools.

Enough.

Time for a change of governance in Victoria.

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