

**Presentation to the Select Standing Committee
on Finance and Government Services
Budget 2017 Consultations**

Courtenay, BC - October 6, 2016

Shannon Aldinger & Katherine Tinmouth on behalf of
Comox Valley Families For Public Education

Comox Valley Families for Public Education – Who We Are:

Comox Valley Families for Public Education (CVFPE) is a non-partisan group of parents, grandparents and concerned citizens advocating for better public education in BC. We believe that children should be at the centre of all educational policy decision-making and that every child deserves equal access to quality public education, no matter how much their parents earn, how much the school PAC can fundraise, or the general income level of the school's neighbourhood.

Endorsement of Submissions of PAN & FACE:

Our group fully endorses and adopts the submissions by The Parent Advocacy Network for Public Education (PAN) and Families Against Cuts to Education (FACE) presented to this Committee on September 19th. Our submissions will build on the information already provided to this Committee by describing the specific experience of our district.

The Experience in School District 71 (Comox Valley):

Our district (SD71) had 8188 students in 2015/16, attending 22 schools (16 elementary, 1 middle, 3 high) in urban, rural and island settings.

Chronic Funding Shortage:

Our group formed last spring as our district's school board trustees were struggling with how to address the \$2.7 million shortfall it was facing for the 2016/17 school year and the comparably sized cuts projected for the following school year (2017/18).

In the two previous school years (2013/14 and 2014/15), BC public education has undergone two labour disputes regarding the adequacy of resources. BC children lost more than two months of learning. And our public schools remain in a funding crisis. The current levels of funding have resulted in cuts far beyond budget efficiencies, educational resources are cut so deeply that the ability of schools to operate is undermined.

Proposed School Closure:

Much of the 2015-2016 school year was spent in a consultation process about the proposed

closure of Ecole Puntledge Park Elementary. Puntledge is a much loved elementary school in our district, it consistently operates at or above 95% capacity, is seismically safe, centrally located, and adjacent to a 30 acre nature reserve. The projected savings from closure (\$720,000) represented less than 1% of SD71 annual budget. Substantial cuts had already been made in the preceding years, and our district was desperate to find any further reductions. Our community was elated when our trustees said no to selling valuable long-term and irreplaceable capital assets to help fund short-term operating budget shortfalls. The proposed closure was rejected and SD71 was instead forced to implement a 4.6 day school week.

The 4.6 Day School Week:

Our school board has now reconfigured the school week to 4.6 days as a budget-saving measure. In practice this means that instructional time is removed from Friday afternoons and the Monday through Thursday school calendar is condensed.

We are deeply concerned that such a significant change to our children's education was motivated by financial constraints rather than good educational policy. As the 4.6 day school week has just come into effect (4 weeks ago), it is too early to see and know all of its repercussions.

What we do know however is that:

1. Increased childcare costs for parents: Parents of students in SD71 will face increased childcare costs due to the lack of school on Friday afternoons. The extent to which these funds will be diverted from other necessary expenses for families is not known at this time but low income families will certainly be the hardest hit.
2. Elimination of Recess: At the elementary school level, the reconfiguration of the school week to 4.6 days has meant the elimination of mandatory school wide recess. We have been informed by the district that recess had to be eliminated in order to meet the required number of instructional hours under the *School Act*.

Loss of Instructional Time: While many elementary teachers are including outdoor play of at least 15 minutes each day to replace recess, this time is now characterized as instructional time. As a result, our district's elementary school students are losing 15 minutes per day of what had been instructional time in previous years.

Loss of Free Play: Alternatively, some teachers choose to incorporate this time into physical education class, with the result that students lose time for free play or taking personal space. The loss of free play time means elementary students lose the opportunity to socialize with friends and siblings in other classes and to intermingle and meet students of different ages and grades (which in turn provides leadership opportunities for the older children and

confidence and a sense of school-connectedness for the younger children) – this is a real loss to the elementary school experience.¹

Loss of Extra-Curricular Opportunities: Enrolment in extra-curricular activities scheduled during lunch break (and previously recess) is likely to decline as students opt to see friends at lunch (their only time of day to do so), rather than to enrol in extra-curricular activities. My own daughter, who is in grade 5 at our local school, has reported to me that she does not intend to sign up for a lunch break club this year because she doesn't want to miss lunch break, the only time she gets with her friends from other classes. As a result, she will miss first choir, then cross-country running, then chess club (which her father runs). She told her father that it may not be worth holding the chess club this year because she doesn't think kids will want to be inside during lunch break when there isn't a morning recess.

Loss of Prep & Personal Time for Teachers: Teachers are also reporting that the loss of recess, which was previously an opportunity for teachers to do quick preparations such as make photocopies, to meet with EAs, to have a break to eat, drink or use the washroom, etc. is a problem.

3. High School Teachers Face 12% Increase in Workload: As a result of reconfiguration of the school week to 4.6 days, teachers at the high school level now have 12% more work (they now teach all 8 of 8 blocks per year rather than 7 out of 8 blocks with the 8th block a prep block as in previous years) and are grieving our school board's decision. Both CUPE & the Comox Valley Teachers' Association have informed our school board trustees that their members are reporting high levels of stress. Irrespective of whether the grievance is successful, we are concerned that the increased workload will result in teacher burnout and less time and energy available to devote to extra-curricular activities for students such as clubs, inter-murals and sports teams.

Reduction in Extra-Curricular Opportunities for High School Students: Reduction in extra-curricular activities is a serious loss to our high school students. These opportunities are invaluable to the high school student's experience as they enable students to find peers with common interests and to fit in socially during what is generally considered to be one of the most difficult and potentially destabilizing periods of life. Extra-curricular activities provide students with opportunities for skills building and personal growth that extend beyond the traditional academic and elective courses. They foster a sense of connectedness and school community which assists many students in their efforts to continue in school until graduation.² Fostering a sense of school community can also develop a sense of civic-mindedness important to adult life. These are key attributes to be promoted and supported in public schools.

¹ Gray, Peter Ph.D., "The Decline of Play and the Rise of Psychopathology in Children and Adolescents", *American Journal of Play*, Spring 2011

² The greatest predictor of educational success is school connectedness. Regardless of program, socioeconomic status, or raw intelligence, students are more likely to succeed when they feel connected to school - Blum, R. (2005). A case of school connectedness. *Educational Leadership*, 62(7), 16-20

Extra-curricular activities in our schools are a key component to schools as “the great equalizer” as they usually involve little to no cost to families, unlike similar activities offered through community centres or private clubs. It will, again, be students from lower income families who will be most negatively affected by this proposed change.

Other Longstanding Cuts & Concerns:

What we have described is just the latest development in our community’s experience with the chronic funding shortage to public education. All of this has occurred against the backdrop of annual cuts to programs, supplies, resources (including textbooks and library books), teachers, educational assistants, learning resource assistants, librarians, counselors, school monitors, custodial staff, maintenance staff, administrative and clerical positions, and the availability of timely psycho-educational assessments.³

The cumulative effect of these cuts is palpable.

A local grade 6/7 teacher in our district described to us her daily struggle to provide learning materials to her students. This teacher explained that she does not have a class set of textbooks in her classroom (this is partially for pedagogical reasons, and partly due to funding cuts). As there are no textbooks, she and other teachers photocopy worksheets to create “packages” for each student. Not only is this inefficient, time intensive (in circumstances where there is very limited time in teachers’ daily schedules to photocopy) and likely in violation of copyright laws, the difficulties are compounded by the fact that there are insufficient paper resources made available by the district. Teachers at a local SD71 elementary school have previously been told the photocopying budget has been maxed out and that further copying requires permission. School PACs may fundraise for classroom school supplies which may in turn include paper, and further shortfalls may also be made up by individual teachers. While this may “work” in some schools, it can easily lead to uneven curriculum implementation across the district. Contrast the engaged teacher willing to spend extra time (and his/her own money) to create individualized packages with the help of funds provided by a well-functioning PAC with a less engaged teacher who does not have the support of a financially strong PAC. The result is that some students are forced to do without basic learning materials. This is an unacceptable result.

Fundraising Responsibilities Falling to Parents:

The Committee has asked previous presenters about the role of PAC fundraising. In our experience, there is a growing expectation that parents, through their Parent Advisory Councils (PACs) or otherwise, will fundraise to fill the gaps created by chronic government underfunding. In recent years, our school district’s various PACs have had to fundraise for or have been asked by school administration to contribute towards such items as:

- Health education classes for students not covered by our school district⁴

³ https://dsweb.bcsta.org/docushare/dsweb/Get/Document-77442/2015-05-22_bcsta_update.htm

⁴ SD71 funds health education classes (approximately 1 to 2 hours of classes per year) for grades 1, 3, 5, 7, 8 and 10 (funding grade 1 was added this school year).

- Supplies for teachers' classrooms
- Technology for teachers' use in classrooms
- Learning assistance
- Counseling
- Software licenses for math programs
- Books – including library books, levelled readers and specific books for classrooms
- Curtains and PA systems for school gym
- Water fountains
- Balls and toys for playground

This additional burden of fundraising can be overwhelming to schools and parents. Parents are dismayed that fundraising is required for equipment and programs that used to be available and publicly funded.

The growing fundraising demands also create a two-tiered system of “have” and “have not” schools, those which are in wealthy catchment areas and those which are not. This increasing inequity flies in the face of the legislative objectives of our public education system: specifically that all members of society “receive an education that allows them to become literate, to develop their individual potential, and to acquire the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to contribute to a healthy, democratic, and pluralistic society.”

While some schools in our district are fundraising upwards of \$15,000 in a school year, others raise almost nothing (apart from gaming grants provided at a rate of \$20 per student). A PAC parent describes the futility and hopelessness of fundraising in a low income school community in an email attached to this submission.

Parents are also frustrated by the countless hours we spend each year simply defending against loss rather than enhancing the quality of our children's education – whether it is in the form of fundraising for programs for students or advocating for change/lobbying against more cut backs. Imagine the opportunities our children would have had if the 100s of volunteer hours parents spent fighting the school closure process had instead been spent organizing and running clubs or workshops, breakfast and hot lunch programs, movies nights, sports days, career days, science fairs or other community building events? We should be harnessing that energy and enthusiasm and those skills in moving forward towards our vision for the future.

Public System is Increasingly Two-Tiered & Inequitable as Parents Outsource Extra-Curricular Activities:

These inequities are further amplified by the decreasing numbers and varieties of programs and courses available through the public schools due to the cumulative effect of chronic underfunding. Parents who can afford to are increasingly outsourcing services that used to be available through public schools: music lessons, art classes, sports/athletics, tutoring and the like. Children of parents who cannot afford to make up for the deficiencies in the public school system simply do without.

The Problem is Not Unique to Our District:

Our school district is not alone in this funding crisis. Over half of our province's 60 school districts faced projected shortfalls as they prepared their 2016/17 budgets last spring with the total funding shortage of all districts exceeding \$80 million.⁵

The Importance of Public Education:

Public education is a fundamental building block of a successful democratic society. We cannot expect our society to succeed without good education. This is not just good for kids, it is good for our province, and our collective financial futures. As FACE states "A strong public education system is not just "nice to have" it is an essential, long term investment that pays big social dividends. Short changing the system may yield some minor "saving" in the budget now, but only at a much larger cost to us all in the long run."⁶

Recommendations:

Comox Valley Families for Public Education urges this Committee to affirm the recommendations of the last two Select Standing Committees to:

- Provide adequate capital funding to school districts for facility improvements, seismic upgrades and additional schools in rapidly-growing communities. (2013: #25 and 2014: #23);
- Provide stable, sustainable and adequate funding to enable school districts to fulfil their responsibility to continue to provide access to quality public education, with recognition of the increased costs that school districts have incurred. (2014: #22); and
- Review the Ministry of Education funding formula for programs and services, as well as administrative staff compensation levels to ensure adequate and competitive compensation.

BCTF's September 2016 brief to this Committee reports that government spending on K-12 education as a percentage of GDP has decreased from 3.42% in 2001/2002 to 2.19% in 2016/2017.⁷

In light of this, we ask that the Committee also consider the following recommendations:

- that K-12 funding as a percentage of GDP be restored to 2002 levels,
- that the funding protection policy be reviewed with a view to maintaining its underlying compassionate purpose while avoiding undesired negative consequences, and

⁵ facebc.wordpress.com/2016/04/10/bcedinred

⁶ <http://www.policynote.ca/fraser-institute-provincial-government-swing-and-miss-again-on-education-funding/>

⁷ <http://www.bctf.ca/uploadedFiles/Public/Publications/Briefs/EducationFundingBrief2016.pdf>

- that legislation requiring school boards to balance their budgets be reviewed with the recommendation that the requirement for balanced budgets be replaced with a mandatory appointment of an auditor for any school district that fails to approve a balanced budget, and with further measures if a school board repeatedly fails to balance its budget.

Shannon Aldinger

From: [REDACTED]
Sent: October 1, 2016 1:34 PM
To: Shannon Aldinger
Cc: [REDACTED]
Subject: RE: from Courtenay Elementary

Hi

I'm [REDACTED] from Courtenay Elementary school. I have been PAC for the past few years ~~only~~ because we are unable to find volunteers from our At Risk school. This year we have a new team.

It has been hopeless to fundraise off our poor school community. It's insensitive. It just doesn't work.

Let's say a Comox area school can raise \$3000.00 dollars on a fundraiser. We do the same fundraiser and make only \$300 IF we are lucky. We are not lucky.

I am not on PAC this year thank goodness.

It is such an impossible position to be in.

Our school is suffering. I have had many meetings with our school principal, Allan Douglas and MLA Don McRae. Change is happening too slowly.

I will let try to get some numbers to you.

Feel free to share my email. Our struggle is very real at Courtenay Elementary School.

Respectfully

[REDACTED] parent volunteer at Courtenay Elementary

Sent from my Samsung Galaxy smartphone.