

Presentation by PAN panellist Maggie Milne Martins
on February 24, 2016 at Bayview Elementary, Vancouver
for the PENS/PAN public forum:



WHAT'S HAPPENING TO PUBLIC EDUCATION IN BRITISH COLUMBIA?

"Administrative Efficiencies and other Government Myths;
Restoring a Vision of Quality Public Education for ALL Children"

I am very honoured to be speaking to you tonight as part of an amazing group of parents from schools across Vancouver that have come together to form Parent Advocacy Network for Public Education.

We believe that every child, regardless of race, gender, economic background or ability has the right to a fully-funded, high quality public education, in safe, educationally appropriate facilities, accessible within their own neighbourhood. ⁱ

These values of equality and the commitment to developing each child's individual potential ARE the guiding principles set forth in the BC School Act - that are the foundation of a healthy democratic and pluralistic society as well as a sound economy. ⁱⁱ

Upholding these values is the government's legal mandate - regardless of political persuasion.

We are deeply concerned that we have lost sight of this inclusive and democratic vision and allowed it to be replaced with a narrow economic rationale that upholds efficiency and fiscal austerity at the expense of all other values. -

What I will be talking to you about tonight are some of the implications of this for both the quality of public education and the right of every child to equal educational opportunities.

Over the last decade, structural underfunding has crippled the public system. (So although Mr. Bernier says that the ministry is increasing spending more than ever, it is not keeping pace with rising operational costs - such as MSP, Hydro, and salary increases negotiated by the ministry itself.) ⁱⁱⁱ School boards, who are bound by law to balance budgets, are forced to cut programming, councillors, music teachers, librarians, and educational resources whilst increasing class sizes. ^{iv}

Last year, school boards were ordered to find an additional 54 million in "administrative savings" over two years. ^v Boards have already exhausted all the administrative cuts they can possibly make. This tome, from VSB 2014-5 budget, is filled with such hair splitting cost reductions such as locking classrooms and selling and leasing back photocopiers to minimize impacts to children. ^{vi} What is left to cut? Well last year, this included the closure of three basic adult education centres that enable young adults in difficult circumstances to complete their high school education. ^{vii}

For the second year in a row, the government has ignored the recommendations of the Select Standing Committee and therefore the priorities of the citizens of BC for adequate, stable and predictable funding. ^{viii} A 'stay the course budget' with its downloaded costs and second year of administrative cuts, means that the VSB is now facing a projected \$24.38 million shortfall and will have to make further cuts. ^{ix} The rhetoric of greater "efficiencies" and "cost savings" is masking very real impacts on children. For example, a survey by BC Parents for Special Needs Children revealed that a staggering 49% of children with special needs have left the public system due to inadequate resources, lack of trained support and resulting deterioration in mental health. A further 39% were contemplating leaving. ^x These children are some of the hidden casualties of chronic underfunding nowhere acknowledged on government spread sheets or official press releases.

Mr Bernier has been talking in glowing terms of BC's educational outcomes.^{xi} Any "excellent outcomes" that Mr. Bernier refers to are a direct result of teacher dedication and not the funding priorities of this government. I would like to call attention to three outcomes that Mr. Bernier has not referenced; outcomes that are undermining the democratic foundations of our public education system and are a direct result of the austerity approach to education taken by his government.

Firstly, let's talk about choice policy

In 2002, at the same time as government changed the funding model to a per student formula, the government implemented a policy that made it possible for students to attend schools outside of their catchment.^{xii} For some has indeed been beneficial. However, 14 years later we have, 41% of elementary students and 49% of secondary students no longer attend their catchment schools.^{xiii} We need to acknowledge that this is having impact on schools in areas of lower socioeconomic status, because there is a net migration of children whose families have the means to do so moving to schools outside of these neighbourhoods.^{xiv} This is undermining the diversity within schools and the social cohesion of those communities. It is also compounding the disparity between have and have-not schools because it is PACs that are now having to fundraise for the basic essentials like graded readers, arts programs, technology and playgrounds.^{xv} While some parents have the means to do this, others do not.^{xvi} We have come a long way from a Public education system that once ensured the redistribution of resources to create equal access to educational opportunities. This should concern us all because it is equal access to high quality education that is the greatest indicator of societal health and future economic prosperity.^{xvii}

The second consequence of this efficiency paradigm is the seismic fiasco that we are now dealing with in Vancouver.

The government has made funding for seismic upgrades (and therefore the safety of children) contingent upon the VSB outlining a commitment to reach a district wide capacity target of 95% - in practical terms that means the elimination of approx. 9,000 so called 'empty seats'.^{xviii} The preliminary details of this plan are outlined in the Interim Long Range Facilities Plan submitted to the Ministry of Education on January 31, 2016.^{xix} While there are clearly schools with extra space in Vancouver, and facilities need to be adjusted to reflect changes in population, these are by no means 'empty schools' - some of these "empty elementary schools" have up to 400 children in them!^{xx}

A district wide capacity target of 95%, as the government defines it, will leave little flexibility to manage population changes, resulting in overcrowding, and increased mental health problems among students - already experienced by schools at or over 95% capacity.^{xxi} A 95% capacity does not recognize the smaller class sizes needed for special needs programs throughout the district.^{xxii} Nor does it allow school boards to utilize additional space as a much-needed resource for TIER 1 schools which have a high percentage of students with complex learning challenges.^{xxiii} There are ways to address surplus capacity that respect the integrity and educational needs of communities - such as the partial repurposing of space for community use or replacing older, larger facilities with smaller schools. A 95% target in conjunction with the government's bottom dollar policy in seismic upgrades,^{xxiv} will force a 'stuff and close' approach to surplus capacity that will mean the closure of up to 21 schools, and the consolidation and redistribution of student populations.^{xxv} So while the government is using capacity targets to save on its capital expenditures, in the end, the disruption, loss of services and the impact on community stability will be felt disproportionately by our most vulnerable children and families.^{xxvi}

The third outcome of this austerity paradigm, is the little acknowledged but deeply concerning erosion of the arts within our schools.

Even though the arts are an integral part of the core BC elementary school curriculum, the government's 95% capacity ruling will effectively eliminate designated spaces for the arts.^{xxvii} Over the last decade, underfunding has decimated the arts in elementary school through the loss of programming and specialist teachers.^{xxviii} To illustrate, the Provincial satisfaction survey, from 2014, showed that 66% of grade 4 children and 69 % of grade 7 children in BC received no visual art instruction at all.^{xxix} In Vancouver, the last 25 years has seen at least a 90% decline in specialist arts teachers with increased dependence on grants, and private donation.^{xxx} Clearly, The arts do not fit with government models of efficiency and bottom dollar accounting. It is true, the arts do not appear on internationally ranked PISA scores, which the government uses to market BC's curriculum abroad, under the Education Quality Assurance Brand.^{xxxi} Yet ironically, research shows that it is the skills the arts teach - creativity, problem solving and flexible thinking - that have been identified as critical to our future economy.^{xxxii}

In addition to these cognitive skills, the arts teach the democratic values of participation, of inclusion, self-expression, emotional resilience and empathy.^{xxxiii}

It is no coincidence that longitudinal studies show that sustained participation in the arts radically improves outcomes for children in disadvantaged situations.^{xxxiv} For many children, access to expression through the arts is essential to mental health and their way of being in the world. While some parents can afford to compensate for the loss of arts in schools, by paying for extra curricular lessons or through fundraising, many simply cannot. What are the implications for our social and economic future if the arts are squeezed out of public education? In a province that boasts of a strong economy, ALL children should have access to a quality arts education.

In conclusion;

The growing disparity between educational opportunities for children has implications for us all. We must not allow the government to continue to substitute the democratic values of our public education system for a reductive economic paradigm of enforced efficiencies and underfunding. Schools are not factories. Public education is not a hand out; it is a public investment in our collective future for a healthy, inclusive and prosperous society. All Children need and deserve safe schools with sufficient staffing, resources and SPACE to provide for a quality education that meets their learning needs.

ⁱ Parent Advocacy Network for Public Education website : <http://www.panvancouver.ca/>

ⁱⁱ Preamble, BC School Act, 2015. The preamble reads "And whereas the purpose of the British Columbia school system is to enable all learners 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 and a prosperous and sustainable economy."
www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/.../schoollaw/revisedstatutescontents.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ For information on how downloaded costs impact BC schools, see BCTF, "Questions and answers about the underfunding of BC public schools", February 2016.
<https://www.bctf.ca/uploadedFiles/Public/Issues/EdFinance/QA-PublicSchoolsUnderfunding.pdf>

^{iv} This letter includes an itemized list of services lost in the VSB on a yearly and cumulative basis due to cutbacks.
http://www.vsb.bc.ca/sites/default/files/shared/15May11_L_toMOE_reVBE_Restoration_Budget_for_2015_2016%5B1%5D.pdf

v "Funding Cuts are Devastating BC Schools Trustees Warn," Lindsay Kines, Times Colonist, March 25, 2015. <http://www.timescolonist.com/news/local/funding-cuts-are-devastating-b-c-schools-trustees-warn-premier-1.1803319>; For a list of impacts due to the \$29 million in cuts made in the first year see BCSTA update May 22, 2015.

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

vi See the Vancouver Board of Education, Preliminary Budget Proposals, 2014 [https://www.vsb.bc.ca/sites/default/files/2014-2015_Preliminary_Budget_Proposals_Report_\(April_8_2014\).pdf](https://www.vsb.bc.ca/sites/default/files/2014-2015_Preliminary_Budget_Proposals_Report_(April_8_2014).pdf)

vii Joanne Abshire, "VSB passes balanced budget but forced to make cuts", News 1130. <http://www.news1130.com/2015/06/30/vsb-passes-balanced-school-budget-but-forced-to-make-cuts/>; For budget breakdown see VSB Budget 2015/2016 https://www.vsb.bc.ca/sites/default/files/VSB_Budget_Presentation_-_March_31_2015.pdf; For impacts of cuts to basic adult education see Margaret White, Chapter 8, Adult Educators in BC Public Schools: A BCTF Study, BCTF <http://bctf.ca/uploadedfiles/Public/Issues/Worklife/AdultEd/chapter8.pdf>

viii For breakdown of Education spending in the 2016 Budget see Ministry of Education 2016/2017 Service Plan, February 2016. <http://bcbudget.gov.bc.ca/2016/sp/pdf/ministry/educ.pdf>; Joint media release, PAN and FACE, "We are failing our future", Feb 19, 2016. http://www.panvancouver.ca/uploads/6/7/1/4/67145647/pan_news_release_february_19_2016.pdf; Findings and Recommendations of the Select Standing Committee for Finance and Government Services for the 2016/2017 budget can be found in Report on the Budget 2016 Consultations 8-11. <http://www.agora-parl.org/sites/default/files/report-on-budget-2016-consultations-2015-nov-13.pdf>

ix Jon Azpiri, "Vancouver School Board facing a projected \$24M budget shortfall", Global News, Feb 22, 2016. <http://globalnews.ca/news/2534249/vancouver-school-board-facing-a-projected-24-4m-budget-shortfall/>; See 2016/2017 Budget Projection, Feb 24, 2016. http://www.vsb.bc.ca/sites/default/files/16Feb24_op_plenary_commV_item3.pdf

x BC Parents of Special Needs Children, "Are BC Public Schools Forcing Students with Special Needs Out? April 2015 Survey Results and Recommendations", January 2016. <https://equitableaccesstoeducation.wordpress.com/full-forced-out-survey-report/>

xi Stephen Quinn's Interview with Mike Bernier "BC education minister defends funding levels" Feb. 23, 2016. <https://equitableaccesstoeducation.wordpress.com/full-forced-out-survey-report/>

xii Gerald Fallon and Jerald Paquette, "Introducing a market element into the funding mechanism of Public Education in BC: A Critical Policy Analysis of the School Amendment Act, 2002," McGill Journal of Education 44.2 (2009)

Gerald Fallon and Jerald Paquette, "Devolution, Choice and Accountability in the Provision of Public Education in BC: A Critical Analysis of the School Amendment Act of 2002.", Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy 75.6 (2008) Funding Formula change announced May 1, 2002. BCTF, "Chronology of Education Legislation and Actions

by the BC Liberal Government since 2001".

<https://bctf.ca/uploadedFiles/Public/Advocacy/Campaigns/ChronologyOfLegislation.pdf>

^{xiii} Information given by Scott Robinson, Superintendent of Schools during VSB Board meeting Dec 2015: For elementary schools in Vancouver, 59% in catchment, 22.5% cross boundary, 18.5% district. Secondary 51% in catchment 19% cross boundary 30% district.

^{xiv} Although this pattern has not been formally tracked, it is apparent to parents living within these catchments. For distribution of mobile student population trends from East to West in Vancouver see Erick Villagomez, "Schooling Vancouver", Spacing Vancouver, June 29, 2015. <http://spacing.ca/vancouver/2015/06/29/schooling-vancouver/>

Research shows that this is the pattern that occurs when a consumer model of education is introduced into public education systems. See Fallon and Paquette, 2009.

^{xv} Cheryl Rossi, "VSB Schools raise \$3.4 million in one year", Vancouver Courier; BCCPAC "Fundraising efforts produce \$3.4 million for Vancouver Schools, Dec. 2013, Nov 5, 2013; Arik Ligeti, "Fundraising playing key role at some of Vancouver's poorest schools, Globe and Mail, Feb 20, 2015 (21 2015); Carlito Pablo, "Vancouver Parents feeling school fundraising fatigue, Georgia Straight, January 24, 2013; "Fundraising", Huffington Post, September 24, 2014; Katie Hyslop "For Vancouver Parents, School Fundraising 'Has Become Our Lives.", The Tyee, 6 March 2015.

^{xvi} In a 2014 report comparing fundraising abilities between schools, the difference ranged from \$194 per student to \$0. "See the Fundraising Totals at Every Vancouver School over the Past Three Years," The Globe and Mail, Feb 20, 2015 (21 2015) <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/british-columbia/how-much-each-vancouver-school-has-fundraised/article23137493/>

^{xvii} Economists agree that a strong public education system is foundational to economic prosperity. Neil H. Buchanan, "An Educated Population is Essential to a Nation's Prosperity," Verdict: Legal Analysis and Commentary from Justia, 29 March 2012 <https://verdict.justia.com/2012/03/29/an-educated-population-is-essential-to-a-nations-prosperity-yet-some-politicians-are-demonizing-our-educational-system-for-political-advantage>

^{xviii} VSB, Interim Long Range Facilities Plan, January 2016. [https://www.vsb.bc.ca/sites/default/files/shared/Interim LRFP Bkgrd Rpt.pdf](https://www.vsb.bc.ca/sites/default/files/shared/Interim%20LRFP%20Bkgrd%20Rpt.pdf)

^{xix} According to the ministry, 95% is the level of capacity needed for school boards to operate with the level of funding they receive from the ministry. Phone Conversation with Lesley Ballman, Regional Director, Capital Planning Branch, BC Ministry of Education, Nov. 2016.

^{xx} Renfrew Elementary is at 59% capacity but has 419 currently enrolled within the school. See Appendix D, Long Range Facilities Plan - Backgrounder Report, January 2016. [https://www.vsb.bc.ca/sites/default/files/shared/Interim LRFP Bkgrd Rpt.pdf](https://www.vsb.bc.ca/sites/default/files/shared/Interim%20LRFP%20Bkgrd%20Rpt.pdf)

^{xxi} Districts like Surrey that are meeting or exceeding ministry capacity rationalization targets are dealing with problems of overcrowding, student displacement and rotating timetables to manage enrolment because of the inherent lack of flexibility in a 95% capacity utilization target. Schools in Vancouver already operating at or over 95% capacity are forced to run lotteries for in-catchment kindergarten enrolment pushing students to schools outside of their catchment. Furthermore, families who have exercised 'choice' are not guaranteed that their child's siblings will be able to attend the same school

creating anxiety and family disruption. A further concern is that the structural restrictions of infrastructure to reflect current populations and their distribution will not allow subsequent generations of children to attend their catchment school. Researchers at the University of Georgia found a direct relationship between schools operating at or near maximum capacity and behavioural disruptions.

<http://sdpl.coe.uga.edu/researchabstracts/behavior.html>

This article is a cost benefit analysis of the capacity rationalization scheme undertaken in Chicago in 2013. The report demonstrated almost no net financial benefit for the government - now dealing with over-crowding problems - but huge costs in terms of reduced access to resource services and supports, disruption and destabilization of families, social conflict between amalgamated school communities, loss of important social and arts based programmes and negative impacts on the mental and emotional health of children impacted. Carol Caref, Sarah Hains, Pavlyn Jankov, 12 Months Later: The Impact of School Closings in Chicago (Chicago Teachers Union, 2014) <http://www.ctunet.com/question-center/TwelveMonthsLaterReport.pdf>

xxii Some of these include gifted classes (cap of 20 students), the Elementary Life Skills program (cap of 15 students using multiple classrooms), Extended Learning Assistance Classes (cap of 15), the TEIR reading program (cap of 10).

xxiii For example, Admiral Seymour Elementary is HI seismic risk facility at 53.42% capacity but is also a Tier 1 school with 39.4% aboriginal students, 62.4% English Language Learners and 75% of students requiring some form of specialized learning assistance. Because the school is under capacity, classes are able to operate with smaller class sizes, better addressing the learning requirements of this needy population. BC Ministry of Education, Public School Reports, Student Statistics: Admiral Seymour Elementary, 2014/2015 https://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/reports/pdfs/student_stats/03939032.pdf

xxiv Memorandum of Understanding from August 20, 2014 between the Ministry of Education and the Vancouver School Board that outlines shift to lowest cost option only for seismic upgrades and demands a 95% capacity across the district. [https://www.vsb.bc.ca/sites/default/files/publications/Signed MOU re VBE Seismic Mitigation Project Office.pdf](https://www.vsb.bc.ca/sites/default/files/publications/Signed%20MOU%20re%20VBE%20Seismic%20Mitigation%20Project%20Office.pdf)

xxv Interim Long Range Facilities Plan, VSB [https://www.vsb.bc.ca/sites/default/files/shared/Interim LRFP Bkgrd Rpt.pdf](https://www.vsb.bc.ca/sites/default/files/shared/Interim%20LRFP%20Bkgrd%20Rpt.pdf)

xxvi Vancouver schools with lowest capacity and therefore in greatest danger of closure are directly related to indexes of poverty or socioeconomic disadvantage. These correlate with schools identified in a report by the VSB in 2013 investigating better ways to support the growing number of high-risk children in inner city schools. Val Odegard, *Re-visioning Inner City and CommunityLINK Resources*, Summary Report, VSB, January 2014. [http://www.vsb.bc.ca/sites/default/files/publications/Summary Report January 2014 FINAL.pdf](http://www.vsb.bc.ca/sites/default/files/publications/Summary%20Report%20January%202014%20FINAL.pdf)

xxvii The government is using design aids for each school that reflect the framework of the new BC Area Standards document that does not allocate any space for art, music or performing space. These are deemed potentially enrolling classrooms and therefore are according to the ministry "empty classrooms". Ministry of Education, Area Standards. <http://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/topic.page?id=DEDC8587EAC34EEB96A41583B7C0BB2D>

xxviii In Vancouver, specialist teachers in the arts have decreased since 1992 by around 90%. In music this has gone from 300 to 40 and in the visual arts, 200 to 5.

^{xxxix} These statistics are in response to the question "In school are you learning about art?". For the question "In school are you learning about music?" it revealed that 48% of grade 3/4 children and 58% of grade 7 children received no music education. Ministry of Education, Satisfaction Survey BC 2014/15
http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/reports/pdfs/sat_survey/public.pdf

^{xxx} According to the former district principal of Performing Arts in 1992, there were around 300 music specialists (K-12 and classroom teachers) in Vancouver. Now there are only 40. In visual arts this number has dropped from around 200 to 5.

^{xxxix} PISA score results for BC http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/assessment/nat_int_pubspisa.htm

Trade and invest British Columbia. <http://www.britishcolumbia.ca/buy/goods-and-services/international-education/>

^{xxxii} Edgar Cown, "Canada's creative industries can lead the economic charge, The Globe and Mail, July 3, 2015. Cowan notes that Canada has slipped in global competitiveness and in innovation. <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/rob-;> Action Canada, Creativity Unleashed: 2011-2012 Action Canada Task Force Report. It argues that the 21st century is the century of the creative economy "Leading companies and top universities have recognized creativity as a key factor in driving innovation, and by extension, productivity and prosperity." <http://www.actioncanada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/AC-TF3-Creativity-Report-EN-web.pdf> commentary/canadas-creative-industries-can-lead-the-economic-charge/article25236146/; Policy Research Group, The Creative economy: Concepts and Literature Review Highlights, May 2013, identifies Fine Arts graduates as possessing the characteristics necessary for success in the creative economy. https://cch.novascotia.ca/sites/default/files/inline/documents/creative-economy-synthesis_201305.pdf

^{xxxiii} Lois Hetland and Ellen Winner, Art for our Sake: School arts classes matter more than ever - but not for the reasons you think" Boston Globe, Sept. 2, 2007

http://www.boston.com/news/globe/ideas/articles/2007/09/02/art_for_our_sake/?page=full

Elliot Eisner, "10 lessons the arts teach" extracted from Elliot W. Eisner, The Arts and the Creation of Mind (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

<http://www.arteducators.org/advocacy/10-lessons-the-arts-teach>; Cultural participation and enjoyment of the arts is cited as one of the rights of the child, article 27, Universal Declaration of Human Rights. <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>

^{xxxiv} This summary of four longitudinal studies found that children from low socio-economic backgrounds with a high arts exposure came close to and sometimes surpassed inequality gaps with children from more affluent backgrounds in test performances, post secondary attendance, graduation, volunteer work and civic involvement - including political activity. James S. Catterall, Susan A. Dumais and Gillian Hampden-Thompson, "The Arts and Achievement in At-Risk Youth: Findings from Four Longitudinal Studies, National Endowment for the Arts, March 2012. <http://arts.gov/sites/default/files/Arts-At-Risk-Youth.pdf>