

October 18, 2016

## **Government Underfunds Public Education, Plays Political Games; Parents Aren't Fooled**

### *Parent Advocacy Network Responds to Dismissal of Vancouver Board of Education Trustees*

**VANCOUVER** — The Parent Advocacy Network for Public Education (PAN) is greatly alarmed by Minister of Education Mike Bernier's firing yesterday of the democratically elected Vancouver Board of Education Trustees. Min. Bernier stated they were "dismissed for failing to comply with the School Act, which required the Board to adopt a "balanced budget" by June 30, 2016". This budget—which has been implemented despite the Board's rejection—involves \$21.8 million dollars in cuts to vital educational services which are already being felt by students, families and teachers.

The Minister of Education knowingly fired the VBE mere hours before it was expected to officially pass the budget in question. This was the latest requirement for funding to upgrade the 68 Vancouver schools that are still seismically unsafe. PAN is baffled as to why the Minister would now circumvent the Board's effort to comply with his demand. We are also curious as to why yesterday's announcement preempted the release of the special advisor's report intended to make public any irregularities in the Board's fiscal management or governance, which was prepared at considerable cost to taxpayers.

Since 2014, the VSB had been under pressure by the provincial government to close schools to achieve an arbitrary 95% capacity utilization target as a condition for securing seismic funding. This target and the government's refusal to fund temporary accommodation of students or to entertain any seismic mitigation proposal other than the lowest-cost option, left the VSB no option other than a shortsighted stuff-and-close approach that would seriously compromise the ability of the VSB to provide equitable access to a quality education both now and into the future. Although this target was recently rescinded without warning, seismic funding still appears to be tied to school closure. However the unprecedented and simultaneous closure of 11 schools would only have saved the VSB \$5 million in operating costs, despite reaching a 92% capacity utilization across the district. This means the VSB would need to close the equivalent of 33 schools to address the current projected shortfall for 2017-18 to meet its legal obligation to balance its budget. Is this what Bernier is referring to as responsible stewardship?

As we have stated previously, a balanced budget is neither evidence of sufficient funding nor indicative of the ability of school boards to provide equitable access to quality public education for all children. We respectfully remind the Minister that for over a decade, structural underfunding has forced school boards across this province to balance their budgets every year on the backs of students, by stripping educational services, increasing class sizes, reducing staffing and closing neighbourhood and community schools. Threats and reprisals towards democratically elected officials who are standing up for the educational interests of children presents a very disturbing picture of the politics currently at play.

Regardless of who is making decisions at the VSB, they are still hampered by the same austerity paradigm that is dismantling our public education system. Will a government-appointed Trustee be allowed to make decisions in the long-term interests of the children and the public education system in this city? How will this appointee “develop a plan to put VSB on firm financial footing” while simultaneously “preserving education services for students” without any increase in funding?

The provincial government has within its’ power to provide school boards with adequate funds and flexibility to make fiscally prudent decisions around facilities and governance that are in the best interest of children. However, in disregard to the recommendations of their own Select Standing Committee (two years in a row), and in dereliction of its own legal mandate, the government is refusing to provide predictable funding and safe, educationally appropriate facilities necessary to ensure that all children in BC, regardless of race, gender, economic background or ability, have the opportunity to meet their full potential.

PAN calls on the Minister of Education to stop "playing politics" and provide the "adequate, stable and sustainable funding" demanded for public education. It is, after all, his legal obligation and duty to do so under the BC School Act.

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### Supporting Resources

**#BCEDINRED** - <http://www.panvancouver.ca/bcedinred.html>

 <http://www.panvancouver.ca>

 [PAN Vancouver@PAN\\_Vancouver](https://twitter.com/PAN_Vancouver)

 [www.facebook.com/PANVancouver](https://www.facebook.com/PANVancouver)

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### About the Parent Advocacy Network

The Parent Advocacy Network for Public Education (PAN), formed in 2015, is a non-partisan grassroots collective of parents and community members who believe that all children have a right to high quality public education, accessible in their own neighbourhoods, in educationally appropriately and seismically safe buildings with the resources and staff necessary to meet their learning needs. We are working to address the chronic underfunding and devaluing of public education in Vancouver and across British Columbia by creating a strong network of parents who support one another in advocacy.