

**Presentation to
The Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services
Vancouver Hearing, October 14, 2015**

**Submitted by: Maggie Milne Martens
on behalf of the
Parent Advocacy Network for Public Education**

Members of the Select Standing Committee,

My name is Maggie Milne Martens, I am a parent of 3 school aged children attending public school in Vancouver. With me today are Gilli Avrahami , Corine Willems and Madeleine Sauve.

We represent a larger group of parents from public schools across the lower mainland that share a deep commitment to the values of public education and have grave concerns for its future.

Together we have formed the Parent Advocacy Network for Public Education to connect parents between schools for the purpose of promoting and preserving Public Education at both a local and provincial level.

(Schools represented include Bayview Elementary, Charles Dickens Elementary and Annex, Collingwood Elementary, Gladstone Secondary, Laura Secord Elementary, Lord Nelson Elementary, Lord Roberts Elementary, Nootka Elementary, Point Grey Secondary, Prince of Wales Secondary, Queen Alexandra Elementary, Simon Fraser Elementary, Sir Charles Tupper Secondary, Southlands Elementary, Tecumseh Elementary & Tyee Elementary)

I would like to address the committee today, on matters of both finance and governance as they pertain to k-12 public education in BC.

Free, accessible and equitable Public Education is a basic Human right; this right is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 26.

This right has been affirmed internationally by the CMEC (Canadian Ministers of Education Council) in their report to the UNESCO convention against Discrimination in Education, 2012, which asserted that all Canadians had access to FREE public education. Not only that, but in Canada, freedom from discrimination extended also to the quality of education received.

"Within the framework of legislation and policy, the rights of students to be free from discrimination encompass not only access to education, **but also the quality of the educational experience itself.**"¹

And within our own province, these democratic values and rights are clearly spelled out in the preamble to the BC School Act, which 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."²

This IS the social contract between the citizens of this province and the government, to which authority and monies have been entrusted to ensure its protection and its provision. And it is the government's responsibility to uphold these values regardless of political alignment.

¹ Canada, Council of Ministers of Education, "Promoting Equality of Educational

² The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 26. See Appendix A

<http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/index.shtml - a26>

BC School Act, preamble, 2015. See Appendix B.

www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/.../schoollaw/revisedstatutescontents.pdf

And yet, the laws and financial decisions being made by this current government are undermining free and equal access to quality education in BC, and are therefore in contravention of that social contract.

How has this happened?

Let me briefly indicate for you some of the policies, related funding decisions and the resulting inequalities that are an increasing reality within the public system.

In terms of policy, in 2002, the Provincial government introduced measures that altered the funding for public education from a school and needs-based formula to a per student-based formula.³ With Bill 34, the School Amendment Act of 2002, 'choice' legislation encouraged schools to compete for their market share of students, and additionally encouraged school boards to generate funds through the international marketing of "knowledge capital".⁴ So, in terms of funding, while annual funding to 'education' has increased, the allocation for public education has not kept up with inflation, increases in contract agreements, nor rising operational and maintenance expenses.⁵ In terms of per

³ Charles Beresford and Heather Fussell, "When More is Less: Education Funding in BC," The Centre for Civic Governance, 2009.

<http://www.columbiainstitute.ca/sites/default/files/resources/WhenMoreisLess.pdf>

⁴ 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>

Creation of SDBC's to encourage entrepreneurial activity and minimize risk. 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)

⁵ See for example the Vancouver School Board "Restoration Budget", April 25, 2013.

http://www.vsb.bc.ca/sites/default/files/13May06_op_board_itemII.d.pdf

Vancouver School Board, "Submission to: Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services," Sept. 18, 2014.

http://www.vsb.bc.ca/sites/default/files/publications/14Sept16_VBE_Submission_to_Select_Standing_Committee_on_Finance_and_Government_Services_Budget_2015.pdf

student funding and percentage of GDP, BC has actually fallen dismally behind the rest of Canada.⁶

Structural underfunding is forcing school boards, who are bound by law to balance budgets, to increase class sizes, reduce programing, cut support staffing, resource workers, councilors, librarians, specialist teachers and the list goes on.⁷ The reality, experienced every day, in public schools across BC is that **present funding is INSUFFICIENT to meet the needs of all learners.**

As a result, parents, who are able, are increasingly pressured to spend inordinate amounts of time fundraising or pay out of pocket to provide their children with the most basic educational resources. These include playground equipment, access to art and music programs, art supplies, musical instruments, school readers and digital technology.⁸

A case in point....

Just in the first month of the school year, I have written cheques totaling \$106 for basic school supplies, I have paid \$200 for my child to participate in his grade 7 school away camp, I have been asked to consider a direct donation of between \$25-\$100 to PAC funds, and have been asked to purchase a \$30 entertainment book and sell more of these to my friends and family.

⁶ Deani Neven Van Pelt and Joel Emes, "Education Spending in Canada, What's Actually Happening", February 2015. <https://www.fraserinstitute.org/uploadedFiles/fraser-ca/Content/research-news/research/publications/education-spending-in-canada-whats-actually-happening.pdf>

⁷ 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](http://www.vsb.bc.ca/sites/default/files/shared/15May11_L_toMOE_reVBE%20Restoration%20Budget%20for%202015%202016%5B1%5D.pdf)

⁸ Cheryl Rossi, "VSB Schools raise \$3.4 million in one year", *Vancouver Courier*; jsteffenhagen, 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.

The government is offloading its fiscal responsibility onto the backs of parents. And this is creating increased inequality of education between have and have not schools.⁹

In Vancouver, this has contributed to gross population distortions, with anxious parents travelling across the district to access wealthier school catchments or fleeing buildings that are seismically unsafe.¹⁰ This is undermining the social cohesion of neighbourhood communities and the democratic principle of inclusiveness, which is fostered by student diversity within schools. Public education in poorer neighbourhoods, with reduced funding and a concentration of need, is therefore exacerbating rather than mitigating socioeconomic disadvantages.¹¹ Not only this, but in the June 8 Special Advisor's Report to the VBE by EY, commissioned by the Minister of Education to "find efficiencies, improve revenues and make better use of facilities" it is **these same schools in neighbourhoods with lower socioeconomic status**, that are disproportionately identified for "immediate school closure."¹² The cost for those children and families impacted, will be staggering.¹³

⁹ "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/>

¹⁰ Erick Villagomez, "Schooling Vancouver", *Spacing Vancouver*, June 29, 2015. <http://spacing.ca/vancouver/2015/06/29/schooling-vancouver/>

¹¹ Funding allocations per school are reduced, and classes have a higher concentration of children needing support for language, learning disabilities, or emotional and behavioural challenges.

¹² EY, British Columbia Ministry of Education, *Report on the Special Advisor's Review of the Vancouver Board of Education (District 39)*, June 8, 2015.

http://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/education/administration/resource-management/reports/moe_vsb_review_report_june_2015.pdf

The EY report recommended closing schools and amalgamating student populations into new "right sized facilities". These new "right sized" facilities must conform to the rigorous area standard restrictions -introduced by the Liberal government in 2008 - limiting the amount of square footage each student is entitled to.¹² This is calculated on a nominal student capacity of only 25, whereas provincial class maximums are 30. On average, since the new area standards came into effect, replacement schools are 65% of the original school size. Ministry of Education, *Area Standards*.

<http://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/topic.page?id=DEDC8587EAC34EEB96A41583B7C0BB2D>

Clearly, access to quality Public education in BC is no longer free and it is no longer equal - undermining the democratic principal at the heart of the BC school act.

The schools identified for immediate closure are disproportionately located in neighbourhoods with a higher percentage of low-income families and children living in poverty. In fact, many of these schools are named in a report by the VSB in 2013 investigating better ways to support the growing number of high-risk children in inner city schools. Part of its recommendation includes the need for additional funding from the provincial government, currently inadequate to address the complex and increasing needs of Vancouver school children in poverty. It also advocates a place-based approach to providing services to these children. The report states; "There is a growing appreciation by governments at all levels – both domestically and internationally – of the importance of locating the capacity to plan and integrate services as close as possible to the individuals and communities that the services are intended to benefit." Not as Ernst & Young suggest, within a 5 km radius. 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>

Closing two or three adjacent schools with one new, Right-sized replacement goes against all educational wisdom for student performance, particularly in areas of high poverty. Research is very clear that smaller schools are better able to foster supportive, relation-based communities that help mitigate the impact of poverty on student outcomes, whilst larger schools exacerbate the challenges of socio economic disadvantages.

"Are Smaller Schools Better Schools?" Education World: Connecting educators to what works, 2000

Wasley, P.A., Fine, M., Gladden, M., Holland, N.E., King, S.P., Mosak, E., and Powell, L.C., "Small Schools: Great strides a study of new small schools in Chicago", (New York, NY: The Bank Street College of Education, 2000). Howley, Craig B.; Bickel, Robert, When It Comes to Schooling...Small Works: School Size, Poverty, and Student Achievement, (Rural School and Community Trust, Randolph, VT, 2000).

¹³ 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>

Schools in have not neighbourhoods are in need of surplus funding, not greater "efficiencies. Instead of eliminating schools in low income areas and amalgamating 2 or 3 schools into one 'right sized' building " these neighbourhood school communities need accessible seismically safe school buildings and extra funds to provide smaller class sizes, and work cooperatively with local groups to provide additional on-site community services and programs like the arts that have been shown to mitigate poverty differentials - programs that require specialized training, extra funding and surplus space.

However, the message we are receiving from the government about equal access to quality education is completely different.

The first week back at school, I received a letter in my child's backpack, from Mr. Bernier the new Minister of Education introducing parents across BC to the progressive concepts behind the new curriculum being launched this fall.¹⁴ It is full of superlatives, and presents the new curriculum with its hands-on personalized learning approach, as evidence of his government's commitment to ensuring each one of our children "get the education they need to be successful." (the word "successful" is in fact repeated 5 times within the letter). However I wonder, who exactly will be financing the materials and resources necessary for implementing this new curriculum?¹⁵

In effect, there seems to be a massive discrepancy between the vision of the new curriculum and the fiscal austerities and corporate efficiencies being imposed on public schools by the provincial government.

Let me highlight one example;
the core competencies of the new curriculum are "communication, creative and critical thinking, and the exploration of personal, cultural and social identities";¹⁶
where are these competencies taught most effectively - through education in

¹⁴ see Appendix B

¹⁵ Parents asked to purchase 500 sheet packs of copy paper, New Westminster. "The school supply list we are given each year has increased consistently to the point that we are to supply the classroom (in addition to the usual notebooks, duo tangs, pens, pencils, and paper etc.), whiteboard markers, packing tape, masking tape, scotch tape, Kleenex, Ziplock bags, black sharpies, USB drives, headphones and photocopy paper. We are also required to pay a fee that covers the copyright fee that is necessary so that our teachers can spend their valuable time photocopying lessons from current online textbooks in order for our students to learn." From a letter by a Maple Ridge parent, Heather Dalton, addressed to Mike Bernier, Christy Clarke et al.

¹⁶ For the curriculum's core competencies see <https://curriculum.gov.bc.ca/competencies>

the arts.¹⁷ And yet, in BC schools, government underfunding has decimated arts programs, virtually eliminating them at the elementary level.¹⁸ No space allocation is given to the arts in elementary schools under the government's stringent area standards (2008) and now in Vancouver, the 95% capacity goal for the district (as recommended by the fore-mentioned Special Advisor's Report to the VBE), would mean the closure of all existing arts spaces, (or 'surplus space' as the report calls it).¹⁹ This is indeed troubling, given that exposure to the arts is shown to significantly mitigate poverty differentials, increase academic performance, graduation rates, employment outcomes and civic engagement, particularly for children at risk.²⁰ How are underfunding and corporate efficiencies compatible with the educational priorities and the progressive vision of the new curriculum? How is this consistent with the democratic principles that are the basis of the BC School Act?

If the government is truly committed to the success of all students, and the new curriculum is to truly benefit all BC children, then it must demonstrate both a financial commitment and a change in policy priorities.

¹⁷ 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>

¹⁸ In Vancouver, according to Fine Arts Coordinator Peggy Bochun, this has been largely due to cutbacks and the consequent loss of arts district principles and specialized teachers.

¹⁹ EY report. Under the new Area Standards, in elementary schools there is no space allocation given to either music or art. Ministry of Education, Area Standards.

²⁰ 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>

In Conclusion

Access to quality Public education should not be limited to those whose parents can afford to subsidize it; it should be free and accessible to all children, in their own communities, regardless of socio or economic means.

Therefore we ask the government to:

- reconsider the market-based policies that exacerbate inequalities within the public education system and renew a **commitment to creating equal educational opportunities** for all children.
- increase overall funding to provide **quality public education that supports the needs of all learners**, regardless of "race color, sex, language, religion, political opinion, national origin, economic condition or [ability] ".²¹
- be committed to the **timely provision of safe and educationally appropriate spaces of learning** in existing school neighbourhoods that allow ample space for the cultivation of the arts and the implementation of the new curriculum.

Thank you

²¹ "Promoting Equality of Educational Opportunity", 2.

APPENDIX A

Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 26.

- 1 Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.
- 2 Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.
- 3 Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.

BC School Act, Preamble

WHEREAS it is the goal of a democratic society to ensure that all its members receive an education that enables them to become literate, personally fulfilled and publicly useful, thereby increasing the strength and contributions to the health and stability of that society;

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;