

Presentation to the Board of Trustees

Presented by Mankee Mah, February 11, 2008

Before my daughter started Kindergarten, a parent advised me that University Hill Elementary was full and I should register early. I did.

By the time my daughter finished her first year of school, her Principal sent home a letter asking parents to consider transferring their children to Queen Elizabeth where there were plenty of seats.

That very same year, I was told that UBC and VSB were reviewing sites for a new elementary school.

Time passed. But, we did not get any closer to a new school. When the old NRC site became available and it was agreed that the site was suitable as a new school, I thought, "Finally, the wait is over." However, when I heard the province did not approve funding for the new school because there were too many empty seats in the district and that VSB needed to conduct some sort of review, I was full of mixed emotions.

First of all, as a parent, I was more than disappointed. "Why on earth would we need a review? Isn't it obvious we need a new school?"

As a Canadian, I was worried...I was worried about the kind of image we were giving students and visiting scholars who moved here from outside the province, from outside the country. "What would they say about our public education system when they returned home?"

But, as a British Columbian, I understood...I understood that the empty seats were not just 'their' problem. It was 'our' problem. If we did have too empty seats in district, a review of our situation was the responsible thing to do.

Two more years passed and now my daughter is in Grade 5. VSB announced the result of that review and I was hopeful again.

That hope faded as parents fought over the problem 'we created out at UBC' and over who should really pay for the new schools. But, after a month of debates, I've come to the following conclusion: It is the responsibility of the Trustees to balance the needs of our children with our fiscal reality. Not the parents.

Among those priorities VSB has identified in their proposal, two must be at the highest...above all else:

- First, to provide schools that are safe and adequate.
- Second, but no less important, to ensure that children within the district have equal access to a school in their catchment.

I would now like to pause a moment and share a story with you. It is a story about a boy and his mother. It is a story about Daniel and Mary...of two Canadians.

After her marriage ended, Mary moved back to Canada with Daniel. She moved in with her sister and planned to get a job to support her and her son. You'll have to agree, this is a pretty modest plan.

Well, getting a job turned out to be harder than Mary imagined. You see, her son, Daniel who was in Grade 1, couldn't get into UHill Elementary school...the school her sister's children attended. Instead, Daniel was sent 7 km away to Southlands Elementary.

Mary didn't have a car. So, she took Daniel to school and picked him up from school by public transit. Mary spent more than two hours each day doing this. A task that made it difficult to find a job she could take in between the drop-offs and pick-ups.

Mary gave it the old college try. But, after 2 months, Mary found it too difficult to make things work here and went back to China.

When we deny a child the chance to attend a school in his catchment, we also deny the child's family the opportunity to seek support from their community. Mary wasn't able to ask her sister or a neighbour to help take Daniel to school at Southlands when their children attended UHill Elementary. Mary wasn't able to ask for help with child minding after school because someone would have had to pick Daniel up from school.

Over the last month, we have heard many alternate proposals to fund the new schools at UBC. If only we can lobby the province to cough up the money. If only we can shame the developers to pay. If only we can find that pot of gold.

Perhaps, with time, we can find that pot of gold. But, in that time, how many more Daniels and Marys would we have let down? We have a proposal that will allow us to build new schools we desperately need and an integrated plan to make our schools safe. It is a proposal we have already waited more than 5 years to get. Some may even say 7 years to get. And yes, it will not buy us everything we want. But, when we have a public education system that fails to give families a chance to live here even with the modest of aspirations, then everything else is just one big wish list.