

# **An Uneasy Custody: Finding the Path to Partnership Between Schools and Parents**

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Originally published in *Our Schools, Our Selves*, Volume 11 N.1 (#65)  
October 2001, pp 25-30.

**It is easy to complain. As a parent I have not always been pleased with the education the public school provides for my children. At times I have caught myself wondering about the capacity of a teacher to do their job. I have been bothered by the petty meanness of school ground play. I have bristled at the sometime callowness of administrators and elected officials. Sometimes these feelings are right.**

**It is a serious failing when children are robbed of their education because elected officials and administrators hide behind budgets and policies. Take the issue of learning disabilities. With respect to reading disabilities, for example, there is no real debate -early identification, early remediation- it's that simple. But what's the point of identification if there is no public will to adequately fund learning services?**

**I have worked with classroom teachers, learning assistance teachers, and a string of principals to find an effective education plan for my children. In spite of hard working teachers and honest administrators it is apparent to me that every child doesn't have equal access to a quality public education. Children from minority communities, children with learning disabilities, working class children, are among those who don't have equal access to public education. These children are denied their birthright in a democratic society by the selfishness of adults more interested in tax cuts than the educational needs of our children.**

**As a relatively informed parent advocate for my children and as a parent activist for an effective public education that meets all children's needs I often feel disempowered. Not because I don't have a vote or a say in hiring or other governance processes at the school -I question the need for this kind of involvement. No, I feel disempowered because the individuals with power in the system appear unable or unwilling to hear my voice.**

**A few years ago Vancouver School Board made a mistake in estimating their enrolment levels. This mistake was compounded by a recalculation of provincial funding formulas and by a deep seated political arrogance on the part of the local school board and their political rivals in Victoria. In the same year as the VSB paid**

out nearly a million dollars for tables, desks, and chairs in their new school board offices they sent out about 400 Christmas layoff notices to teachers.

Reassurances on the part of the school board that only 100 or so teachers would lose their jobs did not reassure either myself, other parents, or the teachers being given layoff notices. The school board, not willing to accept any responsibility for their actions, blamed the teachers' unions for the disruption citing the protection of seniority as a barrier to effective school management of labour. Yet, the mid-year disruption was real and the response of the VSB was dismissive of parent concerns.

I was not alone in being angered and not a little bit shocked by the heavy handed and irresponsible action of officials who saw more value in principles of bookkeeping than in the effective education of children, not to mention the mean spirited action of a mass layoff and reassignment of several hundred teachers at Christmas.

It just so happened that at the same time layoff notices started to arrive in the our teachers' mailboxes our school Parent Advisory Council (PAC) was holding its regular monthly meeting. Reflecting on the meeting now, I feel sorry for the police officer who had been invited to give his 'scare the parents about drugs' talk. The majority of parents who came (it was an overflow meeting of more than 100 parents) were in no mood to listen to a talk on the evils of drugs. We wanted to take action closer to home and, by the end of the meeting, had agreed to set up an ad hoc organizing committee to carryout a demonstration on the school board steps to protest the layoffs.

Our demonstration brought out 300 to 500 parents from across the district to an 8:00 am rally. We were able to mobilize various media outlets and ultimately, our political action played a role in forcing the VSB and the provincial government to respond publicly to our concerns. Of course, our activist presence was quickly displaced by the official parent voice, the District PAC, but the experience was a galvanizing one for our school and its legacy lives on in a far more empowered and involved parent body.

This moment of political protest created a real sense of belonging in our school and, for the majority of parents, demonstrated that by working together we could make meaningful, if small, impacts on educational policy at the district and provincial level. We may not be the type of parents administrators like, but we did, for a short period of time at least, feel more empowered in our children's education than most of us ever did serving hotdogs or driving kids on fieldtrips.

This sort of intervention by parents is not the norm. More typical are the meetings between teachers and parents to discuss the individual progress of our children. Over the course of my history as a school parent I have had many such meetings. These meetings are critical for building real school/parent partnerships. Parents and teachers share an uneasy custody of children. Finding the path to

partnership is one of the most difficult tasks that we face in the education of our children. I have no easy answers or pat solutions. At the very least we need to see each other as people, not antagonists. Teachers need to appreciate that even when we parents have criticisms we are very often among their strongest supporters.

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As parents and teachers we share an uneasy custody of our children. Finding the right path to partnership is anything but simple. Some parents push too hard for complete control without seeming to understand the bigger picture of social responsibility or the real effort and dedication teachers apply to their craft. Some administrators are unwilling to relinquish any control over 'their' schools. And, there are politicians who, blinded by their adherence to free market mechanisms, lose sight of the importance of a fully funded and accessible public education system for a democratic society.

It takes hard work to build real, effective partnerships based on trust and good will. As a parent I know I am impatient. I can see the opportunity for my children slipping away when their educational needs aren't being met. But I'm not willing to give up on public education. Handing it over to private enterprise or independent schools won't solve the problem. I'm in it for the long haul.

Ensuring that parents' voices are heard and listened to is an important part of building and strengthening the partnership. Parents should be involved in the real decision making and planning process. But in providing a political voice to parents we must not silence teachers and other school workers through the banning of strikes or the undermining of their collective bargaining process. With hard work, openness, and a willingness to trust we can find a balance that allows us to put learning front and center. We can bring parents in to the decision making process from the school level up to the governing school boards. And it is possible to do this without undermining the quality of life and the working conditions of the people we entrust with the education of our children.