

## City schools boss aiming to spread good word

### Public education in great shape--East Side and West Side

**Mike Howell**

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Another September, another school year.

For Chris Kelly, it's the 31st year in his education career.

A former teacher and longtime administrator who has worked in North Vancouver, Richmond and Surrey, he became superintendent of Vancouver schools in August 2003.

Last month, the 56-year-old Kelly had his contract renewed for another three years. He's in charge of a district with 109 schools and more than 60,000 students, including 13,650 requiring English language training, 3,800 with special needs, 3,000 in adult education and 3,000 in online learning programs.

Kelly oversees an operating budget of \$450 million.

He spoke to the Courier on Friday and gave his thoughts on the new school year, the school board's relationship with the provincial government and misconceptions about public schools.

Courier: Why did you choose to pursue education as a career?

Kelly: I was always interested in community, society, how human beings develop and how they act. I majored in the area of political science, anthropology and sociology. Both of my parents were very involved with community. My father was an Anglican Church minister and his whole emphasis was on the importance of connections among people serving common ends. So I think that had quite an imprint on me.

Courier: Where did you start your career?

Kelly: I was on a practicum [in 1975/76] at Steveston Secondary in Richmond and then my first job as a teacher was in an alternate school in Surrey for both elementary and secondary students. I worked there for a year and then went to North Vancouver and taught secondary school for four years. I then became a district consultant in humanities and coordinator of First Nations education before becoming an elementary teacher, school and district administrator.

Courier: Was your goal early on to work in administration?



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Schools superintendent Chris Kelly: "If I could take members of a critical public with me into the schools-any of the schools-their whole index of confidence and hopefulness for the future would go up hugely."

Kelly: No, I never had that as a goal. I sort of came to administration from the prospect of leadership and change, and administration is an essential part of that. Fortunately for me, very early on I was closely engaged professionally in the basics of learning and human development. That was the key focus for what we were looking at in North Vancouver. In those days, there was a whole emphasis on research and development.

Courier: There was a decrease in enrolment last year in Vancouver and the school district is anticipating that to continue. Why are the numbers dipping?

Kelly: There isn't any one cause. We knew this was coming. But it's such a dynamic setting in Vancouver that things can change quickly. People we expected to arrive in certain parts of the city, particularly the downtown core via immigration that had been typical for years, they didn't turn out as much last year. Another factor was one of economics. There was a kind of 11th hour greater move of young families to more affordable housing in other parts of the Lower Mainland and Fraser Valley.

Courier: Do you expect the trend to continue?

Kelly: We're not on a sharp decline and in fact, over time, as we look at how neighbourhoods are building up, we see probably a trend back up over the course of the next 10 years.

Courier: What is the biggest misconception about public schools in Vancouver?

Kelly: There are a couple. One of the greatest misconceptions is this East-West division that has been there for probably as long as Vancouver has existed--and that if you're going to have a better program or better achievement, that it's going to be more in terms of a West Side setting. And that's absolutely not the case. Across our 18 secondary schools, the achievement of students and their socially responsible engagement in their community is at a par across every school. That is very important for Vancouver to know.

Courier: What's the other misconception?

Kelly: There's a sense that public schools are in crisis, that they're just getting by, that they're just making do and dealing with all these problems. For me, there are issues to address, there are challenges that are huge but the way those are being addressed and what's being achieved in terms of quality of experience in schools is just the reverse of that. If I could take members of a critical public with me into the schools--any of the schools--their whole index of confidence and hopefulness for the future would go up hugely.

Courier: What will be the most pressing concern for the school district this year?

Kelly: It's to literally make Vancouver more aware of the accomplishments of the people in our schools. This is the students, the very young students, the culturally diverse students, our graduates and also what they're contributing. And that's not a mere PR exercise. It's something that I honestly feel Vancouver needs to be much more aware of than it is and it's our job to do that.

Courier: What don't Vancouverites know enough about when it comes to the city's public schools?

Kelly: Our levels of literacy among young children, and middle years and early adolescence, is better than it's ever been. And those levels of literacy are increasing continuously in all our most challenging settings, as well as the settings where students already come with high levels of reading and writing ability. We also have a remarkable rate of graduation. On an annual basis, of all the young people eligible to graduate, we have no less than 91 per cent who successfully do so.

Courier: How would you describe the Vancouver School Board's relationship with the provincial government?

Kelly: It's respectful and it's positive in that we understand that the provincial government, through the Ministry of Education, is reaching to the same ends. We not only share the mandate, we share the determination around the mandate. We are not odds with the provincial government or the ministry even though sometimes, where issues are concerned, it will seem that way. But we'll always reserve the right to present what we think is the reality and the best interests of the system in relation to what it is the provincial government and the ministry is placing emphasis on.

Courier: You mentioned you majored in political science, do you rely on that education as superintendent?

Kelly: What I learned through that major in political science, as well as anthropology and sociology, was how human communities and human political, social and cultural systems work. And that's been a huge advantage to me. You don't want to ever become dispassionate, but at the same time you have to remain objective about how and why people will think and do what they do--whether they're doing it politically, or as parents, socially or whatever else. In a role like mine, it's a huge advantage.

Courier: Would you ever want to get involved in public life?

Kelly: I think I am. But formally, in a political role, I'm not sure that I'd have a thick enough skin for it. I admire those that do because that's what our system depends upon. I do support people who hold office in that way and acknowledge what they deal with. But I don't see myself in that role.

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