



JULIANNE DOCTOR
District Parent Advisory Council Chair 2006/07 and 2007/08

Trustee elections are coming up. For teachers, one of the most frustrating things has been that trustee elections tend to get lost in the race for city hall. Does DPAC identify a similar concern? What conversations do you think should be happening at schools in the fall - at PAC meetings, meet-the-teacher nights, and on other occasions prior to the trustee elections?

DPAC is very concerned that school board elections get buried under the hoopla of city hall elections. It seems to us that the electorate tends to vote a party slate, unlike other areas of the province where trustees run as independents, regardless of political stripe. All too often, we end up with school trustees who don't understand or don't care about the public education system.

What opportunities do you see for parents and teachers to work together during trustee elections? What might some of the common objectives be, from your perspective?

At the district level, DPAC could partner with the teachers' union(s) to host a couple of all-candidates meetings. Perhaps one on the east, and one on the west side of town. It would be interesting to see the commonalities and differences we share. At school, PACs and teachers could have a dialogue on what they think are some of the things affecting their school(s), and how they could use the election to make candidates aware of their issues.

Over the past couple of years, you and your DPAC colleagues have been vocal advocates for children and public education. Has there intentionally been a more pro-active and visible approach? If so, why?

The DPAC executive of the last couple of years have been quite vocal about protecting and advocating for kids and public education. The majority of the members have come to DPAC from an advocate/activist background. I was very involved in SOS in its day. Both my daughter and I were involved in the No Cuts to Kids campaign when she was in grade 4. (I'm so proud). I think it's fair to say that most of us came to DPAC because of our advocacy background. We've always been vocal about the importance of public education, and I certainly hope that it remains a top focus for our organization.

At the school district level, energies at the 2007-2008 school year were dominated by the Educational Facilities Review, the Avlison Recommendations, and the seemingly never-ending

commandments (unfunded, of course) handed down from the Ministry. What issues or goings-on in Vancouver schools do you think were given short shrift as a consequence?

I think we could have used more focus on the ESL issues facing our district. While we did have a sharp focus on it last year, it seems to have dropped off the radar as a result of all the silly busy-work created by both ministry and district. There doesn't seem to be a lot of information coming out about the commitments made last year. And why have we not heard more about the SWIS workers? The emergency preparedness problem still hasn't been fully addressed. It's a good thing that they are finally looking at hiring a person to look after it, but it still needs to be at the top of the list, along with moving on the seismic work. I'm very concerned that we are sending our kids to unsafe buildings to spend a huge portion of their day

What are some of the stumbling blocks you see for Vancouver parents in their advocacy for children and public education?

The corporatization of schools is a huge concern. The public is beginning to look for sponsorship for our schools, rather than demanding that the government do its job and properly fund public education so we don't need to fundraise for what they like to call the "extras", computers, books, basketballs. I call these things the basics. It's imperative that we don't allow our education system to be diminished or devalued by making it a commodity.

Recent court and arbitration rulings have clarified teachers' freedom of expression rights - identifying that teachers not only have the right but also the professional responsibility to communicate concerns about educational issues to parents and the public. Beyond the individual progress of their children, what do you think are the issues parents most want to hear from teachers about?

Parents want to know what the challenges are in their school, and what challenges the teachers are facing. They want their child(ren) to have the best possible experiences and opportunities in education. Parents want to understand the different ways that the child(ren) can be assessed rather than simply using the FSAs. We know that those tests are controversial. What are some of the other ways teachers are assessing students in the classroom?

What are some other thoughts you'd like to share with Vancouver teachers?

Parents are the teachers' allies. We want to help you help our children succeed. Welcome parents into your classroom. Let us be your volunteer army. Vancouver is an extremely diverse city, with many, many different faces and personalities. Try to be respectful of the differences, even if you don't personally agree with them. Join us in advocating for a truly equitable system. Ask parents what they think a public education should look like.



ELEANOR GREGORY
School Board Trustee 2005-2008

Trustee elections are coming up. For teachers, one of the most frustrating things has been that trustee elections tend to get lost in the race for city hall. I would imagine that trustees find this equally frustrating, because good work being done doesn't necessarily get noticed by the public or even in the school community. What conversations do you think should be happening at schools this fall to address this concern?

When I was elected in 2005 as an NPA trustee, I benefited from riding the coat tails of attention paid to the mayoral and council elections, plus the NPA "brand." However, since not all NPA school trustee candidates were elected, something must have given me something of an edge. Part of the edge was the alphabetical placement of my surname among the other names on the ballot. I came in 7 out of 9, just ahead of Trustee Gregson and Trustee Hansen. On an at-large ballot, alphabetical name placement is critical. I think it is time to look at changing the electoral rules, along the lines taken by other political jurisdictions, to require random listing of candidates to take that advantage away from those with surnames in the early part of the alphabet.

I think the other edge I had was some name recognition because of my long involvement in provincial and federal politics as an active volunteer, and also from my exposure as a practicing lawyer. As well, I actively mined all my contacts in politics, law, and anything else I could think of, sent out broadcast email messages asking for support at the polls, and asked all my contacts to do the same on my behalf. Networking through email and the internet will play a much greater role in the 2008 Vancouver election than it did in 2005.

What were some of the situations or limitations you encountered in your role as a trustee that surprised you?

I expected to feel somewhat powerless because public school funding is controlled by the province, so that fact didn't surprise me. What did surprise me was the lack of understanding on the part of the public about the limited financial political clout of school boards.

From the perspective of someone who recently came from outside of the public education system and into an elected role as public school board trustee, has your view of public education and its importance changed?

I never felt like I came from outside of the public school system. I am the product of public elementary and secondary schools in North Carolina, Ontario and British Columbia (Burnaby to be specific). While my son attended private school for grades 5 to 12, and my daughter attended private school for grades 3 to 12, I had always expected them to attend public school. I always felt like a bit of an outsider in my time as a private school parent. Imposter syndrome, perhaps?

What my experience in both systems has taught me is that when things work well in private school, they work really well. However, when the adults in the private school system have difficulties getting along, there isn't the accountability there that there is in the public school system. There are very significant and important checks and balances in the public system that just don't exist in the private school system. Procedures for handling parent or student complaints, expectations about facilitating diversity, the collective force of organized teaching and non-teaching staff, just to name a few things, levels the playing field for everyone and injects fairness and responsibility into the public system.

It appears that trustees are quite often put in a position where they are apologizing for circumstances generated by factors completely out of their control. Has that been your experience? What avenues out there are available for people who want to advocate for improvements for learning conditions and see those changes come to be?

Following up on my comments in response to question #2, all I can say is 'knowledge is power'. Voters need to know about the financial powerlessness of elected school boards. Voters need to insist that all of their elected representatives - municipal, provincial and federal - make public education a priority.

Money spent well on public education is money very well spent. I don't think I need to list the reasons why investing in education makes good financial and social sense.

What are some other thoughts you'd like to share with Vancouver teachers as we go into a new school year?

Thank you for what you do everyday that makes a difference in the lives of the young people you teach. You do have a great job, albeit the many frustrations. I can't think of a better way for someone to learn than to teach, and all of you get to learn every day. And I do love to learn.