

**EFFECTS OF THE WRECKING CREW: MAINTAINING THE HOUSE OF EDUCATION IN VANCOUVER'S
INNER-CITY**

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In March of 2002, Barbara Buchanan, the Chair of the Vancouver School Board, broke the news that the British Columbia Ministry of Education instituted a new student-based funding allocation for students resulting in a decreased overall budget for the upcoming school year (Buchanan, March 2002). After numerous meetings between the Vancouver School Board and the Ministry of Education, it was determined that a deficit of 25.5 million dollars would be in effect for the following year. The effects of such a large cutback played out in the reduction of 399.8 full-time equivalent (FTE) staff members (Buchanan, April 2002). Cutbacks this significant would inevitably play a major role in the lives of teachers, administrators, parents, and school children province-wide. A class project in anthropological methods was developed to attempt to form a narrative behind the results of the Vancouver School district's 25 million dollar shortfall for the school year 2002/03, and tries to determine how the cuts are being perceived this fall at the beginning of the year and how tangible the impacts are in Vancouver's schools.

The effects of funding and legislative changes were examined in three parts: Vancouver district's west-side schools, special education services, and inner-city schools. This paper focuses on the inner-city schools. Preliminary results were orally presented to parents and teachers in an evening public forum on November 12, 2002, and perspectives shared at that time are incorporated within this report. The purpose of this study is to explore what parents and teachers have to say and situate their concerns within a broader political and cultural context. The final discussion will include speculations on long-term effects of decreased funding and other governmental changes.

Research Methods

This study was assigned to three anthropological student researchers who determined that the best approach to this study was to establish three areas of responsibility. Heather Bjorgan focused on teachers and school administrative personnel. Kiriko Watanabe interviewed parents of inner-city school children. Anne Peterson examined the broader political and cultural significance.

In general, all interviews were conducted under the condition of anonymity unless the respondent indicated otherwise. Individual interviewees were given the option to review and revise interview notes before the notes were considered for this report. Interviews that took place in a seminar or public setting were considered public and not under the same strictures of anonymity and revisions.

The teachers who were interviewed were located through networks of parents and

teachers. These teachers expressed an interest in this project due to growing levels of dissatisfaction with the education system as it changes. As they have pride in their profession and were passionate about the learning process, they appreciated the opportunity to speak about their frustrations with Heather Bjorgan. In some ways, the teacher interviewees (and likewise the parents) found this type of study and its interview structure to be somewhat cathartic. Conversely, not one of the principals contacted (of nearly all of the inner-city schools) wished to participate.

Kiriko Watanabe attended a meeting of Vancouver's inner-city parents, October 22, 2002, at Seymour Elementary School. Permission to attend this meeting and develop a network of possible interviewees from those attending was granted by the organizers. This approach was successful in obtaining several interviews with parents who came forward after Watanabe's presence was acknowledged at the meeting. A further interview was garnered through a blanket e-mail request by the methods instructor for participants. These interviews were taped with interviewee permission and the main points were transcribed. Watanabe focused on each interviewee's concerns as well as recurring issues that appear to characterize inner-city schools.

As Anne Peterson is a strong parent activist within her own community, it was deemed by group consensus that she was too close to the subject under study and may inadvertently skew interviewee comments. Therefore, Peterson interviewed Bill Bargeman of the Vancouver Secondary Teachers Federation and attended an all-candidates meeting of potential school board trustees held at Vancouver Technical High School, October 30th, 2002. Further, a literary search was undertaken and includes material that would be readily available to parents via governmental websites in order to situate interview comments and interview analysis within a broader cultural, political spectrum.

Teachers and School Administrators

The consequences of funding cutbacks on teachers have affected their experience as professionals in the teaching field as well as the quality of education they are able to give children in the classroom. The perception stemming from the interviewees is that teachers and administrators are constantly caught in the middle between the school board and the provincial ministry of education for whom they work and the children they teach. Teachers interviewed for this project often spoke of experiences working with fewer support staff and less resources such as books, audio-visual equipment and classroom space. One inner-city teacher related this experience:

The computer labs don't work well and there isn't an IT [information technology] staff person to keep up with the maintenance of the lab; there isn't a textbook staff person anymore, so teachers can't place orders for books nor can they properly keep track of what books are where.

Another teacher at an inner-city school mentioned that teachers are inherently caring people and that it is now harder to keep up the motivation in the classroom using fewer and fewer resources.

In addition to the tangible effects of operating with a lower budget, inner-city school teachers interviewed for this project communicated experiences whereby frustrations regarding funding cuts were kept under the surface in the workplace. The teachers spoke of encountering a "business as usual" attitude when they asked questions about job security or how their school would be and is affected by changes. The business mentality was especially frustrating to one teacher who said it felt as though his employer had abandoned him. For this individual, being appreciated as a valuable or valued employee was part and parcel to maintaining a motivated, positive learning environment for his students.

The teachers are aware of a change towards a more business oriented philosophy within the Vancouver School District. They are well aware that though the VSD is not a business per se, however, the language used (discussed in more detail later), combined with provincial legislation that requires all school districts to balance their annual budgets, severely limits the options the school board may consider in regards to funding sources. The biggest expense that a school board has is staffing, and the negotiated contract between the province and teachers resulted in the second and third year increases being paid for by the district with no compensation from the province. Teachers know that the only real option the school board has of maintaining a balanced budget is to reduce staff costs, i.e., teacher lay-offs. According to Bill 34, the school board can increase classroom sizes incrementally within limits set by district averages.

When resources are cut district-wide, many staff members in the upper levels of administration return to the classroom because of their seniority in the teachers' union. The corollary of this is that younger teachers who are more inclined to volunteer for extracurricular activities and committees are let go (Bargeman October 2002). A senior teacher from inner-city schools said, "the major difference at the district is that the rich range of talent and people are gone." The exodus of experienced people from the administrative level has had a profound impact on program development. Teachers interviewed mentioned that overall program design and strategic implementations set up by previous administrators have fallen by the wayside with no

viable programs to fill the void.

Inner-city Parents

Parents of inner-city school children recognize that education is an essential means to enhance the overall security of their children's future as educational attainment determines both the potential levels of future income as well as reducing social and economic risks. The four parents interviewed have varying backgrounds of socioeconomic status, educational levels, political concerns, and ethnicity. However, they share a serious concern about providing their children with an adequate education that is fair, effective, and affordable, which will help the children succeed in the future. These parents are actively concerned for their children's educational progress and dedicate considerable amounts of time, energy, and care to ensure that their children receive the quality of education the parents feel they deserve.

When asked about recent changes in the education system, that is, funding and legislation, the parents interviewed commented that it was too early to describe the changes derived from the recent decision regarding financial cuts, as they are often not made apparent. They are aware that there have been some problematic changes; however, they comment that many difficulties existed previously as well. In the words of one parent, the current school situation is "such a disaster" and the entire school system is in "such a catastrophic stage."

Although allocated time and scope limit this research, several sets of general issues come to the fore that are both personal and institutional. These include diversity within a class, insufficient communication between students, teachers and parents, and ethical questions regarding fundraising activities. In inner-city schools, students with various needs and diverse cultural, educational, and socioeconomic backgrounds are integrated into one classroom regardless of their individual needs and the availability of in-class support. Parents perceive a lack of funding for inner-city school results in a failure to identify "students [who fall] through the cracks... who do not have a specific learning disability that qualifie[s] [them] to be labeled 'special needs,' but with low learning capacity...." Managing such social, cultural and academic diversities within one classroom is recognized by parents as being difficult for teachers, who not only teach academic subjects, but also provide the additional social and emotional support required by a number of inner-city students.

Problems arise not only from language barriers that are difficult to surmount as well as socioeconomic disparity, but also from differences in cultural understanding, academic

expectations and a lack of cultural sensitivity. Parents interviewed expressed concern for both the teacher and the students in such a situation and are worried that increasing class size would only exasperate these pre-existing difficulties.

Overcrowding is definitely an issue. [The school] is overcrowded, has cut resources and created a great deal of impacts on ESL students... When you have 34 children, if a student has a trouble or something, how do you get attention? I don't think they get enough attention and therefore have difficulties. The sheer number of children per teacher is overwhelming. In order to ensure that my daughter is learning, I sometimes spend three to four hours of home schooling in the evening. There are not enough resources for each student. When you work full-time and spend three hours trying to teach her, it's hard.

The second issue parents expressed is that a number of inner-city school parents do not speak English well enough to communicate with teachers, therefore, they have difficulty expressing their concerns about their children's education. The district's multicultural liaison workers, otherwise known as neighbourhood assistants, were a valuable resource, which facilitated communication between students, parents and teachers. However, the recent cutbacks in staffing have substantially reduced the number of these liaison workers and as a result, communication has deteriorated.

In addition, three of the four parents interviewed noted that they did not feel that enough dialogue is taking place between teachers and parents without language barriers. One parent strongly feels that the education system is "not responsive to students and parents" and that teachers are not being receptive to parental input. She further comments that "it is frightening" and "absolutely terrifying" that parents' opinions are not given priority over teachers. Parents interviewed expressed sincere hope that the entire school system will become more flexible to correspond with their demands and that access to information within school will flow more smoothly.

Communication is profoundly affected by the constant changes in personnel. Due to financial and legislative uncertainty, as was mentioned previously, teachers, teaching assistants, and inner-city school assistants are laid-off, re-employed and subsequently let go the following year. Administrative changes to respond to staffing needs means programs are disrupted or unsupported. The parents interviewed said that these changes often disrupt the classroom and the school and cause difficulties for students who are most in need of consistency. The perception of the four parents plus those at the inner-city parents' meeting is that educational workers are fighting

over available employment positions and limited resources which creates feelings of animosity between teachers and between teachers and parents. Parents question the accountability of teachers when education is not delivered with any consistency: "I want some leadership in a school to tell the teachers what students and parents want to do." This statement appears to indicate that a parent wants teachers to be responsible and responsive in their teaching otherwise the parent feels that the educational experiences for inner-city school children will not improve.

With the recent changes, the parents interviewed feel that the government is asking them to volunteer to a greater extent. The following comment reveals both a high level of participation and feelings of frustration expressed by these parents:

I don't feel obligated to do [volunteer work], but if you care about your child's education and you realize that there is need, you'd support the school. Fundraising takes a lot of time.

Many meetings to attend. Spend all my time to attend board meetings. You forget about your own child. It's not workable anymore. Everybody just gets burned out. Parents who do all the work are often the same ones year after year. You are not paid for but you have to do it.

All the parents interviewed felt strongly that inner-city schools should not be fundraising because they feel that they are raising the money "out of dinner tables"; the families' limited household budgets. These parents are well aware that fundraising activities generate socioeconomic inequalities between the inner-city schools and the west-side counterparts. Despite the great time and effort expended by inner-city parents to fundraise, the actual results are minimal in comparison to west-side schools who appear to achieve greater results in less time.

The other thing that happened in the inner-city schools is that they don't have the ability to fill the gap between the richer... you know, the west-side school where you have people who are fairly wealthy. If one of those schools call up parents for donations, a lot of parents donate one hundred dollars or more. We can't do that. Most people don't have the money to do that. Most of people are working class or poor people. On the east-side, a school might make \$500 on a fundraising venture where the west-side might make \$10,000. So when [the government] cut back, you create a huge inequity. [The government] say to rely on parents' fundraising. You create a huge inequity.

Further exasperating this inequity is reductions in funding by the Ministry of Family and Children creating situations of personal financial crises for more than a few inner-city parents.

The parents interviewed suggested several possible avenues to improve their situations. Firstly, they suggest that teacher union membership should be mandatory or to reduce the power of

the teachers' union in decision-making processes. This suggestion is interesting as it reveals the extent that the parents are aware of the structure of the provincial educational system. However, the parents are more than aware that seniority means as teachers are laid off, the younger ones are bumped by older and perhaps less enthusiastic teachers, which is why they would like to see the union become more flexible for the sake of consistency. Secondly, consistency could be achieved by decreasing the number and frequency of changes in programming, instruction and support. Thirdly, these parents would like to see communication improved not just from teachers to parents but from parents to teachers thereby offering teachers a meaningful feedback on what is required. And finally, in order for funding to be effective, funds ought to be put behind existing programs that parents deem meaningful and should be supported over the long term.

ESL Spotlight

Funding cutbacks are the catalyst for narrowing the scope of delivery for such supplementary programs as English as a Second Language (ESL) and related services for recent immigrants to Canada. Currently, the goal of the Vancouver District's ESL office is to be a one-stop shop for students since this office works with other servicing agencies in the area. The ESL office is academically oriented and new students are grouped according to not only English-speaking skills, but also classroom experience and learning pace. However, at a time when ESL services are needed more than ever, the funding levels are decreasing. The ESL office lost an assessment teacher and a clerical position, and is also working with only eleven full-time liaison positions for the district. In the meantime numbers of ESL students are increasing. For the year 2002/03, there are 4,364 ESL students, whereas last year there were 3,034 students requiring ESL assistance.

The loss of staff experienced by the ESL office has had a direct effect on classroom teachers who now have to take the time to assess incoming ESL students in their classrooms, taking attention away from other students. One interviewee with connections to the ESL office said the current funding allows only the short-term needs to be met instead of a well-coordinated multi-year plan that helps ESL learners integrate fully into the classroom environment. However, these long-term efforts can not be put into practice when staff is only able to "avoid the cinders and put out the fires."

Parents have likewise noticed an increase in ESL students and a decrease in assistance. [A] more subtle change is the ESL. They don't have the language skills and end up taking teachers' time. There is a large number of ESL students and they require more attention

from teachers. Perhaps 40 to 60% of students might be speaking English as their second language.

On a related issue, one parent has noticed an increase in the number of international students. These students are a source of income for the district school board. The issue for this parent, is that by encouraging this activity, the schools (meaning the district) become more like a business, primarily concerned with the bottom line.

Cultural and Political Context

An inner-city designation is a result of a combination of factors that include an assessment of the catchment's demographics: average household income, number of welfare recipients or those requiring social assistance in some manner, a high population density, a high ratio of single to two parent households, a high transient or turnover rate, high ESL numbers, the average education level attainments of parents and guardians, and the occupations of parents and guardians. In some cases the age and condition of the school structure is taken into account. A teacher who attended the public forum (November 12th, 2002), identified herself as someone who often sits on the committees that considers inner-city designations and confirmed that the criteria listed above is what is considered by these committees. However, the criteria listed above came from an inner-city school's self-description.^[1] This information was not readily accessible on any governmental website.

A British Columbia Ministry of Education, Skills and Training document that was included in the above school's accreditation report an dated 1996/97 contends that the socioeconomic context of a school and its surrounding community (the catchment area, the school district, town or city etc.) has a great impact on the students overall abilities to learn. Home life is considered to have an affect on school performance. Therefore, any assessment of a child's educational experience must include considerations of his or her learning environment. This contention is supported by comparing the variability of student outcomes (i.e., FSA results, grades, number of students graduating, number of students furthering educational attainments with post-secondary education, etc.) with socioeconomic contexts as described by census data.

The current changes and the resulting conflict (as expressed by the development of the parent Save Our Schools movement and the government's response) may be a reflection of two different ideologies under which differing interest groups (educational ministry, school boards, parent groups, teacher organizations, etc.) may subscribe. The first, a property rights ideology

maintains that individual rights and liberties are of primary importance. Relations between individuals, individuals and institutions and inter-institutions are governed by market relations and organized by contract negotiations. Complex notions of ownership and property underlie this philosophy. The second is described as a person rights ideology wherein the rights and liberties that an individual enjoys is governed by and / or granted on the basis of citizenship and moral claims. Underlying this ideology is equitable access and equal opportunity (Wotherspoon 1996:196). However, the actuality of how this is enacted is quite complex.

There is an expectation that education can respond to needs of individuals and groups. However, this sometimes creates a tension between cultural homogeneity (a one-size-fits-all type of programming) and cultural heterogeneity (wherein a variety of programs responds to a variety of needs). Those who feel most disenfranchised are some of those putting greater expectations on the education system to meet the needs of their children as we have discovered in interviewing inner-city parents. Conversely, some of the more vocal critics of current education systems in Canada come from the business community who “need... a graduate who is not so much a storehouse of knowledge but a manipulator of knowledge, capable of responding to personal, social and business needs.”^[2]

Part of the complexity is that funding is shifting from a central government source, i.e., the province, to municipal and private sources. In 1980/1 these local sources provided approximately one quarter of the funding. As of the mid 1990s, they are providing a third (Wotherspoon 197). With the most recent cutbacks, there is an expectation for local school boards to be more “flexible” in finding funding sources. The Vancouver School Board (prior to November 2002 elections) has formed a separate foundation in order to explore business opportunities. This was one of several points of contention during the school board trustee all-candidates meeting, October 2002. The candidates meeting clearly defined a tension between desires to decrease the costs of education (from the business community and right wing lobby groups) and investing in future generations (from organized labour, teacher federations and parent organizations). The demarcation was clear between the Non-Partisan Association (NPA) which reflected the former and the Coalition of Progressive Electors (COPE) who most certainly represented the latter.

The ideology that underlies the business and right wing lobby groups is that of private property and principles of the market place. These groups advocate for de-regulation of state control over education (and a number of other state-funded services) and a return to “traditional” learning. They argue that resistance to their recommendations is centred in a bureaucracy (i.e.,

teacher federations, etc.) that is concerned for its own self-interests and desire to maintain the status quo. Programs that waste funding, according to the business community advocates, are those that have no visible or productive outcome. Therefore, they strongly recommend that the education system be opened up to private enterprises who can provide variety and consumer choice (Wotherspoon 197-199). The message that they wish to get across to the general public is that education costs are far higher than it should be while parents are not given choices for their children's education.

The message sent from the business community is being received by policy makers and school board members who describe parents as consumers, students requiring special services as clients, and students in general as products of education have adopted the language of the market place. Experiences of individuals are described in abstract terms such as inputs and outputs, which are related to concepts of cost-effectiveness and competitive advantages (Wotherspoon 199). And above all, the experiences of the various "stakeholders" (parents, teachers, various community members) in education are either held accountable or demand accountability of how education is delivered. This shift in language and its subtle incorporation by those who would protect the education system from private enterprises demarcates a cultural shift towards a market model ideology, or as Wotherspoon has described it, the private property ideology. A problem with using market model language as outlined above is that it can be misleading as to who has real decision-making power and where actual responsibilities lie. A client or a consumer, for example, has direct purchasing power, whereas clients of the education system do not. All decisions for curricula development occur at the provincial level while programming decisions are made at the board level. These governmental bodies have direct purchasing power and ergo direct responsibility. A stakeholder is one who is communicated to whereas a shareholder has much more say in decisions made.

Another part of this language shift incorporates the concept of accountability. Accountability in education is a nebulous catchword used primarily by those whose interpretation requires tangible outputs for each dollar funded. It is also interpreted as educators being held accountable to stakeholders for the quality of education their children are receiving. This second interpretation includes intangibles such as student's overall performance and improvement, positive outcomes within the school catchment / community and ultimately, success in the job market. The first interpretation requires hard figures based on standard testing (FSAs) and comparisons between schools based on grades and test score achievements. The problem with relying solely on standard

examinations is that students are individually located within the system in regard to their socioeconomic, physical and mental abilities. Standard testing presumes an ideal child from an ideal home environment, which simply does not exist. Further, constructing this ideal is highly problematic in regard to language, ethnic, economic and social differences that are not taken into consideration. (Wotherspoon 201-203; all-candidates meeting, October 2002).

T.W. Maxwell (1996) of the University of New England, Australia, studied B.C.'s accreditation services in the early 1990s and described the process of accountability as being a very complex, reciprocal endeavour based on responsibility. To summarize his argument on responsibility, his discussion is summarized into the following chart to reflect our present structure.

	Political	Professional
Local TQM	PACs and DPACs	School Staff (Admin., teachers)
B.C. QA	B.C. Liberals / Ministry of Education	e.g., BCTF

There are four arenas of responsibility and two types of accountability. The first is quality assurance (QA) which has as its objectives: efficiency and effectiveness. Maxwell equates these goals with a "new right management thinking." Whereas total quality management (TQM) incorporates improvement with efficiency and effectiveness and is more local and specific, relying more on informal information flows rather than the formal stratification of QA (Maxwell 19-20).^[3]

Accreditation was developed as a means of assessing accountability and while the program ran (for all schools) from the early 1990s to the 2001/02 school year, it attempted to holistically assess not only educational programs and services but to understand the context of the school's environment. This was done with an internal steering committee (which included parent representatives), chaired by someone other than the principal, and each member chaired a sub-committee of teachers and parents with the purpose of examining some aspect of the school's activities both academic and extracurricular. The purpose was to have a school thoroughly investigate its own particular strengths and weaknesses and develop a five year growth plan based on three to four goals. An external committee of three to five educators and one parent from districts other than the school's, assessed the steering committee's growth plan and determined whether or not it was reasonable and affordable. The process was modified over the years as various assessments determined necessary. The concept of self-assessment was

supported by the BCTF, though BCTF thoroughly criticized the accreditation process as being unwieldy and time-consuming. They produced an alternative approach, the Schools Taking Action and Review (STAR) program.

The provincial Liberal government has replaced the accreditation services with a new program, School-based Planning Committee (SPC), a committee of five persons: the school administrator, a teacher (elected by secret ballot by the staff), a PAC executive member, and two parents (likewise elected by secret ballot at a PAC general meeting). However, if no parent comes forward, the administrator is authorized to make requests of specific individuals to participate on the committee. This can become an issue in certain circumstances. This committee is responsible for developing yearly reports recording assessments and goal planning to the school board and the parent body. In other words, accountability that was once done with numerous opportunities for staff and parental involvement has been reduced to a few who have approximately six meetings throughout the year. The parents' role is advisory (www.bced.gov.bc.ca/spc).

Maxwell's argument is that evidence within the education system is difficult to produce accurately, as there are four areas of responsibility. Using the model shown above, the process of accountability and responsibility has shifted by sheer necessity from a local, informal but holistic assessment to a more formal, hierarchical structure relying on numeric outputs sent from the local to the central which places the emphasis on responsibility on the local areas. Further, accountability, by shifting in this way, gives the "government certain credibility, since it can point to the process as part of its accountability profile" (Maxwell 25, 32).

This shift towards Maxwell's new right management thinking likewise reflects the shift towards the previously mentioned market model or private property ideology. The business interests that hold such views are, as mentioned, most vocal in calling for educational reforms. However, "[t]he notion that the public is clamouring with one voice for particular kinds of educational reforms is ideologically and socially constructed" (Wotherspoon 199). Sociologists Neil Guppy and Scott Davies (1999) examined the perception of a crisis in education through poll results measuring satisfaction dating back to the late 1980s. The perception of crisis is determined by the growing number of media, lobby groups and governmental reports calling for reform and / or alternatives for education. The question is raised as to whether these calls are indicative of an actual decline in education quality or something else. Guppy and Davies determined that the cultural context in Canada has shifted from a sense of security to one of insecurity due to socioeconomic changes brought about by the mini-recessions of the early 1980s and early 1990s.

The education system may not be failing so much as underperforming in meeting what people generally consider is required to meet work force needs now. They also concluded that there is a growing disenchantment with governmental and other institutions.

However, Guppy and Davies did not include considerations of the very real decline in funding and the resulting decline in program quality. Further, the continual lay-off/re-hire cycles that parents and teachers interviewed had said are disruptive, increase feelings of insecurity due to lack of consistency. As a result, parents who feel insecure in their own socioeconomic situations and feel likewise at risk due to corporate downsizing, are looking to find ways to provide the most opportunities possible for their children's future. Most parents know through media and experience that there is a direct correlation between education and wage employment opportunities. The parents interviewed were quite clear on this point. Further, parents by and large are more educated than previous generations and are therefore better informed and more active in their children's education. Middle to upper-middle class parents are likely to be more effectively organized for fundraising, communicating, lobbying, networking and know how to use the law and media organizations to their benefit. For example, parents have lobbied and fundraised over the past fifteen years to increase technology (in the form of computers, software etc.) in the schools since computer literacy is required to succeed in today's labour market.

However, as noted, the more powerful parent lobby groups do tend to come from middle to upper-middle class neighbourhoods. There is a perception that though inner-city schools do generally include parents from this socioeconomic class, they are not present in any significant numbers to effect change as well as schools located elsewhere. As noted previously, fundraising for some parents in inner-city schools are secondary to concerns of whether they can afford to buy food for supper. A west-side parent, chair of her son's highschool PAC, indicated the importance of having parents of the upper socioeconomic classes being involved in public education due to their more effective means of lobbying. The suggested consequence of a perceived deterioration of public education is that these more powerful parents will move their children into private schools. Speculation on this possibility is that those left behind will receive substandard education. This outcome is somewhat doubtful as our inner-city parents expressed very passionate interest in their children's education and were quite well informed.

As one of the inner-city parents indicated, there are differences in opinion regarding where funding should be allocated. As Wotherspoon points out, the issue of funding becomes much more complex as organized groups and individuals advocate for a broad diversity of programs that are

sometimes in conflict or in opposition with each other, e.g., back-to-basics vs. child-focused learning (Wotherspoon 197). As a potential answer to this quandary, the provincial government mandates the Vancouver School Board to incorporate concepts of choice and flexibility into their planning and budgeting. A possible solution is found in Bill 34, which includes a section that will be enacted in July 2003 whereby students can attend whichever school their parents deem more appropriate. There, the caveat is if space is available (MOE Communications Release 2001).

Where this has been done, results have been mixed at best. In a very recent example, New York inner-city children are given the option to attend better schools within their district, but, as reported in the *New York Times* (Liu 2002), there are very few “better” schools, and these are greatly overcrowded. A federal policy to allow children to attend nearby suburban schools is met with little support. Poor performing students are not wanted. Student potential is not even mentioned. Also not mentioned are any plans to fundamentally improve the inner-city schools themselves. Choice in this instance is not enacted in the real world of inner-city students. To speculate based on what has previously been reported in the media, students of means will have more choice than their much poorer inner-city counterparts. Richer students will have the resources to physically be moved to a school of their choice while inner-city parents struggle to afford a bus pass.

As parents and teachers, school board trustee candidates and Bill Bargeman have all pointed out, changes are occurring too rapidly to fully anticipate possible long term effects. Consistency and stability are key to avoid the cumulative effects that have profound impacts not only in the classroom through the incremental increases of student numbers and the decreases of actual class support for ESL, special needs and other requirements, but also for inner-city families struggling with decreasing social services support.

This qualitative research project illustrates the first-hand effects experienced by Vancouver inner-city school teachers, administrators, and parents coping with educational funding cuts mandated by the school district and province. As a result, our research team found the consequences of decreased budgets, reduced staff and resources to have far-reaching implications in the quality of education in British Columbia. It is not only one or two problems, but the accumulation of issues over time that will prevent public education from meeting the needs of students and society as a whole. As one teacher commented, “It’s like the house has been built,

but now the demolition crew is coming in.” If Vancouver schools are to provide quality education, the wants of all parties involved must be analyzed alongside the realities of classroom experience in order to maintain the “house” instead of tearing it down. Through this research, we have uncovered avenues of concern put forth by parents, teachers and administrators who state the Vancouver School District often fails to meet their concerns, putting the education of children at risk.

Applying qualitative analysis for our research method allowed us to reveal the personal stories of the people we interviewed and uncover the faces behind the bleak educational statistics outlined by Barbara Buchanan, former Chairperson of the Vancouver School Board. Using the qualitative, ethnographic method enabled us to fully engage with the people who are directly and intimately affected by the cutbacks. For us, the research process is complete, however, for people living and working in Vancouver’s inner-city schools, the struggles continue to challenge their children’s educational reality. Much of the difficulty surrounding inner-city schools and the issue of education cutbacks is a clash of ideologies. Not only should the multiple disadvantages experienced by inner-city schools be identified, along with the structural implications of class and ethnicity, but they must also be assessed within their social and historical contexts.

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[1] Newton Elementary, internal accreditation report, 1998/99, Surrey, B.C.

[2] Newfoundland and Labrador Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Delivery of Programs and Services in Primary, Elementary, Secondary Education 1992:44-5, quoted by Wotherspoon, 195.

[3] It is not all that clear whether BCTF ought to fall into a QA category under central professional organization, however, that is what Maxwell has as an example.