

# Cents and Sensibility: The State of Special Education in Vancouver

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## **Introduction and Methods**

What we set out to do was to synthesize individual experiences of parents, teachers, and staff in relation to the cutbacks occurring in the school system. We interviewed ten people in total. Six teachers, one special education assistant, and three parents were asked specific questions about their experiences and that of their child and/or students. The teachers and teacher assistant we interviewed worked in many different types of classes including alternative education programs, Skills Development Centres, and special education classes. There was a range of experience, from over a decade in schools to relatively newly hired people.

The parents had children with a variety of special needs, including physical, intellectual, and emotional needs. Interviews lasted thirty minutes to an hour and were conducted at the participant's convenience. All participants volunteered their time and were willing providers of information and experiences. No participants were excluded. Consent forms were signed by all participants in which they were made aware of their anonymity and of their control over the information provided during their participation in this project. The information from the interviews conducted was recorded in some cases and extensive notes were taken in all cases.

Findings were typed up and each interviewee was shown a copy of their interview, whereupon they could make changes as they saw fit. While some of our report findings may seem anecdotal, we assure you that these stories are part of the bigger picture and that without them you simply cannot understand the complete depth of our research. This is not research based on statistical findings but on the case by case experiences of human beings in social situations. Essentially we are in the process of "connecting the studies of micropopulations with larger theoretical perspectives" (Wolf, 2001: 49). Anthropology is adept at giving people a voice and in "paying attention to what others left unheeded" (Wolf: 50). So what we have are excerpts from "stories" that people have been open to tell us, and we thank them for that. We hope we have been able to locate these stories in the larger context and that our audience has been made aware of these people's experiences.

## **Background**

In January of 2002, the British Columbia provincial government passed Bills 27, the *Education Services Collective Agreement Act*, and 28, the *Public Education Flexibility and Choice Act* (Legislative Assembly of British Columbia, 2002a and 2002b). Among the changes made by these Bills were an un-funded legislated salary increase for teachers, a legislated removal of the cap on the number of special education students per class, and other restrictions on teachers' bargaining rights (British Columbia Teachers' Federation [BCTF], May 30, 2002). The teachers protested this legislation with job action, with the removal of all extra-curricular activities being one of the most controversial actions.

On April 23, 2002, the Vancouver School Board of Trustees voted to approve a revised version of the 2002/2003 budget. The Vancouver School Board faced a \$25.5 million deficit, the result of a combination of a \$4.9 million existing structural deficit, a reduction of \$7.4 million from the Provincial Funding Formula, and un-funded cost increases of \$13.2 million (Vancouver School Board [VSB], April 24, 2002). According

to the School Act, districts must balance their budgets every year. The VSB met this requirement by laying off 400 FTE (full-time equivalent) staff (although the budget makes it clear that only 200 FTE positions would be lost), 9.5 Multicultural Home School Workers, and by making other decreases in services (VSB, April 24, 2002). Despite these measures, the VSB still faces a \$10 million shortfall for 2003/2004, partly as a result of the provincial government's un-funded increase in teachers' salaries. The VSB recognized the length to which they had to go to meet this budget, with Chair Barbara Buchanan stating that "we will be facing the ramifications of this budget for years to come" (VSB, April 24, 2002).

While this budget was approved at the level of the school board, many of the decisions made regarding cuts to individual schools were made by the principals. This resulted in a lack of consistency in programs and services across the district.

The budget originally included reductions to special education as well, but there was an outcry from the general public which resulted in the removal of these cuts from the budget. Several parent-activist groups also formed in reaction to this budget, including SOS (Save Our Schools), one of the most vocal. Although there were no direct cuts to special education, the cumulative effect of the cuts, the cuts to support staff, the loss of services, the uncertainty for parents and staff, and the general feelings of unease in the system all affect the delivery of special education services in Vancouver.

The Ministry of Education's "Attributes of the Public School System" are 1) accessibility: a variety of programs are available in the province to meet the full range of student needs; 2) relevance: programs are current, and relevant to the needs of the learner; 3) equity: resources are allocated fairly; 4) quality: professional teaching and administration are of high quality; and 5) accountability: resources are allocated in a cost-effective manner; parents and the community are informed of the progress of the schools and are involved as partners in planning (VSB, 2002b). Our report seeks to demonstrate the degree to which these attributes are characteristic of special education in public schools in Vancouver, and to examine the provincial agenda behind designating these as the most important attributes of public education.

Similarly, the Vancouver School Board's Mission Statement will be examined. The VSB claims that its goal is "to enable students to reach their intellectual, social, aesthetic and physical potential in challenging and stimulating settings which reflect the worth of each individual and promote mutual respect, cooperation, and social responsibility" (VSB, 2002a). It is interesting to note the while the VSB places importance on respect, cooperation, and social responsibility, the provincial government sees fiscal accountability as more significant in public education.

## **Privatization, Funding and the Notion of Profits in Education**

As funding has been cut back more and more, parents and teachers attempt to make up for it in various ways. Many teachers buy or make their own supplies. Since assessments are taking longer and longer with fewer psychologists, parents who can afford to are having them done outside the system. One parent interviewed, who has a child with special needs, paid privately for a psychological assessment. She was concerned over the usefulness of her son's two year old assessment as he entered high school. Parents who cannot afford to pay for their own assessments, or are not aware of the need due to cultural or language barriers, are less able to ensure that the needs of their child are met in schools.

Parents have attempted to supplement needs by fundraising or by teaching extra curriculum at home. Fundraising at one Westside high school has consisted of renting out the school and making casino deals. The lack of funding and support in the schools not only forces parents and teachers to fundraise, but also creates room for corporations or companies to move in. For example, the Westside high school we visited had a contract with Pepsi, ensuring that they could not sell other pop on the premises. Corporations such as Pepsi and McDonald's may provide much-needed financial support to the schools, but they may also come with strings attached. One teacher explained that introducing the notion of profits into the arena of education means that knowledge is no longer pure. The corporation's vested interest in education and knowledge may well lead to censorship according to corporate interests. One teacher half jokingly remarked, "Pretty soon we'll all have to wear t-shirts with logos that say sponsored by Shell, or something."

While many parents have attempted to supplement services and funds, others have chosen to withdraw their children from the system. This may be through private education or home schooling. Ironically, this translates into fewer funds for the public schools, which rely heavily on fundraising by the parents (wealthier parents who can afford private school can also contribute more to fundraising). A teacher at a Westside high school explained: "The people that can afford to and have a conviction about it send their kids to private schools. It becomes a case of the haves and the have-nots and ghetto-izes the public system." The concern over moves towards privatization and corporate investment are compounded by new intrusions such as education packages that are being "tested" in schools. A concerned parent (and teacher), felt that the tests might be used later to justify privatization by claiming that public education is not working. One principal declared publicly that he feels the aims of the cuts are to privatize education, and the teacher who related this to us agreed. While the cutting of funds may not be expressed explicitly as a move towards

privatization, this trend has been the result. This coincides with what many teachers felt was the overall capitalistic agenda of the cuts.

A special education high school teacher, obviously frustrated by the cuts, felt that the government was trying to run education like a max/min problem in math. She questioned “Who gave them the idea that schools should be economically viable? It is the obligation of the government to provide education, like healthcare. It’s not supposed to be something you can make money on or even not expect to lose money on. It can’t be run like a business and they don’t understand that. They’re very business oriented.” This seems to echo the sentiments of Canadians on the issue of health care. In the recent report on health care in Canada, Roy Romanow found that Canadians do not wish to introduce profits into health care. “Not now, not ever,” Romanow said. “Canadians view medicare as a moral enterprise, not a business venture.” (Romanow, Nov. 28, 2002).

If the government is trying to run education like a business venture, it is a business which disenfranchises those less able to compensate financially for the shortfalls in the system. Ironically, several teachers noted that ultimately shortfalls in the education system will result in additional costs to society. Individuals unable to access education will not only be less prepared for the job market, but may also suffer from self-esteem problems. Effects of these consequences include higher costs of welfare, drug rehabilitation and the prison systems.

## **Inclusion**

*A board must provide a student with special needs with an educational program in a classroom where that student is integrated with other students who do not have special needs, unless the educational needs of the student with special needs or other students indicate that the educational program for the student with special needs should be provided otherwise.*

(BCME, School Act, sections 75 and 168, 2, (2), effective Sept. 1, 1995)

*Inclusion: the value system which holds that all students are entitled to equitable access to learning, achievement and the pursuit of excellence in all aspects of their education. The practice of inclusion transcends the idea of physical location, and incorporates basic values that promote participation, friendship and interaction.* (BCME, August, 2002a)

*I don’t believe for one second that the government is protecting special learning needs.*  
(Teacher at a Westside High School)

While inclusion may be an ideal, both parents and teachers expressed that without the accompanying support, integration becomes increasingly difficult. With support staff hours being cut back from 7 to 5.5 and

teacher workloads increasingly on the rise, this support becomes less and less likely. Two special needs teachers noted that attempting to integrate special needs students into regular classes with inexperienced or overworked teachers was simply “setting the students up for failure”. One parent’s last choice was to enroll her child in a separate life-skills program for students with developmental disabilities, based on her belief that teachers have difficulty modelling the curriculum for special needs children and cannot fully address their needs. However, this parent has found the life-skills program to be narrow, because students only learn about shopping, handling money, integrating into the community and interpersonal relationships. Larger issues, such as understanding how the world works, either socially or scientifically, are not addressed.

Teachers are not required to take training for special needs, and several of the teachers we spoke with felt that this left them unprepared for dealing with these needs in a classroom. One parent felt that her child was just being “babysat” at school rather than given the attention he needed, as the teachers and assistants were too busy. She decided to withdraw him from school and home school him three days a week. She feels stretched to the limit from supporting her child.

If children with identified learning needs are not receiving the support they need, then what of those students whose needs have not been identified? Several teachers referred to these students as “grey area” youth. Remedial in-school programs provide support and assistance to those youth who may not necessarily have an identified learning need, but nonetheless need help. These programs seem to be especially vulnerable to the cuts. A common concern was that those students who are most vulnerable are the ones most likely to suffer from the changes. An elementary school teacher expressed her feelings on the situation: “They’re not thinking about all the kids that need it. They’re thinking about the baseline kids.” This sentiment was echoed again and again by teachers who felt that without needed support, those students who were expected to survive in the mainstream system would not make it. Metaphors such as “falling through the cracks,” “sinking” and “falling off the wagon” were invoked to convey students’ chances of surviving in the mainstream system without assistance. Without this support, students’ options narrow. They can attempt to stay in the mainstream system (many teachers felt they would not be able to do so), drop out, or enroll in an alternative school. A teacher at a separate alternative education program explained that there was already a two-year waiting list and she felt it would only grow longer as in-school programs were being cut back.

Alternative programs teach students who, for whatever reason, are not suited to the mainstream system. A teacher at one of these programs felt that many of her students simply needed more contact and a sense that they mattered. But there is also a sense that alternative programs are used as an escape route in

which to place “problem kids.” With a lack of the support required for integration, several teachers feared that the system may be moving back towards segregation. A special needs assistant believes “that way they can cut back all support and it takes the responsibility off the teacher.” If education plans and other aids cannot be implemented by teachers who are already overworked and stressed, then certainly these students aren’t getting the support they need *within* the mainstream system. In this sense, integration becomes more symbolic than literal, resulting in one parent’s comment that “inclusion is a farce.”

### **Assessments and Labeling**

*Assessment: a systematic process of gathering information from many people in order to make appropriate educational decisions for a student. It is a collaborative and progressive process designed to identify the student’s strengths and needs, and results in the identification and implementation of selected educational strategies.*

(BCME, August 2002a)

Parents are frustrated with the practice of assessing special needs children. Assessments may take a couple of mornings, but for in-depth assessments it is difficult to find the time and specialist available to do it. It is necessary for a child to be identified and labeled by the Ministry through an assessment to get funding. Previously, the government was providing funding only if the assessment form was completed (if the form wasn’t complete, the government wouldn’t acknowledge that the child had special needs and would withhold funding). Psychologists were spending all their time filling out forms instead of working with the children.

Assessments are done less and less now due to the cutbacks in the psychologists’ time, so while there are more identified learning needs in a classroom, there are more potentially unidentified learning needs as well. Parents believe that there needs to be a more holistic approach. Sometimes days are spent doing these assessments, but their child doesn’t fit into any category. There were two to three year waits for assessments, but that was when there were more staff available, so now it is an even longer wait. Teachers are faced with deciding whether or not to place a child on a waiting list for an assessment, because they know that the children won’t get assessed or that their needs aren’t as severe as some other students’. Assessments are often left for teachers to do. This creates an impossible situation for teachers who are not trained and who already lack time. As the only alternative, parents are forced to pay for private assessments, which are very

expensive (around \$1500).

One parent explained how her child will be going into high school on an assessment done two years ago. A grad student did the assessment because of lack of funding. The parent believes that educational psychologists should be doing the assessments. These parents paid for their own assessment. There is a strong feeling that assessments must be done by skilled workers, and these abysmal assessments done in schools have got to go. One parent called the service received “a band-aid service.” Speech and language assessments and questions about whether a child’s language is effective, and assessments being done by unqualified people, led to huge mistakes. Many parents on the westside can have their children privately assessed, but many of those living in other areas of the city are at monetary, social savvy, ESL and cultural disadvantages.

One teacher works in a Skills Development Centre that teaches both students with learning disabilities and “grey area” students who don’t fit the learning disabled profile, but have troubles in school. Since some of her students aren’t labeled as special needs, they will not get other assistance or funding, even though they are not doing well in school. She says that these youth can be two or three years behind in the curriculum. Her program remediates their education and sets assisted learning plans for each student. She says that these students would probably slip through the cracks (and possibly drop out) if they weren’t receiving this extra assistance. Similarly, the Transition Program was started for non-designated children – the grey-area students. If there is no established program in grade eight to help them, these students have a high risk of dropout in secondary school. This program was cut last year.

The irony of labeling here is that students who weren’t doing well in the 1980s were labeled “sweathogs” – lumping them together as underachievers rather than acknowledging their learning problems. Now, it is the lack of labeling that works against them, since being labeled as having a “learning disability” means that you can get extra assistance or funding. Of that time in the 1980s, one teacher says: “The mentality was just to group these kids together as sweathogs. Learning problems? Who cares? They can’t do it. So these kids would basically drop out.” She feels that this is what education is going back to and isn’t confident that her program will be in place next year. She adds, in regards to the cuts: “It’s the kids with hidden disabilities that it’s really easy to hurt.” Another teacher said that while some students in her program had been assessed with hearing difficulties, she has no time to implement the materials that the hearing resource person brings in on the monthly visit.



## **(In)Consistency**

A lack of consistency is a problem for teachers, parents, and students in several ways. One special ed teacher feels that one of the most damaging effects of the cuts is the discontinuation of city-wide meetings for special ed, resulting in a lack of opportunity to share strategies and information between schools. Some special ed teachers tried to continue the meetings on their own, but people were “too busy and jaded” for the effort of organizing and attending such meetings. Without a unified body of special ed teachers, there is less resistance to any changes suggested by the Vancouver School Board.

Another effect of this policy is that teachers don't know how other schools allocate their funding. Decisions on how to implement the budget passed by the Vancouver School Board are left up to the individual school principals, and some principals value special ed more than others. While cuts have been made at the provincial level, it is principals who must decide how to implement these cuts. One parent felt that this made principals into politicians. At a westside high school, the principal decided to keep the Skills Development Centre, but could easily have cut it, following the pattern of other schools in the district. At all schools, special education assistants are now called special education workers, and they are assigned to the whole school rather than one child. This means that the principal decides where to place them.

Skills Development Centres are staffed purely on the prerogative of the principal. One teacher related that the SDC at her high school used to be well-staffed. Now, although the number of students has increased from about six to about twelve, last year the SDC had only three blocks of time allotted, down from seven in the past. This teacher, concerned about the situation, wrote a letter to the special ed parents on school letterhead. The principal then asked the teacher not to send it, and the teacher backed off. The teacher went on to gather data on all the SDCs in the city and on what other support services were offered at the other high schools. She found that her school was the lowest by far in terms of SDC time and other support staff. The teacher passed this information on the principal, which led to “a tense discussion.” The number of SDC blocks was raised to four this year, but the school is still the lowest of all the Westside schools. Compounding the teacher's frustration, in the past (with a different principal), there was open discussion and input from the school staff on position allocation. There have been no such meetings for the past two years, since this principal came to the school.

The lack of consistency is also a problem for the students. Those in special ed programs are often emotionally vulnerable and more sensitive to change than students in regular classes. Several teachers

interviewed had stories about special ed classes that were subjected to midyear teacher changes. Many teachers and counsellors who worked hard to develop mutual feelings of trust and respect have suddenly found those relationships shattered. A counsellor at an alternative program was given a week to leave and say goodbye to students. One high school teacher had been transferred in and out of a special needs program due to the staffing cuts and seniority clauses. In a period of three months, the students had three different teachers, all substitutes. He felt that the shifts affected the students' self-esteem and remarked, "this is just another example to the kids that they don't matter."

### **Cumulative Effects**

The British Columbia Teachers' Federation reports that per-pupil funding has decreased by 4% since 1990/91, and is expected to decline by at least the same amount in the next two years (BCTF, October 2002). However, numbers give little character to what is truly happening. As the BCTF report stresses, it is important to recognise the qualitative aspects of the cuts. Parents and teachers interviewed noted that the most significant consequence was the accumulation of cutbacks to areas ranging from janitorial service to materials to staffing shortages. This includes effects on teachers, effects on students and loss of funding. One teacher noted, "The demoralizing nature of it just filters through the program, you forget about the fact that every year you're just dealing with less and less and less."

While teachers have less funds to work with, they also have more responsibilities. Cuts to support staff and special ed assistants have caused teachers to compensate in areas ranging from ESL-learning to counselling. Along with less support, teachers in regular classes may have larger class sizes and more special needs students in their classes.

At the same time as cuts to services were occurring, so too were cuts to processes. Special education department head and skills development meetings had previously been opportunities to share ideas and develop professionally, but these were cut. A teacher explained that they had attempted to continue these from the ground level, but found it ultimately too difficult. These cuts were made despite the Ministry of Education assigning the responsibility for an ongoing staff development plan to the school district, so that the staff "can more successfully meet the special needs of students", including inservices to "foster professionalism and currency" (British Columbia Ministry of Education [BCME], August 2002b).

In what seems a bitter twist, school boards have increasingly focused on curriculum. One teacher

says, “The buzz word now is accountability, making sure that the kids are making the grade.” How teachers are expected to do this while working with less funds, less support and more students, is unclear. The effects of the cuts are like dominoes, piling onto one another.

### **Effects on Children and Youth**

*The purpose of the British Columbia school system is to enable all learners to develop their individual potential and to acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to contribute to a healthy society and a prosperous and sustainable economy* (BCME, September 1, 1989: p. D-90).

While teachers and parents were concerned about their own workloads and stress levels, what they expressed over and over again were the needs of the students. With increased teacher workloads and cuts to support staff, attention to the individual needs of the students becomes increasingly difficult. An elementary school teacher felt she simply couldn't address them all. “Every day you have to touch another kid and hope that you've touched everyone by the end of the week.” She expressed doubts that even this could be accomplished as certain students demanded more attention than others. Other teachers echoed this concern in their feelings that they simply did not have the time or resources to address individual students' needs. A teacher at an alternative high school felt that this individual attention was essential in drawing kids in and keeping them interested and motivated. A teacher in a Skills Development Centre explained that the number of students per block had increased since the time she arrived from 4 to 17. Other schools are at 20 students in an SDC block, and fight for lower numbers. These high numbers make it impossible for teachers to attempt the kind of interaction and attention they had at one time been able to devote to students. In practise, this time has become a homework block instead of the one-on-one attention that special needs students often require.

High emotional needs were especially a concern since counsellors have been cut back, making student access more difficult. An elementary school teacher listed emotional needs of the students as one of the biggest problems in her job. A high school teacher related that the grade ten class at her school is problematic and their needs are not being met. Counsellors no longer have time to provide drug and alcohol counselling. Peer counsellors are being used more and more at one high school. While their work is seen as invaluable, they cannot replace the professional counsellors. A common sentiment was that while society is becoming increasingly complex, students lack the support they need within the education system.

At an eastside elementary school, the resource teacher now does the job of the special needs resource teacher, the ESL resources teacher and the reading resource teacher. She used to have time to devote individual attention to students outside of class, but can no longer do so. What are the results of this lack of attention and support? Several teachers felt that it results in low self-esteem, anger, drug and alcohol problems and increased risk of dropping out – which may only compound these problems.

The mandate of the BC Ministry of Education states that its prime goal is the intellectual development of the students. Yet it goes on to include “human and social development” and “career development” as “goals that are shared among schools, the family and the community” (BCME, September 1, 1989: p. D-91). However, teachers felt that the cuts were skewing these goals and education’s priorities. One teacher felt that the mandate now seemed to be to make students into “good little workers”. Another lamented, “Making kids into good citizens gets left behind and you’re dealing with a standardised testing, robotic society. They’re not looking at it from a humanistic point of view.”

### **Uncertainties**

Both parents and teachers expressed uncertainties over the future of the education system. Parents were concerned about their children’s quality of education and whether they would get the education that the parents believed to be their right. As programs were cut, parents began to fear that their children would become further marginalized. Some parents turned to home schooling their children, while others continued lobbying to get what they felt their children should receive in the school system. Some changes noted by parents include the raising of school fees, including course fees for every course on top of other fees. Some classes were not available and some courses were cut. Some programs were eliminated and specialist teacher’s hours were changed from 7 to 5.5. This was a major cut to services. Previously, the special education assistants would be there for the arrival and dismissal of the children, but now that their hours were cut back they were no longer there for these times, which put more pressure on the parents.

The everyday uncertainty of the safety of one’s child coupled with the pressures on parents to compensate for what they see as shortcomings in the system led to further uncertainties about the future of their children in the education system. Parents felt that the future would entail lawsuits over safety issues and the fallacy of inclusion. Parents struggled even to get their children into the system. Vancouver used to be seen as one of the better systems for parents and children of special needs because of the proximity of the Vancouver Children’s Hospital and the Sunny Hill Children’s Care. There were generally more special

needs children in Vancouver and some parents had even moved from the interior of BC or from other provinces to be in Vancouver for this care. But now in the last ten years the care has deteriorated drastically. To counteract this, inclusion is sought for their children.

A common problem seen by teachers was the general feeling of uncertainty and instability among special education teachers. The practice of laying off many more teachers than is necessary as well as the fear of cuts to special education give all the teachers in the system a sense of unease. This creates a sense of uncertainty from always having to defend the existence of one's position. Several teachers and parents interviewed identified the union as a problem, because of the need to hire teachers with seniority, rather than those with appropriate experience. However, this animosity towards the union is the result of the VSB's recurring practice of laying off twice as many teachers as is necessary. In the resulting allocation of jobs according to seniority, many teachers are shuffled between schools and positions. It is not that they are hired on the basis of seniority that is the problem – it is the VSB's lack of concern for the turmoil their hiring practices cause in the lives of teachers and their students.

One teacher states that teachers with less than two and a half years experience were cut last time, but they have heard that the cuts will be even deeper this time. For special ed teachers, "this is pretty scary if you've been working for 3, 4, 5 years and you're not confident of an upcoming job." Another teacher says that it is non-enrolling positions like hers that are especially vulnerable, like district resource counsellors and teachers. She says that every year they have to fight for their positions and make sure people know how valuable they are. She adds: "We're always having to fight and defend. It's very discouraging."

Parents feel that they don't have time to wait when their children are growing and moving on. For ESL and special ed, the uncertainty relies on individual perceptions and attitudes in the field. There are issues for brand new immigrants, as it could be that they are only having language difficulties, but the students may also have a learning disability. It is difficult to make this distinction if they speak very little English. Some parents reported that ESL and special needs students are stigmatized, because some wonder why they need a special program. They are faced with the triple whammy: 1. inner city 2. ESL 3. special needs (all of which put these students at a great disadvantage).

There are many uncertainties regarding the Vancouver School Board's viewpoint. The funding crisis is so extreme that one parent suggested that probably in ten years there will be enough control of the situation to bring it to the level that it was at five years ago, just a restorative level. If there is then more building for five more years, that is just too much time according to the parents and teachers. A major uncertainty

expressed was whether the education system in Vancouver was moving towards a segregated special needs high school. That was what happened before, when Oakridge was a separate segregated special needs school, but the Charter of Human Rights was used to abolish it. Parents believe that all of this campaigning really takes away from the family, and what they are really fighting for is only human rights and morality in society.

Not only were teachers worried about their own positions and the students they were teaching, but they were also concerned about the state of education in general. One teacher said: “We’re afraid of where it’s heading. We can see where it’s going and that’s backwards.” She is referring to a feared regression back to the 50s and 60s, when there was no special assistance and kids were just thrown into the mainstream and expected to sink or swim. This teacher is also a parent. One of her children is in kindergarten and does not have any special needs, but she is not confident that they would be taken care of if he did.

Other examples of this uncertainty include a counsellor at one teacher’s school only being given a week’s notice that she would have to leave. As well, support staff in one school were unaware that they would have their hours cut back from 7 to 5.5 until they received their first paycheck. A teacher puzzled over the reasons and mandate of the cuts. “What’s the point, what’s the agenda? I don’t really understand the nature of the decisions being made.”

Part of the uncertainty may be the result of the top-down approach. The teachers feel like the changes are just being imposed on them. A report on special education done by the Vancouver School Board should be released in November or December, and is expected to outline future cuts. Teachers were not consulted for the production of this report. They feel that their expertise is not valued by the Vancouver School Board.

There is also a lack of confidence in the government. For example, one teacher said, “I have no faith in Christy Clark’s ability to oversee any kind of public education model in our province, at all.” Another teacher felt that Clark has no idea of what is going on in schools. One teacher challenged Clark “to spend a week in any school in the city, to deal with what’s going on and be able to say that what she’s doing is right.” There was a general fear among the teachers interviewed regarding the state of education – especially the government’s capitalistic agenda and effects. Teachers do not have official access to the Minister of Education. When Clark gave a speech at King George high school, teachers were not allowed to attend. One teacher described this as “the most appalling thing I’ve ever heard”. Much of this distrust may stem from the provincial government’s imposition of a contract on the teachers last year. When the teachers tried to negotiate their contract there was no negotiation or bargaining – the government just gave teachers a raise but

forced local school boards to pay for it. The teachers are not alone in their distrust of the Minister of Education. Minutes after officially taking office on December 2, 2002, the newly elected Cope-dominated Vancouver School Board passed a vote of nonconfidence in Christy Clark (CBC, December 3, 2002).

Another teacher and a special ed assistant felt somewhat more optimistic, perhaps because they had been interviewed after the elections and they supported the new school board. They felt that the COPE candidates were fighting for the same things they were. However, they said it would get worse before it gets better.

Another general sentiment the teachers expressed was that they were lucky at their school, but that at other schools it was much worse (this may well be true since one school had a special program and the other still had its Skills Development Centre intact, while these had been cut in other schools). The special needs assistant is concerned about what is taking place already, and says “this [latest change] just happened in September. I can see what’s happening now but I can’t imagine what’s going to happen if they cut back everyone’s hours to 5.5”, referring to assistants and support staff.

In the first week of school this year, Ann Dumas told the special ed teachers in the district that in October and November the VSB would be doing a re-evaluation of special ed delivery and services, including recommendations for cuts. Last year, the VSB budget originally included cuts to special ed. There was a public outcry, and the VSB backtracked, making no cuts to special ed. These cuts are expected to happen this year instead, possibly in mid-year reductions. The cuts could include cancelling classes and cutting teachers. Huge cuts are expected by teachers at the end of the year. One teacher is not optimistic for his Junior Communications job, but took it anyway because of its importance to the students.

There is lots of fear in special ed right now, according to one teacher. There are speculation and rumours, because people just don’t know what will happen next. The report commissioned by the Vancouver School Board is expected around the end of November, but the teachers may not get to see it. Special ed teachers had no input into the report, even though it deals directly with their jobs. Teachers question how this report could be constructed without this input, and suspect that it will be based on financial concerns alone. For instance, one teacher heard a rumour last year that two programs might be combined – one a special remedial class for severe behavioural problems, and the other a social development class for the severely introverted. This would mean putting the bullies and the victims in the same class. The teacher believes that funding is the only rationale for such a change. The Vancouver School Board didn’t go through with this, but it indicates the challenges faced in special education.

One teacher sees a phasing out of one-on-one workers with the students, the Special Education Assistants (SEAs). This type of help is not seen as necessary, even for students with severe problems. There are more program and team appointments instead. Severely learning disabled students are not in Skills Development Centres, but are now taught by district School Board Resource Teachers (SBRTs). At this teacher's school, there are about 25 students in 3 blocks, although many of these students learn best one-on-one. This teacher also believes that the quality of some teachers is declining. While there have been some great teachers, there is a lack of energetic, dedicated teachers, particularly in the Humanities.

### **Recommendations**

Regular-class teachers don't have the training or time to understand special needs children. The teachers' and the special needs students' agendas are really different, and they aren't being incorporated. One special ed teacher thinks that what needs to be done is to make a case for what they do need. There is a need for more qualified professionals in the system, as well as for books, supplies and paper. The senior management of the Vancouver School Board should ensure that the special needs students are protected, and they should make this a district directive. Parents believe that it should be a clear mandate, or lawsuits will happen. For example, they bring up the 1985 human rights blow up in which segregated schools for special needs were abolished. Currently, teachers believe that there is a "fallacy of inclusion" and a lack of funding. They also believe that special ed should be made a district directive. Teachers are not prepared to teach special needs children. There is a feeling that teachers' general awareness is down. Class sizes are larger, and there is no limit on the number of special needs in a classroom. The high incidence-low cost J-learners (including severe learning disabled, mild intellectually disabled, and moderate and rehabilitated behavioural challenged students) may now be clustered together, whereas before the numbers were limited per class. Clustering these learners together seems to indicate to some that the system is headed for segregation again.

Principals have more power now than they used to have. In the educational reforms, Christy Clark gave power to the principals. Teachers and parents feel that principals have become politicians. There is funding set aside for high incidence-low cost kids (J-level) who receive funding through the Ministry of Education. They each bring in \$15,000 to the school that they are in, but it is up to the principal to see to it how the funds are used. One parent feels her child is not getting \$15,000 worth of service. She can't see how the money is being used. Parents want their individual child to receive the funding, and they believe that to maintain a comprehensive program is not possible with cutbacks.



Teachers stress that there is a need for more programs and resources for special education, rather than less. It is felt that by identifying and working with students as early as possible, they will be better prepared to meet challenges. Overall, this would be less costly for the system and for society, but it would involve paying now instead of paying later. One teacher suggested that this type of intervention would help to prepare the students to be full members of society, but felt that the current government saw the goal of education as preparing students for work, not for life. Two other teachers expressed that their real frustration was in the sense that they are not being consulted or listened to. They have a sense that the cuts are just being made “willy nilly” and that the Minister of Education has no idea what’s actually going on in the schools, or what effects the cuts will actually have. They would like to have their professionalism and expertise respected and taken into account in decision-making. One said: “If there was some consultative approach here where our expertise was even minutely taken into account then that might be a good thing.” The other said: “I would like to see a total rethink. I would like to have someone knock some sense into Gordon Campbell.”

Another teacher would like a change in government, and supports a more social justice-oriented government. “I fear for democracy when a party says it will do one thing, and when they get elected, do another. What does that say for democracy?” She recommends also more activism and informed decision-making and would like people to get more involved in voting and social activism. It is true that ultimately we need to hold our government accountable if we want our needs and visions of society to be realized. Other common recommendations are to reinstate funding, increase support, limit the number of special needs students in a classroom and provide more teachable materials. Teachers realize these improvements may not be likely, but feel that the needs are very important. Teachers are scared about where education is headed. It should be noted that teachers aren’t simply making recommendations out of some utopian ideal; rather, they are all aware of the current situation and have in fact the most detailed insider’s view as they are the ones in the classrooms everyday, left to pick up the pieces.

People interviewed suggested that the government increase funding to special education. Is the purpose of education preparation for life or preparation for work? The provincial government appears to see education as the necessary process by which workers in the economy are obtained. The holistic approach of viewing children as members of society is not taken by the provincial government, judging by their mandate and their allocation of education funds.

There is a need for more consistency across the system for special programs. Teachers need to use

innovative, different approaches with special ed students. They need to find a way to make things exciting and fun for the students. One teacher suggested that there is a need in Vancouver for an alternate school for gifted underachievers, attached to a main school so that there will be some interaction. Many special needs students, including gifted students, are learning disabled or emotionally fragile. More people need to know how to work with these students. They could be identified and given learning strategies early in their school careers, which would help to prepare them better for school and for life.

## **Conclusion**

The mandate of the Vancouver School Board emphasizes the individual student, focusing on each person reaching his or her potential, and promoting respect, cooperation, and social responsibility (VSB, 2002a). The mandate of the British Columbia Ministry of Education also mentions individual potential, but focuses on the “knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to contribute to a healthy society and a prosperous and sustainable economy” (BCME, September 1, 1989: p. D-90). While the Vancouver School Board may wish to encourage the development of socially conscious students, the trustees are forced to balance a budget within the funds allotted by the provincial government. The School Board has the option of refusing to pass a budget based on these figures, but the board which passed the last budget leaned towards the political right, and wanted to support the Liberal government. The case is clearly different with the newly elected board, whose left-leaning members have already passed a non-confidence vote against the Minister of Education.

The provincial government has a business-like approach to education. The role of social responsibility is not important; rather, students are taught to be the workers who will contribute to the economy of the province. In this regard, the province’s cuts to education funding are short-sighted, particularly in regard to special needs students. Without adequate support in their early years, these students will be less likely to succeed in life. While the emotional and social well-being of these students may not be of any concern to the provincial government, the economic role they may play should be examined. If the students are supported and enabled to reach their potential, they are far more likely to actively encourage economic growth than if they are neglected and made to feel that they don’t matter in our society. Even by their own fiscally-orientated model of education, the provincial government is failing the special needs students. From a socially aware viewpoint, the government should take a more holistic approach to education. Rather than seeing the children as students, they should be viewed as members of society. Education serves not only to pass knowledge on to children, but also to educate society.

The future of special education in Vancouver appears precarious. Problems on the horizon include probable funding cuts, a further demoralization of staff, a possible segregation of special needs students, and a trend towards privatization in education which could easily lead to a tiered system of education, with the ghetto-ization of the delivery of special programs in the public system. On the positive side, special education teachers are very committed to their jobs and are sincerely concerned about their students. There are many politically active parents of special needs children who will fight for their children's right to an equal education. There is also strong public support of special education. Additionally, the newly elected Vancouver School Board promises to take a more socially conscious approach to education, and issues surrounding special education are a matter of concern for the members of this board. Perhaps the pressure this new board can exert will force the province to provide the increase in funding to special education that is essential if the system is to meet the needs of the students.

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