

Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services

Budget 2017 Consultations

Surrey, September 22nd, 2016

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Surrey Students Now is a grassroots organization comprised of parents who recognize the importance of advocacy for public education.

As I read the *Report on the Budget 2016 Consultations*¹, it is clear to me that this committee has heard much of the same messaging I am about to share here.

This Committee recommended “that government ensure sufficient and timely capital funding to provide for facility improvements, seismic upgrades and also to facilitate the building of new schools in areas that are struggling to cope with increasing student numbers.”

Surrey is growing at such a rapid pace that any capital funding announcement having been made in recent history is but a drop in an ocean. There is disconnect between what the City allows in growth and density and the school infrastructure provided by the Province. For example, we have 273 portables which house approximately 7000 students. I have heard the Province state that this is less portables than when a different political party was in power, however, those stats are skewed. Back when there were more portables, there were less students per classroom. Surrey has been in a cycle of thousands of children in portables for far too long. We currently add approximately 1000 new people per month to the city and more when you consider the number of refugees coming here. Portables are meant to be short-term structures for when schools are under seismic upgrades or when another school is actually under construction, not long-term solutions. The current portable inventory and the students in them create their own district and would rank as the 24th largest school district in BC. This is entirely unacceptable.

It is unclear as to the communication channels the City and the Province have with one another. We have a huge development boom in Surrey, but not the school infrastructure to meet the demands. We believe the Province is aware and quite possibly signs off on the Neighbourhood Concept Plans. If the City changes these plans based on the realized needs, then the Province needs to work in conjunction with those amendments and continue to provide the capital funding necessary to meet the increased need. How we understand it is that the City considers these changes and communicates to the District. The District communicates these needs to the Province and are largely ignored in this process. It's apparent that there is no policy in place regarding changes to the neighbourhood concept plans and communication channels with the Province. Please continue to recommend, actually insist, that Surrey receive adequate capital funding now. At the demand of the Province, the City was told to open their

¹ <https://www.leg.bc.ca/parliamentary-business/committees-reports/14#K-12-edu>

doors and develop at an unprecedented pace to help the economy. It's time the Province does their part.

To worsen the inadequate funding for capital, the Province charges Districts when the need arises for portables. Between the actual physical portable, to moving it, placing it, wiring it, and the carbon tax associated, this funding for portables is taken out of the operational budget. This lessens, by millions of dollars per year, the amount of funding that was to be used for resources for the students. We have less teachers. Less education assistants. Less learning support teachers. Less library books. We should not take away from student resources because the Province is inadequately funding school capital infrastructure. Please recommend funding for portables come from a different bucket of money.

The Province currently looks at education as their 4 year term expense, rather than the long-term investment that it actually is. Education is the one single investment that permeates across everything in society. School is the one place that students of varying backgrounds and home life should be able to come for stability and receive the attachment and security one needs to be successful². As education is chronically underfunded, we are seeing the negative draw on our resources. When we pack our schools beyond their capacities, and do not adequately fund resources and supports, children will fall through the cracks. Research supports that there is an increase in untoward behaviour later on. This is cyclical and not only fails the child as they grow, but also puts a larger economic burden on society through increased need for welfare and an increased level of homelessness, criminal activity and incarceration. We can stop this cycle in its tracks by funding education as an investment instead of an expense. When education is adequately invested in, we see higher graduation rates which turns into economic and social prosperity for society.

This Committee “ascertains that additional funding is necessary to ensure the provision of quality public education and to properly meet the increased costs that schools are currently facing.”

It is infuriating to hear this Government speak of a surplus and a rainy day fund, when our education system is in crisis. While we expect fiscal responsibility, it is felt that the purse strings are being tied too tight when it comes to investing in our children. Funding education is not about whether or not we have the funding, it is a choice in priorities made by this Government. It is also maddening to see this Government spend money to announce maintenance spending and re-announce previously announced projects. Maintenance at schools should be done as a routine procedure and not by small buckets of funding that districts have to apply for. Maintaining our schools is part of the original investment and needs to be accounted for at that juncture.

With the current crisis in education in this Province, we feel it imperative that there be a call for the Select Standing Committee for Education to receive a Terms of Reference. This Committee has not met since 2007. Issues that need to be addressed include class composition and size, school size, education supports, choice programs, maintenance scheduling, and more. There are so many areas that need

² <http://www.bathspa.ac.uk/Media/Education/attachment-and-the-implications-for-learning-and-behaviour.pdf>

investigation and recommendations made regarding education and public policy. When the Province continues to keep this Committee dormant, it shows that the Province does not care about education.

Choice programming within our school system is necessary for various students to meet their learning styles and educational needs. This will in turn help grow various sectors within society and is of economic benefit to all. When we first started down this advocacy path we were educated on how the Province does not recognize Choice programming when it comes to counting the student numbers for capital expenditures. As a result, Districts are forced to use Choice programs as moveable pieces when capacity issues arise. This simply makes no sense as these children fill a seat somewhere within the District. When parents make the choice offered, parents and children need to have the program remain stable. An example of misinformation that we keep hearing is that we have a shortage of French Immersion teachers, however, that's simply not the case. What we have is a large number of French Immersion teachers unwilling to stay within an instable program and they choose to teach in English classes instead. We need to count Choice program students when recognizing if a catchment area is full or has additional resource needs and help the District ensure educational stability in Choice programming.

School site acquisition charges³ are taxes passed along to developers to help fund the necessary school capital in growing areas. The amount for the school site acquisition has not been updated since 2007. As we are all aware, real estate prices have increased significantly. We request that this charge also be updated in accordance with the increase in real estate.

The per-student funding formula does not work, it's clear. We know that there are fixed costs associated with operating a school. The funding formula currently doesn't account for that, let alone account for increases to those fixed costs of heating, plumbing, maintenance, internet, phone and electricity. While we don't pretend to know all the ins and outs, partly because no one will respond to our inquiries about such things, we know that we need adequate, sustainable and stable funding for hard costs and variable costs within those operating funds.

Summary

In summary, we ask the Select Standing Committee to recommend, and follow through, on the following:

1. To commit to significantly reducing the number of portables through building more school buildings in the Surrey School District.
2. To commit to coming up with a different process and communication channel with the City and/or District to ensure school infrastructure is in place for growth.
3. To put forth a motion to the Legislative Assembly to give a Terms of Reference for the Select Standing Committee for Education.
4. To no longer charge Districts for portables out of their operating budgets, but to recognize these as capital expenses.

³ <https://www.surrey.ca/files/revisedschoolsiteacquischarge.pdf>

5. To put forth a motion or policy that invests in education over the long term, rather than year to year or short terms.
6. To put forth a motion to have the school site acquisition charges updated to meet today's real estate prices.
7. To change the way the Province count students that are in a Choice program for the purposes of capital costs.

At the end of the day, we need far more funding in this District. Equally important, we need better policies, processes, and communication channels that meet the needs of ALL students in the public education system. We simply cannot afford to not invest in our children. Year over year this Committee has heard similar presentations and has made the appropriate recommendations. We seek clarity on why your recommendations continue to be ignored.