

BC's education system is under assault not by critics but by silence, silence from the very people who should advocate for the best for our children: the leaders within. Why do superintendents, trustees and principals acquiesce to Ministry of Education policies that cultivate public disaffection of public schools, exacerbate inequality, and ignore compelling research that would improve student success rates?

Perhaps superintendents and principals fear that the Minister might reconsider a soon-expected decision to remove a pay-freeze on their salaries. Perhaps trustees fear retaliation, dismissal or further amalgamation by a Ministry that seems to think that schools thrive on turmoil and rather than on stability and sound policies.

The co-authors of this article have been on opposite sides of most educational issues for most of the last two decades. One served as a superintendent, the other as a union head. We now are of one mind in our belief that our public schools, a remarkably resilient and successful public asset, are in peril.

We see the Ministry's current fixation with accountability as a distracter which diverts attention from the real needs of education while offering no real advances in building a system that will effectively prepare our children for their futures. The Ministry itself admits that there have been no appreciable achievement gains in the last four years. Yet, while achievement has reached a plateau, there have been significant cost increases in the administration of the system.

Witness our former lower mainland district, West Vancouver, which has increased its administrative costs by more than 30 percent despite stable student enrolment. What business would institute an accountability model that ignores any inspection of the allocation of the financial resources. The Ministry model does just that. Shortly after they formed government in 2001, the BC Liberals removed caps on administrative spending and ended policies that required districts to target funding designated for special needs students.

Witness the Ministry itself, which has just added four super-superintendents to its ranks at a cost of close to eight hundred thousand dollars. Or, witness the BC Education Leadership Council which is funded by a five million dollar grant from the Ministry. Lest you think that these funds will trickle down to students, the organization has leased offices some of the most expensive real estate in Vancouver – Harbour Towers. Research affirms that resources are best directed closest to the classroom, but the Ministry is pumping millions to the centre and the periphery.

The funding from these three examples alone amounts to approximately eight million dollars, enough to hire 160 more teachers. It is, after all, quality, enthusiastic classroom teachers that make the real difference to students.

Why are our leaders not speaking to the real issues in BC's education system? We suggest that they need to speak up about the following:

- 1) Aboriginal education: The abysmal graduation rate of our aboriginal learners has longstanding and complex origins. Educators at all levels need a new approach to aboriginal education. Efforts to improve overall graduation rates have failed because of the failure to target Aboriginal learners, whose success rates are only half of those of non-aboriginal students. New approaches can succeed only if developed in close cooperation with aboriginal communities.
- 2) Child poverty: The Ministry considers only “outcomes” (test scores) and ignores “inputs” such as child poverty. The millions spent on super-superintendents and office space would produce better results for students by ensuring that disadvantaged students had adequate supplies and full tummies. We are one of the wealthiest provinces in one of the wealthiest countries in the world, yet one out of five students comes from an impoverished background. Poor students suffer life-long disadvantages that schools and society can and must address. Why are our educational leaders not advocating more loudly on behalf of these children?
- 3) Early learning: We know that children’s early years may be their best learning years. Early learning opportunities pay particularly high dividends for Aboriginal, ESL, disadvantaged and special needs students. Early learning initiatives by the Ministry are ill-defined, sporadic and poorly funded. British Columbia should provide all-day kindergarten to all five-year olds (currently only half-day funding is provided to most students) and extend structured play based learning opportunities for three and four year-olds for special needs students and those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Spaces in schools resulting from declining enrolment throughout most of BC make the time right for this initiative! The long-term benefits and cost-savings far exceed the costs.

We believe that developing new approaches to these three issues alone would provide dramatic improvements in student achievement and substantial long-term social and economic benefits to our society. But, we suggest one other area also needs attention.

Einstein defined insanity as “doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results”. This sounds a lot like what we do in education. We are suffering from a lack of innovation in our schools. Moreover, we are not giving our children the appropriate tools to make them the creative individuals we need in our society. We believe that the current model of accountability stifles our teachers’ ability to try new approaches to problem solving.

Examine any successful organization---you will find that innovation and creativity are fostered in order to improve their vibrancy, their learning and their market share. School districts have responded to declining enrolment by closing more than 130 schools province-wide. This is inane when we know we need more daycare spaces, more community health care services and more opportunities for early learning. Let’s take a much more creating look at the possibilities offered by declining enrolment.

If we are to secure our future we need to give the same priority to innovation and to teaching creativity that we give to core academic subjects and test scores. We have wonderful teachers whose enthusiasm is dampened by the current accountability model and its time our leaders spoke out on this as well.

Margaret Wheatley tells us that: “silence is not the absence of action, but another form of action”. Through this article an unlikely twosome is choosing to speak up together. We believe our superintendents, our principals and our school trustees need to choose the action of speaking loudly. The current accountability system for education in BC is morally outrageous and educationally indefensible. Our education leaders need to support our children and teachers by standing up for a system that makes every child feel significant. Our educational leaders need to support our children and our teachers by advocating sound and innovative policies that promise to make outstanding BC schools even better.

Doug Player  
Kit Krieger