



Opening Remarks From the Chair Langley Board of Education Meeting

September 22, 2009

This is the board's first public meeting of the new school year.

The students are back in class, hitting the books, gaining skills and knowledge that will enrich their lives as citizens.

The rest of us have an unwelcome opportunity to learn from our mistakes, because very serious mistakes have been made and must be corrected.

We have 8.3 million things to talk about.

I personally apologize for that.

As a trustee, I have prided myself on arriving at meetings with three-ring binders full of sticky notes, and asking lots of questions about our budgets and finances.

But in the end, like all trustees, I believed the financial statements and audit reports were accurate.

By doing so, I failed you and your children. I take responsibility for that.

Along with my fellow trustees and senior management, I cannot begin to tell you how devastated I am that this took place, undetected, for so long.

The next few weeks will be critical.

As you all know, our internal financial mistakes will have to be corrected within a broader context of limited resources.

Already, some CUPE members have lost their jobs due to cancellation of the annual facilities grant. We have lost the benefit of the important work they do for students. Some repairs and upgrades will not be done in the schools our children attend.

That's a serious loss, and it's on top of the unexpected 8.3 million dollar debt.

We need a comprehensive plan to deal with that.

Given the Board of Education's history of vigorous debate – occasionally punctuated by moments of heavy breathing – I am pleased that trustees and senior management are unanimous on both the goals and the process for developing that plan.

The goal is to do everything we can to protect services to students, and the jobs of the teachers and staff who provide those services. That's easy to say. It will be harder to do.

The process for developing the plan involves you.

Meetings have been scheduled with partner groups to get their input and help in putting the plan together, and getting it approved by the Ministry of Education.

In fact, these meetings have already begun.

The board is deeply committed to that process... to doing everything that can be done to strengthen the relationships... because public education is a social contract and a partnership with the community.

Again, given our community's history and the current financial challenges, working together is easier said than done.

The Langley school community has a wealth of strong opinions and strong personalities.

We're not all friends. Some of us don't much like each other.

For the next few weeks, we need to put that aside.

We need a truce.

We need a ceasefire.

We need to remember there's a child in the middle.

We need solutions and a comprehensive plan.

That's why the board hopes everyone will accept the invitation to put aside our differences, and work together to make that happen.

We need to focus on the students.

We need to work together to get through this, and I thank those who have already joined us in these difficult discussions.

The board and senior management are working hard to deal with this.

We have confidence in the ability of the superintendent and our new secretary-treasurer to work with the school community and the ministry to address the current challenges.

Let me briefly outline what's been done to date.

When the errors first came to light, the board commissioned an independent external review of our finances.

Deloitte's recommendations will ensure that all financial transactions are properly authorized and recorded. We're all angry and perplexed that this was not already happening.

The full report was immediately released to the public and the partners in education.

You've seen everything the board has seen.

Going forward, the school district's finance department is under new management. We have gained people with a wealth of knowledge and experience, and as you get to know them, I know you will be impressed by what they bring to the table.

As I mentioned earlier, meetings have been scheduled with all partners in education.

We hope everyone will respond to that invitation in the spirit in which it is offered, and work together to protect students, services and jobs.

The unexpected debt we face today was accumulated over the last two years.

Our senior staff are working closely with the Ministry of Education to see if we can repay it over a number of years, and thereby lessen the immediate impact. We are hopeful that will happen.

Trustees will consider a number of motions on tonight's agenda asking for the government's assistance in other ways.

Since school started, there have been a number of staff changes and relocations at individual schools. These are due to fluctuations in enrolment.

In addition, as I mentioned, some CUPE positions have been lost due to cancellation of the annual facilities grant.

To date, there have been no staffing cuts related to the debt.

But I am announcing another change.

Seven years ago, the Langley School Board established a business company, and supported it with a 100-thousand dollar line of credit.

It was hoped the school district business company would generate new revenue to support Langley students.

Unfortunately, despite the hard work of the volunteer directors of the company, it did not succeed.

For that reason, the Board of Education has wound down all operations of the Langley School District Business Company. Any assets it may have will be returned to the school district. There will be no further school district funding for that enterprise.

Let me conclude by re-iterating that public education is a social contract and a partnership.

Teachers are the magic at the front of the room.

Custodians keep our schools safe and clean.

Bus drivers, support staff, skilled trades people, administrators and parents are all critical members of the team.

For everyone who works in the school district, it's much more than a job.

It's about our children and grandchildren.

All of us are passionate about education.

As is the case in any large team, we have differences of opinion. Sometimes they are both bitter and personal.

I'm not suggesting we should forget our differences. There are important issues we must discuss and resolve in the months ahead.

But I am suggesting we should hit the pause button.

We have a big problem to solve.

Let's get that done first.

And let's work together to do it.

There's a child in the middle who is counting on us.

There will come a time when we can all let go and curse the dark.

Right now, let's light a candle.