

# TEACHER

Newsmagazine of the BC Teachers' Federation

## Exorcising the debt-deficit curse

Governments demonize deficits, cut services, demand labour concessions, and drive consumers further into debt

By David Denyer

Education Program Funding for 2009–10 in the updated budget is about \$128 million less than the funding allocated in the February 2009 budget announcement. Out of the blue came the \$110 million cut from the Annual Facilities Grant putting further pressure on boards and ensuring that many go into a deficit position. Boards are understandably fuming at this piece of fiscal mismanagement. In a prime example of what is good for the goose is “not” good for the gander, the minister of education has said that boards would not be allowed to run deficits on the grounds that it is illegal, would ruin BC’s credit rating,

and would just make the deficit situation worse provincially. Cuts to grants for PACs, arts groups, libraries, sports, autism support, etc., have followed furtively and in quick succession.

This abysmal funding situation is aggravated by inevitable inflationary increases, negotiated settlements, increased MSP premiums, a potential 8.7% increase in hydro rates, and a looming HST—all downloaded costs for which there is no recognition in the provincial budget. The province will be in a deficit to the tune of nearly \$3 billion, which sounds significant until you take into account that is out of a total provincial budget of \$40 billion—in simple terms a debt

of about 7.5%. A handy comparison might be, a family with a combined annual income of \$100,000 dollars being in debt to \$7,500 dollars. Most would say “lucky them!”

**Even more puzzling in this government hysteria over debt is the wild unplanned, seeming haphazard nature of the cuts.**

Even more puzzling in this government hysteria over debt is the wild unplanned, seemingly haphazard nature of the cuts. In their embarrassment and shame, the provincial government has lashed out in typical paternal

fashion at small and easy targets. The litany of cuts, with which everyone is now sickeningly familiar, represent virtually insignificant savings on a \$40 billion budget and could have easily been completely avoided with a slightly higher deficit or by maintaining the existing tax structure rather than lowering taxes at a time when governments are short of revenues. Tax cuts (or so called “relief”), the hallmark of conservative economic policy, have contributed significantly to deficits in the current recession. To those who depend on these grants and funds, the cuts, however minimal in the big picture, are devastating and it is the community, families, and vital public service agencies that take the hit.

Deficits in themselves are not the evil entity that current corporate-inspired political polemic would have us believe. As a number of commentators have observed, the countries of the western world would not have recovered from the devastation of World War II without them, and they continued for many years.

It is high time that governments

matured and learned to take such events in their stride. Once more the tired arcane rhetoric of guilt is being trotted out to cow those who dare to question current orthodoxy. “How could we possibly pass on such a ruinous debt load to our children and grandchildren?” What hollow twaddle! So, instead, do we saddle them with poverty, poor health, illiteracy, corporate totalitarianism, and hopelessness? Controls on business (particularly in the financial sector), investment in public services, fair progressive taxation of business as well as individuals, and promotion of common goods and welfare would take us a lot further toward the goals of well-being and happiness.

This is the challenging part. Communitarian ideals have been so devalued through a sustained attack over at least a 40-year period that it becomes very difficult to bring these values forward as a reinvigorated political purpose. Distinguished voices, such as Michael Sandel and Chris Hedges, analyze and speculate on this predicament very ably and reach the same general conclusion although differing on the specifics; there is a need to fill the current vacuum with a grand narrative that will offer some form of transformation that we can believe in. So, what are we left with? Governments that yearn to demonize deficits, to cut services, demand concessions from labour, diminish or eliminate pensions, and drive consumers further into debt, which in turn fuels the speculation and corruption in the financial sector while the rest of us watch helplessly as CEOs wallow in their bonuses.

Why not at least start with deficits as not being the end of the world? Even neo-liberals should understand this. It’s simply the cost of doing business.

David Denyer is an assistant director and editor of *Teacher, BCTF Communication and Campaigns Division*.

For an in-depth analysis of the education budget, see page 8.

## Your pension: The future is worth thinking about

By Rob Taylor

Over the course of the next three months, the BCTF is conducting a membership-wide consultation regarding your pension and the future of indexing. The consultation will provide you with information about the challenge of continuing to provide inflation protection and some solutions. You will be asked for your input so that the BCTF can make recommendations, on your behalf, to the Teachers’ Pension Board of Trustees.

The basic pension you are granted at retirement is safe. The basic account is well-funded, with contributions adjusted as required to continue to guarantee the pension. What is not guaranteed, and has not ever been guaranteed, is full indexing.

What is full indexing? Each year, costs tend to rise. Gas gets more expensive, the cost of groceries follow. Real estate prices tend to go up and services that you purchase cost more. Statistics Canada has a shopping basket of 600 items that they price from year to year. This creates the Consumer Price Index (CPI). In the Teachers’ Pension Plan, the indexing that is applied is either the change in the CPI at the end of September as compared to the year

previous, or the amount that the fund can afford. The Teachers’ Pension Board of Trustees has, in the past, granted the increase in costs to the lifetime pension amount, which has allowed retirees to maintain their purchasing power over time. These increases have been granted because the fund could afford them; however, continued full indexing is unsustainable at the current contribution levels.

In real terms, look at what happens to an average pension over time. In 1990, the average pension granted was \$15,817 per year. By 2008, that pension had risen to \$23,440. That almost \$8,000-per-year raise does not make the retiree richer, it simply means they can buy the same amount of gas and groceries as they could in 1990. Without indexing, prices would have risen almost 50% and the pension would still be \$15,817.

This indexing protection is paid for from a special account, known as the Inflation Adjustment Account (IAA). The IAA receives contributions from both teachers and the employer, with the contributions used to pay indexing. Currently, some of these contributions are also used to pay Extended Health Benefits for retirees.

See PENSIONS page 3

## On the inside

Financial matters, particularly budget woes are on everyone’s mind at present. The cutting and slashing of budgets is particularly evident in education and our research division analyzes the result. A difficult decision is pending over the future of indexing in the pension plan. The background and problem are covered in depth and members should make every effort to be part of the consultation process that has been established by the BCTF.

We are into only four months of a new provincial government and the

minister of education and opposition critic introduce themselves through interviews given earlier this year.

Articles on Namibia, Uganda, and Cuba remind us of the extensive overseas work the BCTF and teachers have been doing for many years. TTOC issues get an airing along with BCeCIS and problems in Aboriginal education.

And, as always, there are a number of items attesting to the incredible work teachers do every day in their classrooms.

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## President's message



Irene Lanzinger

Unless you are lucky enough to be independently wealthy, your share of the Teachers' Pension Plan is likely one of your largest investments. If you do not own your own house, it is almost surely your largest asset. Pension plans everywhere are facing difficult decisions and our Teachers' Pension Plan is no exception. While the basic pension plan is very secure, the ability of the plan to provide increases to adjust for inflation is in jeopardy.

The current plan rules do not require that pension payments are

indexed to cost-of-living increases. However, since the early 1980s the plan has provided increases to pensions according to the rate of inflation.

Indexing pensions is an important aspect of income security for retired teachers. However, the provision of full indexing is not sustainable at current contribution levels. Increases to pensions tied to cost of living increases are paid from the Inflation Adjustment Account. The current actuarial analysis says that if we change nothing the Inflation Adjustment

Account will be depleted by the mid-2020s.

The trustees of our pension plan will be making decisions with respect to changes to the plan to deal with this problem next spring. The BCTF will make submissions to them on behalf of teachers in the province.

In order to get input from teachers before we make our views known to our Teachers' Pension Plan trustees, we are holding pension-plan consultation meetings all over the province. Teachers will have an opportunity to hear from

staff and committee members regarding the fundamentals of the plan, the current situation with respect to inflation protection, and the options to be considered.

There will be a variety of ways in which members can express their views on the solution to the problems. Please ensure that you attend the meeting scheduled in your local and let us know what you think. Collectively, we must decide how to ensure that we all have the opportunity to enjoy a happy, healthy, and well-funded retirement.

## Readers write

### Contradictory cuts

On the opening day of school, two Liberal ministers, Education Minister Margaret MacDiarmid, and Olympics Minister Mary McNeil, accompanied by three cavorting Olympic mascots, presided over the launching at False Creek Elementary School of the 2010 Spirit Program, (estimated cost \$500,000), designed to embrace the 2010 Games and to motivate students to healthier lifestyles.

Coinciding with the hoopla surrounding the ministers' Olympic road show were the following looming and additional cuts to public education in school libraries, lunch programs for disadvantaged students, extracurricular activities, computer hardware and software, and funding for school playgrounds. The list goes on as the Liberals release information only when confidential memos are leaked or pressed to do so by reporters.

All of this, on top of the previously announced cuts to the secondary school competitive sports program, which despite its size, will have a negative impact on secondary school athletics together with the elimination of the \$110 million across-the-board school maintenance and upkeep grants that will affect student safety and security.

When challenged in the past to explain the inconsistency of a provincial government having three cabinet members (add in Minister for Healthy Living and Sports Ida Chong) managing healthy lifestyles, not to mention the spending of \$765-plus millions on the 2010 Games, while simultaneously cutting a piddling \$130,000 grant to high school athletes, the best advice the education minister had to offer was an embarrassing and off-the-wall plea for students to increase "walking, dancing, and playing in the park."

Lastly, the irony of two Liberal ministers descending on False

Creek Elementary School (my neighbourhood school) for their high-powered opening day Olympic announcement was not lost on the school's parents where the president of the school's advisory committee announced a week prior to September 8 that their school would be forced to accelerate its local fundraising drive this year to support key programs.

**Noel Herron**  
Vancouver

### Surrendering the need to be in control

One January afternoon, my Grade 8 homeroom class was driving me to the edge. During science they were noisy, disrespectful, and unfocused. When the school counselor popped in for an impromptu visit, I told him I felt tired and hot. I was getting close to losing it. During math, last block of the day, things got even worse. Students were yelling across the room to each other, there was very little learning taking place—it felt like I was trying to contain a gang of mutinous pirates. I was sweltering, both physically and mentally, and I felt like I had reached my upper limit.

Instead of yelling out and unleashing my rage, I took the opposite approach. I took off my sweatshirt and took a deep breath. Instead of infusing anger into my voice, I sweetened my tone. I focused on helping individual students, who were clearly feeling abandoned and frustrated. By being fully in the moment, surrendering, letting go of my concept of "being in control," I was able to be present for the students.

This conscious decision resulted in a shift. The storm clouds broke and some clear air flowed in. There was a transformation in the space, from claustrophobic tension to wide-open ease, imbued with lightness.

I cherish that moment, and the

wisdom it shared with me. Instead of struggling to hold on, letting go can bring forth moments of beauty.

**Steve Wilson**  
Sooke

### Program left high and dry

I just received my copy of the *Teacher* newsmagazine. You did a wonderful job with my article "Outdoor play/education more important than ever" and especially thank you for all the photos. They do tell the story better than words. We have just started the Grade 4 program at Ruckle Park where we teach students how to make stinging nettle twine, use a magnet, the difference between hardwoods and softwoods, the history of the land (it has a very interesting and long history), and more. Our program won the Island Trust's Community Stewardship award this year.

On a very sad note. I learned on returning from my summer vacation that the provincial government (Gaming Commission) has cut our funding for the program. It is not personal, they cut the funding to all environmental programs. Breaks my heart. Sad postscript. So we will be scrambling to keep this very special program alive.

Thank you for your coverage of our program. It could not have come at a better time. I sent a copy yesterday to Hon. Murray Coell, our MLA.

**Jean Gelwicks**  
Salt Spring Island

### Bill 33 consultation meetings

I sat in on Bill 33 consultation meetings for the intermediate teachers in our school. In our school it seems the compositions are getting worse, not better. It was stressful for these teachers to sit across from the administrator and justify their professional opinion. I was proud of our teachers for saying why the classes were not educationally sound and for saying

what is needed to make the learning situation appropriate for all students. I think that it is particularly so because they know that in the past, their school-based administrator, director of instruction, and superintendent all disagreed with their considered opinions. They may have received a fraction of the support for which they asked. They struggled through the years as best they could. Aware of Dorsey's findings in the arbitration, teachers diligently supported their professional opinions and requested remedies. And then they expectantly asked, what next? Do you think I will get any help? Will this year be different? That all depends on what the lineup of administrators is prepared to sign.

During the Dorsey arbitration teachers listened in shock and disappointment to the testimony of their principals. We have to ask, "What are the forces at work that brought administrators from asking for flexibility so that they didn't have to reconstruct classes when a fourth identified student was enrolled mid-year, next to starting the year with such a class, to now saying classes with six identified students is appropriate?" Surely this is not what they had in mind when they undermined our collective agreement. How can principals stand up for classes that leave little hope for teachers to adequately help all children achieve their potential? I wonder what the

results would be if principals could state their professional opinion by secret ballot? I don't believe every single principal in the province believes every class is educationally appropriate. What are the screws? Demotion to teaching? Firing? Blocked career advancement? Promised advancement? There really is a dark side to administration.

By the time this is printed, we will know if a single principal in the province declared a single class inappropriate for student learning. My hope against hope is that many have, but my money is on not a single one. It is time for administrators to explain why they say our classes are educationally appropriate. Principals need to take responsibility for being the first in line, the closest administrator to the classroom, to say all is well.

When you face great pressure to do more and be more, redirect it to where it belongs. Remember you stood up for your students when it mattered, you are on the record, and you are doing everything you reasonably can. Remember that beyond yourself—no, you can't do it alone—you don't have control over the resources that will make a critical difference to your students. It is now for administrators and government to use their power to make things right.

**Veralynn Munson**  
Terrace

People across BC are modeling the importance of literacy on October 26. Have you taken up the challenge? Have your friends? Join the BCDEAR Facebook group at <http://tinyurl.com/ly7uwz>

October 26, 2009 National School Library Day

Drop Everything  
and **READ**  
Challenge

Reading  
is a beautiful thing

Today,  
every day,  
read for twenty minutes.

The DEAR Challenge is sponsored by the B.C. Teacher-Librarians' Association and the BCTF

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The IAA contribution rates are set out in the Joint Trust Agreement. At present, you—the teacher—contribute 2% of your salary to the IAA, and the employer contributes 1.13%. Those contributions are fixed. Any change must be negotiated between the two partners in the Joint Trust Agreement (the BC Teachers' Federation and government). From the outset, it was clear that the IAA, as negotiated originally, would not be able to guarantee paying full indexing in perpetuity. The reality is that with normal expected inflation, that account will be completely depleted somewhere between 2020 and 2035. If the account is depleted, indexing can continue, but will be limited to paying out the contributions that were received the previous year. As you can imagine, it will be extremely limited.

A second factor affecting the viability of the plan has been the plan demographics. As baby-boomers have been making their way through their teaching careers, the teaching population has aged. Only seven years ago, there were 2.6 working teachers contributing to the pension plan for every retired member; today that ratio has fallen to 1.7, and that number will continue to fall. As well, teachers are living longer. The average lifespan of a female teacher in BC (and women comprise 72% of the teaching population) is just over 88 years. Retirees can reasonably expect to collect a pension for almost as long as they teach. The third pressure point has been the rising cost of providing the Extended Health Benefits at no cost to the retiree. Each year, there are 7% more retirees receiving the subsidy, and the cost of prescription drugs has also been increasing at a rate of 10% per year. This has meant a rise in the premium costs to the Pension Plan. These factors, combined with recent volatile investment returns put added pressure on the IAA.

So what are the options? That is the purpose of the consultation. There are solutions to the situation that will extend the life of the IAA.

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A rise in contributions is the simple answer. If the employer and teachers increase their contributions, the fund could be sustained in perpetuity. To guarantee continued full indexing, the contribution increase would need to be 4% of salary from each partner.

Discontinuing the Extended Health Benefit subsidy would provide a small measure of inflation protection.

Other options include limiting indexing to a set percentage or limiting what parts of the pension receive indexing.

All of the factors leading to this situation, and the possible solutions will be covered much more thoroughly in the local pension consultation meetings happening in your area. Look for information coming from your local teachers' association and make it a priority to attend the meeting. Being well informed will help you give the BCTF good feedback regarding the future of your pension.

We hope to see you there, and to get your input on this extremely important issue.

Rob Taylor is an assistant director, BCTF Income Security Division.

# Support TTOCs by ending preferential callout



By Glen Hansman

Our local, the Vancouver Elementary School Teachers' Association, has had an official TTOC Committee for many years. This committee's chairperson is a voting member of our executive committee, and the TTOC Committee has been a good vehicle for helping to support TTOCs and encouraging them to get organized around issues of concern

**With declining enrolment, and with lower-than-normal use of sick leave, there is less work available for TTOCs currently.**

to them. We had, of course, organized meetings of TTOCs in the past, but this was the first time that TTOCs were given this sort of recognition as a group.

One of the first issues of concern this committee focused on was the preferential callout issue. Preferential callout refers to the practice of teachers and AOs requesting certain TTOCs rather than a random or rotational callout system.

There was no singular perspective on this issue, and it took a while within that committee to gain consensus—but consensus was eventually reached on a position that was pro-seniority and anti-preferential callout. Of course, the practice of preferential callout had been long-standing in Vancouver, so it wasn't as if an immediate change could be made.

What occurred over the next three years was a gradual change in culture due, in large part, to the continued dedication of our TTOC committee to this issue, and willingness of our executive committee to take it on. The TTOCs brought the concern back to VESTA general meetings and staff-rep assemblies numerous times; we sent information out to the schools for discussion; and we published various articles in our newsletter (from a variety of points of view) on this topic. What was eventually recognized by our local, as an organization, was that the seniority principle, principles of professionalism, our Code of Ethics, our concerns about social justice, and the new Vince Ready language on on-scale pay for TTOCs all affected how we viewed this issue.

In the 2006-07 school year, our general meeting finally took the position against preferential callout for TTOCs, and thus our responsibility as an organization was to push our management and trustees to make changes, which we have had some success doing.

Currently, our HR department is

not allowing preferential callout to continue—in part because of the number of “permanent TTOCs” (that is, continuing contract teachers who currently are not in a continuing position and instead are on the TTOC list temporarily), but also, we hope, because there is a recognition of the inequities preferential callout creates.

The situation is complicated. Right now there are 1,150 TTOCs in Vancouver. This number has remained constant for the past decade or so. With declining enrolment, and with lower-than-normal use of sick leave, there is less work available for TTOCs currently. Given the size of Vancouver, about 300 TTOCs are needed on any given day to accommodate absences of contract teachers. Of the 1,150, about two-thirds work in other districts and many are not available every day because of life circumstances, so the 300 isn't always guaranteed. This is part of the reason why we agreed to a second, *Limited TTOC List*, which would be used only when there isn't anyone available on the regular list.

With regard to retired contract teachers applying for and accepting offers to go on the TTOC list, we also have to be mindful that these individuals are also workers that have every right to work and (like everyone else) have a variety of reasons why they are choosing to work at this time. Retirees are accepted to the regular TTOC list in Vancouver, as well as the limited

TTOC list for those seeking casual work. Given the changes to the *BC Human Rights Code* and elimination of mandatory retirement, it can't really be any other way at this point—though the concerns of some younger TTOCs, particularly those needing to pay off student loans, need to be acknowledged.

Over the past few years, VESTA has supported the motions coming to RAs and AGMs pushing for an end to preferential callout and for seniority-based callout for TTOCs—now a bargaining objective provincially, one that we hope makes it to bargaining table(s) in 2011. (See 3.B. in your *Members' Guide to the BCTF* to find all the bargaining objectives—in the list you'll find a new one at 3.B.03 from the 2007 BCTF AGM that states: “That the BCTF and its locals work to secure contract language that provides for seniority-based TOC callout procedures that take into account areas of expertise.” Similarly, the February 2008 BCTF Representative Assembly carried the following: “That BCTF locals work to eliminate the practice of contract teachers calling out, selecting, or expressing a preference for particular TOCs to fill a teacher absence.”)

In the meantime, we all need to support our TTOC colleagues, and not put ourselves (as colleagues) in the position of evaluating TTOCs and their teaching. Let's work together to make all schools welcoming to every TTOC that comes in—making sure they know

**...we all need to support our TTOC colleagues, and not put ourselves (as colleagues) in the position of evaluating TTOCs and their teaching.**

the name and location of the BCTF staff rep when they begin their work day, making sure they're included in recess and lunchtime conversations, making sure they receive the regularly scheduled prep of the contract teacher for whom they have been called, making sure their other rights under the Collective Agreement are protected, and

making sure they aren't made to feel they have to sell themselves to colleagues in order to get work.

Glen Hansman is past-president, VESTA and a BCTF Executive Committee member-at-large.

## Call for submissions: TTOC task force

The BCTF Executive Committee created a task force in response to a significant motion that was carried at the 2009 AGM. The task force consists of five members: Avi Gupta (Quesnel), Christina McDermott (North Okanagan-Shuswap), Brenda Stewart (retired teacher, Nanaimo), Robert Tarswell (EC, Princeton), Wendy Turner (local president, Cranbrook), and Kelly Shields (staff). The task force will have three, two-day meetings to complete its work with a report back to the 2010 AGM.

The task force will report to the December 10-12, 2009, Executive Committee meeting.

The task force is seeking input from the BCTF membership on:

1. The challenges, benefits, and reasons for retired teachers returning to work as a TTOC.
2. The impact on the employment of non-retired TTOCs.
3. TTOC callout systems in BC that successfully address these issues.

\* The task force has taken the position that this is a broad mandate, e.g. submissions can be made on callout systems that members may wish existed, such as seniority callout, or callout models used by other unions or employers that are successful.

All submissions are welcome. Submissions may be made by local/Federation committees or individual members.

Send your submissions via e-mail to: [toctaskforce@bctf.ca](mailto:toctaskforce@bctf.ca) or by mail to the BCTF:

Attention: Kelly Shields  
BCTF Task Force on TTOC Work in BC  
100 – 550 West 6th Avenue  
Vancouver, BC V5Z 4P2

**Submission deadline:** October 28, 2009 at 5:00 p.m.

## Looking back

### 70 years ago

The sponsors of education are weeping at the Wailing Wall, for it is known that the many youth in our land are as backward in reading as were the gentry of the Dark Ages. Many students seeking admission to the university have a reading ability commensurate with the sixth grade. A few of us predicted long years ago that this would occur, but we were called croakers then. It was decided that children were reading too slowly, perhaps only a word at a time. So Silent Reading was introduced on high authority and the teachers loved it, for they silently watched as the children ran their eyes over the pages to see which could finish first. The average teacher forgot that it is not the eye that reads, but the mind.

– October 1939, *The BC Teacher*

### 50 years ago

Whereas it is our opinion that over-crowded classrooms have a detrimental effect on the efficiency

of teachers and the achievement of pupils; Be it resolved that the Federation adopt as policy, and urge the Department of Education to recognize, the following limitations on elementary class sizes: (a) That for an average teaching situation the maximum class be 30 pupils (b) That in the primary grades the maximum class be 25 pupils. Department of Education reply: The maxima suggested in the resolution would seem totally unrealistic.

– Sept./Oct. 1959, *The BC Teacher*

### 30 years ago

A teacher's interaction with the class in the first few weeks of school determines, in large measure, how they will work together for the rest of the year. It is during this crucial time that either a negative or a positive pattern is established. If the pattern is a negative one, it becomes very difficult to break, and daily confrontations become a way of life. One of the techniques I have found to work

well in establishing a positive pattern is positive phrasing.

– Sept./Oct. 1979, *The BC Teacher*

### 10 years ago

On a daily basis we come face to face with a sad little secret in Canada: childhood poverty. It's thought that since we don't have the movie version of poverty, with crippled children begging in the streets, we don't have poverty, but that ignores the reality that Canada's childhood poverty rate is officially a crippling 20.5%. One child in five lives below the low-income cut-off of Statistics Canada that is typically considered the poverty line for industrialized countries. Our children don't beg on the streets because, as an industrialized country, we force their parents to beg in the welfare offices.

– Oct. 1999, *Teacher* newsmagazine

Chris Bocking, Keating Elementary School, Saanich

# Seniority-based callout

By Sandra Dueck

The BCTF Representative Assembly, May 29, 2009, passed the following motion:

*That the BCTF have a province-wide campaign to educate the members about seniority-based callout for TTOCs.*

There is a lot of fear, misunderstanding, and resistance to the idea of seniority-based callout and we need to begin an informed discussion about this issue as a union, prior to taking action.

There are three reasons why action is urgently required:

## Retention

Contrary to the widely held view that TTOC work is only a brief transitional stage prior to working in a contract position, a significant number of TTOCs across the province presently find themselves working as TTOCs for extended periods, sometimes for many years.

The average length of time all new teachers stay on the TTOC lists will increase in the near future when the hiring rate into contract positions slows down, as districts deal with budget shortfalls by laying off contract teachers. Added to this is the problem of declining enrolments, again at least for the near future. This means new teachers will be spending more time on TTOC lists before they are hired into contract positions. Some student teachers are now being told they should expect to work as TTOCs for three to four years before getting hired into a contract position.

In order to attract and retain new teachers, it is important that TTOC work be seen not as a transitional stage, but an actual class of work, and that some kind of fair distribution of that work is implemented.

## Fostering professional autonomy

Given the continuing assault on public education being conducted by the current provincial govern-

ment, it is even more important for the long-term well-being of the BCTF and the cause of public education, to foster a sense of professional autonomy among new teachers. When people feel they have been hired based on their individual merit and their professional training, and when they are respected and fairly rewarded for their contributions, as they will be with seniority-based callout, they learn to develop confidence in their professional judgment and ownership of their profession. This confidence can sustain them through their entire teaching careers.

It takes much longer to develop that self-confidence and ownership if you feel that you get TTOC work based on random chance or luck, or good connections, or your ability to please your seniors, or by having out-competed your colleagues.

## Union building

Those of us who support seniority-based callout see it as a first step toward getting seniority-based hiring. We know that this will need to be negotiated with our employers, and we are aware that our employers have strong resistance to the idea. This does not mean it is an impossible task, but in order for it to become a reality, demand for seniority will need to become a bargaining priority among our members. We think that once new teachers get used to the idea that they are entitled to be treated with fairness and respect as TTOCs, they will expect the same treatment when they get hired into contract positions. And then they will start to ask for seniority there as well.

This is how you build a union—show you care about newcomers, not by forcing them to compete with each other for the favour of their seniors, but by welcoming them with fair and transparent treatment that respects their intelligence, commitment, and training, and by offering them the peace of mind that comes from knowing that if they serve diligently and faithfully

they will be rewarded with increasing income and financial security, even if they don't achieve a contract position as soon as they had hoped, and above all, by showing them that their union is willing to fight for that protection on their behalf.

When I was on the provincial TTOC committee in 2006, I had the opportunity to present a workshop about teaching on call to student teachers at UBC. Many of them were shocked to learn they would have no seniority protection upon being hired as TTOCs. One young woman, however, announced to the room that she had no worries because "my mother is a teacher, and she and her friends will make sure I get work." There is no workplace that I can think of where that kind of disparity leads to loyalty and solidarity among colleagues.

We are all aware of the problems I'm talking about; we know they are long-standing; and we know there aren't that many solutions available to choose from. It is more than time to give our full attention and commitment to seniority-based callout as the fairest and most transparent of them. Maybe seniority callout has flaws, maybe there are exceptions that need to be considered, and maybe there are concerns that need to be addressed. But despite this, we need to start talking about ways to make it work. It won't happen if we don't start.

The public education system is under a lot of pressure now; maybe this has always been the case. Whatever the reason, it is important that our union actually is a union of professionals, that we stand united, and that we show concern for our newest and most vulnerable members. It is the best way to ensure the future viability of the profession, the union, and the public education system.

*Sandra Dueck teaches in Burnaby and is a member of the BCTF's TTOC Advisory Committee.*

*Note: The views expressed in this article are personal and do not reflect the position of the TTOCAC Committee.*



# Photo educators: We need to dance!

By Cheryl Kay

I wrote this piece in response to Brent Chudiak's article, "Photo Educators: We need to talk!" in *Teacher*, March 2009.

It all started at a dance educators' conference. It was the first National Dance Association Pedagogy Conference held in Dallas, Texas, in January 2003. As a presenter, I was asked to introduce photographer Steve Clarke to his dance photography session participants. As I waited to do that, I was fascinated with the samples of his fine photography that were displayed. The walls outside the room were lined with images of dancers captured in the act of dancing. Their expressions ranged from the ecstatic to the subtly intent. As I watched a slide presentation of still more photographed dancers, projected off to the side, it was as if I knew I was in the presence of dance. I was captivated and I felt the familiar surge of creative anticipation building as I wondered if these artistically intriguing ideas were ideas that I could translate into my work with secondary dance students back home in Burnaby.

In his session, Steve talked about the dancer "Seeing While Being Seen" and he shared ideas about how transformative it can be for dancers to see themselves "re-presented" as dancers through the photographic image. Dancers have the inner experience of dancing but until they see either still or moving images of themselves, they never really "see themselves while being seen." Some of my students look at me a bit cross-eyed while I go on about it but the idea has led to some interesting creative work with dance themes in photography for them. While some students may never really get the idea at a cognitive level, I believe that each one benefits in a creative embodied kinesthetic way just by participating in the project.

Sometime later, after returning to Burnaby, I ran into Lisa Parsonson, our district consultant, Visual and Performing Arts, and learned that she had just purchased a class set of cameras for use throughout the district. I was able to book the cameras for the following spring and thus began my experimentation with dance and photography as a dance teacher working in a secondary VPA elective dance program.

The goal of the project is to produce meaningful artistic renderings of dance, not just smile-for-the-camera shots. One of the most valuable parts of the project is the written reflection that students are asked to do about one selected photograph of themselves. I think they gain meaningful insights into their identity as dance artists when they think and write about the experience of what happens "when I dance..." This has become a favourite project and early in the year, students invariably ask when we're going to do this project.

In 1998, we received a BC ministry-approved dance curriculum; so dance as a fine-arts elective at the secondary level is a newcomer on the fine-arts scene. Dance is the little sister of the fine arts and is fragile. It is not well understood for its place in schools. Therefore, in addition to using photography educationally with students, I have also become aware of the advocacy value of this work. Since then I have combined this student work into photo-stories about dance in education and the presentation of these serve to educate students, parents, fellow teachers, administrators, school board members, and others about the meaning of the arts experience that students have in dance class. I display the students' artwork outside the dance studio and sit back and watch as most people who wander by, stop to contemplate the stories that these photos tell. It becomes a potential arts experience for the entire school population as well as a meaningful glimpse into what goes on in the dance studio.

When I read Chudiak's article, I realized that I, too, am a photo educator. I still haven't found the white light balance button on the digital cameras I use, but I definitely get the connections that students make when they combine photography with their dancing to create images such as those presented here. My technical knowledge of cameras is limited and my strategy is to put the cameras into the hands of students and send them off to capture shots of shapes, movement, or reflections. It's sort of like mixing apple slices together with sugar and cinnamon. Something delicious is sure to happen.

I agree with Chudiak—there is a need for a photo educators community. I would benefit from some Pro D on using photography in my dance-teaching situation and so could others who are trying to incorporate this technology into their teaching practices. Thanks to the advent of digital cameras, photography has become accessible in teaching situations such as mine. I have seen how students' learning about themselves is transformative and the presentation of images to program supporters and advocates educates people and creates a deeper understanding of the dance arts experience that students have in schools.

I look forward to that upcoming conference in Salmon Arm and, yes, I am the caretaker of many student photographs of dance that could be shared with fellow photo educators at that time.

*Cheryl Kay teaches at Moscrop Secondary School, Burnaby, e-mail: gottadance22@hotmail.com*

*Seeing While Being Seen: Dance Photography and the Creative Process*, Steve Clarke. A highly creative, philosophically interesting, book of dance photography that is well worth the gaze. [www.ahperd.org/NDA](http://www.ahperd.org/NDA)

# Corporate hucksters hijack Me to We Day

By Conor Murphy

As teachers and throngs of students from all over the Metro area filed into GM Place last Tuesday, September 28, for the *Me to We Day*, we were greeted by zealous teams of exuberant volunteers. These youth leaders worked the cavernous room so that by the time the lights dimmed in the hockey rink, it felt more like a revivalist gathering under a giant tent. After all, we were about to hear from some of the most inspirational and heroic figures of our time including anthropologist and environmental activist Jane Goodall, actress and human rights crusader Mia Farrow, and his holiness the Dalai Lama.

The crowd of 16,000 erupted into a euphoric roar as television co-hosts Ben Mulroney and Tanya Kim took to the stage. Mulroney encouraged us all to take out our mobile phones and helped choreograph a glow-in-the-dark cell phone wave using the thousands of lighted screens. Cell phones, we came to learn, were a big part of this event. Telus was one of the key sponsors and for the next six hours we were captive to its logo and scrolling text messages projected on the bottom half of the massive video screens. At regular intervals, our handsome hosts reminded us to text our brilliant ideas to the Telus number displayed above. But the corporate huckster-ism did not stop here. A representative from every major sponsor had their turn at the podium to talk about their product

and introduce the parade of passionate speakers and performers to the thousands of impressionable young people in the audience. The corporate elite from financial institutions, the hospitality industry, and media conglomerates were given the chance to link their brand to the social justice, peace, and environmental movement. One business celebrity, when asked what advice he had for the thousands of students in attendance, emphasized, above all, the importance of studying marketing in school. Even Premier Gordon Campbell, whose government policies have compounded the deep poverty in this province, was given an opportunity to address the enthusiastic crowd.

Some of my teaching colleagues were uncomfortable about being at an event with such obvious corporate branding when its motto was "Be the Change." Me to We is a private enterprise launched by brothers Craig and Marc Kielburger. The company's website boasts that 50% of its after-tax net profits from selling books, music, t-shirts, and travel opportunities go to its charitable partner, Free the Children. (What happens to the other half of the revenue generated is not clear in its promotional material.) Free the Children, for its part, is an international network dedicated to "children helping children through education and development programs."

I began to worry that this audience, comprised of thousands of school-aged children, might be

unable to deconstruct the conflicted messaging. Were they aware, for example, that the Disney corporation, on stage promoting its online Penguin Club, has an atrocious record when it comes to overseas labour practices? Did these kids understand that many of the companies taking the stage support governments committed to reducing or eliminating corporate taxes—revenue that otherwise might be used to look after the most vulnerable in our communities? Did these children recognize that our culture of mass consumption promoted by global companies has resulted in the heartbreaking human misery and overwhelming environmental degradation—problems they were being challenged to alleviate? Were they simply too young to recognize the hypocrisy of this extravaganza?

The 12-year-old sitting next to me seemed oblivious to the contradictions. He devoured an overpriced basket of factory-farmed chicken nuggets as Jane Goodall alerted us to the continuing destruction of habitat threatening the chimpanzee. When the lights went up, the exhausted crowd of youngsters trudged up the stadium stairs that were now coated with a thin layer of spilled Coca Cola. As I headed into the overcast skies, I felt dispirited. How can any of us from the Me to We Day feel inspired to "be the change" when our bag full of free goodies is advertising a national drugstore chain?

*Conor Murphy teaches at John Henderson Elementary, Vancouver.*

# Queer education around the world

By James Chamberlain

In contemporary times, it is sometimes difficult to believe that homosexuality remains illegal in 77 countries and that people can be imprisoned for 10 years or more simply because they love someone of the same gender. Five countries in Africa (including parts of Nigeria and Somalia) as well as Iran enforce the death penalty for anyone accused of homosexuality. Imagine being fired, imprisoned or worse for being "out" at school or for advocating for equality for lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) students and citizens!

In August, I attended the Out-rights conference in Copenhagen, Denmark, and heard first hand of the challenges and successes from educators around the world.

Research from Belgium, Canada, England, Finland, Sweden, and the USA show that:

1. LGBT students and those perceived to be so are at much greater risk for verbal and physical harassment while at school.
2. Students who do not conform to rigid notions of masculinity and femininity are often targets.
3. Students at the secondary and post secondary levels often do not report incidents of homophobic or transphobic harassment (even those they witness) because they believe school officials will do little or nothing to intervene.
4. The main problem in dealing with LGBT issues in schools is continued silence and inaction on the part of teachers, principals, and other school board officials.
5. LGBT youth are at much greater risk than their heterosexual peers for suicide and substance abuse.
6. More LGBT students are coming out at younger ages (within secondary school) with few, if any, supports in place for them.

## What do teachers say?

Teachers and researchers all spoke of the fact that homophobia was one problem, but so was heteronormativity. That is the assumption and belief that heterosexuality is and should be the norm in society. Gender role stereotyping was discussed at length and many teachers spoke of students needing to fit a narrowly defined mould in order to "fit in" and avoid being targets for abuse.

All agreed that their colleagues should be teaching about the negative impacts of gender role stereotyping from elementary school onwards and that teachers should examine their own practices (implicit and explicit messages and actions towards students) which may reinforce heteronormativity.

**Teachers and researchers all spoke of the fact that homophobia was one problem, but so was heteronormativity. That is the assumption and belief that heterosexuality is and should be the norm in society.**

## Global actions

Many jurisdictions have produced resources for teachers to use to examine these issues and challenge homophobia and transphobia in the classroom and school environment.

1. "Pride and Prejudice" is a resource package that was successfully piloted in an all-boys Catholic school before teachers began using it extensively in one region of Australia.
2. "Challenging Homophobia in Schools" is a handbook produced by Gay and Lesbian Educators of BC ([www.galebc.org](http://www.galebc.org)) used in schools in BC.
3. The Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network ([www.glsen.org](http://www.glsen.org)) also produces many resources for teachers to use in the United States.
4. The Norwegian Ministry of Education is currently in the process of developing a grade by grade handbook on how to include LGBT issues in classrooms.
5. In Brazil, LGBT issues are part of the school curriculum there and teachers are supported to teach them.
6. The National

Education Association ([www.nea.org](http://www.nea.org)) in the USA provides free workshops to teachers on LGBT issues as do some teacher unions in Canada.

7. Many schools in the USA and Canada support gay straight alliance (GSA) clubs for students in secondary schools where students can find safety and support.

## Global concerns and challenges

In Lithuania, a law was passed in July 2009 that prohibits the discussion of homosexuality in schools and banned it from any public information that could be seen or referenced by children.

In Poland, despite the training of 500 teachers in 2004 as part of their Campaign Against Homophobia, the official line is that there should be no discussion of homosexuality in schools. There are no openly LGBT teachers in Poland, for fear that their teaching contracts will not be renewed. According to educators there, gay male teachers would be accused of being pedophiles if they came out.

In some countries like Peru, Columbia, and Chile work has begun to document the lives of LGBT people. One of their goals is to put a face to LGBT issues through the power of storytelling by documenting LGBT people's lives and realities. In Namibia, the Rainbow Project worked with print media to train reporters on the reality of LGBT people's lives so that media stories about LGBT people are more accurate. In Indonesia, LGBT people are being interviewed to collect and tell success stories and document violations of human

rights. All of these projects are being supported by The Global Alliance for LGBT Education ([www.lgbt-education.info](http://www.lgbt-education.info)).

All countries spoke of the need for more openly LGBT educators to serve as positive roles for students. Many described the challenges of being out at school in unsupportive environments. We need to do a better job at changing the "hearts and minds" of colleagues, parents, and educational leaders on the need for LGBT inclusive education.

## Examining our privilege and practice

In many countries, educators have a fair degree of privilege in comparison to the rest of society. We have job security, good pay and benefits, and can be "out" in the classroom without fear of losing our jobs. Along with these privileges also comes a responsibility to question the status quo and work to change schools and the education system at large to be inclusive of all students.

**Our classrooms need to become more inclusive as we challenge homophobia, heteronormativity, transphobia, and sexism. Ideally, we should work with teachers around the world to think and act locally and globally on LGBT issues.**

Dealing with homophobia, transphobia, and heteronormativity are relatively new topics in the history of education. Therefore, this is a prime time to reflect on your classroom practice and ask yourself:

- How am I improving education to make it more inclusive of LGBT people's realities?
  - What am I doing to make my school safer for LGBT students and those perceived to be so?
  - How is my classroom supportive of LGBT students and children from same gender families?
- Reflecting on your privilege and practice informs how you can be a change maker.

## Next steps for change

Educators in many countries want to see training programs with mandatory courses on LGBT issues prior to teacher certification. To that end, some are working toward having mandatory requirements for LGBT issues in the curriculum. This would make it obligatory that all teachers deal with LGBT topics.

Many agreed progress has been made within teacher unions in terms of changing policies, developing Pro-D opportunities, writing lesson plans, and starting GSA clubs in schools. At the same time, we were reminded that we cannot impose our local programs on other parts of the world. There is no "one-size-fits-all" strategy for dealing with LGBT issues in schools.

We clearly need to share resources, ideas, knowledge, classroom practices, and expertise. Our classrooms need to become more inclusive as we challenge homophobia, heteronormativity, transphobia, and sexism. Ideally, we should work with teachers around the world to think and act locally and globally on LGBT issues.

Attitudes toward homosexuality have recently changed for the better, thanks in part to the work of progressive educators. While there is still much to do, we can be optimistic that schools are becoming safer and more inclusive places for LGBT students and same gender families.

At the same time, the people in 77 countries of the world who have no voice, rights, or ability to advocate for themselves are depending on us to be their advocates. We enjoy the freedom to do this work without fear of imprisonment or death. Let's use this privilege wisely and not squander it. Now is a perfect time for you to educate yourself on LGBT issues and act. Remember that any action, no matter how small, is a step towards LGBT equality and acceptance.

James Chamberlain is an assistant director, BCTF Professional and Social Issues Division.

## BCTF Cuba project: Collaboration in Guantánamo

By Mick Loosemore

The name *Guantánamo* has become synonymous with injustice through the infamous US naval base toward the eastern end of Cuba. It's unfortunate that this association leaves most of us with that single impression. The real Guantánamo is a vibrant city of some 400,000 friendly souls, apparently oblivious to the contraventions of human rights going on just 30 km away; in fact, the only reference you're likely to hear is *la base ilegal*, which leaves little to the imagination about the thinking of Guantane-meros toward their unwelcome neighbours.

I had the opportunity to spend some time there last March, along with three colleagues as part of the BCTF Cuba Project, a 10-year-old BCTF program, in which a team of BC teachers spends two weeks in Cuba as volunteers, delivering workshops in language teaching

methodology and language enhancement for Cuban teachers of English. But for all participants, it is as much an interchange of ideas as it is a delivery of pedagogical methods. We learn as much from our Cuban colleagues as they do from us; we are all involved in the same venture: not only to improve ourselves as language teachers, but also to understand the similarities, differences, and challenges that exist within our respective societies.

Program locations change each year, depending on the wishes of both the union and the Ministry of Education. This year the program was located in *El Oriente*—Manzanillo, Santiago de Cuba, and Guantánamo—three cities with distinct characters, but with similar vibrancy and warmth.

After making preparatory arrangements with the English Department at Santiago's pedagogico (teacher's college), I traveled in the ubiquitous union-owned Soviet-era Lada, which

might or might not always make it, to Guantánamo, fully expecting to arrive in a city emblazoned with anti-yanqui billboards, but instead finding a city seemingly unaware of the mystique that might be expected from such a globally infamous name: Guantánamo.

**The Cuba Project is open to active BCTF members. More information about the Cuba Project can be found on the BCTF website—[bctf.ca](http://bctf.ca), including an application for participation on future Cuba Project teams.**

The driver introduced me to the gregarious Dr. Guillermo Acosta, director of international relations, at the pedagogico, whose enthusiasm immediately destroyed my expectations of a routine organization of the program. My colleagues back in Canada, who were likely running on

empty completing their winter sessions, had prepared materials for three, two-and-a-half-day workshops. Guillermo (given names only, please!) had other ideas. He presented me—initially to my dismay—with a finely detailed hour-by-hour, dawn-to-well-after-dusk schedule of 10 days of both academic and cultural activities. Well, that was my job: to delicately negotiate any misunderstandings or mistaken expectations: communication with Cuba is not always easy, due to frequent Internet interruptions and the outrageous cost of phone calls—\$2.50 per minute!

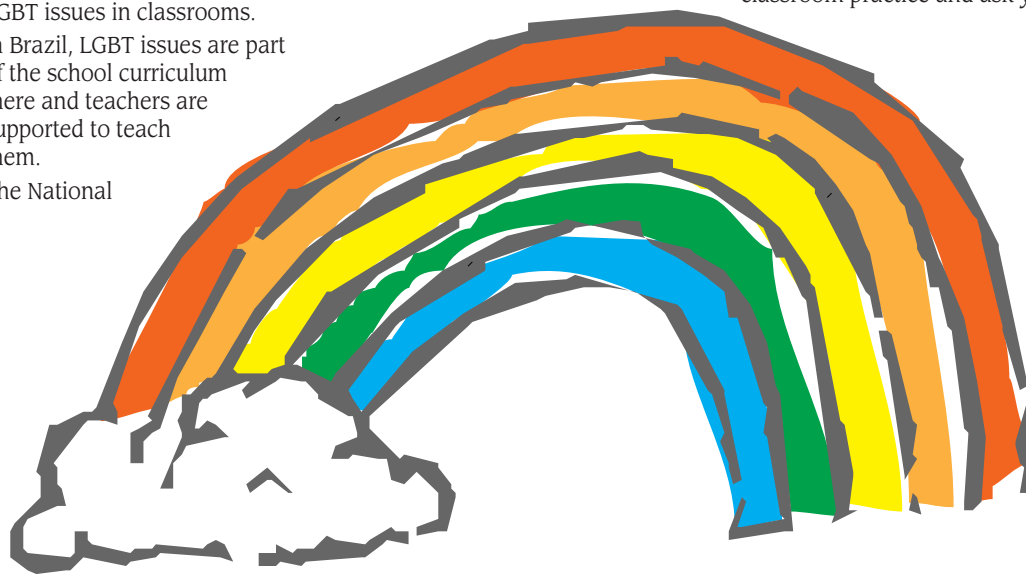
Amongst Guillermo's many qualities was his flexibility: how can we modify the schedule to meet the expectations of all colleagues, Cuban and Canadian? No worries. Despite their meagre \$30-a-month salaries for a six-day work week, Cuban teachers are enthusiastic about their jobs, and the presence of native English speakers was, without exaggeration, a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for many. Guantánamo is not on the itinerary of many travelers, and *la base ilegal* isn't the spot for a Sunday picnic.

And so it came to be that my

colleagues (and eventually I) spent a busy, inspiring, energetic two weeks there, exchanging ideas by day, absorbing culture in the evening, and sharing basic accommodation in a drab, elevator-less concrete highrise. The neighbours took very little notice of these strangers pedalling away in the morning after loading their teaching materials into yet another chugging white Lada, which returned at night, the indefatigable Felix still at the wheel, to whisk them off to Guillermo's pre-arranged event. Maybe traditional dancing, maybe drama, maybe storytelling, maybe a hot night at the disco, but always entertaining, always a cultural immersion and sharing.

Travelling is an opportunity for personal growth, and when interaction with locals is a built-in component, the opportunities for learning multiply. As the team leader for this year's Cuba Project, I consider myself extremely fortunate to have been able to expand my horizons beyond what I had experienced as a teacher-participant in two previous programs.

Mick Loosemore is an adult educator, Surrey.



# Interviews with Margaret MacDiarmid and Robin Austin

By David Denyer

The Honourable Margaret MacDiarmid, minister of education, and Robin Austin, education critic for the NDP, were both kind enough to agree to be interviewed by the BCTF. The same set of questions was asked of each without any prior preparation. The responses are recorded exactly as given with no editorializing. The only edits that have been made are the elimination of repetitions and excessive use of ...ums, ...ers, and ...you knows.



**The Honourable Margaret MacDiarmid**  
Minister of Education



**Robin Austin**  
NDP Education Critic

## Interview with Margaret MacDiarmid

### What has been your background and career thus far?

I was a family doctor for 23 years, 17 of those were in Trail, BC, where I did a full breadth of family medicine activity, so I took care of my patients in my office, but also I did house calls, palliative care in their homes. I took care of my patients in hospitals, assisted at their surgery, and worked in the emergency department. Everything except for delivering babies, that's one thing I didn't do. I also did some various kinds of volunteer work; probably the most fun thing was being a pianist—rehearsal and performance pianist—for the Rossland Light Opera Players, a very talented group of people. I was on the Canadian Medical Association Board for 6 years and the British Columbia Medical Association for 12 years and I was the president of BCMA in 2006–07 which is what really triggered my interest in politics. And I wasn't actually involved in politics except as a voter until just a couple of years ago.

### What personal qualities, attributes, experiences do you feel that you bring to this position?

I have a lot of curiosity and interest in people and very strong communication skills which I honed over my career as a GP—that's work where it's very much about listening, problem-solving, helping people, and trying to make a difference for them. My work on the various boards I've been on has taught me a lot about governance and also how to be an effective board member and how to work well in groups. I'm finding those skills very useful in my work now, in caucus and in cabinet.

When I was BCMA president, a lot of that was about bringing parties together and finding common ground, working to find solutions, and from time to time conflict resolution was definitely important. I learned a lot in that area about government relations and that was where I really got much more interested in actually becoming an MLA and, certainly in my work as a GP, I really could see, pretty much every day, how important education is. I would

have patients come in to see me with a health problem, and at the root of that health problem was education; I actually found this a bit frustrating in my work. And had they had educational opportunities, I know that it would have made a difference, and I likely wouldn't have had them in my office with those health problems. I certainly felt when I was working as a GP that I was making a difference in my patients' lives one at a time. But as part of government, as a member of government as an MLA, my goal is to be part of setting and implementing policies that will make a positive difference in the lives of all British Columbians.

The other thing, from a personal point of view, is that I was a breast cancer patient a couple of years ago and I was treated with chemotherapy, radiation, and surgery. And that was a very educational experience for me. One of the things I learned is actually how strong I am, also how to ask for help and accept it, and how valuable each and every day is, and I also learned that people are just inordinately kind and generous, which is a good thing to know.

### What will be your priorities as minister of education?

I'm very keen on all of our early-learning initiatives, so we'll be implementing full-day Kindergarten starting in September of next year and we're going to start some kind of full-day learning for four-year-olds as soon as we're able to do that. At the same time, we're going to continue to focus on other areas of early learning such as our StrongStart program.

The other thing I want to do is make progress on achievement for our Aboriginal students. We are making progress but there's a lot more to be done so it's very important to me. And I'd like to meet as many students and educators as I can and visit as many schools as possible, meeting with students and educators but also with parents. I think by listening to them individually, and hearing all the different ideas they bring, I think that's going to be very enriching for me.

### Do you believe teachers are adequately supported in their work?

I'm not sure about this. I feel I need to spend time talking with teachers to find out what their needs are and if they believe their needs are being met. My sense is that some teachers will say they're doing fine, while others will say they need more support but it will be in quite different areas. It's clear that teachers are not all the same—they're a very heterogeneous group, I'm quite sure.

I'm really looking forward to meeting with, and listening to, teachers all around the province this year. And I've got to say, I've already met a number of teachers—some of them at meetings, and some of them in the various places I've visited like within Vancouver and Victoria and, most recently, Smithers. And every time I've met with teachers individually, I'm just

so impressed with how dedicated they are with their students and with the creative things they're doing in their classrooms. So, lots for me to learn there.

### Is the funding of education sufficient?

I'm sure as you're aware, our funding has steadily increased since 2001 in spite of enrolment that has declined. We have excellent student outcomes on national and international testing which I think is a really good measurement of our system. We do have a real challenge in BC, like the rest of North America, because of our declining enrolment. It's just the reality of the demographics of our times. We've got about 60,000 fewer students this fall than we had in 2001.

Our government's priority is to focus funding on student and classroom learning so what we're going to do is look very hard for administrative and other savings and then take that funding and channel it back into the classroom. So I think that there is currently adequate funding but it may not be distributed in the best way and that we may be able to put more resources with our students in the classroom by shifting the resources that we have currently.

### What are your views on testing?

I think testing is an important part of the whole system. I, personally, did not ever write any kind of exam until the first year of university other than just some Royal Conservatory music exams, and I felt that that was a weakness in my education. I felt it difficult to be writing an exam that was a very serious thing when I'd never done it before. But setting aside my personal experience, our government is committed to testing including FSA and provincial exams. We have a commitment to parents and the public and we made a commitment regarding FSA which was very clearly articulated in the throne speech in February 2009. We have accountability to parents, to students, to taxpayers, and the FSA is one of the measures of our performance and of our education system's performance. We know that students who are not presently meeting expectations on FSA testing in Grades 4 and 7 are much less likely to succeed in school and much less likely to graduate from high school, and we know that if we can identify these students we can actually put extra resources in place to increase their chance of success and we owe it to them to make sure that we have the information and that we act on it. We're certainly very willing to work with teachers and with all of our partners to improve all of our testing so that we make sure we're doing the very best that we can for our students.

## Interview with Robin Austin

### What has been your background and career thus far?

I'm an immigrant to this country. I came in 1980 at the age of 21, straight out of university with a degree in business and a specialty in hotel management. I spent close to 20 years in the food business, working in large hotels, owning my own restaurant for a while, and was catering manager at UBC for five years.

I moved to Terrace in 1995, working in the hotel business still and then when the forestry industry plunged, I found myself unemployed. At the age of 40, I returned to university and got a social work degree. During that time I got to spend two years as a teachers' support worker, a CUPE member, an SSA, in the Terrace area, School District 82.

Immediately after finishing my degree, I went back into the school system and worked as a community schools co-ordinator in a number of downtown schools in the Terrace area.

In 2005, I threw my hat into the ring to run for public life and then became a politician representing Skeena.

### What personal qualities, attributes, experiences do you feel that you bring to this position?

I've spent a lot of time working in the school system. But I think the greatest experience for me was 10 years that my wife and I were foster parents. That process led to a lot of personal growth in both of us. When you take on the responsibility of raising somebody else's children, particularly children who by virtue of the fact that they're in care of the government they have a whole range of difficulties that you have to try overcome and compensate. My wife and I worked a lot with the teachers of these children to make sure that they got the best they could possible get out of the school system at the time.

I've seen quite a few different school systems; I lived in France for three years, Holland for three years. So I think, all in all, I've witnessed a lot of different school systems, of course in Britain as well. So I'm hoping that all of these experiences will help me to do this job.

### What will be your priorities as NDP education critic?

That's very clear. I spent four years in public life, listening to what the government has been saying, and hearing one mantra coming across the aisle. That was the message delivered very clearly by the former Minister of Education Shirley Bond, which was that times

have never been so good for education, and that the amount of money put into education funding was at an all-time high. I come from a school district where we had to go to a four-day school week due to lack of funding, and I know that all around the province school boards are challenged with the constant cuts—so it's death by a thousand cuts that have happened in the last several years.

While it's true to say that per-pupil student funding has increased most years under the Liberal government, what they fail to say and to tell everybody is the other side of that accounting ledger which is that a lot of costs were downloaded into per-pupil student funding. Prior to that there would have been specific funding for certain areas, for example, special needs.

So my priority will be to try to make sure that this government is held accountable for that, that the story is told in such a way that the parents know that things in their school district are not hunky dory. So I hope the new minister will not constantly give us that same mantra and will get down to the serious business of discussing education funding.

The government made a promise prior to the election, during the election, and after the election that the two areas of public spending that will not be cut in any way would be healthcare and education. My job will be to hold them to account on that and to also point out the fact that we have already seen lots of cuts, and how are we going to put money back into the school system that will enable us to have the best school system that British Columbians deserve?

### Do you believe teachers are adequately supported in their work?

Absolutely, not! I've spent enough time in the classroom to know that teachers have reached the point of dire stress, and I think when you speak to teachers, especially long-term teachers who've been in the field for 20 years or more, they will attest to the fact that the classroom environment and what is expected of a teacher has increased so dramatically in the last 20 years that without those extra supports in the classroom, it's made it very challenging for them to be able to not just get through the curriculum but to be able to adequately serve the needs of each and every child in their classroom.

As a support worker who spent two years in the school system, I noticed constantly that we were being cut back in terms of the hours given to either a specific child, or groups of children. When SD82 made a decision to go on to a four-day school week, those savings were made largely on the backs of support workers. If you cut all the support staff out of the school district, that is obviously hurting the ability of the teacher who is in charge and is responsible for the classroom to actually get his or her job done. And I know that this is happening right across the province.

We've also seen cuts to specialty areas of teaching, whether it be teacher-librarians, special ed

teachers, music teachers—all of these things help to create a balance for the child so that they start to enjoy their educational experience and don't think of it as just a chore, just the basics of reading, writing, and math, but to think of education in a holistic way. Where I come from teachers in the secondary level are actually choosing to buy time, take a block unpaid, and use it for prep.

### Is the funding of education sufficient?

It isn't sufficient for what we are asking of the educational system today. What I have noticed in my time is that we are now using our educational system to try and solve almost all societies problems.

We are demanding more and more of our educational system everyday, and that's not necessarily a bad thing but there's only so much that can be crammed into a school year, and we need to have the supports in place in order to accomplish all of these goals, as wonderful as they are.

We don't have sufficient funding in place to do that, and I think you're seeing school trustees and boards all across the province finally standing up and saying there isn't enough money in the system—even those boards who were very reluctant. Because, let's face it, school trustees, at the end of the day, have to make do with whatever government money is sent from Victoria. Their job is not necessarily to criticize central government because I think that they consider that to be biting the hand that feeds them. But I think now, enough trustees and enough boards are saying wait a second here, there is not enough money in the system to do the things we need to do.

And so, as the critic, I hope that we can as a society all come together, including the new minister of education, and recognize that we need to increase funding to the education system. Otherwise my fear is this, having come from Britain: if we undermine confidence in our public education system, eventually the middle class of this province will choose another option. Just as they have done in other countries; they will mortgage their house, they will do whatever it takes to send their children to a private school in order to give their child that little extra lift that they deem necessary. So it's critical for us as a society to fund our public educational system sufficiently well that everybody feels that their children are getting the best possible opportunities in life.

### What are your views on testing?

I think it's getting to the point now where the government needs to actually sit down and talk with all the stakeholders. What I have heard for the last number of years was there has to be some kind of testing because British Columbians spend 34 cents of every dollar on our public education system, and when you spend that amount of money at some point it has to be accountable to the taxpayers. And that's one

argument. But at the end of the day we have to ask ourselves, why are we testing children? What's the purpose of it? I think that there is now enough controversy and enough parents who are thinking, this isn't necessarily the best thing for my child. And in fact, you see this now as parents are actually voluntarily pulling their children from the FSA testing system.

The government needs to sit down with professional educators, with parent groups, with administrators, and actually come up with a better method of testing so that we can address all the concerns that the various stakeholders have. I know that the BCTF is asking for a moratorium. My feeling is that if all these groups were to sit down with the new minister to do that and commit to finding some changes that are necessary, there could be a testing regime in place that actually did its job.

When I first got hired as a community school co-ordinator, I didn't know what the job involved, so I went to an elementary school in Prince Rupert—Roosevelt School—and I was absolutely astounded when I walked through the doors of this school, because it was not like any junior school I had ever been to. There were lovely coloured murals all over the walls; there was a feeling of real comfort from all the staff in that school; and there were programs in place that assisted and recognized that the children in that school came from some of the most disadvantaged families in this province. In fact, I think probably over 50% of the kids in that school, at the time I went, were living on social assistance. And I came away, and I worked with that school co-ordinator to develop programs in Terrace. And I thought it was a wonderful school which did great things.

About three years after that, it got listed on the Fraser Institute as being, I think, the "worst school in British Columbia." So here I am, shaking my head, realizing that a school that was doing all it could, and did marvelous things with these children, had been labeled as "the worst school in British Columbia." To me, that's very problematic, and it tells you what's wrong with our testing regime, because inevitably, parents don't know all of these things.

This is not the top 10 best cars in the world, or the top 10 best beaches. We are dealing with a complicated system that needs to look at all the variables that work to create an effective education system. And that's where this testing is failing, and the whole ranking system is to me, frankly, abhorrent. So we need to address that.

I want to say how thankful I am to have a co-critic, Diane Thorne, MLA for Coquitlam-Mallardville to assist me in our job of holding the government to account.

*David Denyer is editor of Teacher newsmagazine and assistant director, BCTF Communication and Campaigns Division.*

# Provincial budget update bad news for public education

By Margaret White

One way to assess how public education will be affected by the revised provincial budget is to compare the education program funding that was originally allocated in the February 2009 provincial budget to the allocation in the revised September 2009 provincial budget. Such a comparison shows a significant loss of funding, the effects which are already being felt across school districts this September.

## \$128 million less education program funding in September budget update

Education program funding for 2009–10 in the September 2009 budget update is about \$128 million less than the funding allocated in the February 2009 budget announcement. As public-school funding comprises 95% of all education program funding, this will have a significant impact on public education budgets.

Chart 1 shows that instead of a \$73.2 million funding increase to education programs as announced in February 2009, Education Program funding decreased by \$54.8 million in the September 2009 updated budget.

After accounting for the transfer of \$50 million in CommunityLINK funding to the Ministry of Housing and Social Development, there is still a funding decrease of \$5 million since 2008–09 and \$78 million less funding than was allocated in the February 2009 budget.

## What funding was cut from education programs?

CommunityLINK funding to provide nutrition and counselling support for vulnerable students was cut by \$2 million. This funding decrease is difficult to justify given the persistently high family poverty rate in BC, the growing number of vulnerable families due to the recession, and higher food prices facing providers of school lunch programs.

**This funding decrease is difficult to justify given the persistently high family poverty rate in BC, the growing number of vulnerable families due to the recession, and higher food prices facing providers of school lunch programs.**

Presumably, much of the \$128 million loss of funding for education programs (compared to the February 2009 estimates) is due to the unexpected cancellation of the \$110 million Annual Facility Grant (AFG) that districts rely upon to do much-needed maintenance and upgrades to school facilities. Some districts also reported not receiving the last installment of the 2008–09 AFG, even though these funds were committed for work already under way or completed. (See [bctf.ca/uploadedFiles/Publications/Research\\_reports/2009EF02.pdf](http://bctf.ca/uploadedFiles/Publications/Research_reports/2009EF02.pdf) for a BCTF research report on the cancellation of the AFG.)

While the ministry claimed that districts held about \$98.6 million in cash reserves that must be spent first, many districts have since revealed they either have no cash reserves or the funds were already committed for planned or ongoing projects. Surrey school district

reported to the *Surrey North Delta Leader* on September 8, 2009, that the board will have to find \$8 million to cover costs for projects to which the district is contractually committed. Many districts are trying to assess the impact this sudden loss of funding will have on their budget. Some districts immediately halted repair projects where possible, laid off maintenance and other staff, and were still left with significant budget shortfalls.

The Vancouver School Board (VSB) lost \$10.6 million in funding due to the cancellation of the AFG, with only \$160,000 in uncommitted funds in its AFG account. The VSB launched a pro-active response to this sudden loss of funding, and the Ministry of Education agreed that the VSB could transfer up to \$5 million from its restricted capital reserve fund and \$2.4 million of unallocated Combined Seismic Mitigation Program funds to address the shortfall. This still leaves the VSB with \$3 million less in funding than anticipated, due to the cancellation of the AFG.

## What new cost pressures do districts face that the province is not fully funding?

The increase to Medical Services Plan (MSP) premiums announced in the September 1 Budget Update will increase costs to all employers who cover MSP premiums for employees. This is a downloaded cost to the school districts, as there are no additional funds to cover this unanticipated cost pressure. The VSB estimates the 6% increase to premiums will increase operating costs by \$100,000 in 2009–10 and \$200,000 annually. VSB budget documents available at [www.vsb.bc.ca/districtinfo/districtpublication/newsmedia/20090909.htm](http://www.vsb.bc.ca/districtinfo/districtpublication/newsmedia/20090909.htm).

Other cost pressures include negotiated salary increases, increased heat and electricity costs if a BC Hydro rate increase is approved, and H1N1 prevention costs incurred by schools. The Vancouver School Board estimates the cost of the board's efforts to prevent the H1N1 virus will range from \$200,000 to \$300,000, according to the *Vancouver Courier's* "Class notes" on September 16, 2009. The Harmonized Sales Tax, effective July 1, 2010, could significantly increase costs to districts unless school boards receive a rebate for the 7% provincial portion of the HST.

## Do the ministry's funding decisions really protect services in the classroom?

No. When the Operating Grants or other education funding do not cover costs, or when the sudden loss of funding leaves school districts unable to meet commitments, school boards must take action to deal with the resulting shortfalls. By law, districts cannot run a deficit.

The ministry claims the AFG was cancelled so as to protect funding for students in the classroom. But the effect of forcing districts into a shortfall position at the start of the school year is that education services will be compromised as districts scramble to make up the loss of funding. Many districts already reduced education services last June to address significant funding shortfalls and submit a balanced budget for 2009–10. It is difficult to see how classroom services can be maintained in the face of more budget shortfalls.

## What about district operating grants?

There is no information in the budget update on how 2009–10 operating grants are affected by the reduced funding for education programs. Reading between the lines, it appears that districts did not receive all of the operating grants funding committed for 2008–09. A footnote in the Ministry of Education 2008/09 Annual Service Plan Report (July 2009, p.23) indicates that \$18 million in Distributed Learning (DL) funding was frozen by the Treasury Board. These are funds that presumably should have been released to the districts after the final DL enrolment count.

The Port Alberni school district reported, to the *Alberni Valley Times* on September 10, 2009, that they were informed one week before school began that the ministry took

**While the ministry claimed that districts held about \$98.6 million in cash reserves that must be spent first, many districts have since revealed they either have no cash reserves or the funds were already committed for planned or ongoing projects.**

back the district's declining enrolment fund of \$35,000. Vancouver School Board's Provincial Budget Update shows that the ministry is retracting \$404,000 'holdback' funding the district received in June. Holdback funds are supposed to be released after enrolment counts for Distributed Learning and Special Education are conducted during the year. The retraction of these funds means there is less money available to support students in the classroom.

## The case of the vanishing holdback

These examples suggest that operating-grant funds are being reduced behind the scenes without any formal public announcement. The enrolment-decline supplement and enrolment funds in the holdback are part of the operating grants. The 2008–09 Recalculated Operating Grant tables (due to be published by December 2009) should reveal how much of the 2008–09 operating-grants funding disappeared from the holdback.

## Other funding cuts that will affect students and public schools

In early September, the ministry announced that parent advisory councils (PACs) across BC will see their gaming grants cut in half in 2009–10, leaving PACs with about \$7.6 million less funding to support student learning. Parent advisory councils use these funds to purchase computers, library and text books, and to support school field trips and other learning enrichment activities. Schools have become increasingly dependent on these funds to compensate for inadequate funding by the ministry for school-based resources. Schools in low-income areas will be hurt the most by the loss of this funding.

The ministry also cancelled, without consultation, a \$130,000 grant to BC School Sports, an organization that supports secondary-student athletes in 425 BC schools to train and participate in sports events. This was another last-minute announcement with no

time for sports groups to raise funds elsewhere. The ministry is facing ongoing criticism by a wide spectrum of citizen groups for the elimination of this grant.

## More trouble on the horizon

The September budget plan for education programs also shows \$127.5 million less funding in 2011–12 and \$64.5 million less in 2011–12, compared to the February 2009 budget (Chart 2). Overall this results in a cumulative decrease of \$320 million over three years.

Even though the ministry implied the cancellation of the AFG grant was one-time-only for districts to use up their "unspent reserves," a comparison of the February and September estimates shows about \$127.5 million less funding for education programs in 2010–11.

If \$50 million of the reduced funding is due to the transfer of the CommunityLINK grant, there is still \$78.5 million less funding for 2010–11 compared to the February estimates.

The ministry has committed \$44 million to implement phase one of full-day Kindergarten in 2010–11, and an additional \$107 million in 2011–12. But education-programs funding (based on the funding plan in the September 2009 updated budget) increases by less than that, \$37.6 million in 2010–11 and \$78.6 million in 2011–12.

The Provincial Speech from the Throne indicated that there would be no money available for public-sector wage increases until the

province resolves its deficit. The updated figures for the Ministry of Education plan for 2010/11 and 2011/12 suggest that changes in education-program funding and total public school revenues will not be sufficient to cover the increased cost for full-day Kindergarten, salary increases, and other cost pressures such as the provincially mandated increase to Medical

**Holdback funds are supposed to be released after enrolment counts for distributed learning and special education are conducted during the year. The retraction of these funds means there is less money available to support students in the classroom.**

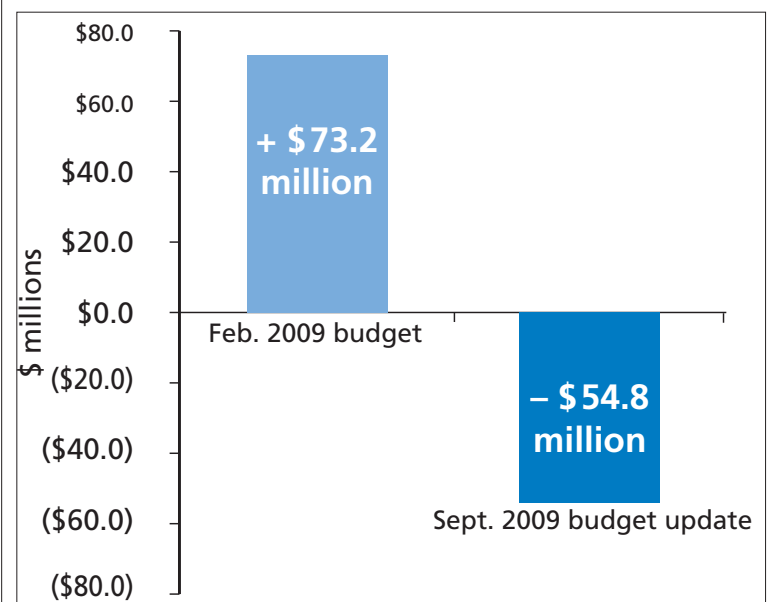
Services Plan premiums.

Unless the Ministry of Education makes significant improvements to the three-year plan in the September 2009 budget update, expect further erosion of classroom conditions, as districts cut deeper into school budgets to offset the resulting shortfalls.

For data table and full references see: [bctf.ca/uploadedFiles/Publications/Research\\_reports/2009EF03.pdf](http://bctf.ca/uploadedFiles/Publications/Research_reports/2009EF03.pdf)

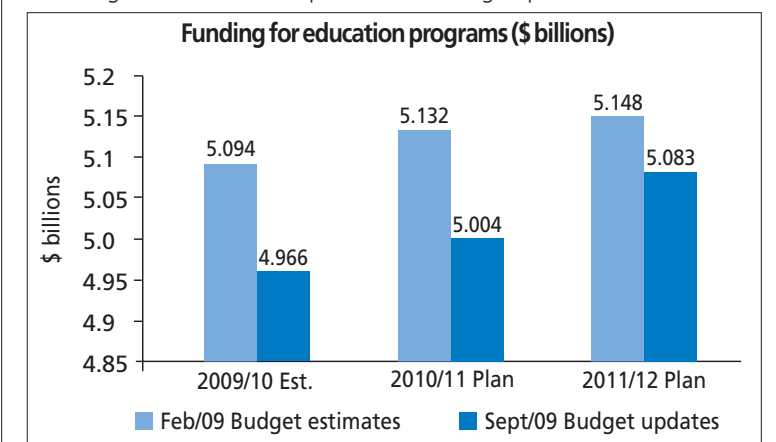
Margaret White is a research analyst, BCTF Research Department.

Chart 1: Change (increase or decrease) in Education Program Funding for 2009–10 compared to the 2008–09 restated estimates



BCTF Research chart with data from: Ministry of Education 2009/10 to 2011/12 Service Plan, Resource Summary Table, Feb. 2009, p. 21; Ministry of Education 2009/10 to 2011/12 Service Plan Update, Resource Summary Table, Sept. 2009, p. 22.

Chart 2: Education Programs 2009/10 to 2011/12: A comparison of the February 2009 budget estimates to the September 2009 budget update



BCTF Research chart with data from: Ministry of Education 2009/10 to 2011/12 Service Plan, Resource Summary Table, Feb. 2009, p. 21; Ministry of Education 2009/10 to 2011/12 Service Plan Update, Resource Summary Table, Sept. 2009, p. 22.



## Budget lock-up

By Stacey Robinsmith

I contacted the minister of finance's office and arranged to attend the September 1, 2009, budget lock-up in the premier's office at Canada Place on behalf of *The Vancouver Observer* and *The Left Coast*, two online publications, for which I contribute frequently.

At the premier's office I signed an agreement stating that I will not tell any of the secrets from the budget to anybody before the finance minister rises in the Legislature. After signing, I am directed into the media room where I see Will McMartin, writer for the *Tyee*, another online publication. McMartin spent some 30 years inside government actually working at creating the mystical budget documents. He leans in close to me and says, "All governments lie, the trick here is to find the lies." The problem is I really have no idea where to begin looking.

*...the budget lock-up was an interesting exercise but it certainly was not one that made the funding of BC's public education system any clearer.*

As we scan through the budget documents, staffers from the Ministry of Finance stroll around the room and ever-so-patiently try to explain any confusing issues that the budget presents. It is also interesting to see them dance around the issue when we question them on how the \$1.9 billion that big business will no longer pay in HST will be made up.

Looking at the numbers, the first point of interest is to note that the Medical Services Plan premiums are increasing by 6%. This is the first funding claw-back the school districts take.

The budget documents show the "per-pupil funding will be maintained at more than \$8,200." However, when you look at the estimates book in the Ministry of Education section you see that the



*The minister of education has been on the receiving end of much criticism for her response to a question on the cuts by saying, "Rather than formal team sports, maybe people will be doing more walking or dancing or playing in parks." (The Vancouver Sun, September 5, 2009) For a closer look at her views, go to page 6 for an interview.*

"Operating Expenses" for Education Programs for 2008/09 were \$5.021 billion. The 2009/10 estimates show the "Operating Expenses" have been reduced to \$4.966 billion.

Then there is a provincial commitment of \$151 million in the budget for local school boards to implement all-day Kindergarten that is mandated to start for 50% of BC children in September 2010.

Patti Bacchus (Vancouver School Board chair) was at the budget lock-up and I began by asking her about the all-day Kindergarten program. She believes that the amount committed to starting up the all-day Kindergarten programs will only minimally meet the many start-up costs of the program. She added that the administrative costs of setting up the all-day Kindergarten

program, recruiting teachers, and equipping classrooms has not been accounted for and will therefore have to come out of the already over-stretched local school budgets.

When I asked Bacchus for her thoughts on the education piece of the budget, she expressed disappointment but not surprise. She added that, "This budget will fail to meet the funding requirements of the public school system."

After leaving the lock-up, I e-mailed the minister of education for clarification on some of the budget issues. Although the minister herself was unable to call me back, a spokesperson from the Ministry of Education's Public Affairs Bureau did call me back to explain the mysteries of the budget and education funding.

First off, he assured me that, in fact core-funding has not decreased. He added that there are 7,000 fewer students this year over the previous year and 55,000 fewer students since the 2000-01 school year. And at this point he emphasized that core-funding has increased every year in spite of this steady decline in enrolment and that the per pupil funding is now at \$8,323; the highest funding ever!

When I questioned him about the increased costs local school districts were going to face in the coming school year, for example, the costs of wage settlements imposed by the provincial government and the downloaded costs of the increased MSP premiums, he referred back to the fact that core funding has actually increased by \$84 million for

the 2009-10 school year. He added that the wage settlements, as they have always been, are fully funded.

In summary, the budget lock-up was an interesting exercise but it certainly was not one that made the funding of BC's public education system any clearer. The numbers can be, and are, distorted in so many different ways that the information from the budget lock-up really is of limited use. One thing though, I did not feel any more reassured that "the highest funding ever" was enough to adequately fund BC's public education system.

*Stacey Robinsmith is a New Westminster teacher and BCTF activist. [www.TheLeftcoast.ca](http://www.TheLeftcoast.ca) and [www.TheVancouverObserver.com](http://www.TheVancouverObserver.com)*

## Our school is an amazing place

By Shelley Stark

Our school is an amazing place to work; staff is cohesive, involved, and inspired! Teachers are energized, enthusiastic, and eager to try new teaching strategies while facing many challenges. Three such obstacles include; a student population of over 85% English as a Second Language (ESL), a district-based social development program, and a Parent Advisory Committee consisting of two volunteers in a school of almost 600 students. I left to teach elsewhere, but felt compelled to come back for several reasons. The first reason is the teachers—we have experienced a relatively high turn over rate on our staff in recent years, and yet our camaraderie as colleagues remains strong. The second reason is administrative leadership; we have definitely had strong, confident leaders who have been respected role models.

A cohesive, inspired, and enthusiastic staff, begins with an individual and collective desire for professional growth and self improvement. Growth and development begins with a positive attitude and a personal desire to improve. Teachers demonstrating an interest in lifelong learning are positive role models for their students and an inspiration to their colleagues. Interested educators are more likely

to ask curious questions, enter into motivating discussions, and think critically about their profession and their students. Without internal motivation and positive attitude, there is little chance of critical personal connections being made with students or colleagues.

Once rapport is established between colleagues, personal connections need nurturing in the workplace, just as they do in one's personal life. Time is the most precious gift one has to offer, and taking the time to share experiences, laugh, listen, and provide emotional support is critical to building a mutually supportive environment. When I am not sure I have the time or energy left to support a colleague and lift him or her up, I remember that positive energy will come back to me in my time of need...if not from that same person, then someone else.

Teachers should not be afraid to ask for help, as it may not be obvious to others that you need help. Asking for help is not a sign of weakness, but a reflection of one's strength, confidence, and personal awareness. Asking for help when needed is also an indicator to your colleague of the trust and respect you have for him or her. Support could be as simple as an encouraging word or a positive comment about a job well done. I believe a collaborative environment fosters a network of support, and this

support makes many challenges seem less intimidating.

As educators, we should be celebrating the small accomplishments that provide the motivation and inspiration to keep moving forward. As professionals, we need to congratulate our peers for the small successes, because only we know how much time and effort some of those little things require. Likewise, it is important to honour one's colleagues for the decisions they make or the job that they do with children. Work is only part of one's life, and we never really know what challenges our colleagues are facing, beyond the walls of our workplace. We respect and honour our students in our classroom, I believe that we should show the same respect for our colleagues' changing degree of involvement or participation at work. This trust and respect allows for flexibility while avoiding assumptions and potential conflict.

Supportive staff develop trust among members. When people feel trusted, they feel safe. A feeling of safety builds confidence. When people feel confident, they are more likely to take risks, step out of their comfort zone, or stretch themselves personally and professionally. Educators feeling supported and encouraged are more willing to invite colleagues to give constructive criticism in order to grow and develop. They are comfortable,

relaxed, and can have fun creating a learning experience for themselves within their teaching environment.

Successful administrators also recognize and promote schools as a positive working and learning environment for teachers as well as students. Having an administrator who is accessible, consistently and predictably supportive, and a role model for lifelong learning and personal improvement, is important for fostering a safe, trusting environment for teachers. Providing opportunities for, and encouraging, various teachers to take leadership roles, also creates a positive feeling for staff members by increasing their sense of worth, importance, and overall value. Teachers can build their skills, develop their confidence, and feel empowered by their accomplishments and contribution to the school. This distribution of responsibility to many teacher leaders also contributes to the continuity within the school, as any administrative change causes little disruption to the running of the school.

With personal desire to improve one's practice, confidence, and trust between teachers, and support of the administration, the natural progression is toward a collaborative teaching environment. In order to be successful, a collaborative teaching environment cannot be forced, but it can be encouraged and supported, with the positive

results being shared and celebrated by the entire staff. When teachers see the potential of collaboration, they want to be included in the process. The idea of working together, sharing the load, creating something better than one could have accomplished alone, and having fun along the way, is inspiring to many teachers. The main obstacle to collaboration is finding time for mutual planning, marking, problem solving, and sharing. Creative planning to find this time is one element of support that administration and teacher leaders can offer.

Those are the reasons my school is an amazing place to work. I have suggested that many components play a part in creating the supportive, cohesive, and motivated place I work at on a daily basis. Relationships are the key. Trusting and supportive administration is important, as is the safe and mutually respectful rapport between staff members. All of this is possible because of each individual staff member's willingness to take risks, to share their work and ideas, and to trust themselves and their colleagues. All parties involved contribute to these relationships. Time invested has been time saved in the end, and the rewards are inspiring, both personally and professionally!

*Shelley Stark is a Surrey teacher.*

# All-day Kindergarten surfaces once again

By Noel Herron

So you think that BC Liberals after four years of delays, postponements, and repeated promises are getting serious about introducing and funding a universal, full-time, Kindergarten program for five-year-olds beginning in the fall of 2010? Think again.

This is, at best, a debatable promise by a provincial government facing a staggering \$3 billion deficit and a credibility gap that appears to be widening with each jettisoned financial commitment.

Long before the 2007 Speech from the Throne, in which the Liberals acknowledged that one in four preschoolers lacked readiness for school entry, there was credible evidence from both the practice, (the Vancouver School Board has had several full-day Kindergartens for over two decades; currently there are over 100 in city schools), and research, (UBC's longitudinal research is over a decade old), that thousands of Kindergarten kids were being left behind because of provincial foot-dragging.

Since the BC Liberals announced their intention to act in the speech from the throne in 2007, it is estimated that 25,000 kids have been denied this rung up on the early-childhood ladder due to Victoria's studied delay in supporting all-day Kindergarten.

Lacking school readiness, preschoolers fall increasingly behind by the time they reach Grade 3.

As the vast majority of preschoolers entering Kindergarten this September will attend only on a part-time basis, the discriminatory practice of singling out English-as-

a-second language, Aboriginal, or certain students with special needs for all-day admission will continue yet again for another two years.

In a government that previously was determined to hide the true magnitude of its budget deficit, the question arises of where the estimated two-year, \$151 million grants in operating costs (staffing, space, in-service, supplies, materials, resources) for universal all-day Kindergarten will come from?

Not to worry, the abrupt late August cancellation of \$110 million dollars in grants, allocated annually for the maintenance of schools—an unblinking, rob-Peter-pay-Paul manoeuvre—covers the proposed, gradual introduction of this long-awaited program (see attached 2007–11 time frame).

Other than stating that full-day Kindergarten “will be introduced in stages” next year, the dearth of information from our new education minister on the size, scope, and level of financial support for boards (now responsible for the delivery of early childhood education) remains a mystery.

In his recent budget speech, Finance Minister Colin Hansen implied that half of the province's five-year-olds would be accommodated in 2010 while the remaining half would be funded in 2011.

This split schedule will lead to an uneven and geographically varied pattern of admissions across BC and leave many parents scratching their heads as to why they can't gain admission for their preschoolers in a particular school district.

Furthermore, the division of provincial grants: \$40 million in 2010–11 school year followed by grants of \$110 million in 2011–12, is far from a 50/50 split, as implied by the Liberals. Rather, it is a 30/70 split with the backloading of the majority of new all-day classes opening in the 2011–12 school year.

And so the provincial foot-dragging continues.

But the space crunch for all-day Kindergarten is only part of the

problem.

Advance Kindergarten registration in some districts, starting this month in Vancouver where a new computerized system kicks in, will be thrown into disarray in the absence of any information from Victoria.

It also appears that school boards will be on their own in funding such key issues as classroom modifications, teacher in-service, furniture, maintenance, and the purchase of a wide variety of supplies, resources, and materials that a respectable and enriched early childhood environment requires. (The importance of in-service and workshops by experienced teaching colleagues and board consultants should not be underestimated as quality delivery will depend on this.)

If boards are faced with shortfalls in all of the aforementioned areas, as now appears likely, then this is a badly flawed introduction to this provincial program.

Already, a sharp increase in local fundraising is being predicted by several provincial parents' groups to close the looming gap.

Vancouver School Board Chair Patti Bacchus is quoted as saying with regard to all-day Kindergarten: “It looks like (provincial grants) might just cover salaries of teachers and benefits and nothing to support districts.”

The forced closure of many of the 177 schools over the past decade, while early childhood options were still on the table, underlines not only the lack of provincial planning in terms of space, but a degree of ineptitude that is staggering.

And what about last month's Speech from the Throne and the embattled Liberals linkage of the new harmonized sales tax (HST) to all-day Kindergarten?

It is a sad but not surprising fact that BC Liberals were willing to view the introduction of all-day Kindergarten through the ideological prism of the upcoming 12% harmonized sales tax.

Claiming that because the government was willing to fund all-

day Kindergarten at a cost of \$1,150 per student, a typical family of four would come out ahead by \$1,000 dollars after all of the new HST taxes were imposed was an off-the-wall perspective by Victoria.

One of the province's leading journalists acidly commented on this convoluted reasoning as follows: “Thus did BC Liberals pioneer the claim that sending your children to school would amount to some kind of government-authored tax break.”

Understandably, boards' spokespersons, while welcoming this new move by Victoria but facing imminent reviews of education spending (and the accompanying past experience of sudden provincial downloading or withdrawal of funding), are apprehensive about the circumstances surrounding the start of a new province-wide program.

It's not just the recent cuts to school maintenance budgets, but additional cuts to schools' sports programs, cuts to community libraries and services that support schools (such as daycare), that add to their growing unease.

Trustees know that investment in early childhood education, as Canada's chief public health officer has stated, “will ensure that Canadian children will become better educated, well-adjusted, and more productive adults.”

But they are hoping that in the intervening time prior to September 2010 that the provincial government will get it right. They are very concerned that they will be left holding the bag with downloaded, bare-bones, all-day Kindergarten classes on which the long-term future of thousands of kids depend.

Noel Herron is a former Vancouver school principal and school trustee.

## Early childhood 2007 to 2011 time frame

**2007:** Speech from the Throne states that one in four children entering Kindergarten lack school readiness.

**2008:** Speech from the Throne floats the idea of setting up an Early Childhood Learning Agency.

**2009:** Speech from the Throne promises to introduce all-day Kindergarten in 2010; Early Childhood report released in April 2009; cancellation of \$110 million in provincial school maintenance grants in August 2009.

**2010:** Minister of education promises to introduce all-day Kindergarten in stages; grants of \$44 million for 30% implementation by boards.

**2011:** Minister of finance confirms that all-day Kindergarten will be available to all five-year-olds; grants of \$110 million for remaining 70% implementation.

## Research

• *Two early childhood reports: BC and Ontario*

During the past year, two significant early childhood reports were published by two provinces—BC and Ontario. BC'S report from the province's Early Learning group, set up within the Ministry of Education, received over 1,800 submissions. This report was scheduled to be released in 2008 but surfaced only on the ministry's website on April 2009—a month prior to the May provincial election. It may be downloaded at: [www.bced.gov.bc.ca/ecla/topics/ecla\\_report.pdf](http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/ecla/topics/ecla_report.pdf).

The Ontario report written by Dr. Charles Pascal, the province's deputy minister, has received widespread publicity, and is on schedule to be implemented starting next year. It can be downloaded at: [www.ontario.ca/en/initiatives/early\\_learning](http://www.ontario.ca/en/initiatives/early_learning).

• A new study, released last month by UBC, entitled “A Comprehensive Policy Framework for Early Human Capital Investment in BC,” presents the case for broadly based pre-Kindergarten support for parents and pre-schoolers in the form of, among other recommendations, affordable daycare, extended parental leave, and an increase in income support for poor families with children.

# Empathy building going to the dogs!

By Tamara Michalas

This past year, approximately 20 Holly Elementary School teachers opened their doors to Naomi Mitchell, a well-known SPCA presenter and her 10-year-old Australian shepherd/red heeler mix, Millie, to help teach empathy, social responsibility, and leadership. It was a total success.

Mitchell and Millie visited our school, an inner-city school in Surrey, three mornings a week for two-and-a-half weeks to teach empathy, compassion, and leadership. Sessions lasted for about an hour and were based on the five BC SPCA teacher-created units: *Kindness Counts*, *Companions For Life*, *Bite Free*, *You Can Make a Difference*, and *Cluck! The Life of an Egg-Laying Chicken*.

Before beginning, Naomi took time to find out if there were any special situations or needs in the classrooms to ensure a pleasurable experience for all. Students were more than willing to donate \$1 each and some asked if they could donate more to cover the \$30 suggested donation per workshop.

Some teachers chose to use the corresponding BC SPCA teacher-created units to supplement the workshop while others chose to use a lesson or two. All unit plans clearly outline the PLOs they target, provide black-line masters, organized lessons, and include activities for diverse learners and dynamic teaching strategies.

Primary classes received the *Kindness Counts* workshop, which focused on animals and empathy

development. This was done through exploring differences between animals and people and between classmates. Students brought in their favourite stuffed animal to role-play kindness situations. Included in the presentation are pictures of friendly and non-friendly pets, which helps kids realize what different behaviours mean and look like.

The Grade 3s and 4s had the *Companions for Life* workshop. It focused on responsibility and empathy development. Students explored the costs, time, and needs of a pet and how to choose the right pet for their family.

The Grade 4 and 5 students had the *Bite Free* workshop. The accompanying unit is on the Provincial Recommended Resource List for CAPP/Health & Career Planning. It is targeted at both primary and intermediate students. It teaches students how to properly respond to animal behaviours and body language to avoid potentially dangerous situations. This is a great one to do just before summer.

The Grade 6s and 7s and some Grade 5s had the *You Can Make a Difference* workshop where they learned about animal welfare, SPCA interventions, and how students around the province are making a difference. In the accompanying unit, students learn how to make positive changes through the use of a variety of multimedia and learning strategies.

*Cluck! The Life of an Egg-Laying Chicken*, designed for Grades 4 to 7, makes students think critically about the treatment of farm

animals, the food they consume, and the value they put on the humane treatment of animals. It connects with PLOs in math, drama, art, LA, social studies, and science. As a culmination of the unit, it would be interesting to tour a chicken farm in your area—a fieldtrip with real educational value.

After the workshops, Ms. Gibbons, principal of Holly Elementary School noted, “It's amazing to see how some of the students formed bonds with Millie over the few weeks she was here and became interested in her welfare.” Zachary Csirkes, a Grade 5 student, learned a great deal about animal welfare and thought, “she (Naomi Mitchell) should teach every class about this.” Ms. Mortimore, a Grade 3 teacher, shared how several of her students who were afraid of dogs at the beginning of the workshop were by the end asking “when can the dog come back to visit?”

All of the units are user-friendly, can be completed in one to two weeks, or stretched out longer. They outline connections to antibullying programs, PLOs from math, LA, socials, science, art, drama, and CAPP. The units include a section on pet facts arranged under different kinds of pets. These are great to give students ideas for art posters or to create informative bulletin-board displays.

Having a dog included in the presentation enriches the experience for the students. The instant feedback the students got when they interacted with Millie was such a positive reinforcement of the



PHOTO: SHARON DOUCETTE, SURREY NOW

unconditional affection that animals can provide. Watching the presenter interact with her dog provides modelling of the relationship one can have with an animal, which is a skill that can be generalized.

If you're interested in setting up a presentation or obtaining the free unit plans, call Paula Neuman, a

teacher/Humane Education supervisor at the BC SPCA: 604-647-5505.

Book your presentation today, and lead the way to a more empathetic world around us.

Tamara Michalas teaches at Holly Elementary School, Surrey.

# Aboriginal education in a social justice union

Part 2

By Christine Stewart

I now turn to the broader question of how the BCTF Aboriginal Education Advisory Committee works on Aboriginal education in the context of what is called social justice unionism.

To date in BC, we have 275–300 self-identified Aboriginal teachers who are members in the BCTF. This number fluctuates and we have experienced a decline over the years. There are many pressures on Aboriginal teachers. They are more often than not called upon to be the “cultural brokers” for all the Aboriginal concerns within both the district and the schools in which they teach. Aboriginal teachers experience the pressure of educating their colleagues on all issues, ranging from the very basic to the complex, that face Aboriginal people.

Aboriginal teachers often feel that as the brokers of Aboriginal culture and community, they are on display—taken out of the cupboard for show and returned once their usefulness as showpieces has been fulfilled. The pressures on Aboriginal teachers are enormous, and it has been difficult to find non-Aboriginal teachers who are willing and able to share the load. Aboriginal teachers are pressured to be homogenous and fit into multicultural or global education.

It is the pressure on Aboriginal teachers that makes the Aboriginal Education Advisory Committee so important. The committee gives us the strength and the ability to acquire understanding and apply indigenous knowledge as an emancipatory process against the backdrop of our colonial past that has served to deny indigenous rights. This is what keeps us together when we are feeling uneasy and uncertain.

## The challenges of social justice

There are a number of challenges I see in how a union committed to social justice, as the BCTF is, can simultaneously hold onto ideals of unionism and social justice in public education and incorporate the concerns of the Aboriginal community at the same time.

Both Aboriginal teachers and children can be used as a starting point to have a dialogue on social justice, but the problem—it is important to stress—is not one that arises from specific Aboriginal issues. Rather, the problem is that of the inequality and discrimination resulting from embedded ethnocentrism, which is rampant in our society and our schools. The challenges are captured in how we make and create space for others on their terms. In *Anti-racism Education*, George Sefa Dei writes: “...New solidarities must seek to rupture the political, economic and ideological status quo and challenge society to side with the forces of social justice, peace and human dignity. The personal risks taken in advocating for social change are real and insidious, particularly given the mounting organized resistance against progressive change.” (p. 18)

I believe the leadership of the BCTF in 1999 boldly facilitated progressive change in this house of labour for all members of the BCTF. They understood that the issue of Aboriginal education had to be brought within a general framework of antiracist education, while at the same time providing Aboriginal educators with a place to stand within the union. They encouraged the development of the Aboriginal Advisory Committee and they made

certain that there was an administrative staff person for Aboriginal education in the Professional and Social Issues Division of the union. It has made a great difference. For the first time, everyone involved in the union appeared to acknowledge the devastating impacts colonization has had and continues to have on children and communities.

To date, the Aboriginal Education Advisory Committee has been immersed in substantial intellectual work (in association with the larger union). It has developed new and progressive policies, and has signed-off on provincial language indicating a commitment to employment equity for Aboriginal teachers. Now, it must navigate these policies and articulate what is to be done. The real project work for employment equity begins both inside the Federation and in the local teacher union leadership.

Employment equity for Aboriginal teachers has caused great concern for all involved. Some of the initial reactions voiced by the membership include:

- Are these teachers going to be qualified?
- Affirmative-action policy hires on numbers and not merit.
- What about my child who is in teacher education now?
- Why do they need this? I did it, why can't they?

These questions suggest that people are losing something by addressing Aboriginal concerns. They appear to be very disruptive to “white” working people in general,

***It's easy to say, "I'll fight for a 10% raise for you next year" or "you deserve smaller class sizes." But, it is not so easy to approach people who seem to be supportive and say to them, "you're part of the problem. You have to change. You need to be aware of your privilege and how it affects others."***

and teachers are no exception, especially in these lean times of economic security with declining enrolment and school closures.

Teachers have not always shared a common understanding of the social justice issues that stem from First Nations policies adopted by the BCTF that were designed to improve the conditions of Aboriginal education in the province. And there are still problems. There are still those who think the union must first attend to the rights of the whole, and then later to those who are excluded by discrimination from the rights enjoyed by the majority. They don't understand how this weakens the union. In *The house that race built*, Stuart Hall writes: “Symbolic lines are drawn...and power uses differences as a way of marking off who does and who does not belong... The future belongs to those who are ready to take in a bit of the other, as well as being what they themselves are. After all, it is because their history and ours is so deeply and profoundly and inextricably intertwined that racism exists.” (p. 298)

Unions have been down this path before with workers facing powerful employers and women wanting the same basic and equal labour rights as their male counterparts. Aboriginal educators strive for that same equality now.

If the BCTF were to merely focus on workers' rights and benefits, it

would have to abandon its belief that teachers care for all our students, and it would have to ignore the fact that not every child in public education comes from a place of privilege.

Most of the members of the BCTF do not want to abandon this belief, but turning it into practice is the real question. It is this practice that will define the union. And there is still a lot of resistance to it.

As the past Aboriginal education co-ordinator trying to put these beliefs into practice, I ended up as a “cultural broker” for all Aboriginal teachers. In spite of my union's commitment to social justice, my work often put me in awkward situations and sometimes created great tensions. In this situation, the Aboriginal Education Advisory Committee is key to being able to do the job with integrity. I had to be there for them and keep in close touch—so I didn't forget the direction we were suppose to go.

It is not easy to push in this direction. It is not easy to always remember that I was in service to my people, my union, and fellow educator's students and families. Even in a social justice union like the BCTF, those who are thought of as doing the “special” work of social justice—the work done in the Professional and Social Issues Division—are not seen as doing the real union work, like member rights and collective bargaining. This “special” work was in effect marginalized. The union appears to be going in the right direction in terms of formal policy. However, when the real work needed to be done, support was often not forthcoming. One must take on this kind of work with the mindset of a fight, which is a perspective that I and the Aboriginal Education Advisory Committee are not comfortable with. But we are all stuck with it.

Nobody should have to fight inside her or his own union. The challenge can be very draining and takes its toll on the individual worker. It's easy to say, “I'll fight for a 10% raise for you next year” or “you deserve smaller class sizes.” But, it is not so easy to approach people who seem to be supportive and say to them, “you're part of the problem. You have to change. You need to be aware of your privilege and how it affects others.”

Real change can happen. There is a need for this change, but the group seeking this change is small. They are outsiders. They are Aboriginal. At the same time, and very important in the BCTF, they have an advisory committee that is developing some influence. It will need ongoing interrogation of positions of privilege, between all concerned. I believe we can build coalitions that will support and facilitate ongoing changes inside of the union. Again, this will not be easy. As Charlotte Bunch argues: “Challenges to oppressive attitudes and the resistance with which they are met are responsible for many of the problems arising [in coalitions].”

But, unless there is a willingness to change these oppressive attitudes and behaviours, coalition building will be seriously impeded. Coalition building is a central component of constructing better opportunities and experiences for the future for our union and us as indigenous educators. It is the individual who experiences oppression, but that oppression must be addressed and overcome collectively.

*Christine Stewart teaches at Britannia Secondary School, Vancouver, and is a member-at-large, BCTF Executive Committee.*

# A different look at the problem of Aboriginal student achievement

By Debra McIntyre

It is no secret that our Aboriginal students trail behind their non-Aboriginal peers in school achievement. The grim facts show up in standardized test scores, school completion rates and overall emotional satisfaction. (Aboriginal Report 2003–04 —2007–08 How are we doing? [www.bced.gov.bc.ca/abed/performance.htm](http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/abed/performance.htm)) Typically, a lot of blame gets tossed about. The more liberal excuses tend to blame the conditions of poverty. I have heard other teachers suggest poor parenting is involved. Some complain about an essential lack of inner motivation. We even blame the media for promoting “gangsta”

***What if the problem is really a symptom of something that nobody wants to talk about; what if our educational system was inherently racist?***

lifestyles over scholarly pursuits. I would like to offer a radically different perspective. What if the problem is really a symptom of something that nobody wants to talk about; what if our educational system was inherently racist?

I realize what I have said sounds vaguely blasphemous. Nobody gets into the teaching profession from a position of hatred. We all teach because we love children, knowledge, and the good things in life. Racism represents everything that teaching is not.

Yet teaching positions tend to be filled by white Canadians who have unconscious cultural assumptions about how the world operates. I am suggesting that some of those assumptions may be harmful to some of the children entrusted into our care.

## Colour/ethnicity does not matter

I have heard people defend themselves against the charge of participating in a racist system by emphasizing that they do not see the colour or ethnicity of their students. In the eyes of those teachers, all students are alike. However commendable such an ideal may be, it denies the realities our students face in their daily life. Ask Aboriginal people if they have experienced racism, and if that experience has left a legacy. The terrible stories you will collect from ordinary people underline the idea that though colour ought not to matter—in reality it matters a great deal. Ignoring the issue does not correct it.

## White culture is normal

If you ask a white person what it means to be white, you will either get a perplexed answer (huh?) or a vague and brief description (Scottish-English Canadian for example). Yet, if you ask someone of Aboriginal descent what it means to be a First Nations member, you will likely provoke a much more interesting response. Social scientists who have studied this phenomenon have concluded that white culture is seen by many parties as normative—the way things are. The result is that white Canadians, by and large, are oblivious to how cultural assumptions shape understanding and behaviour. One of the most damaging assumptions is the myth of meritocracy.

## The myth of meritocracy

The myth of meritocracy basically



says that anyone can achieve anything—provided they are willing to work hard—great news if you're doing well, less if you're struggling. The ugly side of the meritocracy myth is that it suggests that people also earn failure. The white middle-class assumption is that hard work will ultimately lead to success for all people. This assumption could be considered fair if everyone began life with similar circumstances; unfortunately, there are many random variables that can affect a person's success. I would like to suggest that diligence is not the only key or even the key means to success. Luck plays a significant role.

## Internal locus of control

Another cultural assumption white teachers may bring into a classroom is the idea that an individual is the master of her or his destiny. The philosopher Alain de Botton has questioned our society's assumption that having an internal locus of control is normal or even psychologically sound. He noted that in medieval society if you met someone who was at the bottom of the social heap you would likely describe them as being an “unfortunate.” Today, that person would be described as a “loser.” In the middle ages, fortune or luck was recognized as a variable that led to or against success. Today's society is much more competitive and perhaps less humane. One wonders if our society's epidemic of depression is connected to this belief in taking personal responsibility for success and failure.

## What does this mean for teachers and students?

The BCTF policy on Aboriginal education [bctf.ca/IssuesInEducation.aspx?od=5666](http://bctf.ca/IssuesInEducation.aspx?od=5666) is a comprehensive resource for ideas and specifics about how to be culturally inclusive. However, since systems are made of parts, my hope is that more teachers will reconsider their personal role in maintaining a system that clearly does not allow

***The terrible stories you will collect from ordinary people underline the idea that though colour ought not to matter—in reality it matters a great deal. Ignoring the issue does not correct it.***

for the success of some of our students. Perhaps the first step is to admit to the invisible elephant of systemic racism. If we can agree that our system of education does not meet the needs of Aboriginal students then perhaps the next step is to use diversity training opportunities when considering our professional development needs. If we truly care about all of our students then business as usual cannot continue; we must adapt to our students instead of continuing to insist that they adapt to us.

*Debra McIntyre taught in northern BC and is currently pursuing a master's degree in counselling.*

# BCeSIS—more demand than supply

By Larry Kuehn

BCeSIS has been a source of teacher stress and pain from the day it was turned on. However, complaints have usually been dismissed, with fingers pointed everywhere but at BCeSIS itself.

Teachers are the problem—they won't learn how to use it correctly was a common response by the techies to teacher complaints.

The ministry chief information officer pointed at school boards, claiming the problem was inadequate infrastructure within districts. Everything was fine on the provincial network until it reached the districts.

Too many students watch YouTube videos through the Provincial Learning Network (PLN), using up the bandwidth on the PLN, she added.

AAL ([www.aalsolutions.com](http://www.aalsolutions.com)), the company that supplies the software for BCeSIS, claims there are no problems at their end. When I was at the National Education Computing Conference in June, I spotted an AAL booth in the commercial displays. When I mentioned BCeSIS, the person in the booth said that they got only good feedback—the BC Ministry of Education loves it. He then dismissed any complaints as simply the union trying to make trouble or the inadequacy of local infrastructure.

But maybe the message from teachers is finally getting through.

The BCeSIS News is the online publication from the SMC. That is the Service Management Council, the group that is supposedly in charge of BCeSIS. It is made up of administrative representatives from every district that has signed on to BCeSIS. The back-to-school issue has a message from Ernie Mannering, the chair of the SMC. In it, he acknowledges that "Systems with the size and scope of BCeSIS have flaws that must be acknowledged in order to be addressed."

Finally, not just pointing fingers at the teachers and school districts, but recognition that there might be problems with BCeSIS itself.

In fact, a lot of the story is told in a section of the newsletter headed BCeSIS Stats:

*The follow stats are for the week of June 22–29:*

Current number of active students: 505,990

Max # of concurrent user connections: 2,217

Max # of users logging on in a day: 9,439

Number of district logins for the week: 37,031

It seems that the designers forgot to check on the work processes that are defined by the school calendar. Every teacher who has to submit grades on BCeSIS needs to log in over a matter of very few days.

If your technology is going to be adequate for the job, it cannot be based on an assumption of even demand. Some times are going to have peak demand. These are the points at which BCeSIS has failed in the past.

One year it was in the days before school started, when schools were creating timetables.

Another peak time was when the online portions of the Foundation Skills Assessment were using bandwidth and getting priority over BCeSIS. (Anyone for a YouTube student contest during the February FSAs this year?)

The BCeSIS stats from June show the nature of the problem. The overloaded system was so slow that the administrator in one district sent a memo to staff telling them that after they made an entry they should count to five before making another entry.

## Did it have to be this way?

Of course not. When the decision was made to go with BCeSIS, another approach could have been taken. BCeSIS is a centralized system where everything has to be held on a central server and connected through a single pipeline, PLN.

Most of that information does not need to be held centrally.

Another model would be a distributed system. Each school district would hold the information for its district on a server. The only data that would need to go to a central server is what is necessary to provide the information required for an appropriate central purpose—such as how many students for funding purposes, final marks, and course credits.

Why would the ministry choose a centralized model that creates many capacity issues? Centralized control has to be at least a part of the explanation. As the BCeSIS newsletter says, "A student's record begins right from attending a Strong Start center (sic) and follows them throughout academic life."

District staff responsible for BCeSIS are finding one of the downsides to this permanent online tracking—as the newsletter asks, "what student information follows the student electronically around the province? Who sees it? Where is it stored or archived?"

A careless and inaccurate comment about a student by a teacher or administrator could become a part of their permanent record in this world of permanent online tracking.

These could have been entered on the old paper permanent record, but those mostly disappeared into some basement storage and were not easily accessible. In the electronic world, that information can become part of a data warehouse and be data matched with information in other government data-banks.

At the BCTF Summer Leadership Conference, an overflow crowd turned up for the workshop on BCeSIS. The message, according to the workshop facilitator, David Halme, was clear. We have to do something about this mess.

If you want to know what the BCeSIS implementers are saying about it, go to their website at [www.bcesisgroup.ca](http://www.bcesisgroup.ca).

If you want to join a discussion of teachers talking about BCeSIS, go to the BCTF web site at [bcf.ca](http://bcf.ca).

Larry Kuehn is director, BCTF Research and Technology Division.



## Teaching together in Kampala, Uganda

By Erika van Oyen

In December 2007, I was sitting with my book club for our annual Christmas dinner when the host asked if anyone was interested in going to Africa.

This has always been a dream of mine. My hand shot up. They laughed and one said "That doesn't surprise any of us!"

It was six months later—to the day—that I landed in Uganda. I went as a member of Niteo, a Kelowna-based NGO, to participate in the "Teaching Together" project. This partnered Canadian teachers with Ugandan teachers for an educational dialogue about best practice and educational challenges faced on opposite sides of the globe.

We found that even if we are on opposite sides of the globe, we are the same in our goal to instill a love for learning in our students and desire for these students to become successful members of the global community.

The biggest difference? My classroom is stuffed full of books, craft supplies, and resources. If I don't have it, I can easily get it. In Kampala, the teachers I worked with had tiny blackboards, the occasional textbook, and their voices. That was it; in Uganda, if a teacher wants a resource she or he either creates it or they do without.

In order to address this, while the Canadian teachers worked in the schools, a second team of Niteo members put together the Eva Ruf Resource Centre. This is a three-bedroom house that has been partially converted into an education centre filled with storybooks, novels, games, computers, teacher resources, and craft supplies—all of it generously donated by Canadians. The resources were shipped over in a jam-packed shipping crate that miraculously arrived the same day we did.

***I was moved to tears. Many of the children had never before coloured a picture, done a puzzle, or had a book read to them one-on-one.***

The resource centre came together in just six days. This was a true labour of love. It included painting, assembling, and installing locally made custom-sized furniture, organizing and indexing thousands of resources, and creating a computer network. The centre is also going to function as a guest house with three of the bedrooms converted into guest suites so that it will be self-sufficient. Betty Kabagambe, the director of the centre, was hired after an exhausting series of interviews by Niteo executive.

On opening day, teachers and students from the various schools and people from the community came to see what had been created for them. I was moved to tears. Many of the children had never before coloured a picture, done a puzzle, or had a book read to them one-on-one. Even the teachers were like kids in a candy store; they opened books and ran to their colleagues to share what they had discovered. The students spontaneously broke into song as a way to share their joy with us.

"Canadians are such generous people," Muhamad Sekimuli, a biology and chemistry teacher at Kawanda Secondary School, said to me. "Thank you!"

I feel, though, that I got the greater gift. It reinforced my belief that possessions are not as important as experiences.

I was fortunate enough to return this summer (2009) with another team and we saw the resource centre in action. It was incredible to see how well used it is. Every day students come to use the books to help them with their studies. A local Kindergarten class comes every Thursday for story time. Teachers use the centre to get ideas for their lessons. Teens and young adults come for the free dance lessons being offered in the evenings. It has become a community centre and a safe place for children of all ages to hang out. Veronica, a 9-year-old girl, walks an hour each way during her school holidays and on Saturdays to read and draw at the centre. Puzzles, games, cards, books, magnetic letters, soccer balls, craft supplies, reference books, and teacher resources—all are being used on a daily basis. Some days, there are over 75 students at the centre but when Betty Kabagambe is ready to go home, Apollo, the groundskeeper, blows his whistle softly and all the students file out of the gate without any problems. The following morning when the gate is opened, children start pouring in again. What an incredible success!

The teachers from Canada also offered PD opportunities for their Ugandan colleagues. Adrienne Gear and her publisher generously donated *Reading Power* books so that two workshops on Reading Power could be offered. There were also hands-on science and math workshops. They were a great hit and the teachers have asked for more next year. The skills that the team of Canadian teachers brings next year will help determine what PD opportunities Niteo will be able to offer our Ugandan counterparts. They are especially hoping for music, writing, PE, and secondary science to be offered as workshops for them. While Ugandan teachers do complete an education degree at the university in Kampala, little training is offered on how to make

lessons hands-on for the students.

The students in my school are currently fundraising to help pay for a van to be used as a bookmobile to take resources to the teachers in and around Kampala who can't access the resource centre. In the 2008–09 school year, students held two benefit concerts, had a car-wash, did healthy bake-sales, had a used-toy sale, and several students donated birthday money toward this cause. We are now two-thirds of the way there. This year, we will meet our goal and when I return to Kampala next summer, I will be able to take photos of the bookmobile that our school purchased

***While Ugandan teachers do complete an education degree at the university in Kampala, little training is offered on how to make lessons hands-on for the students.***

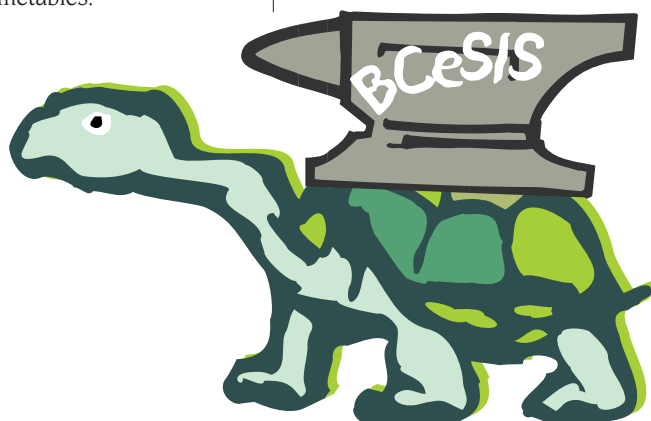
for the teachers and students of Uganda. It is a very exciting project and the students often ask me how close we are to our goal. They were disappointed when we didn't make it by last June but they are already asking what we will do this year to meet or even exceed our fundraising goal. It's inspiring to see that the students here are so excited about the students across the ocean.

I was so moved by my experience in Uganda in July 2008 that I am now a member of the Niteo board. We are a volunteer-run non-denominational organization and all our fundraising efforts go 100% toward our projects. We intend to return to Uganda next summer with two teams of volunteers: one team will be intergenerational for parents/grandparents to travel with their children/grandchildren, and the other team will be for teachers and other volunteers who want to work in Ugandan schools and orphanages. Both trips will be for two weeks. Future goals are to create a resource centre in the North where the villages are starting to rebuild after more than 20 years of civil war.

We are always looking for more people who would like to be involved. You can learn more about Niteo on our website at [www.niteoafrika.org](http://www.niteoafrika.org). If you are interested in being involved or if you want to come to Uganda in 2010, please contact me at [e.vanoyen@gmail.com](mailto:e.vanoyen@gmail.com).

Uganda is a beautiful country with amazing people. I feel so fortunate to have added this exciting experience to my life!

Erika van Oyen teaches at Ecole Glenmore Elementary, Kelowna.



# Teachers' Pension Plan

Everything you always wanted to know about your pension, but didn't know who to ask

By Rob Taylor

If you are like me you signed a whole stack of forms when you accepted your first teaching assignment, and somewhere in the pile was an enrolment form for the Teachers' Pension Plan. That was the last you thought of it until sometime in late May or early June when a mysterious document called *Member's Benefit Statement* arrived in your inbox.

When you opened it there was a lot of small print, but what probably caught your attention first was your earliest retirement date. For me, it was April 1, 2015, which back in 1984 was so far away that it wasn't even worth thinking about and the pension numbers were so infinitesimally small that it was laughable.

Each year my statement arrives, and somehow that April Fool's Day date is not so far away anymore.

## But what does it all mean?

Your pension is a trust, established between you, the employee, and your school district, the employer. Contributions are made, on your behalf by your employer and you make contributions from your own salary. For teachers the combined employer/employee contribution levels total 21.45% of salary on the first \$46,300 and 24.45% on any earnings over that. Your own contributions vary between 9.16% and 10.66%, with your employer making up the difference. Those contributions are remitted to the Teachers' Pension Plan.

Once there, the Pension Corporation, under the direction of the Teachers' Pension Board of Trustees, administers the fund, using some to pay out pensions that are already granted and sending the

rest to the British Columbia Investment Management Corporation (bcIMC), which is responsible for investing the funds of all public pensions in BC. bcIMC is guided by a strict set of guidelines, known as the Statement of Investment Policies and Procedures, developed and reviewed annually by the Teachers' Pension Board of Trustees. It is worth noting that the total investments of the Teachers' Pension Plan now exceed \$14 billion, not an insignificant amount of money to manage!

Rob Taylor is an assistant director, BCTF's Income Security Division.

## Factor 88? Don't wait

A member who has attained age 64, has reached factor 88 (age plus contributory service), or is in receipt of a retirement pension under a registered pension plan, may voluntarily withdraw from the long-term portion of the Salary Indemnity Plan. Withdrawal may be made during any school year in which one of the foregoing conditions has been met and upon the completion of the appropriate withdrawal form. Withdrawal will be effective, upon approval, in September for applications received in that month. Applications submitted later will be effective the month following approval of the application.

In making application for withdrawal, you should ensure that in the event of serious illness or accident you have sufficient accumulated sick leave which, when combined with 120 days of benefit from SIP: short-term, will protect your salary to the end of the month in which you reach factor 90 or the end of the month you attain age 65, whichever comes first.

Applications are available online at: [bctf.ca/uploadedFiles/Public/SalaryBenefits/SIP/LT-WithdrawalForm.pdf](http://bctf.ca/uploadedFiles/Public/SalaryBenefits/SIP/LT-WithdrawalForm.pdf) or by calling the BCTF Income Security Division at 604-871-1921.

# Reach: to extend; to connect with

By Dianne King

*Reach for the Top* (also called School Reach) began as a national school program in 1965 ([www.reachforthetop.com](http://www.reachforthetop.com)). It is open to any secondary school student fortunate enough to have a sponsor and a team in their school. Presently, more than 40 teams participate in BC, with over 400 teams participating nationwide.

**Reach dramatically increases the participants' knowledge base, makes learning fun, and teaches teamwork.**

Students enjoy buzzing in and trying to answer questions pertaining to academic subjects and general knowledge. The question format frequently changes within a round. For example, sometimes the first team member to buzz in can answer, but sometimes each team member has to answer a question in order for the team to get points. In a typical interschool Reach game, a team of four players will compete with other students substituting between rounds of play. Students usually practice once a week to prepare for interschool games or provincial tournaments.

Reach dramatically increases the participants' knowledge base, makes learning fun, and teaches team work. Diversity is encouraged and respected, as it is to a team's advantage to have members who are strong in different areas and can cover all topics, including science, history, mathematics, languages, pop culture, and current events.

At this year's provincial tournaments, Sir Winston Churchill Secondary School's senior team (Grades 11-12) won gold for the second year in a row. The BC championship was previously held by St. George's School (14 times). University Hill Secondary School (twice), as well as Windermere Secondary School, Magee Secondary School, and Mt. Douglas Secondary School (once each). Burnaby North Secondary School came second this year, and University Hill Secondary School third. Of the junior teams (Grades 8-10), St. George's School came first this year, Burnaby North Secondary School second, and Churchill Secondary School third.

In their first national competition, held in Toronto, the Churchill Reach team won their first game, but was defeated in the quarter-finals by London Central in a very close-scoring game.

Dianne King is a Vancouver parent.

# What does social justice have to do with a union?

By Patrik Parkes

Occasionally, other BCTF teachers tell me that social justice issues are merely a distraction, that we should focus exclusively on our own labour concerns. What, they ask, do homelessness, unethical pension investments, or slaughter in Gaza (among other things) have to do with our concerns as teachers? Such questions—although they need to be asked—betray a misunderstanding of the context in which we work.

For those who doubt our need, as a union, to be concerned for external social justice, here's my response: a society that lacks communitarian values is certain to have no interest whatsoever in improving conditions for teachers. A society in which it is deemed acceptable to let people freeze to death on its streets, to invest pension funds in weapons development, and for its allies to massacre unarmed civilians, is certain not to give a damn about class composition or teachers' wages. Especially, not when many see their own (frequently far worse) working conditions eroded in a free-market race to the bottom.

At the end of 2008, a market crash resulted in hardship—in many cases extreme hardship—for its victims. In essence, this resulted from a system that prioritized short-term, individual profit, with little or no concern for social costs. But it's not just governments and banks that need to learn from this. As a union, we also need to start think-

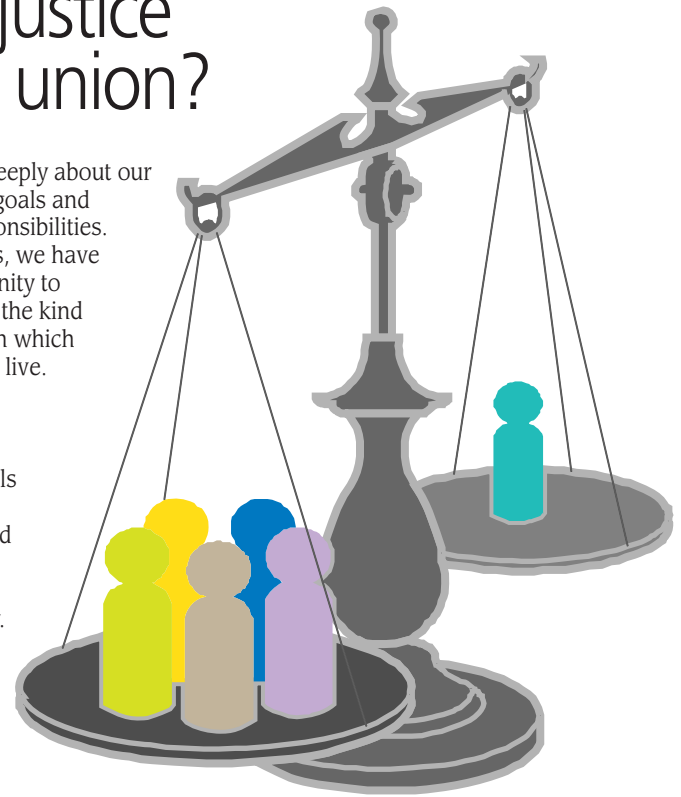
ing more deeply about our long-term goals and social responsibilities. As teachers, we have an opportunity to help shape the kind of society in which we want to live. We need to educate students to acquire tools of critical analysis and awareness of community. But we won't be able to do so unless we also start educating ourselves.

In 2002, Henry Milner's *Civic Literacy* outlined (with a Canadian focus) a disturbing lack of political and social awareness in North America. And judging by Chris Hedge's more recent account in *Empire of Illusion* (although with a US focus) the situation has not improved. Hedges describes a callous, irrational, and atomized society—in fact, the very kind of society that has no use for the communitarian values on which a public education system should be based. So, if we want to repair and improve that system, we'd better start working toward the kind of society that will nurture it.

A lot of excellent social justice work is done through the BCTF, and

we can do much more to model the kind of values we'd like to see reflected in society. This fall, locals will start preparing resolutions for the 2010 BCTF AGM. Let's make sure social justice concerns are reflected in these motions, that we don't regard them as superfluous by putting them at the end of agendas, and that we discuss them in a transparent and democratic manner. Let's use this opportunity to educate fellow teachers, and the general public, about the kind of society we'd like to build.

Patrik Parkes teaches at Moscrop Secondary School, Burnaby and edits the *Peace and Global Education* newsletter ([www.pagebc.ca](http://www.pagebc.ca)).



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This initiative is an extension of *The Gathering Place*, a teaching resource for grades 5-8 Social Science and History. Email us at [info@classroomconnections.ca](mailto:info@classroomconnections.ca) for your free copy.

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YOU can decide the winner! Finalists entries will be displayed on our website and voting will be open to the public.

Check out last year's winner: [www.yourhome.ca/homes/article/589712](http://www.yourhome.ca/homes/article/589712)

### The Cuba Project

is open to active BCTF members.

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(See story p. 5)

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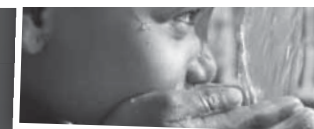
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**4-6** Richmond. BC Making Connections Conference, Creating and Sustaining Positive Futures—Everybody has a role to play Making Connections 2009 is the 12th annual conference focusing on school-wide positive behaviour support. This is a great conference for schools just starting their journey with PBS and those looking to add to and sustain their efforts. Check out our exciting new format. For more information visit <http://mail.sd35.bc.ca/~BC-PBS/>

**5-7** Vancouver. 15th Annual Provincial Conference on Aboriginal Education, Reconnecting the Generations, presented by the First Nations Education Steering Committee and the BC Ministry of Education, [www.fnesc.ca/conferences/index.php](http://www.fnesc.ca/conferences/index.php). For more information phone 1-877-422-3672 or e-mail [jenniferw@fnesc.ca](mailto:jenniferw@fnesc.ca)

**19-21** Edmonton, Alberta. Mind Body Spirit Conference presented by LDAA (Learning Association of Alberta). A continuing education opportunity for teachers, administrators, professionals, and parents on practical strategies and emerging research on learning disabilities. A host of experts who will discuss approaches to intervention that focus on mind, body, and spirit—recognizing that learning disabilities affect every aspect of a person's life. Register online at [www.LDAA.ca](http://www.LDAA.ca).

## MARCH 2010

**26-27** Kelowna. BC Science Teachers' Association present Catalyst 2010—A Science Odyssey. A conference for all Science Educators K-12+ at the Delta Grand Okanagan Resort and Conference Centre. Exciting keynote, featured speakers, teacher-led professional development, hands-on workshops, technology workshops, science literacy and reading strategies, IRP implementation ideas, current issues in science education, presentations by leading scientists, science teacher collaboration, K-7 science workshops, Exhibitor Hall...and much more! Visit the BCScTA website [www.bcscta.ca](http://www.bcscta.ca) for more details.

**31-April 1** Vancouver. The Special Education Association (SEA) is proud to present the 35th Annual Crosscurrents Conference (right before the Easter long weekend) at the Westin Bayshore Hotel. The dates have been changed this year to accommodate the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics. Keynote: plus a variety of quality sessions and exhibitors for regular and special education. For information contact or visit the website: [bctf.ca/SEA/SEA2/Conf\\_2009.htm](http://bctf.ca/SEA/SEA2/Conf_2009.htm) Exhibitors contact Karen Bell at [karbell@shaw.ca](mailto:karbell@shaw.ca)

## MAY 2010

**19-23** Vancouver. The Environmental Educators' PSA (EEPSA) hosts the EECOM 2010 national conference in partnership with Simon Fraser University and Metro Vancouver. Diversity, Sustainability, Environment: Cultural and Practical Diversity in Environmental Education. Contact Patrick Robertson, 604-818-6521, [pabrobo@shaw.ca](mailto:pabrobo@shaw.ca) or see our website for more information at [www.bctf.ca/eeepa](http://www.bctf.ca/eeepa).

Future October PSA days  
2010-11: October 22, 2010  
2011-12: October 21, 2011  
2012-13: October 19, 2012  
2013-14: October 25, 2013  
2014-15: October 24, 2014  
2015-16: October 23, 2015

## PSA PD Day—October 22, 2010

PD Calendar website: [bctf.ca/ProfessionalDevelopment.aspx](http://bctf.ca/ProfessionalDevelopment.aspx)  
Additions/changes: [sdrummond@bctf.ca](mailto:sdrummond@bctf.ca)

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By Irene Lanzinger

In the BCTF, we proudly describe ourselves as a social justice union. In my years of activism, I have seen ample evidence that we live up to this claim. But the most compelling evidence comes from our international work. Our commitment to social justice requires that we look beyond our borders and work with teacher unions in other countries to carry out the work of trying to build a more socially just global community.

In August, I had the privilege of travelling to Namibia to see the impact of our international work. The Namibian teachers' union (NANTU) invited me to address their 9th National Teachers' Congress to help them celebrate their 20-year anniversary as a union.

Our work in Namibia grew out of the activism of BCTF members in the global anti-apartheid movement in the 1980s. Larry Kuehn, our director of international programs, was active in organizing BCTF participation in that struggle. Some Namibian students joined the group and ensured that the group understood that apartheid existed not only in South Africa but also in what was then South West Africa (later Namibia) and Mozambique.

**When the tide on apartheid turned in the late 1980s, many activists in the anti-apartheid movement, including our members, were determined to support those engaged in building new societies out of the oppressive past. So began a strong and fruitful relationship with teacher unions in Namibia, Mozambique, and South Africa.**

When the tide on apartheid turned in the late 1980s, many activists in the anti-apartheid movement, including our members, were determined to support those engaged in building new societies out of the oppressive past. So began a strong and fruitful relationship with teacher unions in Namibia, Mozambique, and South Africa. Our work in Namibia began as an English-language proficiency program and now is largely union training based on our school union representative training model.

NANTU's invitation to the president of the BCTF to address their convention was recognition of the role we have played in helping them build a strong teacher union in their 20-year history. By the same token, my attendance at the congress was a message to their members about the value we place in that relationship.

# Viva NANTU Viva!



(L-R) Don Reader, Patrick Kazimbu, Larry Kuehn, Irene Lanzinger, David Chinavane, and Bendos Garoëb on The Etosha Pan.

Larry Kuehn and long-time NANTU trainer and BCTF activist, Don Reader, had also been invited to the congress and travelled there ahead of me. Don Reader has been to Namibia so many times to help with training that the Namibian teachers refer to him as "Uncle Don" and indeed that's what his congress name tag read.

On the evening of August 26, I embarked on the 40-hour journey of airplanes, airports, and car travel to reach Tsumeb in northern Namibia. I arrived at 5:00 p.m. on Friday, August 28, and I was scheduled to speak to the approximately 300 delegates at the congress at 6:00 p.m. I knew I would be making the speech almost immediately on arrival and so I made sure it was well prepared in advance. The adrenalin and excitement associated with being in Africa helped too.

The following day was the final day of the congress. Among other things, NANTU members debated admission tests imposed by some principals (NANTU called for the abolition of these tests as unfair and discriminatory), a fee increase (it passed), the length of term-of-office for elected officers (they went to five-year terms!), recruiting student teachers, and establishing a retired teachers' association as per the BCTF model.

There was a wonderful band that played during breaks and sometimes during the session. There was much singing and dancing. To the delight of another international guest, David Chinavane from Mozambique, there were frequent shouts of Viva, NANTU, Viva! David told us that the shouts of "Viva" originated with the Mozambique movement for

elimination of apartheid and independence from Portugal. That explained how a union in a country with German, then Afrikaans, then English as its official languages, ended up with cries of "Viva, NANTU, Viva!" To our delight there were sometimes cries of "Viva, BCTF, Viva!" as well.

On the final afternoon of the congress, there were elections both for full-time officers of the central union and for 20 members on the National Teachers' Council. The election process took until 10:00 p.m. and was followed by a gala dinner, which was served at midnight and, in true African style, consisted mostly of meat. I was delighted to discover that NANTU is worse than the BCTF for making their activists work long hours and going into the wee hours with events related to their large meetings!

After the Congress, NANTU invited us to take a two-day trip into the Etosha game park. Several members of the NANTU staff accompanied us. Etosha was an amazing experience. The Etosha Pan is a dried up salt water lake surrounded by plains that are filled with an amazing array of animals. We saw zebras, giraffes, spring bok, hartebeest, wildebeest, impala, lions, rhinos, ostrich, warthogs, hyenas, jackals, etc. The highlight was watching 60 elephants at a water hole spraying, playing, and rolling in the mud and water.

The next day, we left the park and travelled north of Etosha National Park close to the Angolan border. The scenery changes dramatically from central Namibia to the north. In the north, traditional African homes on subsistence farms line

the road along with very small shops and bars with colourful names. My favourite was "Fanny Resting." The vast majority of black Africans continue to live in the north because the repressive apartheid policies of South African rule restricted their access to the farming area in central Namibia controlled by white Germans and South Africans.

After a visit to the school of the NANTU president, Simeon Kavila, we travelled another 80 kilometres into the bush. Our NANTU guide needed a local guide to help him find the way to "Kate's" school. Kate attended a BCTF training a number of years ago. She insisted that a number of the trainers accompany her to her community where she taught under a tree in the bush.

**But as a leader of the BCTF, the most significant experience I had in Namibia was when a number of NANTU members at the congress expressed the view that they would not be involved in the leadership of their union without the training they received from the BCTF. We have made a difference for Namibian teachers.**

The BCTF trainers, including Susan Lambert, Sheila Pither, and Don Reader proceeded to raise funds through the BCTF and our locals—Burnaby Teachers' Association and Vancouver Elementary and Secondary School Teachers' Associations. There is now a two-

room primary school near Kate's tree. Queen Alexandra Elementary School in Vancouver raised money for the pit toilets out back and they are dutifully labelled "Queen Alexandra." Henderson Elementary School and Kitsilano Secondary School also helped fund needy project in Namibia (another school and construction of an Aids orphanage).

Though schools were not in session while we were in Namibia, when we drove up to the school we were greeted by a large group of children, the school board, and members of the community of all ages.

As we opened our doors, the children began to sing beautifully in English. The children are educated in their native language until Grade 4 so there is no doubt there was considerable rehearsal time for the song. I am not sure whether there was a dry eye among the foreigners.

That evening, we returned to Oshikati, a large city in the north and the site of a BCTF/NANTU three-day training that was to begin the next day. I expected that I would "bring greetings" from the BCTF to the 18 or 20 teachers eager to give up some their winter holidays to work on behalf of their union. Imagine my surprise when we arrived at the training the next morning and I discovered that at 10:15 there was to be "motivational speech" given by Irene Lanzinger, president of the BCTF. Thankfully, my work in the Federation has given me plenty of opportunities to speak so I had some previous speeches to draw on.

The following day we left Don Reader and a NANTU staff member to continue with the training and made the long journey back to Windhoek, the capital city.

The trip to Namibia will leave me with many wonderful memories; our NANTU friends, the singing and dancing at the congress, the amazing scenery and animals, the voices of Kate's students, and the remarkable Namibian countryside. But as a leader of the BCTF, the most significant experience I had in Namibia was when a number of NANTU members at the congress expressed the view that they would not be involved in the leadership of their union without the training they received from the BCTF. We have made a difference for Namibian teachers. As I said to them, we have been honoured to help them build their union and we have learned a great deal from them. They have built a strong union on the foundation of a very difficult struggle for independence and freedom from racism and oppression.

Our international work, as exemplified by our work with NANTU, is at the heart of our claim to be a social justice union.

*Irene Lanzinger is the BCTF president.*

