

To:
The Minister of Housing and Social Development
Honourable Rich Coleman
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Email: rich.coleman.mla@leg.bc.ca

CC: North Van MLA's, BCCPAC, Shane.Simpson.MLA@leg.bc.ca (NDP critic for Housing and Social Development)

Dear Minister Coleman

As the executive of the North Van Parent Advisory Council, representing the 8,000 parents of some 16,000 students spread across the 39 schools in the North Vancouver School District we are compelled to respond to the irresponsible timing and degree of funding cuts to our public schools resulting from the decision to cut in half the gaming grants funding to PACs and DPACs in support of our children.

In the Times-Colonist you were quoted as saying that you haven't heard much from parents about this issue, but the timing of these announcements has meant many PACs are still getting ramped up for the new school year as they hear of the PAC funding cuts. Additionally PACs are also dealing with the huge cuts to our districts and schools caused by the elimination of the Annual Facilities Grants. In North Vancouver the gaming grants cuts will amount to the loss of some \$160,000. This is funding parents use to provide essential supplies, equipment and important educational opportunities such as anti-bullying workshops and anti-drugs education programs for our students. The PAC gaming funds cuts pale in comparison to the \$3 million cut to the school districts facilities maintenance budget but are significant because the PAC funds directly impact classrooms by taking away funding parents use to provide basic school supplies for already under-funded classrooms.

Expectations

This is not an issue of entitlements, it is an issue of consistent expectations. While we recognize the government's need to respond to changes in the economy, the best way the government can help manage in these difficult times is to support the stable environment needed for long-term investments to grow and pay-off. This is as true in education as it is for the arts, sports, the environment and in business.

School PAC's manage to the cycle of the school year. The government needs to respect this model by applying funding changes, including PAC funding through the gaming grants, to the next school year rather than mid-year or whenever it conveniences the Ministry.

Minister Coleman, you have complained that recipients of gaming funds shouldn't consider the funds as an entitlement. What you as Minister may call an entitlement is in fact an expectation set by the Ministry over the course of multiple years using the same funding policies. As a result of this long term behaviour, people have come to expect funding for these long-term programs. More importantly, the long-term pattern of behaviour means that people expect to receive fair warning of changes to these funding policies. A warning that enables them to respond to the budget changes rather than cutting into active programs mid-stream. Just like any organization, PACs have long lead times for many events. In some cases we have to book and pay for educational workshops and other uses of gaming funds months in advance. Cutting funds on short notice creates a massive disruption for our organizations.

So while we may agree that funding should not be considered an entitlement and should be provided based on actual needs, we also believe that when governments operate on a consistent basis for an extended period of time that organizations should expect ample warning of impending changes to that system to ensure they can budget appropriately for the changes. Many PACs logically plan their budgets around the school year and commit funds early on to their activities. Having surprise cuts as the school year begins throws all of this into disarray as PAC's may have already committed the funds.

Commitment to Meaningful Funding

If the funding policies are to be based on need it is important for the Ministry to work with the groups requesting funding to understand the needs of those groups. In the case of the gaming funds, the use of these grants is the only parent controlled public funding in the school system. It is the only public money parents can see be directly applied to the needs of their school and their children's classrooms.

PAC funding is direct funding for classrooms. PAC funds go to library books, educational supplies, computers, workshops and playgrounds. These items are essential to the delivery of a quality education and are no longer adequately funded by the Ministry of Education. Instead these vital tools must be funded by the PACs and increasingly the teachers from their own pockets. For all intents and purposes, the PAC's budgets including the gaming funds are the only source of enrichment funding in a school system focused on cuts. Healthy PACs ensure BC's education system continues to deliver the educated populace we need to be competitive and these cuts significantly impair our ability to support our students.

Similarly the province needs to return PAC funding to the \$20 per student level provided in 2008/2009 to enable PACs to continue to meet the specific needs of our students to provide them with an enriching school environment. \$20 a year for supplies, books and computers may seem very little but PAC's are very good at leveraging funds across the school to enhance the school for all students. At a \$10 a year level, however, the PAC's ability to deploy the funds is severely limited as there are now insufficient funds to provide even a base level of support.

In closing we shall repeat ourselves and ask the Ministry to commit to managing the gaming grants to ensure that the timing of funding changes respects the realities of the school year with stable meaningful funding for children through their PACs.

With respect

David Whitehead & Leslie Uhlenbruck -
Co-chairs - The North Van PAC Executive 2009/2010