

EDITORIAL



TAKE NOTE, TRUSTEE CANDIDATES

Students, parents, and staff deserve a systematic shift to accountability and transparency. Here's how trustees running in the October elections can make it happen.

The Vancouver School Board is an elected public body of nine trustees who make localized decisions based on guidelines set by the Ministry of Education and the province. Being the second largest district in British Columbia, over 50,000 students, 9,000 staff, and half a billion dollars flow through the jurisdiction every year.

In October, the public will vote in nine candidates for VSB trustee to represent them on the school board in the 2022 municipal elections.

However, students are the group that the school board's decisions are most consequential to. The same group has the least voice in those decisions.

That needs to change. And with that, The Griffins' Nest Editorial Board has compiled a list of demands for 2022 Vancouver School Board Candidates, to be considered a non-partisan mandate letter from the almost 20,000 district secondary students, nearly 3,000 of whom will be eligible to vote in this year's upcoming election.

Education is about students, and it's time the Vancouver School Board operates that way.

1 Our Current Board is a Passive Board. That's Unacceptable.

The purpose of school trustees is to hold our public education system accountable to the public. The current Vancouver School Board is far too close to management, and as a collective, does not ask tough questions of staff. Trustees should be engaged and inquisitive, and as a body, they are currently neither. Students expect the trustees to properly consult the perspective of all stakeholders as opposed to the current deference to management's word. A passive democracy is a weak democracy and democracy is weak in the District.

2 Reevaluate School Scheduling

School schedules must be re-evaluated to ensure they maximize students' success. Flexible periods should continue to be incorporated into schools' daily schedules, but with less interruption from mandatory school-wide activities, such as safety drills or assemblies. To ensure students are well-rested and prepared for school each day, later start-times should be considered. Students and staff recommendations should determine which school system (linear, semester, quarter) provides the most enriching learning experience.

3 Engage in Meaningful Student Consultation

The VSB's current level of student consultation currently receives a fantastically failing grade. And there's no public relations spin to put on that statement. Consultation of students consistently appears minimally affectual in the District's decision making, especially through restrictive surveys. Senior management and trustees need to meaningfully consult with those whose lives board decisions impact the most but have the least voice. A robust framework for collecting and using student input in decision-making is needed.

4 Civil Liberties Must be Respected in Schools

Freedom of expression, whether it be in the form of posters, discussion, campus newspapers, or dress, is a Charter right particularly abused by staff who do not understand the civil liberties implications of their job. That, among other students' rights issues, needs to be addressed and aided by the consultation of the British Columbia Civil Liberties Association, West Coast Legal Education and Action Fund, and the British Columbia Human Rights Clinic in developing a plan to respect civil liberties in Vancouver's public schools.

5 Lighting and Temperature in Schools

The poor quality of lighting and poor heating/ventilation in schools affects the mental well-being of students. Particularly in classrooms and hallways that have no windows, the dim, yellow lighting is noticeable. A change to brighter, neutral-tone lights is ideal. Also, improve heat regulation systems, notably heating schools in the wintertime and maintaining an adequate temperature in the summer months. Many schools' temperature control systems are inconsistent even within buildings, creating uncomfortable learning spaces.

6 Process for Filing Serious Complaints Against a Teacher

Serious non-academic complaints about teachers need to be addressed and adjudicated quickly, effectively, and objectively. Victims of teacher sexual harassment or bullying have the right to have their complaints addressed. Current mechanisms for teacher behavioral accountability are ineffective and inconsequential, and force students into situations society would not tolerate in any other setting. The school district is failing wholly in this realm, and fundamental and unprecedented progress is to keep school safe for students.

7 Engage Teachers' Unions to Review Professional Autonomy

Professional autonomy in collective agreements has profound necessities, including the protection of teaching styles and unique methods of instruction. However, it has left many teachers unaccountable to their students and their families and administrators are effectively powerless to intervene and serious academic concerns. A solution that balances the current imbalance of student and staff interests needs to be reached through consultation of the VSTA, BCTF, other subject matter experts, and students themselves.

8 Consistency Across the District for the Mandatory CLC Course

The content, structure, and attendance requirements for Career Life Connections 12 (CLC) varies greatly across the District. Much like other graduation-mandated courses, students should expect a level of consistency throughout District schools for CLC. The option of taking CLC in students' Grade 11 year should be provided to all students to allow for more flexibility in their timetable and the possibility of using their CLC Capstone as a "passion project" in their supplementary post-secondary applications.

9 Afford Student Councils More Independence

Student Councils across the District require more independence from their administration in order to fully represent the student body. They currently lack autonomy, and work at the whims of their school officials. With greater independence, student voices are held in a higher regard and more meaningful representation and action can be achieved.

10 Mental Health Support

Mental health issues and stress are common amongst students, making accessible support necessary. Students may hesitate to reach out to their counselor or be unaware of existing support services. A proactive, informational approach to mental health in classrooms (i.e. increasing mental health check-ins) would be extremely beneficial.

11 Commit to Improving Workplace Culture for Staff who Speak Up

The Vancouver School District has yet to recover from the toxic workplace culture revealed in 2016. Some staff go about their professional lives keeping their concerns private out of fear of reprisal. That's unacceptable in a 21st century workplace and at a public body. More needs to be done to allow for effective articulation of teachers' professional concerns.

12 Increase Enriching Field Trips and Guest Speakers

Field trips and guest speakers allow students to deepen their understanding of course content. They provide students with the opportunity to learn in natural environments, be exposed to primary source resources, and connect abstract concepts to real-life experiences, thus both should be considered a critical component of the curriculum.

13 Re-Evaluate The Use of Teams

Microsoft Teams has become integral to schooling in the District. However, Teams was rushed into use at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, and its effects on student education has not been fully scrutinized since. The District should commit to a full report on how Teams has fallen short and measures up to expectations.

14 Cover Costs of Printing that Students Currently Have to Pay

At some secondary schools in the District, students who require the use of a school printer to print their homework, assignments, and projects are currently subject to the corresponding fees to do so. Those costs must be covered by the Vancouver School District. Students should not be paying out-of-pocket for lacking access to a domestic printer.

15 Work with the City and Translink to Develop Safe Routes to School

Transportation can act as a barrier for students to access school. Collaboration with the City of Vancouver and Translink for bike/walking routes and transit routes would improve accessibility and student safety. Especially in neighbourhoods with growing school-age populations, increases in safe transportation to schools is necessary.

16 Access to Devices for All Students

Many teachers require students to submit assignments online, something only students with access to a device can do. Financial means should not limit a student's success in school. Schools need to find alternate means of learning, or provide devices to students who are unable to access their own on a consistent basis, so they are equitably accounted for.

17 Provide Resources to Students Dealing with Addictions

Schools should increase the number of resources they offer to students dealing with addictions, and make existing ones more accessible. While the VSB currently works with SACY to address addiction, many students aren't aware of this and the availability of their staff members is often slim. Schools would benefit from full-time substance abuse counsellors, more educational presentations or workshops, and connections to external youth organizations.

18 Amend AP 106 so Trustees Drive Consultations

Public consultations are currently driven by management staff, which has led to significant strife and damage to the District's constituency relations. Management staff have proven time and time again since 2017 that they cannot be trusted to transparently, objectively, and meaningfully conduct consultations of stakeholders and the public. Trustees, who, unlike management, are accountable to the public, need to drive the consultation process. This is essential.

19 Immediately Remove the \$2,400 Honorarium of the Student Trustee

The annual \$2,400 honorarium for the VDSC Student Trustee needs to be immediately removed. VDSC's collective attendance rate to VSB meetings has been below expectations, and there is no reason a single student should receive a monetary reward for ceremonially representing student voice. The honorarium is practically offensive to all other students who do important work for their communities without any form of monetary compensation.

20 Urgently Develop Media and Information Literacy Resources

The current level of media and information literacy of Vancouver's students is dangerously low. Our democracy depends on a population that can understand and interpret information soundly. The VSB should immediately engage News Media Canada and OpenMedia as well as other consultants to develop a strategic plan to promote the development of information and media literacy and to prepare students and staff to actively combat mis/disinformation.

21 Make the Student Trustee Electable by the School District Population

The Student Trustee has been elected exclusively by Vancouver District Student Council ("VDSC") members by an online ballot (COVID accommodation) or by in-person vote. The Student Trustee is supposed to represent the entire school district population at the board level, yet the trustee is voted in by a select group of students. Just as school trustees are voted in by the general voting population, the Student Trustee must be selected by who they represent.

22 Revisit and Reevaluate Interactions with DPAC

The District Parent Advisory Council is treated by the VSB as an annoyance, not an actual stakeholder group. This is not an appropriate way to interact with a core stakeholder group. The current relationship held by the two hinder public discourse and limit meaningful engagement. The VSB must reevaluate its interactions with the District Parent Advisory Council, and work collaboratively to heed and respect the views of parents in the District immediately.

23 Support in Post-Secondary Applications

Grade 12 students need guidance and time to prepare post-secondary applications. Most students do not know where to begin in this process. Consider step-by-step assemblies. Allocate time for students to work on applications with the help of teachers and counsellors. Schools should also employ a staff member to act as a career counsellor to walk students through their career goals and the possibility of post-secondary education. This is critical in students' futures.

24 Larger Scale Emphasis on Environmental Consciousness

It is known that climate change is not only dangerous, but rapidly advancing. Our school system needs to both actively foster a generation of change-makers on the environmental forefront and invest in infrastructure that aims to minimize environmental footprint. Environmentalism should be incorporated into course content across a multitude of subject areas. Robust recycling programs should be invested in and new construction should be carbon neutral.

25 Extend 5 Minute Time Limit for Guest Speakers at Board Meetings

Guest speakers petitioning their cause at board meetings frequently lack the time to champion their cause. The five minute limit currently imposed prevents speakers from explaining their points fully and accurately. Extending the limit to 10 minutes will help substantially in increasing stakeholder engagement.

26 Ensure Schools Have an Adequate Counselling Department

Secondary schools should have qualified counselling teams that can meet the needs of all students. This means having a sufficient number of counsellors available and ensuring that they offer both adequate mental health support and valuable career advice. Both organizing courses and providing student support is crucial.

27 Re-Evaluate the Efficacy of the VLN

The Vancouver Learning Network has been found to be a largely ineffective medium for online learning. With so many students relying on it for educational service, it is a necessity that the VSB re-evaluates its effectiveness and readjusts the VLN to aid student education, especially with the VSB last reviewing the VLN in 2016.

28 Alternate Learning Programs

Students' individual needs vary greatly. In recent months, many of VSB's programs catered to advanced or Ministry designated "P" students have been removed or restructured in the name of equity. An increased number of these options are necessary to foster learning in students of all abilities. External academics must be consulted.

Those 18 years of age or older are eligible to vote for trustees in the upcoming municipal election on **Saturday, October 15, 2022**

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