

Democracy and education: they go together, except when the government doesn't like it?

by kevin harding - Monday, June 28, 2010

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The recent controversy over the Vancouver School Board's budget situation has been a bit of an interesting story to follow. Much like every other school board in the province, the VSB has been wrangling with a considerable problem: the costs of providing a high-quality public education continuously increase, while the funding that comes from the provincial government doesn't keep pace.

This isn't a problem that only the elementary, middle, and high schools face; indeed, every public educational institution in this province, from the Vancouver School Board to Simon Fraser University must somehow find a way to balance their budgets in the face of increasing costs and stagnant levels of funding. I'm certainly not an accountant, but the financial problem that all school boards -- and our colleges and universities -- face is a substantial one. When costs increase and funding doesn't match, then cuts to education need to be made because the provincial government has legally required all school boards, colleges, and universities to submit balanced budgets. To repeat: all school boards, colleges, universities, and public educational institutions are required, by law, to submit balanced budgets. This is a feat that even the provincial government itself couldn't accomplish, instead, they amended their balanced budget law giving themselves a pass.

But the legally required balanced budgets aren't the crux of this issue. The true centre of the controversy was the fact that the Vancouver School Board stood up and spoke out about their financial issues. They publicly called upon the provincial government to fairly fund education. They postponed approving their budget because the legally required balanced budget would have meant substantial cuts to education and school closures. They acted as advocates for education.

It seems that this was something that the province didn't want the VSB to do. The minister of education commissioned the comptroller general to investigate the school board's management practices and report back with recommendations on how the budget could be balanced. The submitted report essentially branded the VSB trustees as incompetent; apparently, they spent too much time discussing the impacts of underfunding on the school district, they spent too much time discussing how they could best advocate for education, and they didn't spend nearly enough time just dealing with it and cutting education. Of course, the issue of provincial funding was out-of-bounds for the comptroller general's report.

It's interesting to note what wasn't out-of-bounds, though: the entire principle of elected school boards. The report from the comptroller general noted that elected school trustees, for some entirely incomprehensible reason, felt that their job was to advocate for education. And because education actually needs a lot of advocacy under the BC Liberals, the trustees had been engaging in advocacy. So, the comptroller general suggested that the government should re-consider the 'co-governance' model of education. Reconsider having elected school boards.

Why? Because, in my experience, appointed boards responsible for education don't speak up as readily, and don't embarrass the provincial government in the same way when their funding is being slowly drained to unsustainable levels.

Elected school boards seem to advocate for their schools. This seems to be dangerous -- or at least distasteful -- to the province. So, the province should reconsider this arrangement, at least according to the comptroller general.

To understand this a bit better, it's useful to compare the elementary, middle, and secondary school situation the post-secondary education situation. And I will use a very familiar example: Simon Fraser University. I graduated from SFU with a BA (Hons.) in Political Science and Labour Studies in June 2010, and I was an elected student member of the university's Board of Governors from 2008 to 2010.

There are a number of similarities between the Vancouver School Board and Simon Fraser University. The two have budgets comparable in size: the VSB's is around \$480 million, and SFU's is around \$420 million. Because both organisations rely on employees to conduct their main activities, teaching, the majority of both budgets are dedicated to staff salaries and benefits. Both organisations are public organisations, with funding from the provincial government being the primary source of funding.

Both organisations feel cost pressures in similar ways. Each year, the costs of teaching increase: computers must be replaced, textbooks purchased, libraries updated, and so forth. Inflation increases all costs across the board. And while provincial funding tends to increase each year, it doesn't match the increase in costs. So cuts need to be made.

Both organisations have to make cuts in order to balance their budgets -- the VSB is considering closing eleven schools, closing some programs, and increasing rents to nonprofit and community organisations, while SFU is engaging in round after round of layoffs, closing programs, and shifting more and more teaching from expensive faculty to cheap 'temporary instructors.' In both cases, the quality of education decreases. In both cases, class sizes increase. In both cases, education is at risk.

But there is a striking dissimilarity in how the two organisations respond to the problems of underfunding.

The Vancouver School Board trustees, elected by their constituents to both manage and ensure a high quality of education in their school district, have taken a public stand against underfunding. They have loudly stated the obvious: if funding does not match costs, something has to give. And unfortunately, what's giving is the quality of education. This is not good.

The Board of Governors of SFU take an entirely different approach. No public pronouncements. No public stands. Instead, there are quiet pleas to an entirely indifferent Minister of Advanced Education. Cuts are made. Staff and faculty positions eliminated. Programs closed. Class sizes increased and quality of education decreased. And no public stand is taken. This is not good.

It's not good for students in both cases. Quality of education decreases in both cases. And education is the key to a healthy society in so many ways.

But why is it that only the VSB takes a public stand? The answer, to me, is contained in the comptroller general's report to the ministry of education: the Vancouver School Board is elected.

The Board of Governors of Simon Fraser University is mostly appointed by the provincial government. There are fifteen members of the board, and only five of them are elected. Two are elected students, two are elected faculty, and one is an elected employee. While the provincially appointed members don't take orders from the province, their approach is entirely different to that of the trustees of the Vancouver School Board. In my years on the Board, we spent a large amount of time talking about the issue of underfunding. Each one of us acknowledged the severe challenges that it presented to the university. All of us seemed to agree that this needed to be changed if the university was to be able to continue to provide high-quality education.

But we didn't take public stands as a board. The predominant thought amongst the majority of the board, those who were provincially appointed, was that advocating for funding wasn't the role of the board. Instead, the role of the board was to oversee the implementation of budgets that necessitated cuts because of provincial underfunding. And maybe, if we were so concerned, we might from time to time write a letter to the Minister who would probably just tell us 'too bad.' The chair of the board and the president would meet with the minister privately, who would then likely just tell us 'too bad.'

Despite all of us at least tacitly acknowledging the problems of underfunding, the provincially appointed members of the board were reluctant to take any public stand about the funding situation of the university. They felt it wasn't our role. Instead, our role was, seemingly, to simply implement the cuts that the province mandated by underfunding the university. Without public protest.

The trustees of the Vancouver School Board, on the other hand, seem to feel strongly that their role is to advocate for public education as well as doing the best that they can with what they have. They have refused to simply implement the cuts that the province is downloading, at least without protest. They are all elected by their constituents, and they feel a responsibility to them, a responsibility to education. They don't want to simply take a pronouncement that their underfunding is something that they simply have to deal with.

The difference here is that the Vancouver School Board is entirely elected by the people that their decisions affect. They have a very consultative approach to governance, with the participation of stakeholders, including staff, parents, and students, as a primary goal. They are democratically administering the school district, democratically managing and advocating for education. Advocacy is a key role of democratic accountability, which seems to be incredibly different than the bounded realities of fiscal accounting that the comptroller general's report considered to be the most important role. The VSB is putting their advocacy for quality education above the passive implementation of provincial cuts.

Only a third of the Board of Governors of Simon Fraser University are elected. The rest are appointed by the province. They are overseeing the managing of the university. They implement the cuts that the province passes down without public protest. Public advocacy is something that they have identified as not being part of their role.

A foil exists in all of this: the province has the ability to fire the school board, and the province can replace its appointed members on the university's board of governance at any time it wishes. Provincial

governments have fired school boards before, generally when there is a budget dispute between the board and the province. Also, replacing provincial government appointees on university boards is something that happens regularly. In 2001, after the province deregulated tuition fees, when the Board of Governors of SFU voted against raising tuition, the province replaced the Board.

The comptroller general's report, as commissioned by the Ministry of Education, looked at the Vancouver School Board in the same way that the provincially appointed members of the SFU Board of Governors look at themselves. The comptroller general ignored the democratically administered nature of education. The comptroller general did not look at the issue of provincial government underfunding. Instead, the business mindset influenced the report.

The comptroller general recommended that the provincial government review the 'co-governance' model of school district administration, the elected status of school boards. The implication is that the university model is better.

But the university model is better in only one way: it implements the decisions of the provincial government, it cuts education, and it does this without public protest. It is not democratic, and it is not responsible to advocate for education.

The controversy around the Vancouver School Board and its resistance to underfunding is being used by the provincial government as a way to bring up the idea of taking away our elected school boards. Not because it's necessarily a better way of doing things, but because appointed boards don't publicly complain and protest harmful decisions from the province.

This controversy is about education and it is about democracy. The province harming the former by underfunding our school districts and universities and colleges, and it is trying to do away with the latter to enable it to continue on its way.

Either we believe in our education system and we elect people who will democratically administer the most important thing that a society can do to invest in itself, or we allow cuts to continue. The provincial government seems to have made its choice. Have you?