

The Public School Boards' Association of Alberta
Presentation to
the Standing Policy Committee on Learning & Employment

(Monday, February 3rd, 2003)

Introduction

We are here to-day because all of us in the room are partners in the exciting job of providing education to students and building community. We appreciate the opportunity to make this presentation. We look forward to the conversation to follow, and we look forward to an on-going and more frequent conversation with you and your colleagues.

We champion public schools

The Public School Boards' Association of Alberta is the one provincial association which exists only to be representative of public school education. As we say again and again, "we champion public schools".

The Legislative Assembly is responsible for all forms of education offered in the province. The PSBAA is concerned with public school education -- the education provided by public school jurisdictions throughout the province.

This system of education has served Alberta well for more than 120 years, and it is the envy of the world. Part of the success of our public school system can be traced to the original organization -- it emerged from the local community, which was determined that public school education would be excellent, strong and enduring, and sufficient for everyone.

Public school education in Alberta is the envy of the world principally because the community has always been faithful to the rationale for its existence -- the best possible education of students and the well-being of the community.-- and so it has characteristics which make it unique, valuable, and attractive.

The Unique, Valuable, and Attractive Characteristics of Public School Education

First, public schools accept every student and welcome every parent. Public schools do not question anyone -- about race, religion, political outlook, or income -- as a condition of entry or of staying. Public schools exemplify respect for diversity and an expectation of responsibility for neighbours and community.

Second, public school education models what we expect our students to practice when they are adult citizens. We believe in civil democracy and we hold it out as the best framework for successful communities. For example, we do not want to

see communities fragmented, and we are opposed to recent amendments to the School Act which are likely to result in the fragmentation of rural communities.

Third, the success of public school education depends upon understanding and responding positively to local conditions and values, and local priorities. Quite simply, local responsibility builds pride and makes for excellence: centralized decision-making makes for cynicism and mediocrity. The presence and the work of locally elected trustees demonstrates that representative democracy is alive and well. The government's recent move to end elected representation on Regional Health Authorities was a sad event for the progress of democracy in Alberta.

When we say that we champion public schools, we mean that we champion schools which are inclusive as a matter of conviction and design, schools in systems that welcome everyone into their political process, schools that look at the world from the point of view of civil democracy, and schools that demonstrate civil democracy in a multitude of ways, all based on the role of the public school trustee. Our concern is all students, and all communities.

As the champions of public schools, we want to concentrate on three issues in our time with you to-day.

Reasonable Local Autonomy

We believe that local politicians, being closest to the electorate, stand the best chance of "getting it right", that is, they stand the best chance of being in tune with local conditions, needs, and aspirations. Students are perceptive and persistent: locally made decisions will ensure that education is relevant to students, who need to be able to relate education to the life they live, the people they know, and the conditions they observe in the local community. Locally made decisions will also increase the likelihood that parents and others in the community will re-inforce the experiences that students' have in school. Finally, there are many examples of the public school system doing a better job when, knowing the condition of the students and communities, it can customize its work. AISE is an excellent example of the potential represented by decentralized decision-making.

To put it another way, we believe that trustees are meant to carry the community's messages to the provincial government; they are not meant to carry the provincial government's messages to the local community. The voice of trustees should always be insisting that public school education do more for students and for the community, the voice of trustees should always be insisting that the community and the province do more for public school education.

The tide of centralization has been coming in for too long. We are not arguing that the government has intended to be centralizing, but we do believe that the government has picked up centralizing practices and rules that have come in with the continent-wide tide of centralization. The same tendencies which sometimes

frustrate you in your relationships with the federal government sometimes frustrate supporters of public school education in their dealings with the provincial government. If the provincial government can say that it expects to be trusted with federal transfers for health care, you can understand trustees who say that they expect to be trusted with money for education.

We urge you to consider a local government charter, to ensure that the relationship between the provincial government and local government is reliable and very stable. The process is simple and straightforward, although the work would be challenging and time-consuming.

We urge you to remove the current requirement in the School Act that the Minister must approve the appointment of a Superintendent of schools, in writing prior to his/her appointment by a board. We urge you to remove the current provisions in the School Act which make superintendents, principals, and classroom teachers accountable to the Minister, perhaps in conflict with their responsibility to their board.

We urge you to consider a new Part to the School Act, to govern the relationships between the provincial government and the two biggest public school boards in the province – Edmonton and Calgary.

Public school education comes first

The public school system was the first system in every community and even to-day it is often the only system in a community. In such circumstances, public school systems are for everyone, and everyone participates in making sure that the system works well. Such public school systems represent a commitment by the whole community, that they will do the best they can for their children, that they will pay to ensure the best possible education, and that they will choose leaders who are committed to the students and the community. It is our submission that public schools should be the first concern of government in every community, and certainly in new communities.

We urge the government to adopt the policy that the first school in every new community will be a public school.

Some of the government's funding programs discriminate against public school systems, and that means discrimination against the students and parents who are involved with the public school system. **We urge the government to review every funding program – starting with transportation and sparsity and distance --to ensure that the design, the rules, and the administration do not discriminate against parents and students in the public school system.**

We urge the government to amend the School Act so that members of the minority faith, where a separate school system exists, would explicitly have

the right to choose to be supporters of the public school system. We make note of the fact that this provision was originally in Bill #16 (2001) and was withdrawn by amendment at Committee stage. We see no reason why members of the minority faith would not have the right to support the public school system if they would prefer to do so.

Adequacy of Funding

The public school system is not adequately funded to do the job that parents, students, and the provincial government expect. There is a structural shortfall of approximately four hundred million dollars per year (\$400M), or, about \$4.00/student/instructional day.

As we said in our submission to the Provincial Commission on Learning:

“The fact remains: Alberta has one of the best education systems in the world.

We are convinced that this is true, in very large measure, because of the herculean efforts of people who care – the students themselves, teachers, principals and support staff, parents, trustees, and many community resources.

We are very concerned that, as a community, we are nearing the end of a curve of energy that was ignited and fuelled in years gone by and is not being fuelled adequately now for the future.”

Without a substantial increase to base funding in the upcoming fiscal year, the public school system and, we believe, the separate school system will hit the wall. There will be significant layoffs for teachers and other staff. Class sizes will increase beyond the threshold of parental tolerance. The number of bus routes will be reduced and the length of the bus ride will be increased. Custodial and maintenance service will be reduced, and the results will be noticeable if not immediately costly. Fees of various kinds will be increased. Program variety will be reduced.

The public will not be happy, and they will be looking to hold decision-makers responsible. The public knows that last year’s binding arbitration was imposed by the provincial government. The public knows that local school boards have no funding except that which the province provides. The public knows that the provincial government decides what its revenue flow will be, and where it will come from. The public knows that it is the provincial government which has shifted the tax burden from corporations to individuals and homeowners.

Like us, the provincial government is accountable. We want to help, and we are in a position to help. We want you to hear our input, including our concerns, because we can give you the best possible information on which to make decisions. And we want you to make the best possible decisions. We live and work on the front-

lines of the system day in and day out. We are the first to see what is happening, and we see it mostly clearly. We know what is possible. We are determined that public school education should be excellent, strong and enduring, and sufficient for everyone.

It also needs to be said that, no matter how little money is available, we can make the best use of it when you give us discretion.

We sometimes hear it said that trustees and administrators should take a lesson from farmers and ranchers (many of whom are trustees). They can complain, it is said, about net farm income, but complaining doesn't change the reality: it is dictated by the weather and world markets. Their only recourse is to make the best of what they are given.

Even in such circumstances, no one in Alberta Agriculture tells the farmer what fertilizer to apply or when. No one tells him whether or not he can build a barn, or of what size. No one tells him that his truck should be a three-quarter ton rather than a half ton, or vice versa.

Current base funding for K – 12 education in Alberta is not sufficient for the task. This major problem is compounded by increasing centralization and prescriptive decision-making at the top.

We urge you to make changes. **We urge you to trust local people, and give them more discretion. Trust the local community and let them provide education differently in one community than in another.**

We urge you to fund education adequately, given the challenges all Albertans face. Our prospects are exciting. Their realization requires an investment on our part. We need the courage to think of the future as an investment, not an expense. In respect of education, the courage required is not great: the value of the investment is apparent.

Conclusion

We have a copy of our submission to the Learning Commission for each member of the Standing Policy Committee. You will find the submission filled with creative and positive suggestions for public education in Alberta.

We look forward to our discussion with you to-day. We look forward to future meetings.

We welcome all of you to our working lunch with M.L.A.s on March 3rd.

We are all in this together. We look forward to working with you.