



Greater Victoria Teachers' Association

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Via email

May 8, 2020

Trustees
Greater Victoria School District No. 61
556 Boleskine Road
Victoria BC V8Z 1E8

Dear Trustees,

RE: 2020/2021 GVSD Budget

The GVTA appreciates the opportunity to provide feedback on the District's 2020-2021 budget. The GVTA represents the largest employee group in the district, with approximately 2000 teachers working in a wide variety of roles.

Setting the budget is an exercise in examining our underlying philosophy of education and setting priorities that best align with this philosophy. We hope you believe, as we do, that the primary function of public school is to enable children to access their full potential through a diverse, responsive, and meaningful education. In a time when we all acknowledge there is never quite enough money, we hope this budget will prioritize putting funds where they can be most effective in supporting our shared goal for education. The best value for money will be found when dollars are put directly into schools, where it stays as close to the students as possible. We look forward to further discussion about how the district can most effectively support teaching and learning in SD61.

Our current feedback prioritizes the following areas of need:

- Avoiding cuts to direct student support
- Facilities
- Inclusion
- Professional Development
- In-Service and Training
- Recruitment and Retention

These areas reflect not only our anticipated priorities for the 2020-21 school year, but also current identified areas of need. We look forward to conversations about how the current budget can be used effectively to support students and teachers in the District, including maintaining adequate staffing and maintaining

adequate resources and materials for student learning as funded through school departmental budgets.

Avoiding Cuts to Direct Student Supports

The District has an accumulated surplus, and this is the rainy day you have been saving for. Due to COVID-19, the District forecasts a loss of more than \$6,000,000 in International Student tuition revenue. The Secretary Treasurer has advised that this loss be balanced entirely by cutting more than 30 teaching FTE. We propose that staffing levels should be maintained/smoothed by using funds in the accumulated surplus. Eliminating more than 30 positions will impact schools across the District, which is an excessive and unnecessary disruption when we anticipate the eventual return of these students, this revenue, and an additional staffing need in the Covid-19 context.

Another avenue to explore for avoiding cuts at the school level is examining District-level Administrator staffing for positions that can be eliminated through attrition or redeployment into schools. The GVTA has frequently expressed our concern about the number of people working in the Tolmie office at an arm's length from students. This has only been increasing, despite facing resource shortages in schools. We urge the board to carefully weigh the efficacy of district-level staffing against provision of school-level services.

Facilities

We know the District has had ongoing problems with insufficient spaces in our buildings. With Covid-19, and physical distancing requirements, we anticipate this becoming more acute. We need to make sure that the facilities budget is sufficient for safe, hygienic and effective teaching and learning.

This year, we have had teachers working without appropriate classrooms or learning spaces for individual or small-group support. Many classrooms are without running water to allow for regular handwashing. Many teachers are required to share spaces and squeeze into spaces that were never intended for teaching. The budget will need to prepare for changes to physical spaces to meet physical distancing requirements.

In a number of schools, specialist teachers and prep teachers have no choice but to “teach from a cart” – rushing through the hallways from class-to-class with a cart full of materials – because they do not have consistent dedicated space in the school. This is not a sustainable practice for teachers, and it is not safe in a pandemic. Additionally, this practice results in many classroom teachers without an appropriate space in the school to do their preparation when their prep coverage is occurring in their classroom. These conditions do not support safety or learning, and they are frustrating and demoralizing for teachers.

Even before Covid-19, the GVTA was concerned about facilities maintenance and cleaning. Teachers regularly express frustration about the lack of custodial time in schools and lengthy waits for routine maintenance and repairs. In the context of Covid-19, and the necessity to avoid any kind of sickness in order to eliminate staff working sick, it is imperative that the District plan for increased custodial staffing to maintain healthy building environments.

Inclusion

There is widespread understanding that effective implementation of the model of full inclusion is expensive. The board's philosophical support for inclusion must be met with financial support in order to adequately meet the needs of all students.

Schools have been notified that their "School-Based Inclusive Learning" funds have been decreased for the coming year. This is resulting in damaging cuts to teaching and EA staffing levels, with no clarity or explanation about the criteria for distribution of this funding. Despite these cuts, the needs remain. Staff and students deserve stability and clarity now more than ever.

School-Based Teams are contractually required to make recommendations regarding assessment, programming, placement, and strategies to support students (See Collective Agreement Article D.2). Too often, these professionals are discouraged from making recommendations to support students' academic, physical and social-emotional growth and well-being, because of budgetary limitations.

The GVTA encourages the District to budget not only for the minimum staffing requirements of the Collective Agreement, but also for the staffing and resources needed for meaningful inclusion. Smaller class sizes, additional teaching and support staff, time for consultation and collaboration, training and in-service, and provision of resources and equipment, are all necessary supports.

In recent years, the district has moved to close a number of programs that specifically serve students with special needs, and to move towards "full inclusion" in the regular classrooms. We are concerned that schools, students and families no longer have access to a continuum of options for meeting students' needs. Where inclusion in regular classrooms is not adequately supported by additional staffing in and out of the classroom, training and inservice, and access to alternate facilities and materials, students are too often fully excluded from school when they are sent home or scheduled for less than full hours. We know that we have a number of students that will not be able to physically distance themselves. These students will require additional staffing.

Professional Development

The pandemic has suddenly thrust education into a new context. The 2020/21 school year looks to be a year like no other we have experienced. There will be an intense and urgent need for funds to support teachers as they adapt and change their practice, and for teachers to have funding in order to collaborate and support each other.

Professional development is crucial to success for teachers and students. Teachers are professionals who reflect on their students' needs to determine the best investment of time and resources. Our students' needs are diverse, and so are our teachers'. A one-size-fits-all approach does not work, and in this context of change, teachers need to be able to determine their own individual needs.

In recent years, the board has allocated an additional \$100,000 to teachers' professional development. These funds have been appreciated and have enabled more teachers to participate in quality professional learning. Even with this additional funding, the GVTA has been forced to turn down many teachers' requests for funding from the Joint Professional Development Fund. Next year we anticipate the need will be greater than it has ever been. Increased funding for teachers' autonomous professional development would not only support improved student learning, but it would also be a sound investment in increasing teachers' efficacy, agency, enthusiasm, creativity, innovation, and morale.

The recently ratified provincial Collective Agreement will result in a one-time allocation of funds for early career teachers' mentorship. This will be a welcome injection into our fledgling mentorship program, which will continue to need District-level funding in 2021-22 and beyond. Mentorship has been highly successful and much appreciated in supporting new teachers, and teachers in new assignments.

In-Service and Training

In addition to teachers' ability to access autonomous professional development, there are also common needs driven by necessary changes to teaching and learning conditions.

The district also has obligations and/or priorities as an employer that require training and/or in-service for employees. Topics might include district policies and/or procedures, health and safety, or orientation for new employees. There are often attempts to schedule these activities for Professional Development days, which is not appropriate given teachers' right to autonomous decision-making about their professional development. The activities are then scheduled in addition to the regular work day, which means they are often rushed and resented. When the employer believes that a learning opportunity is valuable and

necessary, they should demonstrate their commitment by providing a budget allowance for adequate release time for employees to complete this training.

Conclusion

The GVTA appreciates the opportunity to provide feedback about our priorities for the District's 2020-21 budget. We hope we have conveyed teachers' valuable knowledge about how budgeting decisions impact education. We all want the best for the students in our schools. We look forward to ongoing discussion about the needs of teachers and students in the District now and in the future.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Winona Waldron', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Mrs. Winona Waldron

President
Greater Victoria Teachers' Association

cc: GVTA Executive Committee