



VICTORIA
CONFEDERATION
OF
PARENT ADVISORY COUNCILS
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September 14, 2020

Board of Trustees
The Greater Victoria School District 61

By email: trustees@sd61.bc.ca

Re: Motion to Rescind Board Motion from 2015

Dear Trustees,

The motion before you at its heart goes to whether or not parents/students' written communication of their self-exclusion from the FSAs should be respected and accepted as valid by our district's administrators.

In 2015 this Board passed the following resolution:

"That the Board of Education of School District No. 61 (Greater Victoria) direct the Superintendent to inform school-based principals to honour parent requests to withdraw their child from the FSA testing and to refrain from contacting them upon receipt of their withdrawal request form as of January 2016"

The current FSA Administrative Manual states:

"Based on the exceptions identified above, administrators may identify students who may be excused from one, two or all three components of the FSA. Students may only be excused from participating in consultation with the student's parent or guardian. The student's parent or guardian must be notified prior to the administration date by letter or telephone call."

The handbook does not prohibit parents from sending a written notice to the administrator setting out the fact of their child's exclusion and the reason for it.

While the handbook does say that Students may only be excused in consultation with the student's parents, and that parents must be notified of the exclusion by an administrator prior to the administration date in writing (by letter) or in person (by telephone), it seems that written communication from a parent excluding their child satisfies the process contemplated by the Administrative Handbook.

It seems to VCPAC that the Administrative Handbook is aimed at preventing administrators from excluding students who might not score highly on the FSAs from taking the test, for the purpose of raising their school's score, rather than require administrators to contact the parent in order to question the validity of a written communication from a parent confirming their child's exclusion.

If a family has made the decision that the student will not participate in the FSA and communicates that decision to the administrator in writing, it is VCPAC's advice to this board that such decision should be respected and should be the end of the matter. There's been consultation in the form of a written communication (a letter in all but formatting) setting out the parent's decision.

It is improper and a clear sign of disrespect for parent voices than an administrator would then take it upon themselves to call the parent and question that family's decision.

Parents have every right to proactively exclude their child from the FSAs, especially where the parent determines that their child fits into the exemptions set out in the Administrative Handbook.

We note that the Student Learning Assessment Order only mentions responsibilities of the board, administrators and teachers. It is silent as to responsibilities of students. The only responsibility on a student exists under the School Act, in section 6(b), which obligates them to participate in an educational program. The definition of "educational program" does not on its face include an obligation to participate in an assessment of the educational system as a whole.

As to the motion before you we advise you not to vote in favour of it. As your District PAC we are concerned that the fact of the board's resolution in 2015 and the motion to rescind points to an undercurrent in this district of disrespect and disdain for parent input and choices.

Have you so little regard for parents and their ability to make a decision for their children that in the face of clear written communication you think it appropriate to follow up with a telephone call to make sure the parent understands the issues?

VCPAC advises the board to take every opportunity as a board to show your high regard for parent and student choices and voices, and this is one such opportunity.

The Province could have included an express obligation on students to take the FSA, but it has chosen not to do so. The Province could also write to you as a board or issue an administrative direction to you should it think you as a board have failed to meet your obligations under the Act - it has not done so. The Province currently allows its employees to send written communication to parents that directly undercut the Province's goal of having as many students as possible write the FSA – it could stop it, but it has chosen not to.

VCPAC advises the Board that it can both help the province raise the participation rate in the FSAs and show respect for parents' by using your power to ensuring balanced information is distributed to families about the FSA.

Currently some families only received information about the FSA from the teacher's union, which opposes the FSAs. We understand that in classes where a Vice Principal is also the teacher, and not a member of the teacher's union, that no communication goes out to parents about the FSAs.

VCPAC takes no position on the appropriateness of the letter or the position of the GVTA – we respect their right to collectively bargain for the purpose of securing improvement in working conditions. Our experience is that the letter from the union is placed in the student’s backpack by the teacher and contains a suggested form for communicating in writing the exemption for the student, and is sent with a sense of urgency asking parents who wish to exempt their child to return the form to the school administrator.

VCPAC does take the position that anyone making rushed choices with unbalanced information has a hard time making good choices. As such VCPAC advises the board to pass a motion aimed at helping parents make good choices based on balanced information, rather than the motion before you which seeks to allow administrators to undermine a parent’s choice after the choice has been made and communicated in writing.

VC PAC envisions a motion that would require all parents to be notified in advance of the FSA test, the benefits of the FSA data, the exemptions explained, and information about how to exempt a child and how to ensure each child has access to the supports set out in their IEP on test day.

We note that there is also a useful FSA information memo published by BCCPAC which could be sent out.

Finally, VCPAC urges the board to take proactive steps in reducing anxiety around the FSAs, but in a manner that is respectful of parent choices. Ensuring timely balanced communication about the FSAs is distributed is a core part of reducing such anxiety, but so is ensuring that each student does have the supports necessary to feel good writing the test.

On a personal note, as a parent, I do believe in the goal behind the FSAs – collecting data about the functioning of our public school system and did not ask for my child to be excluded. However, discussions occurring in the classroom about the relative merits of the FSAs created anxiety about the test, and on the day of the test she refused to write it. I am still frustrated about the situation, and sad that her first experience in standardised testing was an extremely negative one.

VCPAC encourages you as Trustees to support the province in realising the goal of the FSAs, and encourages you to do so by using your power to ensure that balanced information is distributed to parents rather than by disrespecting parents choices after such choices have been communicated in writing.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Please include our letter in the Agenda for the Board meeting at which you plan to vote on the motion.

Respectfully,

VCPAC.