



Esquimalt Nation  
1189 Kosapsum Crescent  
Victoria, BC  
V9A 7K7



Songhees Nation  
1100 Admirals Rd  
Victoria, BC  
V9A 2P6

May 28<sup>th</sup>, 2021

Chair Jordan Watters  
SD 61 Board  
556 Boleskine Rd,  
Victoria, BC  
V8Z 1E8

Attn: Chair Watters,

Please accept this letter from Esquimalt and Songhees Nation's Chief and Council with the upmost care and consideration, as it pertains to our concern with the proposed budget considerations and our belief that these considerations violate the Ministry of Education's foundational principals.

As a prelude to our letter, Leadership would like to express our alignment with the Ministry of Education's commitments outlined in the platform, *Working for You*, which include (but are not limited to): 1) Putting people first: protecting and enhancing the public services; 2) Lasting and meaningful reconciliation: to focus on creating opportunities for Indigenous peoples to be full partners in the economy and providing a clear and sustainable path for everyone to work toward lasting reconciliation; and 3) Equity and anti-racism: implementing mitigative practices to address racialized and marginalized people who face historic and present-day barriers that limit their full participation in their communities, workplaces, government and their lives.

While these principles are the focus of the Ministry, we fear they are lost at a regional level.

As indicated in Ms. Axford's summary report, a number of profoundly negative impacts are listed as a by-product of your decisions, which conflict with the aforementioned commitments by the Ministry.

To date, both Nations have met with Minister Whiteside and Joan Axford. These meetings produced the following understanding of next steps and the expectations from the Nations:

1. Minister Whiteside and SD 61 are collaborating to address the budget cut concerns;
2. It is both Nation's expectation that the Board will reconsider their proposed cuts. Now is not the time for austerity, or a living within our means "budget reset", or paying down historical structural capital deficits. Now is the time for elected officials to hear the needs of constituents and support their communities, particularly those who are most vulnerable and already disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The proposed budget feels poorly conceived, and appeared to pit Indigenous students against their non-Indigenous peers through a false and deeply concerning narrative. These cuts will only exacerbate the growing challenge of the increased learning gaps and mental health challenges within our school population as a result of the COVID-19 global pandemic;
3. As Rightsholders, it is the expectation of both Nations that SD 61, in consultation with Esquimalt and Songhees Nations, will promptly establish protocols for transparent budget reviews and ongoing consultation with the Esquimalt and Songhees Nation Leadership.

4. The SD 61 Board will issue a public apology to the communities at large for the Boards' conduct exhibited at the March 1<sup>st</sup> and May 10<sup>th</sup> meetings, both of which permeated a pattern of colonial thinking – it is our expectation that this apology will acknowledge indiscretions undertaken by specific individuals and be issued in the next week or two;
5. A SD 61 Board representative will connect with Esquimalt Nation's Executive Director, Katie Hooper, to plan the logistics for individual apologies (in person or virtual) to Esquimalt Nation and Songhees Nation Chief and Council for their inappropriate conduct. Formal, in person apologies are a sign of respect in Indigenous culture and we are anticipating that the Board is striving to improve their understanding of these cultural practices;
6. SD 61 Board Chair, Trustees and Senior Administrators are required to receive cultural sensitivity training delivered by qualified First Nations service providers;
7. Long term plans to build capacity and address issues of systemic racism within SD 61 will continue to be discussed. Esquimalt and Songhees Nations would like to see a Special Advisor brought in to perform a comprehensive assessment and steps towards meaningful, long-lasting change;
8. The Shoreline and Craigflower amalgamation project will be reset.

Finally, Esquimalt and Songhees Nation's are in support of the following proposed motion:

That the Board of Education of School District 61 (Greater Victoria) schedule public meetings between June 1, 2021, and June 18, 2021, to:

1. examine considerations included within the report submitted by Joan Axford, Independent Advisor, and receive information from, and ask questions of, District Department heads and school administrators,
2. to identify budget allocation options for School Year 21/22 culminating in a Board meeting on June 18, 2021 to pass the annual budget bylaw for School Year 2021/2022.

Esquimalt and Songhees Nations have been insulted and ignored by previous apparent attempts at "consultation" including the Craigflower/Shoreline staff presentations, the subsequent public hearing on the matter where consultation shortcomings were identified, the summary cancellation of the March 1<sup>st</sup> 2021 Education Policy Committee meeting and the use of First Nations students as a wedge to justify the budget proposal championed by staff. If the District is sincere in its desires to repair the relationship with the Esquimalt and Songhees Nations, an invitation to actively participate in comprehensive budget meetings would be an appropriate first step.

We thank you in advance for your thoughtful consideration of this letter and we look forward to collaborative and constructive next steps.

Signed,



Chief Robert Thomas  
Esquimalt Nation



Chief Ron Sam  
Songhees Nation

cc: Honorable Minister Jennifer Whiteside, Ministry of Education  
Honorable Minister Murray Rankin, Minister of Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation  
Honourable Mitzi Dean, MLA for Esquimalt-Metchosin