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Response to the District Closure Process 2008 from the good folks at CAPE

We have now survived (only just) a series of information sessions conducted by School District #79. The declared purpose of these events was to advance the consultation process with regards to the closure of four of our district schools. Our families and employees gathered together in order to receive a series of power points outlining the reasons why these schools must close and gloating about the fairy tale world that will open up once this has been accomplished. Perhaps this is a good time to reflect on the information as well as the spirit of these meetings – a fair hearing is only fair if the result actually reflects what the governing authority has heard. If consultation is merely an exercise in scripted procedural democracy and the outcome does not reflect the evident will of the community then it is not genuine consultation... it is merely a drill calculated to endow disconnected decisions with undeserved credibility. Let's face it – the only thing that is worse than not being consulted is counterfeit consultation that merely serves to legitimise decisions that have already been made by a chosen few ... in other words, manufactured consent.

Don't let them manufacture your consent!

The district has cited declining enrolment as the driver for our fiscal troubles. Is this really true?

Repeated many times in the information sessions and even echoed in the opening remarks from the neutral facilitator is the insistence that the culprit in the closures and cuts is the drop in student numbers in our public schools. However it is obvious that if the funding formula were not bound to headcount, enrolment would merely be a demographic artefact. Are fewer children in our system a satisfactory reason to assume that there should be diminished resources for those who are there? Somewhere a logic leap has permitted a propaganda victory where we have become convinced that a large and growing tax base built on many lifetimes of labour and revenue collection combined with a smaller number of students should now translate into fiscal crisis.

We have a growing community and large numbers of school age kids – where are they?

In the midst of all this talk of declining enrollment it is important to know the whereabouts of our school age population. In Cowichan district according to Ministry stats we have for 2007/ 2008 - 17% of our elementary kids, 25% of our middle school kids and a whopping 29% of our high school kids in private schools. And you and I pay so that these families can have that option. In 2002-2003, \$156.8 million was spent on private schools' operating expenses. This was estimated to reach \$186.3 million in 2005/06 – almost \$30 million (or 18.9%) more in just three years. By contrast, during the same time frame, the public schools' operating expenses increased by only \$100 million, or 2.4% more. As budget constraints force school districts to close schools and curtail services, taxpayers who send their children to the cash-starved public system are, ironically, paying taxes to subsidize smaller classes and better services in a growing number of private schools.

Extra Capacity...how can we use that space?

First it is important to point out that though the ministry has mandated the proliferation of daycare facilities there is no acknowledgment of that usage when calculating rates of utilisation. If the four schools close, the calculations that indicate that we have lots of space in our other district schools is based on the supposition that our day care programs, alternate education site (Middle Alternate Program at Drinkwater), resource rooms, multi purpose rooms used for music etc will have to be transformed into classrooms – removing the much needed flexibility for the myriad activities that we hope should be happening unimpeded in our schools as critical parts of our kids’ learning and our families’ well being. Further what we actually have in our schools is not empty space but unstaffed space. Imagine having a classroom with 30 kids and being able to hire another teacher allowing you to have two ‘full’ classrooms for 15 kids each. We would use twice the space because we would have the staff necessary to enjoy reasonable class sizes.

Does closing schools supply net savings to redirect to other schools and programs?

We have been told that closing these schools will permit a redirection of resources to other schools – has the closure of many schools in this district plumped up our budgets? We are frequently reminded that 80 – 90 % of the operating budget for this district indeed all districts relate to wages and salaries – if a school is closed and the children from that school are moved to another in the district then generally the positions move with them and the costs of educating them is ongoing – but at another location. We still have to maintain class sizes according to the School Act and Bill 33. Even a closed school needs to be heated and cared for inside and out (except apparently Stanley Gordon but that’s not for here) – and it is obvious that a crowded school requires more maintenance than a more lightly populated one. And – as I know is often the case – when a school closes and for one reason or another some of the children leave the public system or the district we lose that funding. There is little to redirect when schools close. If anything we find ourselves paring back and losing assets and continuing to find that the provincial policies for underfunding fail our kids. It is important to note that the relative percent of gross domestic product spent on public education funding in this province has been dropping since the early nineties from a high of around 3.5% in 1990 to a low of 2.4% in 2006. Along with per pupil funding - downloaded expenses for salary increases, costs related to the legislated changes to class size and composition in Bill 33, as well as the shortfalls that the elimination of school fees have created and a whole host of other costs that the ministry has seen fit to dodge -has placed tremendous pressures on boards. Closing our schools is part of the process of cutting not a solution to it – as evidenced by the fact that all the previous cutting and closing which by the way have gone hand in hand has not slaked the appetite to continue to diminish our school programs.

Projected K-6 enrolment – what does it say and how should the board respond?

Here is good one to reflect on – according to a wee chart in the handouts at the four information sessions (slide 24) entitled ‘Enrollment and Capacity’ it indicates that current K- 6 enrollment in our district schools is at 4086 and it is projected that in five years the enrollment for K-6 in this district will be 4007-that is of course a projection. Now...this means that for a drop of 79 students over the next five years spread over 18 schools (present number) they are willing to cause all this upheaval and grief. We can do this math just for the hell of it if you like. So – that means that for a projected loss (and they always project for the most pessimistic numbers when it comes to enrollment) of just over 4 kids per school over the next five years or to put it another even more irritating way -a loss of less than one kid per school for each of the next five years they are dragging us all through this misery. Brings to mind the old WW#2 slogan –‘Is this trip really necessary?’ Well... is it?

Will 1st Nation's education be advanced by closing Koksilah School?

Koksilah does not represent some kind of relic that needs modernising or some archaic form that has run its course – Koksilah actually represents the future. This school is the local school for the families on a large portion of the reserve. The families and teaching staff along with the administrator have a vision for this school – they are looking at reconfiguring the grades to relieve the difficulties that the transition to middle school creates for 1st Nations students. They are anxious to expand the culture and language content into more areas of the curriculum and to proceed with Hul'q'umi'num immersion. This is no embellishment and cannot be accommodated with a few language classes now and then or a cultural event from time to time. The presence of the culture and language of 1st Nation's people is decisive to the realisation of a quality learning environment. All in all – Koksilah does something quite miraculous and rare – it offers safety as well as freedom. It offers a good place to gain confidence, pride and skill in a setting that is the choice of these families. When their children are good and ready they will engage with the wider community but in Koksilah they receive the foundation to demand equality and just treatment as well as learning.

So I guess the short answer is 'no'.

How will the recorded outcomes from regional meetings be used? Was there any outcry favouring school closure?

I suppose that you might be forgiven for believing that during the zonal meetings that took the temperature (please excuse the image) of our community there was a general baying for school closure considering that this has been the most extrovert outcome of those meetings. But there was not. Not one person in all the meetings I attended and I attended them all stood up and cried out for school closure. In fact – the gathering were characterized by their devotion and regard for their schools. I guess you had the proverbial 'fair hearing' accompanied by the traditional turning down of the hearing aid while yodeling. That explains it but it does not excuse it.

Is closure the answer or is closure the path to divestment?

Closure is merely a means to very messy end. In fact closure is the second act to the main event – the sale of our prized public assets. Now – when you liquidate your assets you know you are in real trouble. We need a full on review and revision of our property disposal policy to actually meet progressive standards of civic inclusion. Right now as you can read in our current policy there is nothing to direct the behaviour of the board and administration but the rudiments of the market. They use the presumption of secrecy to keep the community out of the process but this is not ethical. As you can see there is no delineation of consultation in our policy (#2230), and the only priority is market value regardless of the intended use of the site. There is no basis for property sales of public land to be done in secret – the stated purpose of this secrecy is that a furtive process somehow is in the best interests of the district fiscally speaking – but if the priority is not merely to achieve top dollar then the need for confidentiality evaporates. In short – the communities that are affected by board decision have a right to be heard and have their views meaningfully included in directing the outcome. Further – there is a public consultation process for school closure - as limited as it is – why is there no similar process for the sale of the same properties?

Can we expect our elected reps to insist that our voice guide the decisions they make?

Yes...elected trustees must take pride in their role and have an obligation to listen and act on the will of community members. They must undertake the job of leading by example. It is easy to vote and even to make decisions that reflect community will but that is not where our responsibilities end. It is our job to mobilise around public education needs and values.

There is no evidence that we cannot provide for these schools and the needs of their communities, there is no evidence that eliminating these schools will serve our district fiscally. Yes – it is true that boards including ours have written and asked for changes in funding and the answers from the provincial government are always facile and unproductive - just complicated variations on the word ‘no’. But the powerful always say no – that’s what they do. We just have to find a way to only take ‘yes’ for an answer. That will be our victory - as a community. All I know is that nothing will change and this will continue to its logical conclusion – if we do not insist, if we do not look for strategies to pressure all our governments to use the money they have extracted from us for our requirements. If we keep adapting to their program with ever diminishing expectations, allowing ourselves to be stampeded by tales of crisis we will follow this down. And yet – we don’t have to...we can lift our heads and send a message that would only be an opening shot. Remember – there is no ‘last cut’ and there is no ‘last closure’ - there is only an ongoing relentless drive to rub out public education. Valuable advances will happen if we can face down these overbearing formulas and demand funding and resourcing that have as its main objective – the needs of our kids.

So... meaningful consultation has to go back to the bare boards and insist on a complete review of public education funding and the basis upon which it is allocated. We have already paid in full for this system – ask the question – “Where is our money?” If this government does not esteem public education or the people who provide it or the families who rely on it for their kids then all of us – that is trustees arm in arm with our communities have to make them recognise our will and change this agenda.

Cowichan deserves a plan that advances quality public education for all

Cowichan must demand a needs budget

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