

October 11, 2005

Ms. Alvina Gooch, Chairperson
North Okanagan-Shuswap School District #83
220 Shuswap St. NE
Salmon Arm, B.C. V1E 4N2

Dear Ms. Gooch:

I was disappointed with your letter to Shirley Bond and Michael de Jong, a faxed copy of which I received on Friday. Once again, you have demonstrated your reluctance to take a firm point of view when matters are at a crisis. I am saddened by your inability to do so.

Other board chairs have not been so reluctant as is indicated by this quotation taken from a letter by Keith Nielsen, Board Chair of Southeast Kootenay School Board:

This government has handcuffed the School Boards who are the employers of the teachers in not allowing our representative, BCPSEA, to negotiate a fair and reasonable collective agreement. The Government has said that since the School Boards and the teachers cannot come to a negotiated settlement it means that the system is broken. If the system is truly broken only one party is to blame and that is the government for not allowing the Schools Boards' representative any flexibility in achieving a fair and reasonable collective agreement.

L.W. Anderson, Board Chair in Vernon, makes the following statement:

The Board of School Trustees of School District No. 22 at the public meeting of October 4, 2005 passed a resolution to send a letter to you expressing disappointment that the process was not allowed to come to a negotiated resolution. Your legislation will not allow BCPSEA and the BCTF to find a solution. Trustees are caught in the middle of a dispute where education and students will be the losers. Please reconsider your decision for the sake of our children.

Your letter, I am forced to conclude, displays your unwillingness to assume the responsibility of managing the school district for which you have been elected.

Ever since the Liberal government has been in power, learning conditions for our children have worsened, teacher morale has plummeted, and antagonism between the government and teachers has reached an all time high. Teachers are stretched more thinly as they attempt to meet the needs of an ever-increasingly complex group of students. At a time when funding should be increasing, the government has sadly taken the opposite approach and is reducing the amount of money they spend on education.

Why would anyone want to enter a profession that is constantly disrespected by the government? Who thinks that a demoralized, distressed, and disheartened group of teachers is the best way to deliver a first rate education to the province's number one resource, its children? Sadly, the government appears to think this way.

In the past, legislated settlements have produced a residue of resentment that has taken years of work to overcome. Another legislated settlement is unmindful of the right of teachers to negotiate and of the right of school boards to meet their responsibilities to administer the public education system. Indeed, past legislated settlements that were not even fully funded have caused serious budgetary difficulties for you. You have been forced to compromise educational delivery in order to meet settlement obligations.

In the Legislature, Education Critic John Horgan made the following points:

Time and again, Gordon Campbell has used teachers for political purposes. He tore up their contract in 2002. He stripped teachers of their self-governing body in 2003. He overruled a BC Supreme Court decision on classroom composition in 2004. And he refused to meet with teachers when he had a chance to make progress. Responsibility for the escalation of this dispute lies squarely with Premier Gordon Campbell and his government. The BC Liberal government always chooses conflict and confrontation as its first option. And this time, parents, students, and teachers are the ones paying the price.

Anti-teacher legislation will not do a single thing to solve the problems in our schools. Students deserve quality learning conditions, not larger classes and less support. Teachers also believe that a resolution is possible, but the government needs to sit down with teachers and to refrain from provocative acts that only inflame the situation.

The common area of agreement in the current labour dispute is that everyone would like teachers and students back in their classes. The unanswered question is how that can be accomplished. Currently the government believes that crippling the union financially through the courts will ultimately bring 'success'. The real question is what that kind of 'success' will look like in the aftermath.

It is clear to teachers that while the provincial government can pass unjust and undemocratic legislation, enforcing these laws through the courts does not solve

the issues. Bear in mind that this government has been condemned by the United Nations International Labour Organization six times for legislation that broke covenants that Canada signed. Canada, a world leader in world peace and justice, has a provincial government violating those principles we hold sacred.

Four quotations from famous men will, I think, underscore the solidarity that teachers are feeling as they withdraw their services:

We should never forget that everything Adolph Hitler did in Germany was "legal" and everything the Hungarian freedom fighters did in Hungary was "illegal." (Martin Luther King, Jr.)

Laws are only words written on paper, words that change on society's whim and are interpreted differently daily by politicians, lawyers, judges, and policemen. Anyone who believes that all laws should always be obeyed would have made a fine slave catcher. Anyone who believes that all laws are applied equally, despite race, religion, or economic status, is a fool. (John J. Miller)

There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way in which it treats its children. (Nelson Mandela)

If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality. (Desmond Tutu)

In conclusion, I believe that as this district's elected leader, you are morally bound to act in this time of unprecedented crisis. You need to:

- Call on the government to repeal Bill 12
- Tell the public details about the real effect of years of under-funding
- Call on the government to reinstate bargaining and remind them that a contract serves the public but will require additional money

I hope that you may take action that in your heart you know has to be taken for the good of students, teachers, and public education as a whole.

Yours truly,

Steve Naylor, President
North Okanagan-Shuswap Teachers' Association