

**Premier Gordon Campbell**  
**Address to the B.C. Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils**  
**November 8, 2002**

*Check against delivery*

I take my hat off to the Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils for the work you do in your communities: advocating for your kids and helping to make our education system in this province better than any other, and to be more responsive to the needs of different kids in different parts of the province.

I want to congratulate you for having a special day with First Nations parents to talk about the challenges their children face in our school system. We have to make sure that our school system meets the needs of all children, and that's one of the huge challenges we face.

How do we make an institution like public education respond to individuals in community after community and school after school throughout the province? I'll tell you how we do it. We bring together parents, teachers, trustees, principals and superintendents.

Parents are children's first teachers, and we should never forget that. In fact, I think our parents are not just our first teachers – they're our last teachers as well. My mom is still giving me advice, and occasionally – practically all of the time – I listen to what she has to say.

You know we're trying to open up education again in the province for the first time in a generation. The education committee of the legislature went around the province to communities and talked with people about what we can make better. And we had a dialogue on education, bringing together parents, teachers, superintendents, academics and MLAs to talk about what we can accomplish, and what are our goals.

Sometimes we can get locked in to our day-to-day activities and the challenges we face. It's important for us to stand back every once in a while and say to ourselves: "What is really good about the public education system, and how can we add to it so it works even better?"

Last night Dr. Yvonne Chan talked to you. *[Chan is principal of one of the most successful urban public schools in the U.S.: the Vaughn Next Century Learning Center in Los Angeles; she is also an adjunct professor at UCLA and California State University.]* She is an exceptional educational leader, and we are going to do everything we can to take her message to the people in the system around the province, because she understands how a school system really works, and how complete it has to be to create the foundation for the future children deserve.

It always offers choices, and it brings in all of the partners – the parents, the principals, the teachers, the superintendents, the trustees, the public – because everyone wants a good system, no matter what their politics are.

Dr. Chan says that in her community there are no “good” parents or “not-so-good” parents; parents we want in the school, and parents we don’t. What she said is: “I want every parent in our school. Every one of you can contribute to our school, and know that when you come and contribute for your child in some way in your child’s school, you’re contributing to every child that’s there.”

That’s a very important thing for us to remember. Parental involvement in public education is about building a strong public education for all of our children.

Something not everyone knows about me is that I was a teacher, and it was one of the most rewarding jobs I ever had. It was exceptional. I taught English, current events and history in Nigeria for two years.

You can probably imagine what it was like to be teaching English in a small town in Nigeria, and have a curriculum given to me by powers-that-be, which included Julius Caesar and A Christmas Carol.

I can still remember reading Julius Caesar. In West Africa, there’s very little sense of irony. If one of the teachers had said, “Oh, go and jump in the lake,” the student would think, “Well, am I supposed to jump in the lake?” And they’d think of finding a lake and going and jumping in it. So when you talk to them about Julius Caesar and William Shakespeare, it’s kind of tough for them to get the flavour of what’s going on.

When I first got to the school, I watched one of the teachers teaching Julius Caesar. He was up at the blackboard writing notes onto the blackboard, and the class was writing notes into their books. I didn’t think that was quite the way we should be trying to get Julius Caesar across.

I decided I would do something a little bit different. I was going to talk to them, and finish up with the famous “Friends, Romans, countrymen” speech. And I was going to create some new characters. Instead of Cassius, there was going to be a young man named Husseni in our class who was like Cassius.

I knew I had succeeded in this particular lesson plan when every child in that class stayed right in their seats. I finished off with the speech, and every child cheered.

I started walking out of my classroom, and one student came up to me and said: “Sir, this literature is true, true, true.”

When that happens in a classroom – whether that classroom is in Nigeria or in Dawson Creek, whether that classroom is in Cranbrook or Terrace, whether it’s in a big school or

a small school – it’s an incredible, incredible reward for what we do. It’s a reward for parents. It certainly is a reward for teachers.

As we create a public education system that meets the needs of our kids, it’s important to recognize the partnerships we have – parents with children, parents with teachers, parents with principals – so everyone can get excited about that part where a young person says: “I found something I really care about.”

There’s no public policy issue that has a longer reach than public education. We talk about health care all the time. The best preventive health-care program that has been invented anywhere is a great public education system. We talk all the time about public safety. The best public safety program is education.

When you give people a sense of themselves, a sense of opportunity, a sense of learning, a sense of exploration, a sense of control over what they can do and how they can sort through problems in their world, that is an exceptional gift. And it’s one we do pretty well. That doesn’t mean we do it perfectly, and it doesn’t mean we shouldn’t improve it, but we should recognize that we do pretty well.

Educator John Gardine says the purpose of education is “the release of human potential, the enhancement of individual dignity, the liberation of the human spirit and the harnessing of human imagination.”

We should be telling every parent of every child: “Read to your child 20 minutes a day. If you can think of nothing else to do, read to your child. If you’re tired, read to your kids.” We already know that creates huge, huge benefits, long-term, for our children.

We’re trying to find new ways to make sure that if young children have an educational challenge, it’s identified early. And we can build on that early so they can come through the system in a way that’s supportive and constructive and positive.

We look to you, in the parent advisory councils of the province, and we’ve made changes. We have not finished the task of meeting your agenda because there’s always something new and better to do. There’s always something we can work at. Every single year we should learn something new about how to reach our goals.

In 1993, you said you wanted education to be an essential service. Education is now an essential service in British Columbia.

In 2000, you said parents have the right to volunteer in schools. We agreed. You now have the legislated right to volunteer in schools in British Columbia.

In 2000, you said there was no flexibility in class sizes. We’ve changed that so children in one family can be together, and so parents and teachers can work together to make sure young people get the educational opportunities that they deserve.

You asked us to eliminate PST on school supplies, and we're doing everything we can. It's not perfect, but it's a start. And it's important that we've done that.

You said that you wanted to make sure that the district parent advisory councils could advise school boards. We've done that.

You've said that you wanted to be sure that parents can be involved in more than just fundraising. We've done that.

Last year \$150,000 was made available to the BCCPAC specifically because it's not good enough just to say: "Please go and do this." You have to give people the tools they need so they can be constructive, active participants in that process.

It's not about the schools saying: "This is our plan. Thank you very much." It's about you going and working with them and saying, "No. Here is *our* plan. Here is what parents believe will work. Here's how we can build a school that works for young people." And I know that this way works, because we've received very positive response from that program. And I want you to know this: the \$150,000 that was there last year will be there this year.

We're not the only province that's trying to make sure that we have an education system that's second to none. We're not the only people that are committed to public education and making it work.

But I believe that if you tap into the creativity, the imagination and the initiative of parents in a way that's constructive and positive, we will succeed in our goal.

With people like you – hundreds of people here today and yesterday to try and find ways we can learn from one another and improve the system – I have no doubt we'll succeed. And we're going to need your help.

Currently, one in four young people in British Columbia do not graduate. That's not good enough for us. It's not good enough for them.

It's not those kids' fault. We've got to make sure that we have a system that's responsive to their needs so that they can graduate. If we allow you to help shape the system so that it meets the needs of your children in your communities, we are going to succeed.

The thing that's critical for us to remember is what we got from our parents and what we effectively inherited from them. We inherited a wonderful world of opportunity. Our parents made constant commitment for us, not for themselves.

When I graduated from university, we had \$2.84 billion in public debt. I have two sons. My second son is about to graduate from university. He's 22 years old, and he's inherited \$40 billion in public debt from us.

We have to make sure we do for our kids what our parents did for us. We're going to do that by controlling our own desires so that we can think about our long-term goals and objectives.

We're going to do that in a way that Marian Wright Edelman, the founder of the Children's Defense Fund in the United States, suggested that adults should act. This is what she said: "We must put one foot ahead of the other, basking in the beauty of our children, in the chance to serve and engage in a struggle for a purpose higher than ourselves."

That's what you're doing. You are examples of that. You are exemplary students as well as exemplary parents, and I want to say thank you for your contribution.

Thank you very much.