

B.C. School Trustees

Premier Gordon Campbell

April 2, 2005

Check Against Delivery

I want to start by saying how much I appreciate being asked to come. I would also like to recognize the people in the Legislature and in the government of British Columbia who are committed to developing an excellent public education system. I want to thank our Minister of Education, Tom Christensen, who I think has done a great job on behalf of all of us.

I would like to introduce and acknowledge the MLAs here today -- John Nuraney is here from Burnaby-Willingdon. Reni Masi is here from Delta North. Their hard work and dedication in their ridings make them excellent representatives of government's commitment to education excellence on all levels in the province of British Columbia.

I learned an important lesson from your past president, Gary Comeau. He taught me that governments need to work with stakeholders in order to accomplish our goals, that success is possible only through collaboration. He talked to me about providing more flexibility to school trustees because he understood the diverse nature and character of school boards across B.C. and knew that this uniqueness was the result of particular, local issues. Giving school boards more flexibility was the best way to create positive change in our education services and improve the quality of experience of the kids who attend them.

This year marks 101 years that the BCSTA has been serving our province. The face of our public education system today would be unrecognizable to those early teachers and administrators but what they would instantly recognize is the dedication to quality and passion for education that has characterized our School Trustees for a century and will continue to direct its developments far into the future.

Public education in British Columbia began in 1872. There were 574 students in the whole public system in B.C. Today we have 580,000 students receiving their education in our province -- students from a variety of backgrounds, students

from every corner of our province. By working together, I know that we can provide each one with the best possible education.

It was mentioned that I spent a little bit of time teaching. I can tell you there are few things as rewarding as watching the eyes of a young person light up when they figure out a lesson or read a great story, when they are suddenly in awe by what they have learned, suddenly excited about the world that is opening to them with each math equation or language lesson or history class. This experience is not only brought by teachers; as school trustees you get to make the administrative decisions that make our schools places our kids are excited to go to every morning.

Kids are passionate for learning, they show that to us again and again and I believe that the goals of our public education system must be to create spaces that foster that passion, spaces where that spark of excitement for learning stays with them right up until graduation. If we do that for them, we will have given them something exceptional for their whole lives.

One of the things we're committed to is our "Ready, Set, Learn" program to support parents in their child's education. Each child will get a book so that parents can read to their kids and in doing so will light that spark of interest and imagination and excitement of literacy in their minds. "Ready, Set, Learn" is one of our government's fundamental education goals and I want to thank each and every school board across British Columbia for your support.

Our number one goal is to make British Columbia the most literate, best-educated jurisdiction in North America; with your support and our combined efforts to put literacy at the top of our priorities, we will accomplish that goal. You have joined us; you have put literacy at the top of the list.

Literacy is more than just being able to read and write or do math; it's about having access to the many different ways we can understand the world we live in. It's about experiencing cultures: our own and the myriad of others that we share the world with. Literacy is about being able to cope with the changes in our society, in our province, in our nation, and in our world.

When we talk about being the most literate and the best-educated jurisdiction in the world, I think we should recognize that it is an enormous challenge, but it also a huge opportunity which, due to the excellence of our public education system, is an opportunity that is wholly within our grasp.

Schools have always been one of the centerpieces of our communities because they represent our future. Our public education system is the barometer of success in our province because it represents possibility. If our children are getting the best possible education, then the future of British Columbia is a bright and limitless one. If this system, this tradition that we have nurtured for over 100 years in this province starts to fail them, then our future is in peril. To secure our future and our children's future and their children's future, we must ask ourselves what work needs to be done to protect and promote and support public education in B.C.?

No role in the public education system is without value. Elected trustees are essential to balancing the issues in our education system that affect our whole society. Locally elected school trustees in the province of B.C. are critical components in the success of education system because you represent what people need and want most to happen in our schools.

When Tom Christensen comes and asks you to help him deal with the challenges in front of him, he's asking for you to give him that information, to use what you know based on your experiences in the day-to-day activities of your public service. This is the only way our goals can get accomplished. It is the only way our kids will know the best education system, the only way our province will lead the world in literacy and education. I think you are all doing an excellent job in this regard and I want to thank-you and encourage you to continue. Together, since we became government, we have dealt with some big issues -- like the myriad of conditional funding arrangements -- successfully and that deserves our recognition.

We believe education is an essential service. We believe it's critical that we provide our kids with the education that they deserve. It is not acceptable to us that children lost four million student-days of learning as we went through the 1990s. We will always maintain education as an essential service. We will also make sure that as we go ahead, that we resolve the problem of class size. We know that's important to teachers, parents, and most of all our students.

Another important goal is that we continue to build an environment of understanding and true dialogue, an environment where the experience of locally elected school trustees helps to inform decisions at the government level, where our goals are laid out clearly so that we can all work with them as we move ahead.

We want to make sure that we actually achieve our goal, which is: to create for our children the education that they deserve, an education unparalleled.

If we look back over the last four years, we see what happens when school boards are given more flexibility to make their decisions; we see that we have made progress. We see that we are getting results that we want.

We have the highest level of graduation that we have ever had in the province of British Columbia: that is because of the work that you have done.

First Nations graduation rates have also started to rise because we stopped asking "What's wrong with you?" and began asking "What's wrong with the system?" In the public education system, as teachers and administrators, as trustees, as government, we all have to be students. We all have to be constantly upgrading our research and knowledge and practices.

We know a lot more now than we did when the BCSTA was first founded about how kids learn, about how adults teach, about what works, and about what doesn't. For 100 years we have been willing to try things to see, in fact, what does provide results for children. In the difficult situations where we don't seem to be reaching a child, then we have to try harder. I know all of us here are committed to giving our best efforts and I know we will succeed.

A 79 per cent graduation rate is great; 85 per cent is better; 92 per cent is better than that. If we can reach our way up to a hundred, that would be great. It'll probably take a fair amount of work, but if we strive for it, if we say to ourselves, "How do we bring our focus and our resources and our efforts and our energies and our creativity to it?" I know we will surprise ourselves with the results.

Every school board is discovering new ideas for new programs and avenues to success. When you come together and you share those ideas at the provincial level through the BCSTA and other major provincial educational organizations, a forum of possibility gets created. And we can open that forum to your colleagues from across the country to find out what's working in Newfoundland and Ontario. This kind of intra- and inter-provincial communication ensures that our public education objectives for our young citizens are always in their best interest.

Public education is, in fact, the foundation of our future. The best preventative health care program we have ever found is public education. The best economic development tool we have ever found is public education. The best gift we can give our kids is an education that allows them to pursue their passions, their goals and their objectives openly and freely and critically and creatively so they can have the fullest life possible.

I've been very encouraged by the First Nations leadership who have come to you and to government and expressed their desire to collaborate to ensure their young people have all the same opportunities and support that non-aboriginal students have. This is an example of true leadership for it shows that none of us can do it alone. Government can't do it alone, the BCSTA can't do it alone: we are strongest and most successful when we work in concert.

The world of teaching has changed; the techniques of teaching and the tools available to teachers and students are totally different than they were even when my kids started school. Today we have the Internet; we have open learning. Today our kids use electronic games, Nintendo and the Sony Portable Playstation -- there is more smart power, more technological power in those games than was involved in the first rocket launch, more than was used in the rockets that took people to the moon for the first time.

I know that my sons are way better with technology than I am, way better. I can remember once I was away and I thought I would get my son Jeff one of those portable games. Of course, as dads will do, quietly in the privacy of their own seat on the airplane, I took out this game and I started playing with it. I was horrible. I was getting scores like '6'; I think '37' was my record. I took it home and skeptically gave it my son. Later that day, he was getting scores breaking '1000'! I don't know how they do it, but kids really get this stuff!

Our question is how can we connect it for them in our classrooms; we need to tap into this technology for more than game playing. These staggering technological advancements have also opened up a whole new way of learning for our children.

We've made investments in web casting; we've made investments in laptops. We've seen different school districts that have different programs that seem to be working. We've strived to connect with kids in different ways in different parts of the province, and in most cases, they're working like a charm.

But you know, as we sit today and we look at our world, we can definitely say that change has become what we know; flux is the defining characteristic of our society and if our public education system cannot weather change, we're going to let our kids down in a profound and unforgivable way. Dr. Elizabeth Stoll said "A school is either improving or it's getting worse. It can't stand still." I know what direction we all want our schools to be moving in.

We are faced with other changes; look around this room -- we're all getting older. As we are getting older, the number of young people that we have in our province is getting smaller. This is a major demographical shift that we have to be prepared to deal with.

Here's another change I think we are experiencing: we're starting to recognize the limits of our resources. We would all like more, there's no question about that. But we are recognizing that we have to live within our means, and we're recognizing there our means are not endless. So it seems to me that we should try and learn is how to maximize the benefits of the resources that we've got. This is will prove to be critical to our future possibilities.

Right now I know some of the pressures that you've all felt in public education are: declining populations and increasing physical plan and the cost of the physical plan. So it seems that one of the things we should try and do is find ways we can take down some of the institutional barriers that split us off from one another.

So I talked with Tom Christensen about this. We talked with a number of people at the Union of British Columbia Municipalities, and we talked with a number of members in your leadership about this. And what we thought we should try and do was to see if we could work together to find a way that we can restore, reinvigorate, and revitalize the whole idea of the school as the learning centre for a community. How can we move forward, take the advantages of the things we know today, break down some of the walls and barriers that seem to separate us, and move us ahead to improve the way we are delivering services?

So tonight I'm pleased to tell you that we are going to establish a School Community Connections program in British Columbia. We are going to do it with the BCSTA and the Union of B.C. Municipalities, and we're going to fund it with \$10 million to try and make sure that each school district can develop different ideas to make your schools community schools that meet the unique needs of all of the people in your community.

Maybe you have some extra space in the school that would be perfect for seniors to use. Maybe you want some extra space in your school for a daycare. Maybe you want to create literacy centers in your schools. I know many districts are already doing that.

Bringing together the BCSTA and the UBCM will reinforce the strength of local communities and invigorate local imaginations; most importantly, these partnerships will re-establish the local schools as the centers of their neighbourhood communities as they were way back in 1872.

What I'd like to say to you, and I know it's hard for lots of us as we go through our day-to-day activities to be able to take the time to re-vision our schools, to imagine what they could be with the right kind of effort, the right kind of imagination, the right kind of creativity. We hope that the School Community Connections program will provide the resources and support to try some things that are new and are suited to your unique communities.

We have to be willing to go out there and take some chances and see what we can do that will really work for all of our kids and when we have those examples, let's share them with one another.

We should ask ourselves of our schools: what do we want them to be? What can they be? How can we improve on them; what new things can we do that will make them work, without being disruptive to the values that we've established in the past?

The power of public service, the awesome power of collaboration of School Trustees, parents, teachers and students, is limited only by our imaginations. That's really the power that reaches out, that makes us strive to do our best, that makes us strive on behalf of our communities and in the interest of our families and our kids. It is the power that builds new understanding of the world in which we live. It is the power that gives us the ability to deal with the changes that confront all of us. It's the power in your hands to take the province of British Columbia which is I believe the best place on earth and make it even better.

I want to thank the BCSTA for your contribution, for the countless hours that you contribute to making this public service an even higher quality of public service. Thanks for thinking of our kids first. Thanks for creating an environment of open inquiry and exploration and excitement, what education is all about.

Thanks for making us proud to live in a province that delivers a top quality education to our young people. You make a huge difference. Thank you very much.