

Public statement in support of Learning Initiatives

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Trustees, union representatives, parents and members of the audience: thank you for listening to this statement in support of Learning Initiatives. I am opposed to any cuts to this program.

I am speaking as a resident who lives in School District 61 and also as a strong supporter of evidence based public policy.

I'll quote the budget presentation document that was released last week in order to provide members of the audience with a summary of the program. That document stated:

“The Learning Initiatives team presents workshops, coaches classroom teachers, creates school based literacy and numeracy mentors, works with Learning Connections Schools in workshops and learning rounds, facilitates Smart Learning mentors, coordinates professional book clubs, supports early intervention, supports middle school reading projects, and offers individual school support in literacy, numeracy and assessment.”

In short, the Learning Initiatives program makes good teachers even better. Although the program is administered by a district principal, the majority of the coaching and mentoring comes from the teachers themselves. This creates a non-threatening atmosphere in which a teacher can give a gentle nudge to a fellow union member and say, “Hey, what do you think about this idea?”, or, “Have you considered trying this?”

From a management perspective, Learning Initiatives is well documented as a successful and effective program.

The 2008 District Review Report stated that, “The learning initiatives team model is highly regarded and its impact, especially with respect to Assessment for Learning, is well recognized in schools.”

In December 2009, the district released the “Superintendent’s Report on Achievement.” That document identified the Learning Initiatives program as one of the factors responsible for improving the number of vulnerable students who met or exceeded performance standards for writing, reading and numeracy.

Although the impact of cutting this program would be high, the cost savings would be relatively small. The proposed budget reduction for Learning Initiatives is less than \$80,000. This is five one hundredths of one percent of the entire budget for next year. The proposed cut is only five percent of the total proposed budget cuts and this amount is within the projected operating surplus of approximately \$156,000.

Trustees, I recognize you are pulled in many directions and you have some difficult decisions before you. However, this program deserves stability and longevity. I respectfully request that you consider saving this program, particularly as it has empowered many teachers and students over the past few years. In the long term, it may even be worthwhile for the district to consult and collaborate with teachers to expand this valuable initiative. Thank you.

References:

2008 District Review Report (SD61):
<http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/review/061-2008.pdf>

Superintendent's Report on Achievement:
http://www.sd61.bc.ca/super/Report_on_Student_Achievement.pdf

Update

I gave the above statement at a public input hearing on March 31st, 2010. The meeting was held at S.J. Willis and the purpose of the meeting was to provide feedback about the proposed 2010 / 2011 school budget. There were roughly forty people in attendance, most of whom appeared to be employees of School District 61. Although I didn't recognize anyone from the media, today I noticed that Erin Cardone from vicnews.com wrote an article about the event:

http://www.bclocalnews.com/vancouver_island_south/victorianews/news/89716702.html

After my presentation I spoke with Superintendent Gaipman. He clarified that the core Learning Initiatives program will remain in place but with funding reductions. The proposed cuts are divided into two parts. First, a senior staff position will not be replaced (0.72 FTE). Second, release time for teachers will be cut by \$15,000. The release time is what allows a school to hire a substitute for the morning so the regular teacher can go to a Learning Initiatives workshop.

Instead of release time, the district is planning "pizza nights" that teachers can attend on their own time. I feel this will be less effective for several reasons:

- 1) Teaching can be an overwhelming experience and teachers need to set boundaries with their time outside of the instructional hours of the school day.
- 2) The pizza nights will limit opportunities for teachers who have families or other outside commitments.
- 3) The release time provides an incentive for the teachers who would not otherwise seek out professional development opportunities. Some of the teachers who may

benefit the most from the Learning Initiatives program might not participate on their own time.

4) What about new teachers? Is there a plan in place to offer formal mentorship to those most in need of support with their literacy and numeracy programs?

If anything, I feel that School District 61 should be doubling or even tripling the amount of release time so that more teachers can participate in the Learning Initiatives program.

Other speakers at the meeting included:

Nicole Strong

A teacher who is also the parent of an autistic child, Nicole spoke passionately about the need for more special needs education funding.

Deborah Nohr and Starla Anderson

Representing the Victoria Public Education Coalition, they both spoke in favour of a deficit budget.

Paul Rowley, Randy Jones, Mike Smith and Sylvia Cook

Representing CUPE #382, they spoke against cuts to the cartage program and the proposed elimination of the district's shipping-receiving position.

Next Meeting

The next public input meeting will be at 7 p.m on Wednesday, April 7th at S.J. Willis (923 Topaz Ave). This meeting will take the form of a round table discussion in which members of the public can sit down with a trustee and discuss their concerns.