



Battle River School Division #31

Growing to Greatness

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October 30, 2009

Hon. David Hancock, Minister
Alberta Education
224 Legislature Building
10800-97 Avenue
Edmonton, Alberta T5K 2B6

Dear Mr. Minister:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide our input into the School Act revision process. We appreciate being consulted and further appreciate the diligent work that is being done to create a strong vision for the future of education in our province. It is our hope that we will be able to review a revised Act in draft form as it is developed by the Ministry.

The Trustees of Battle River School Division have three main priorities we would like to see reflected in the new / revised Education Act.

First, we believe that the new Act should replace the current provisions related to the student "Code of Conduct" with an expanded section that relates to the role of the student. This section could speak to the student's role as a learner and a citizen. It would also include the student's rights and responsibilities. We believe it is critically important that the new Act reference citizenship and character development as important goals of education. Local authorities should have input into the manner in which these goals are met. We would suggest character education include appropriate use of language and technology / digital citizenship.

Second, the new Act should embrace inclusive education. Inclusive education doesn't mean one education system for all; rather it means a rich variety of offerings that meet the needs of all constituents within the public system.

And third, the School Act must acknowledge and empower locally elected school boards, recognizing that these bodies, with their deep connections to local communities, are the central mechanism through which the educational hopes, dreams and aspirations of communities are expressed. As such, school boards also provide a critical link between communities and government.

The values of opportunity, fairness, citizenship, choice, diversity and excellence as outlined through the Inspiring Education process are central to the success of students and Battle River School Division fully supports each of them. BRSD also supports the five themes proposed as a foundation of the new Education Act.

Our thoughts on each of these themes are shared below.

All children have a superseding right of access to the ECS – 12 public education system which is not dependent on where they reside.

BRSD believes that quality education is the right of all Albertan children, and notes that in a school division where students are spread over a large area, we are having success and seeing the future with using technology such as video-conferencing, online education, SMARTBoards and laptops to enhance students' access to programs.

In addition, we suggest that students' area of residence should not determine the state of their school facility. Currently, we operate aging buildings that are in need of modernization; however, they do not qualify for infrastructure funding and are unlikely to in the near future. We suggest that an integration of capital allocations into regular yearly funding, that takes into account enrolment changes, age of school and other factors would allow us to save dollars and allocate them as we see fit, according to local needs. This would support our assertion that rural students are deserving of quality facilities, as well as quality programming.

As ECS is included in this theme, the matter of starting and ending ages of students who are accessing the public education system arises. BRSD would advocate having one consistent starting / ending age that is used by all divisions, throughout the province.

Also within this theme are transportation concerns; our position is that for reasons of safety and due to parental requests, transportation should be available to students who are more than 1.6 km from school as opposed to the current 2.4km.

Students should be able to access instruction at any time, any place and at their own pace.

BRSD advocates flexibility to provide year round schooling or other forms of schooling which break away from the traditional school year structure. While this flexibility creates challenges for school divisions it provides better service to students. In BRSD there are evening classes, summer programs, home education, on-line schooling and outreach schooling available, in order to meet student needs. We also offer site-based flexibility with school calendars, alternative programs (such as French Immersion or Christian Education) and blended programs which allow students to combine attendance at traditional schools with online programs.

We also agree with the notion that education of the future will expand beyond the traditional classroom walls, and further that it must allow all students flexible rates of learning. However, the expansive nature of our province creates diverse local needs, meaning that rural situations may look very different than urban ones. To ensure this access to all students, local community needs must be considered.

Student success is the primary goal of the education system and government has a responsibility to provide the structure and supports to maximize it.

BRSD concurs with this statement and believes that it is also the role of government to create a clear definition of “student success”. BRSD has developed the “pyramid of success”, which builds on a fundamental belief that students succeed best in their academic journey when they receive wholistic support, which balances academics with emphasis on succeeding in relationships and character development.

School systems must have the resources and mandate to consider the needs of local students; ensure a range of programs and services are available to engage students in learning; and to collaborate with parents, community and other agencies to support students.

Many students require support and services from human service agencies which are part of other government ministries. Strong cross ministry cooperation and communication is essential to ensuring student success. An integrated service delivery model that puts the needs of students at its core must be developed. Within this, we would advocate that Alberta Education and Alberta Transportation work together to create bussing guidelines that are less rigid, in the interests of student success. For example, regulations should make it possible for students who attend young mothers’ programs to be transported to school in the company of their babies.

Student success depends upon quality teaching and the professionalism of teachers. ASBA has submitted amendments to the role of the teacher as currently defined in Sect. 18; we agree with that expanded definition but would like to specifically mention teachers’ obligation to continually improve teaching practice **and leadership capacity** through professional development. It is this commitment that moves a division forward.

The connection of locally elected school authorities to their communities is an important element of our public education system. Government has a responsibility to support maximizing trustee and board competence, and to set provincial standards for the roles and responsibilities of boards.

Battle River School Division has a deep conviction that locally elected school boards should remain the central mechanism through which the educational needs and wishes of communities are addressed. Board members are selected by their geographic peers and maintain strong ties to the communities they serve. Appointed boards would not represent the wishes of the community in the same way that elected officials must. Public involvement in education is dependent upon strong local representation.

Battle River School Division covers a large geographic area – several of our trustees have wards that cover four or more communities. That local connection between board members and citizens is a significant part of our school board’s accountability and also allows us to be responsive to specific needs within our own jurisdiction.

We agree that trustee and board competence are critical to the success of a school board. The Battle River board has taken responsibility for maximizing board competence. We have successfully created and continue to implement standards for roles and responsibilities of board members. Having a strong structure in place provides us the necessary framework for ensuring decisions are made in the best interests of students.

Governance is the role of the board. We believe the new act should specify a governance role, rather than an administrative role, for school boards. But within that role we must maintain a strong relationship with our Superintendent, empowering and supporting his role and holding him accountable. This strong working relationship benefits the entire school division and allows everyone to make positive progress in meeting student needs.

Battle River School Division agrees that school authorities should focus on educational outcomes and are accountable to parents, communities and to the Minister. Given the existence of a strong structure, strong relationships and public accountability, Battle River believes that boards should have the autonomy to make decisions that affect local communities. For example, Boards should have the right to appoint a Superintendent of Schools for their division.

We suggest that having the Minister able to overrule decisions in matters such as school closures or expulsions creates redundancies in the system. In addition, the ability to overturn locally made decisions compromises the board's role, weakens the board's mandate and costs the board money. Instead, we suggest that appeals should be at the local board level, occur on a timely basis and include a fee to offset the financial and resource costs incurred by school divisions.

If the new Education Act designated school boards as "natural persons" the level of authority would more closely match the level of responsibility. As well, the principle of "subsidiarity" as suggested by ASBA makes sense to us in that the central authority (or government) would perform only those tasks which cannot be performed effectively as a local level.

In short, we would ask that the new Education Act provide boards with outcomes, hold us accountable to those, and let us figure out how to get there in the way that is best for our communities.

There must be balance between local autonomy and fiscal responsibility.

We believe that local autonomy and fiscal responsibility go hand-in-hand and are not at either end of a spectrum. School boards must report and account for their decisions and results.

In Battle River School Division, there is a desire for increased autonomy of the school board to make decisions that are in the best interests of the division as a whole. For example, the school board cannot currently make capital decisions that would allow better service to students and address local community needs. BRSD would advocate a clear definition of fiscal responsibility and an increased level of autonomy.

In this area as well, Battle River School Division would also advocate for a clear definition and revised procedures for school closure, that allow the process to move forward in a more timely

fashion. Regulations currently set boards up to appear as though decisions have been pre-determined, creating unnecessary stress and anxiety for communities in a process already destined to be difficult. The board believes responsibility for this process should remain clearly in the hands of locally elected school board officials.

In conclusion, we thank you again for welcoming our input into a new Education Act. We believe these changes will help create a living document that is designed to ensure the provincial government and locally elected school boards work together for the success of students, no matter where they live or what their 21st century learning needs might be.

Sincerely,

Cheryl Smith, Chair
Board of Trustees