

Policy and Governance Report

Good afternoon David,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide additional comments on the *Stronger Together* report that was presented to the Policy and Governance Committee on December 1. I am responding on behalf of the Vancouver Elementary School Teachers' Association.

VESTA supports the aims and objectives as described on page 2 of the Executive Summary of the report. VESTA shares the VSB's commitment to providing a safe, caring, and inclusive learning environment for all students; and, VESTA supports the VSB's decision to move ahead with developing a strategic plan with actionable goals to address racism and other forms of discrimination in the district.

For many decades, VESTA has supported, encouraged, and participated in anti-racism, anti-discrimination, anti-oppression, and reconciliation discussions, policy-development, and other initiatives within the VSB. VESTA has also encouraged and supported work done in individual classrooms and individual schools.

VESTA has also advocated for both the VSB and the Ministry of Education to budget accordingly in order to ensure that teachers and other staff in schools have access to professional development opportunities, in-service opportunities, accurate and inclusive teaching materials, and supports that students may need.

These are essential so that:

- teachers and other staff feel confident doing this work;
- anti-racism, anti-discrimination, and reconciliation work is done consistently, responsibly and comprehensively in all schools;
- students see their identities and lived experiences valued and reflected in what is taught, in learning resources, and in school culture; and,
- students from marginalized communities experience a significant improvement in their day to day experience at school.

Unfortunately, as demonstrated in the qualitative and quantitative data contained in the *Stronger Together* report, too many students, staff, and other members of our school communities continue to experience racism, misogyny, transphobia, homophobia, ablism, and other forms of discrimination and harassment while at school. As well, too many students and their families perceive that the situation is not improving and that their concerns are not being taken seriously.

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VESTA is not surprised by the key observations summarized in the “What We Heard” section of the report on pages 2-4 and then detailed in Chapter 2 on pages 17-25. Likewise, while they are upsetting to read, the many direct quotes from survey participants and the student responses for each question in Chapter 3 are compelling and honest reflections of the day-to-day reality for many students in VSB schools.

VESTA shares the belief articulated by trustees at the most recent Policy and Governance Committee meeting that there is an ethical responsibility to acknowledge and act upon what survey participants have shared with all of us through this process. VESTA also recognizes that there is a legal onus on the public school system under sections 7 and 8 of the *BC Human Rights Code* (as well as court decisions like [SD#44 v. Jubran](#)), is to be proactive in ensuring that no student or other member of the school community experiences discrimination or harassment while at school. VESTA remains committed to working together with the VSB and with the various stakeholder and rightsholder organizations on these extremely important matters.

In terms of possible steps forward, VESTA proposes the following:

1. That the VSB continue with additional non-instructional days for the next several years for further anti-racism, reconciliation, and anti-discrimination in-service for all employees.
2. That the VSB formally commit to implementing Call to Action #57 of the Truth & Reconciliation Commission of Canada, and adopt an action plan to implement it. This action plan could include the additional non-instructional days referenced in 1. above. Call to Action #57 reads as follows: “We call upon federal, provincial, territorial, and municipal governments to provide education to public servants on the history of Aboriginal peoples, including the history and legacy of residential schools, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Treaties and Aboriginal rights, Indigenous law, and Aboriginal–Crown relations. *This will require skills-based training in intercultural competency, conflict resolution, human rights, and anti-racism*” [emphasis mine].
3. That the *Stronger Together* report continue to be further reviewed and discussed at Policy and Governance and relevant VSB advisory committees – and that this be done thematically or by section given its size and the amount of qualitative and quantitative data in the report on a wide range of issues. It is important that all of the information be acted upon, and many of the issues detailed in the report will not be addressed by an anti-racism action plan alone. Policy and Governance Committee and/or advisory committees may also want to look at *Stronger Together* in conjunction with re-looking at recent MDI data as well as the most recent report from the McCreary’s [BC Adolescent Health Survey](#), as both of these contain data on students’ experiences with discrimination, safety, and sense of belonging while at school. Either way, VESTA hopes that the *Stronger Together* report is not forgotten about after a couple years; rather, VESTA is looking forward to the report being part of an impetus for change.

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4. That steps be taken to report back to students and other individuals who participated in the surveys leading up to the *Stronger Together* report so that they can see their contributions reflected back to them, and so that they will know what will be done to try to repair harm and prevent further incidents.
5. That the VSB take steps to ensure that all schools in the district have School Codes of Conduct that are in keeping with Section 6 of [Ministerial Order 276/07](#) (including ensuring that all schools have included “gender identity and expression,” as per the 2016 changes to the BC Human Rights Code, and “Indigenous identity,” as per the 2021 changes to the BC Human Rights Code); and, that steps are taken at the school level for all staff to know these changes and to understand the school’s obligations in this regard. VESTA is open to working with the VSB to help make this happen.
6. That the VSB work with all employee group unions and associations whose members are subject to the [Professional Standards for BC Educators](#) to help increase awareness of the recently-revised standards – and, in particular, to promote, affirm, and articulate a shared commitment to the new ninth standards, which reads as follows: “Educators respect and value the history of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis in Canada and the impact of the past on the present and the future. Educators contribute toward truth, reconciliation, and healing. Educators foster a deeper understanding of ways of knowing and being, histories, and cultures of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis.
7. That the VSB take steps to build awareness among school staffs about [Policy 21 \(Anti-Racism and Non-Discrimination\)](#) and [Administrative Procedure 171 \(Racial, Ethno-Cultural, and/or Religious Harassment\)](#). Pages 67-97 of the report contain the reason why this is important. As VESTA has previously recommended in our feedback to the previous anti-racism in-service days, it would be beneficial to include training on Policy 21 and AP 171 in future in-service days for all employees so that students (and employees) can count on the Policy and the AP being implemented consistently across the entire school district. VESTA would welcome the opportunity to collaborate with the VSB on this.
8. That the VSB renew efforts to build awareness among school staffs [about Policy 17 \(Sexual Orientation and Gender Identities\)](#), in particular as it relates to trans and gender-diverse students, as well as the related obligations under [Sections 7 and 8 of the BC Human Rights Code](#). *Stronger Together* contained an alarming number of trans and gender-diverse students who report being misgendered, being asked uncomfortable questions about their gender identity, not having access to universal washrooms, not having access to changing spaces, and not having confidentiality or autonomy respected. The percentages on page 48 of *Stronger Together* and the responses on page 52 are disappointing to read in 2022, almost a two decades since the VSB adopted its first comprehensive LGBTQ2S+ Policy, several years since it was revised into its present form as Policy 17, and almost six years since gender identity and gender expression were added to the BC Human Rights Code. Students should not have to wait this long for corrective action to be taken, for adults’ understandings to catch up. Likewise, student should not have to out themselves to get access to washrooms or changing

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spaces, go searching for a key to these spaces, to sit through sexual health curriculum that doesn't recognize their identities or realities, fill out school or district forms that only provide M/F options for gender, or be repeatedly deadnamed or called by the wrong pronouns by staff members. While we would like to think that such things no longer occur in Vancouver schools, the survey data in the report clearly demonstrate that they do occur. VESTA remains committed to working with the VSB to ensure that Policy 17 is fully and consistently implemented in every school in the district, and that a stop is put to certain practices.

9. That the VSB further analyze the information shared on pages 52-56 of *Stronger Together*, where students shared information about the spaces in schools where they do not feel safe, welcomed, or comfortable. Some of the concerns identified by students are consistent with what is referenced in 5. above, and these absolutely must be addressed. There are other concerns shared on page 52, though, and these too are deserving of attention. More data may need to be required. VESTA is open to working in partnership with the VSB on this.
10. That the VSB call upon the Minister of Education and the Minister of Indigenous Relations & Reconciliation to revise Section 5(10)-(12) of the School Act [Regulations](#) to:
 - a. delete any reference to the Commonwealth and imposed loyalty to the Crown;
 - b. clarify that neither students nor staff shall be obliged to participate in the singing of O Canada, or any patriotic exercise, or imposed loyalty to the Crown;
 - c. include a reference to the National Day for Truth & Reconciliation; and,
 - d) include a reference to a local First Nation(s) song or anthem. This has been recommended by VESTA to VSB trustees before as part of discussions on tangible ways of implementing UNDRIP in the district; but given the feedback from Indigenous students contained in *Stronger Together* about sense of school belongingness, VESTA would like to again invite the VSB to join VESTA in asking the province to make these changes to the Regulations.

VESTA looks forward to further conversations about the *Stronger Together* report, and discussions about what the next steps may be. If you wish to discuss any of the above recommendations with me or another VESTA representative, we would be most willing to do so.

Yours truly,

Glen Hansman

VESTA representative to VSB Policy and Governance Committee