

Dear

Please find below the feedback received from VESTA members in response to the Board's request for input to the VSB's direction on Wellness.

There was a lengthy conversation at our General Meeting where members brought comprehensive consultation with members at their worksites and the energy for such a discussion was high. A spirited discussion resulted, with written follow up submitted by many schools. Members voted almost unanimously in favour of a motion to communicate through the Wellness consultation that the primary way that teacher Wellness can be achieved is by ensuring balanced teacher workload, adequate support for students, and a significantly improved provision of mental health support for members.

The feedback falls into several categories that overlap, thematically. Those are: Lack of appreciation and respect for teachers by the employer, increasing workload and lack of trauma-informed practice by the employer, a problematic lens on wellness that is individualistic, and the insufficiency of the services provided by the EFAP program.

You will note that the feedback does not hew to the three goals that the VSB identified and sought advice on. In part, this is because teachers disagreed with the characterization of the questions and categories, because, in the words of one member,

*"The questions are based on faulty premises – the language of the framework is not in any way the experience of students, staff, or families, and it's disingenuous to ask us for feedback on fictional achievements. Everything that happens that is beneficial for students happens because of the work of teachers, working without support, and sometimes, despite the barriers and hurdles erected by the VSB"*

We are responding to the request for input in the best way we know how – by representing teacher voices in the format they were expressed to us. We want to be clear that this feedback is not a criticism of individuals at the school or district level, but instead a cry for help from a teaching staff who are at the end of their ropes, and who are experiencing fatigue at yet another offer of "consultation" despite having articulated our needs loudly and clearly for decades. Teachers are understandably wary of the concept of consultation, especially after seeing little, if any, change to their working conditions as workload has increased, services decreased, and especially, through the pandemic.

VESTA is aware that there is a difference between the benefits that are part of our extended benefits plan and those provided by the EFAP, and while many members commented on the need for improvements to the EHB plan, we have not included those here, as they fall under the scope of Provincial Bargaining.

#### **Employee's experience of lack of appreciation by the employer**

*"While I have seen a steady downhill change in the way that VSB connects with and interacts with their employees over the last several years, it has never been more noticeable than during the last two years of this pandemic"*

Many members who responded to our request for input were experienced teachers with long careers at the VSB. They identified a feeling of disconnection to the employer, and a feeling of depersonalization of their employment relationship. Teachers provided examples of increasingly ungenerous approval of requests for leaves, reductions in FTE, callous treatment of members who are ill or bereaved, and a

climate of lack of trust, in part due to what members perceive as decreasing autonomy and respect, with increasing standardization, surveillance, and unnecessary disciplinary action.

*“[The VSB has] a palpable lack of respect and trust in their employees, a lack of genuine empathy and understanding for the difficulties the pandemic presented both professionally and personally for employees, and most importantly, a lack of meaningful, personal connection to the VSB.”*

Teachers identified feeling disrespected by their employer in many ways. Some of their experiences were connected to the lack of acknowledgement by the employer of the struggles of working in schools during a pandemic, but in other ways, it was a feeling of an absent employer, increasingly centralized and less personal and connected than ever. Teachers identified the lack of connection and invisibility of a constantly changing Superintendent and growing District Management who are increasingly removed from the classroom.

While teachers generally reported good relationships with school-based Administration, their concerns about their treatment by District Management and the VSB led to a strong perception from members that the problem described by this set of feedback was a top-down problem, one that resulted from a lack of empathy, respect, and trust.

*“At a time when we watched other districts not only step up to support employees, but do so in a public and transparent way for all to see, myself and my colleagues felt unheard, unseen and often disrespected by the VSB.”*

*“In the past, schools could rely on in person connection from district principals, associate superintendents, and other senior staff employees. [...] We have moved further and further toward the VSB relying on reaching out via form emails, online links to wellness resources that are difficult to use and satisfaction surveys that are managed by paid consulting firms. This lack of personal connection to the board has never been more apparent than these last two years – arguably the time when we needed our employer the most. I cannot remember a time, in the recent past, when VSB media relations has put out anything that meaningfully shows the board respects, cares about, trusts, and amplifies the incredible work of teachers”*

We begin with this feedback because it reflects the perception that VSB wellness needs to be systemic, needs to demonstrate through actions as well as words that the primary objective of the VSB ought to be centred on the provision of education – and this is more than just about students, it requires a strong, well-supported staff. Teachers also felt challenged by the language in the framework, because the words reflect goals that we share, but the reality requires a Human Resources department that treats employees as individuals, who cares about their goals and relationships, and understands that teaching and schools are built upon a foundation of relationships.

This is deeply connected to the next section of feedback, that of a district that keeps asking teachers to do more with less, downloads increasingly untenable workloads to teaching staff, and fails to acknowledge the impact on teacher wellness, teaching and learning environments, and then chooses discipline rather than support when teachers understandably struggle.

### **Increasing workload and lack of trauma-informed practice from the VSB**

Teachers also identified that the strong messaging from the PHO, from the Federal and Provincial Government, the district and Administration highlighted trauma-based practice, including its' infusion throughout the COVID plans and communications. However, their experience on the ground continues to be that teachers are bearing the brunt of pandemic conditions, the TTOC shortage, and the reduction of support for students with complex learning needs.

*"We have all been through trauma due to the COVID-19 pandemic, yet it does not feel like the employer is taking a trauma-informed approach with staff. Communication is unclear and often poorly timed. There is little transparency regarding how decisions are made. [...] There is increasing pressure to meet seemingly arbitrary deadlines (ex: earlier IEP deadlines despite larger caseloads; the January report card due-date not being moved despite starting a week later than planned)"*

Some of the feedback connected directly to teacher wellness as a relationship to supports for students, and the challenges this creates in the classroom, both by teachers feeling overwhelmed with the diversity and complexity of student need, as well as the fatigue that comes with the challenges that result from that same lack of support. Teachers identified increased violent incidents, children in crisis, challenges with families resulting from disappointment due to lost services, and difficulty establishing meaningful and timely assessment and reporting during times of high absences.

Some of the matters raised by members are not the remit of the VSB – for example, the reporting order must be changed by the Ministry, but the lack of communication about processes and decisions led to a real feeling of isolation, confusion and a sense that the district does not acknowledge or appreciate the number of times and the scope of teachers' efforts to shift, flex and accommodate changing students, expectations of families and the district.

*"Not only is vicarious trauma a reality, witnessing and experiencing student violence and distress repeatedly through our workplace creates trauma. Under Supported students and ill-supported teachers are a recipe for disaster [...] Many staff do not feel supported by management in our schools and are frustrated by lack of support for students as well as not supporting teachers when dealing with difficult situations, behaviours, etc."*

*"We've been asked to take a trauma-informed approach with our students, but have not been given in-service in this. Self-paced workshops are available, but teachers need to take personal time to work through the 7-hour online course."*

Teachers had a great deal of input that spanned Goals 1 and 2 from the VSB Education Plan, in that they felt largely abandoned by the district in the failure to provide adequate supports for student achievement, as well as physical and mental health and well-being. They acknowledged in their feedback that supports for vulnerable students are treated as dispensable, reassigning resource and other non-enrolling teachers to cover absences. Teachers anecdotally are aware of colleagues who have gone to other districts where teachers are treated "better" and where teachers are hired, and know of teachers who were not hired by the VSB and went on to work in neighbouring districts, and lay their frustration and resentment over the TTOC shortage at the feet of the VSB, feeling that the shortage and pulling of services to students was an avoidable and manufactured problem.

*"We do not feel supported when we see our students struggling due to lack of adequate supports. SSA supports are already stretched thin and the ongoing EOC shortages make this worse. There is not enough Resource Teacher time for classes and the paperwork demands take away from time working with students. TTOC shortages mean Resource Support is interrupted when they have to cover classes. No TTOC's provided for Resource Teachers and Teacher Librarians (unless they provide preps) means students also miss out. This downloads much to the classroom teacher, leading to burnout. Accessing District Resource Teacher expertise requires extra meetings and paperwork. We do not have enough access to SLPs, school psychologists, and VCH pediatric staff (OT/PT)."*

*"We need student supports provided by trained counselling professionals. Currently social-emotional needs are mostly handled in the classroom due to lack of a full-time counsellor and SSA shortages. It feels like this has been downloaded to the classroom teacher. Rather than being provided with more counsellor time, schools were each sent a box of books and sensory tools to be shared amongst staff."*

Teachers also made the connection between staffing shortages and lack of support for vulnerable students and Goal 2, which reflects equity. The students most impacted by the workload considerations are students who are most vulnerable, and the families who are less able to advocate for additional services for their own child / student. Teachers identified feeling helpless and internalizing the shame of the system's failure to provide adequate and equitable learning conditions for all students.

*"The fact that teachers are managing an increased workload through a pandemic has not been acknowledged. As people said in the meeting, this feels like gaslighting. We are being told this is business as usual, but nothing feels like business as usual."*

*"We work in a school where a high amount of the population suffers from trauma, be it through colonial damage, racism, poverty, and poor access to mental health resources. The needs of the population are largely unmet, and the school board does little to support the students in ways that meet student and family needs on a basic level."*

### **Problematic and individualistic focus on Wellness**

Teachers responded strongly in this category, both in expressing deep concerns about the model of Wellness that is being advanced by the district, and the mechanisms for its' implementation. Their perceptions on this topic span all three goals again, as the perception of the inadequacy of the Wellness program did not provide choices for employees, were not equitably available, and do not recognize the systemic nature of teacher wellness.

*"It is putting a pretty bow on issues that are structural and systemic. The most cost-effective therapy is CBT - which is what they offer. Think your way out of bad feelings. But you can't think your way out of a stressful situation that is systemic. The program would be okay if it supported you towards making systemic change but I can't see that it does."*

Connected to Goal 2, teachers identified that the equity objective was unmet, particularly given the diversity of our employee population, the systemic nature of both our workload and workplace stress, as well as the chronic and institutional conditions of racism and homophobia/transphobia experienced by members across the district. The Stronger Together document needs to be read in the context of Goal 1, 2 and 3, as the perception among members is that the district has not been proactive or responsive

enough to concerns about oppression in the school system, nor have adequate supports and protections been provided to employees.

*"Wellness programs are gaslighting. They locate the problem in the individual worker, distracting from the poor working conditions, the source of much emotional distress. The line "fostering a culture of care, where employees feel supported" is not only insulting, it's telling. Clearly, it's more important for workers to "feel" supported than actually "be" supported."*

Teachers have concerns about an individualistic model of wellness for the reason that it does not account for systemic problems, but also because it does not respond to the diversity of experience that members face in their schools, communities, and workplaces. One size does not fit all, when it comes to wellness, and teachers carry incredible responsibility for their own safety and wellness, that of their colleagues, in addition to providing safe, equitable, accessible learning spaces for students.

*"The concept of "wellness" has racist and discriminatory roots and asks historically marginalized peoples to 'just deal with' the injustices and aggressions we face in our place of work. We don't need more after school mindfulness sessions."*

*"Employees suffer from vicarious trauma and adequate care for this is not provided. It is a health issue related to our job, but instead of having mental health care or staffing and resources we are told to attend online lectures that tell us to take a deep breath, take a bubble bath, and "get out there and enjoy yourself, girl" ... You can't make something a goal for us without providing supports."*

This feedback indicates the degree to which teachers are struggling and internalizing the challenges of their workplace. Care ought to be taken in offering supports that ask teachers to extend their day, to conflate their concerns, or to put aside their experiences as part of a system. "Wellness-washing," as one member described it, puts the blame on the teacher for being unwell, rather than on the system for perpetuating the conditions leading to mental and physical health challenges.

Another member connected this concern to the lack of commitment to meaningful reconciliation.

*"You write down and say we're supposed to be doing all this stuff, but [...] pay Indigenous learning lip service, let alone making reconciliation top priority. The big earthquake drill is on Red Dress day. Indigenous students have different and higher learning needs than many other students, and yet staffing and access is inadequate."*

### **Unsuitability of services provided in EFAP**

The final category of feedback on the three goals connected to the Wellness Framework was teachers' desire to communicate their dissatisfaction with the services provided by the VSB Wellness program and in particular, the EFAP. This is exacerbated when the programming does not reflect the diversity of the district or the needs of employees.

*"The supports provided through the EFAP is wholly unacceptable. Long wait times, pressure to use online services (even before the pandemic!) inappropriate and short-term support only can do more harm than good. Putting a band-aid on my daily challenges without addressing the trauma, anxiety and isolation we are experiencing while denying leaves and reductions in FTE create a climate where teachers feel valued for their labour and not for their wellness, even though coming to work every day in a pandemic requires all of our resources, strengths, and energy."*

*"I see very little programming that meets minimal needs of oppressed groups- forget just being a Black or Indigenous person or a person of colour, add gender and sexuality to the mix and there is very little that represents the emerging wellness needs of a diverse staff population. As a queer trans POC it is not helpful for a white woman to tell me to try yoga or something."*

To be clear, it's possible that the Wellness program and the provision of services through EFAP are more diverse and suitable in their scope than members acknowledge, but the barriers to accessing the services, and the way the services are communicated is clearly missing the mark. Teachers report feeling patronized by the communications, and abandoned by their employer, connecting back to the first two areas of concern above. If it is true that the EFAP and wellness program are making efforts to address the real and lived experiences of a diversity of teachers, our members are not aware of that. We understand from the consultation that teachers frequently discontinue their efforts to access EFAP after not insignificant challenges and problematic interactions.

*"Accessing EFAP has been very difficult for some members. A limited amount of counselling time is provided and there are situations where teachers may need longer-term counselling. Intake paperwork can be a barrier and may increase anxiety around what information will be shared with the employer. Members may need to speak with someone specialized in particular needs (ex: grief, trauma, family, etc). Counselling is supposed to be available to family members as well, but it can be difficult to find counsellors trained in working with children"*

Lastly, members had much to say about the Health and Wellness Lead, or Wellness Champion in schools. They reported that the program felt superficial, like a further downloading of work on to teachers to solve their own and one another's problems, as well as creating problematic relationships among teachers. Some teachers reported feeling as though they had to police their colleagues, that the program was insensitive to teachers' other responsibilities and insensitive to feedback.

*"The attempt to have a Health & Wellness Lead downloads more work to teachers. No information was provided about what this role would entail. The teacher who agreed to take this on was told they would be forwarding information to staff. The role included after-school meetings that often fell on union meeting days. This was pointed out to the people in charge of running the groups, but no change was made to meeting dates. The Health & Wellness Lead stepped down at our school due to too many demands and no one else has been willing to take this role."*

In summary, meeting after meeting, teachers are reporting burnout to a significant degree. When teachers talk about wellness, and when they read the VSB Education Plan Goals, they see a significant disconnect between their experience and the objectives. They see their wellness as connected to systemic working conditions and the implementation of their working conditions by the employer.

We have seldom seen such spirited discussion at a meeting. The invitation to provide feedback on this matter touched a nerve with teachers, and while our feedback does not strictly follow the desired format, we felt the desperation and desire of our members to envision a better district where they were better supported by their employer must be shared.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any further questions,

Sincerely,

Joanne Sutherland