

Dear Trustees:

I wanted to take a moment to follow up on the current budget discussions and share a few observations and questions from a CUPE perspective. I attended the recent Board of Education meeting, which has been difficult for me to attend in the past due to a course I was taking on Tuesdays (now completed). While I was prepared to raise these matters publicly (if needed), I believe it is more respectful and constructive to share them with you directly.

First, I would like to acknowledge the significant amount of work that goes into developing and managing the District's budget. I recognize this is complex and challenging work, and I appreciate the time and effort that staff dedicate to this process. It does not go unnoticed.

That said, I do have some ongoing concerns regarding how budget pressures are being approached, particularly when it comes to staffing decisions. There appears to be a consistent pattern where discussions of cost savings **focus on reductions to support staff**. Those who work most directly with students and families every day. While I understand that difficult decisions must be made, I would respectfully suggest that greater attention be given to reviewing all areas of staffing before reductions are considered in frontline roles.

From the information available, exempt staffing represents just over \$5 million in the budget, and based on my own review, that amount may be closer to \$5.7+ million across approximately 52 excluded roles (that I am aware of), and this appears to be a conservative estimate. An estimate that does not include personal expenses (as reported on the SOFI report).

The board is advised of and appreciates the concern. We also recognize this as a common theme of concern when budgets are tight and priorities are being reviewed. The board shares the priority of keeping resources invested in front-line services wherever possible without sacrificing our capacity to support the healthy operations of a complex system. One strong indication to the board that we prioritize front-line services is found on page 21 of the attached package from our Budget Advisory Committee Mtg of April 7th 2026. The table on page 21 looks to the proportional structure of our district budget in contrast to comparable school districts.

It is also not clear how much additional cost is associated with **contracted services**, as some of this appears to be grouped within the "Other Professionals" category. Greater transparency in this area would be helpful to fully understand the overall staffing picture before decisions are made that impact student-facing roles.

I've provided comment on this further below. Regarding transparency, please consider us advised of the interest, with the Budget Advisory Committee serving as one potential venue to surface this discussion further.

**Public education funding is intended to support students**, and our staffing priorities should reflect that by ensuring resources are directed first to those who **provide direct support in schools**. We have clerical staff who are overwhelmed by workload demands, Indigenous EAs who report not having sufficient time to provide cultural support, facilities staff observing work being contracted out and then having to address deficiencies afterward, custodians facing increasing expectations due to rental use of SD sites, and EAs dealing with high levels of workplace violence. These realities speak directly to the pressures facing frontline staff. Decreasing those staff is not the answer.

While I can't speak to this directly, I want to acknowledge the board and staff are advised of you interest and concern on these points.

Related to this, as transportation costs are being raised as a concern, including the possibility of increasing fees or adjusting routes for families, I would ask whether a comprehensive review of spending across all sites, departments, and **contracted** services has been undertaken. Before measures that impact students and families are implemented, it is important to be confident that all areas of internal and external spending have been fully examined.

At this time, no consideration has been given by the board to increasing bus fees. The board has also heard clearly that cost pressures on the district can't simply be passed along to families and parents facing their own, often challenging financial circumstances. With that noted, I can't pre-determine future direction from the board if this is considered.

A review of spending has helped inform difficult budget recommendations in both this year's and last year's budget as we have tried to correct the impact of a structural deficit in spending. That review will continue, with the support of the board.

I would like to better understand the District's approach to contracted work. There appears to be a growing reliance on **external providers** and, in some cases, former employees. It would be helpful to know whether a review has been conducted to determine what work could reasonably be done in-house, particularly where we already have **skilled staff within the organization**. Ensuring that internal capacity is fully utilized before contracting out work is an important part of demonstrating fiscal responsibility. I would also like to note the ongoing use of legal services, and whether there are opportunities to rely more fully on resources available through BCPSEA as a (large) cost savings.

The level of contracted services in the budget is assumed to be at levels consistent with prior years. These services bring expertise and capacity that we do not have resources to do internally, or that are short term or capacity building work. Some examples include roofers for facilities and math coaching inservice for teachers.

In terms of legal services, we do use BCPSEA where it is available as well as BCSTA and SPP; however, as a corporate board there are several risk areas that require timely and current legal advice. These include capital, privacy, student safety, appeals, bylaw and policy.

With respect to staffing, the current budget reflects a reduction of 7 FTE Education Assistants, with funding being reallocated to (mostly) **excluded** positions. At the same time, there continues to be consistent underspending in EA allocations (7.8% on the most recent quarterly report), including the recent 14.6% underspend identified for Indigenous EA supports. How many EA positions are currently **unfilled** relative to budget? How many students are **impacted** by those vacancies? **Why do these positions remain unfilled while reductions and reallocations are being proposed?**

I've asked staff to follow up on this question. I'm sorry I can't provide more immediate clarity on this point but I am confident in staff communicating with you directly in how the budget is operationalized across the system.

The District has identified a projected **decline of approximately 300 students**, while at the same time there are significant capital investments underway, including the Sardis Secondary addition and the construction of two new schools. Securing capital funding approval for new schools in BC is highly competitive and requires demonstrating both current and projected enrollment needs. It would be helpful to understand how these projections are being reconciled.

Additionally, with respect to the property purchased at the base of Promontory, can the District **confirm whether Ministry funding for that acquisition has been received**, and if not, **what impact** (if any) **this has had on the District's current financial position?**

Chilliwack has experienced significant growth in enrollment over the last 10 years. Enrollment has increased more than in most other districts in BC. The district has had to use portables to provide classrooms for many of these students throughout the regular school day as buildings no longer have enough room and are over their capacity. Obtaining approval, funding, and beginning construction on buildings has a lead time of at least 5 years. Accordingly, many of the buildings now under construction have been in the works for many years and they will provide classrooms for students who are still learning in portables every day. Promontory is one of our highest growth areas and the number of elementary students who are currently being bussed off the hill to other non-neighbourhood schools, could

fill the site that was just purchased. This is an area that has been attracting young families. As a result when a site became available it was the board's judgement that the site should be purchased. The cost of the bussing is a couple of hundred thousand and a neighbourhood school was seen as preferable. The purchase has been funded by school site acquisition charges (SSAC) and at current a loan. The district has written directly to and submitted a request to the Ministry to fund the loan portion. Until it is covered the District may use SSAC to help pay for the interest. Any interest not covered by SSAC will need to be covered out of the district operations. We have made a provision for a couple hundred thousand from operations for 2026-27 budget year. The exact amount will depend on interest rates and we have been conservative in our estimates.

Overall, my concern is ensuring that funding and staffing decisions remain aligned with the core purpose of public education: **supporting students**. The staff who provide direct, day-to-day support are central to that work, and it is important that we carefully consider how budget decisions affect those supports.

I would like to acknowledge the District's *Strategic Plan* and the shared commitment to values such as accountability, equity, inclusion, and human flourishing. When frontline supports are reduced or left unfilled, it has a direct impact on students, staff well-being, and our ability to create inclusive and supportive learning environments. Aligning the budget decisions with these shared values requires us to carefully examine where resources are allocated, and to ensure that the people who provide direct support to students are prioritized and supported.

Thank you for the reflection and connecting the work of your members to our shared commitment in advancing the goals of the strategic plan. The alignment of resources with strategic goals is a continued area of focus for the board and we appreciate you drawing attention to it through the perspective of CUPE 411 as informed by your membership.

I appreciate your time and consideration in reviewing this, and I welcome any clarification you are able to provide. While I cannot speak for every CUPE member individually, I do my best to represent the experiences and concerns that our CUPE members share with me.

Thank you.

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**President**

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