



Media Statement

August 24, 2011

RealRenewal is a voluntary organization dedicated to improving transparency and enhancing the public's voice in education decision-making.

To begin with, RealRenewal fully supports inclusive education for students with special needs. Further, we believe educational assistants play an important role in making inclusion possible, a role not easily duplicated by other professionals.

From our experience, students and parents highly value frontline workers in the system. They value stable personal relationships and close, loving care. At the same time, parents do want better access to speech therapists, psychologists and other professionals.

Yet few parents we've met agree occasional professional interventions, however helpful, adequately replace frontline staffing on a daily basis, even with an increase of teachers in the classroom. It's a matter of teamwork – you need all the players.

Parents have witnessed the palpable levels of stress in today's classrooms, and fail to see how removing educational assistants from the scene will alleviate this situation.

Unfortunately, among decision-makers the standard default position is that if parents have something to say about a policy, they speak only from narrow-self interest and resistance to change.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Parents speak from knowledge of the situation on the ground, from expertise in their children's needs, and from concern for the system as a whole.

As previously indicated, RealRenewal advocates transparency and parental voice in decision-making. While a review of the role of educational assistants has its merits, it has failed on these two important counts.

When RealRenewal first raised the issue of planned cuts to educational assistants and school community coordinators at a Regina Public board meeting in October 2009, we were met with a denial and an accusation of spreading false rumours. To be fair, it is quite possible our local trustees were at that point uninformed these positions were being targeted for reductions.

To the detriment of our democracy, we have observed that it's not unusual for Saskatchewan's elected school board representatives to be left in the dark by administrators, until after the horse has left the barn.

Also to be fair to our local school board, Regina Public is operating in a time of increased curriculum demands from the Ministry of Education, coupled with an anticipated operating revenue decrease of just over six per cent in the coming year. The constraints are many and the options are few.

Providing families with the additional services they want while maintaining the classroom supports they currently have is next to impossible. Any effort to improve things just ends up being a game of take-away.

I fail to see how, in a time of economic boom, it is such a struggle to provide basic education services and supports for our children.

While the Ministry has distanced itself from the policy of reducing educational assistants – saying it doesn’t tell school boards what to do – it is clearly the Province that holds all the carrots and sticks. This is especially true since local boards were stripped of their taxation powers.

It is the Province that developed a policy to phase out educational assistants. It is the province that provides policy information to local decision-makers, including a power point presentation advising that when parents express disagreement, it is merely because they don’t like change and their sense of personal entitlement is threatened.

This gives no credence to the possibility that members of the public might have some legitimate points and useful suggestions. It denies the possibility that direct daily experience with the system might yield some important perspectives.

At a local level, we do commend Regina Public for tackling the important issue of support services in a 2007 review. However, the inclusion of just two parents and zero students on a committee of 26, dominated by administrators and consultants, is no guarantee that those most directly affected were actively and genuinely involved in the decision-making that led to dramatic, ongoing cuts to frontline staff positions.

At this point, we call on local and provincial decision-makers to take a pause in the march toward phasing out frontline staff positions, and to deal more honestly and openly with the public about the plan.

If any school board thinks eliminating EAs is their best option, they should just say it in plain English, rather than hiding behind obscure language like “conversion of para-professional to professional positions.” This makes it seem like the EAs are all getting a raise in pay and status, instead of laid off.

Finally, if any parent believes their child’s right to education is being harmed by this policy direction, they should organize with other parents and take action. This highlights the need for an independent education ombudsman in the province to uphold the public interest.

In conclusion, it seems bureaucrats and policy wonks are often baffled by the things parents and students value. This is because they can’t see the situation from the ground. Likewise, they often have a poor appreciation of the work and skills of employees farther down the professional ladder than themselves, whether they be educational assistants or nursing assistants. We would argue that everyone working in our schools with our children is in fact a teacher, and should be respected as such.

We call on decision-makers at all levels to genuinely seek perspectives other than their own, including the perspectives of students, parents and support workers, and to equitably share decision-making power with them. They will be the wiser for it.

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RealRenewal