



CUPE backgrounder: Bill 20

March, 2007

Bill 20, *THE SCHOOL (STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT ENABLING) AMENDMENT ACT, 2007*, was tabled in the B.C. Legislature on March 26. The legislation follows up on the B.C. government's February Throne Speech, which proposed many significant changes to the *School Act*.

Key areas in which Bill 20 proposes changes include: school fees, power of superintendents, and model schools. School boards will now be called Boards of Education, to reflect their expanded role in the areas of early learning and literacy.

School fees

By doing an end run around the October 2006 BC Supreme Court decision banning fees, Bill 20 embeds new fee-levying powers in the School Act. The legislation re-opens the door to school fees in three key areas – sports academies, band programs and trades training/apprenticeship programs. School boards will have enhanced powers to levy fees in ways that can discriminate against students and families of lesser financial means.

School fees are not a fair or sustainable way to support educational programs. They work to stratify the student population and their families into haves and have-nots. That is why CUPE is on record opposing widespread and growing district reliance on school fees to fund educational programs.

Bill 20 requires that boards collecting fees have a policy to deal with financial hardship, but does not specify what that policy should include. If a student wants to join a sports academy but cannot afford fees of \$1,000 or more, will that student still be allowed to participate? And what hurdles and/or stigma might students and their families face if called upon to demonstrate financial hardship? At a minimum this legislation should require boards to include all students in programs regardless of whether they pay the fee.

Role of school boards/powers of superintendents

Bill 20 creates new provincial Superintendents of Achievement with powers to override board decisions. It also makes district-level superintendents responsible to the new provincial superintendents in achievement-related areas.

These changes alter existing lines of accountability and undermine the current authority of elected school trustees in these areas.

Local school boards, governed by elected trustees who have wide-ranging responsibility to administer our public schools, are a cornerstone of our public education system. CUPE believes that measures that undermine board powers or centralize control over K-12 education make the system less accountable and therefore less effective.

Model schools

The legislation would allow for model or “demonstration schools.” CUPE opposes this proposal. CUPE believes that inclusive options for special education need to be developed within the context of the existing system. Research has shown that all students benefit when they have close daily interactions in regular educational settings.

CUPE represents 8,000 special education assistants who work with special needs students on a daily basis in the B.C. public education system. The collective experience of these members underlines the fact that students with disabilities need proper and fully funded supports. Our members are also emphatic that the way to support these students is not to segregate them in specialized institutions but to include them, as much as possible, in the regular life and programs of our public schools.

Enhanced mandate for public schools

Bill 20 formally changes the School Act to broaden the public school mandate to include early learning and literacy. As part of this, school boards will now be called Boards of Education. The expanded mandate reinforces a trend that is already well underway in the province. CUPE supports these changes while stressing the need for early learning and literacy programs and staff to be properly funded and supported in their work.