

June 23, 2020

Good evening and welcome to our final Board Meeting of this school year.

This year, like every other, trustees have been privileged to celebrate the many incredible accomplishments of our students and staff in public education. However unlike other school years, this one feels like we have had two: the one that came before COVID-19, and the one that was forever altered by the arrival of a pandemic. While the words "thank you" feel wholly inadequate, on behalf of the Board, I want to thank all students, staff, families and our partners for everything that they have done to make this highly unusual school year a success.

Today is the 35th anniversary of the Air India bombing and the National Day of Remembrance for Victims of Terrorism. The day was initially created to mark the bombing of the flight, which remains the deadliest terrorist attack in Canadian history. Flags throughout the District are flying at half-mast. This national memorial day gives Canadians an opportunity each year to remember victims of terrorism around the world.

I also want to take a moment to provide an update on some recent advocacy efforts by the Board. On June 8 Trustees and I met with all of Burnaby's Members of the Legislative Assembly to provide them with an update about capital projects, our efforts around COVID-19 – including those to support the school community beyond education – and the impact the coronavirus has had on our budget. Separately, on June 15 the Vice-Chair provided a presentation on finance to BC's Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services. This all-party committee of the Legislative Assembly hears public consultations on the next provincial budget. This was an excellent opportunity for our district to share the impact on our schools and students with those provincial budget decision makers.

I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge the important conversations taking place right here right now in the Burnaby School District about racism. Trustees and I – along with senior staff – stand firmly in support of human rights, and in solidarity with black people, Indigenous people, people of colour and allies opposing racism in our schools and communities.

While our beliefs as a district are long-held, we have a continued responsibility to translate our ideals into action. And we cannot do this by ourselves. I am reminded of a

Malcolm X quote that a student at Burnaby South Secondary recently shared with her school's staff: "there was a time when you didn't know what you know today." We are looking to our community to help inform where we go from here.

This will be our first step as a board: to create space for people's stories to be shared, honoured and understood. We are grateful to those who have already contacted us to share their views, including their thoughts on the RCMP School Liaison Program. These are exactly the kinds of uncomfortable and courageous conversations that need to happen. We are committed to hearing feedback and addressing concerns on the program and its effectiveness in our district, including from those who have engaged with police in our schools and participated in programs.

We must also learn from the lived experiences of those in our school community who have been affected by racism, discrimination or bias right here in Burnaby. This will help inform where we want to get to: a system action plan. If we are to impact systemic racism, we must not only honour their stories and address concerns, but we must also have an actionable strategy and be accountable for results. But first we must listen – particularly to the voices of black people, Indigenous people and people of colour in our school communities.

Our Superintendent has also indicated to the Board that, in reviewing district operations, she will be hiring a person to help us with this important work.

I want to reiterate that as a district, we agree that we must always strive to be part of meaningful systemic change. The work of reaching out about racism to engage and listen to the community we serve is just the beginning and long overdue. An opportunity to do better has been presented to all of us everywhere, and the Burnaby School District intends to take it.

We know September will bring continued challenges with both moving this work forward in a meaningful way and managing student learning during a pandemic. In the meantime, as this is the last Board Chair Report of the school year before summer, I want to once again acknowledge all of the contributions and efforts of our entire school community, including families. It has been quite a year, and I wish you all a wonderful summer with the people you care about.

Gary Wong, Chair
Burnaby Board of Education