

**April 27, 2021**

Good evening and welcome,

My report tonight focuses on one of the most critical aspects of healthy school communities: safety for students and staff.

This morning, Vice-Chair Brassington and Superintendent Niccoli-Moen and I met with the Fraser Health Authority's Medical Health Officer. I wrote to Dr. Ariella Zbar last week on behalf of the board, urging her to prioritize Burnaby School District staff in their vaccination plan. I also requested a meeting, which we had today, to learn why Burnaby staff are still waiting, as districts adjacent to Burnaby get their vaccines, and to have a conversation on the data informing the Health Authority's vaccination roll out plan.

These are anxious times for our staff as they continue to see increased cases in their schools and workplaces. It is the tireless efforts of all staff that have kept schools open. As vaccines roll out across the province, staff have been patient, trusted in the process, and put their faith in public health. I am grateful to the Medical Health Officer for meeting with us. Although we were given no definitive answers today, we are anticipating an update later this week. On behalf of the Board, I will continue to advocate for our staff, whom we fully believe deserve urgent access to vaccines commensurate with their colleagues in the Metro region.

I also want to speak further about our ongoing work toward addressing systemic racism. At our meeting last June, Trustees unanimously passed a motion designed to engage with, listen to, and learn from the community the Burnaby School District serves – and particularly Indigenous people, Black people and people of colour. Our motion directed staff to put together a working group comprised of all partners, and include representation from Black, Indigenous and racialized communities. The importance of creating a safe and culturally sensitive space for people's stories to be shared, honoured and understood was a key part of that motion.

Updates have also been shared at previous board meetings this school year about anti-racism work led by our District Vice-Principal of Equity, Diversity & Inclusion, school staff and students. As outlined by staff at our Board Meeting last month, much work has been done by the working group centering BIPOC voices. Since first meeting in the fall, the group has offered their insight and expertise in support of an engagement process.

Students, their families, staff and community members are encouraged to participate in the resulting survey, which is scheduled to go out in May. The survey will provide overview data that will inform and shape the next phases of the engagement process. Phase 2 is anticipated to focus on in-depth input, with Phase 3 involving deeper conversations. This Board remains committed to that fulsome engagement. It is important to note, however, we concurrently continue to listen to concerns in real time – and to act.

Back at that meeting last June when the motion was passed, then Board Chair Gary Wong expressed gratitude on behalf of Trustees to people who had already reached out to share their views. That included and still includes those with thoughts or concerns on the School Liaison Officer and the RCMP Youth Officer Program, and its effectiveness in our district – including hearing from people who have engaged with police in our schools and participated in programs.

We have heard clearly that not everyone feels safe in the presence of police in schools and we have not waited to initiate critical conversations about police in our schools. Before I touch on work underway, I want

to share some notable differences between the program in Burnaby and that in neighbouring districts, where decisions are being made about their School Liaison Officer Programs.

Those districts have municipal police forces and School Liaison Officers based in schools. In Burnaby, RCMP officers are part of a Youth Section – not a School Liaison Officer Program. Officers work in the community with youth. Engaging with the district is only part of what they do. They are not in Burnaby schools full time. The focus in the Letter of Understanding between the RCMP and the District is on supporting children and youth through restorative justice, as an alternative to charges.

Our District's focus is on prioritizing student and staff safety. Police do not lead this – our staff do. We have a unique program here. The District's Safe and Caring Schools Team is the link and interface with students and Youth Section officers. The team works in partnership with the RCMP's Youth Section. The focus is on support to schools and youth in the community, threat and risk assessment, and youth restorative justice. The District team assists administrators, staff, students, parents and members of the community in developing positive, proactive approaches, which enhance the safety and well-being of everyone in our schools and communities. This includes mental health support, intervention, and child abuse prevention. Mental health has been a particular focus this year, during the pandemic, as the Safe and Caring Schools Team has worked in partnership with counsellors. They have prioritized supports for students, including those who are learning remotely.

As part of the team, each of our high schools has a Safe School Specialist who is an employee of the district. Safe School Specialists work closely with the RCMP Youth Section, as they prioritize student support and maintaining safety. Safe School Specialists work to build relationships with students based on trust and respect and help develop positive, proactive approaches which enhance connectedness, safety, security and well-being. Emergent issues, in the community or in schools, are addressed by the prevention of intimidation, harassment and bullying, risk/threat assessment, emotional de-escalation, substance use assessment and response, conflict resolution and restorative justice.

As we continue the dialogue on police in our schools, it is important that any examination include this local context that is not the same as neighbouring districts.

Since last June, District staff have had several meetings with leadership at the City of Burnaby and local RCMP detachment. One of the issues staff have raised are concerns about police in uniforms when they are attending in schools. Staff have brought forward a request to see if this is something the RCMP can look at. In accordance with our health and safety guidelines this school year, the District has also asked RCMP to only come into school buildings as required for support and to provide presentations virtually. Our Safe and Caring Schools Team and our new District Vice-Principal of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion have placed an emphasis on a trauma informed lens when police do intersect with our schools. At the District's invitation, Youth Section officers attended online training with school administrators and district staff regarding a "Trauma Informed Return to School."

The focus in our District is student and staff safety – not a program. As we have seen with COVID-19 exposures, schools are not immune to what is happening in the community. There will unavoidably continue to be times when policing and schools will intersect. There will, unfortunately, continue to be issues in the community, such as drugs and violence. And there will continue to be times when we will need to call the police. Under the current structure, they are coming in when they are asked. District staff have worked with Youth Section Officers, as they support schools with responses to critical incidents. This close partnership has allowed our schools to respond quickly to issues and concerns, identifying the most appropriate response and recommending resources and assistance necessary to deal with the issue or concern. Examples this year include threats, traffic accidents, child custody and domestic disputes, missing children, and bullying – including online. The RCMP Youth Section has also continued to provide presentations virtually. Upon request from teachers who have noted concerns, these presentations address topics such as internet safety, bullying and cyber-bullying, as well as social media safety at the elementary and secondary levels.

People in our community have strong views about Youth Section officers' connection to schools and student safety. We need to and want to hear that. As we work to both address concerns raised about police in schools and focus on a broader journey to confront systemic racism, we are taking concurrent action: we look forward to hearing from the community we serve through the anti-racism engagement process; we will continue to champion concrete support now. Things have evolved since that first Letter of Understanding between the RCMP and the district and I fully anticipate there will be changes to come in how the RCMP can better support our schools in the future as we approach this work through a trauma informed lens.

We know there is no single or quick fix to addressing systemic racism. On behalf of Trustees, we are deeply grateful to those willing to courageously share their lived experiences. We encourage everyone who is open to it, to participate in the District's engagement process when it launches next month. The first part of the process is a survey, which has been translated into nine languages in order to reach as many people as possible.

If we are to impact systemic racism, we must not only confront uncomfortable truths, honour stories that are shared, and address concerns – but we must also have an actionable strategy and be accountable for results. We remain committed to listening, hearing and creating a better path forward together.

**Jen Mezei, Chair**

**Burnaby Board of Education**