

BC Independent Schools and Public Funding

Nick Loenen

Post-World War II immigrants provided the numbers to start Christian schools. 25 years after Vancouver's start in 1949, there were 15 schools. Today, there are 40 schools with 10,000 students. Post-war immigrants supported Christian day schools passionately. Many of the congregations that formed in the 1950s and 60s first built a simple, flat-roofed school used on weekends for worship. Later, the church building followed.

Growth is partly due to government funding. Our province is the only one in Canada to fund parent-controlled Christian schools. It started in 1977. The rate was set at 30% of the per-pupil cost of educating a student in the public school. In 1987 funding was raised to 35% and two years later to 50%. There is no funding for most capital costs.

How did public funding for private schools come about?

The Christian Reformed love Christian education, but not paying for it! "What! Parents must pay to practice their faith?" That is new, strange and wrong! To the Christian Reformed...

1. Neither government nor churches, but parents have responsibility for educating their children.
2. Government is to provide parents with the financial resources necessary for their educational task.
3. A just society provides equal funding to all parents regardless of religious orientation. (Note the peculiar Reformed way of seeing the separation of church and state. To the Reformed, the state maintains the wall of separation by funding every religion, so as to not favour any religion.)

Those are sound principles, but politicians are seldom swayed by principles. They count noses. The Christian Reformed did not have the numbers. To swell those numbers the Federation of Independent Schools Association (FISA) was formed in 1966. It consisted of 4 groupings (1) Roman Catholic, the most numerous (2) private British type schools (3) 'our' Christian schools (4) Sikh, Muslim, Mormon, Jewish, Montessori, Mennonite, Lutheran, Baptist, etc.

Here is an important detail. Each of the four groups was given one vote, regardless of how many students they represented. For two reasons!

1. It would be contradictory to tell government that minorities have rights and deserve recognition, if you yourself are unwilling to give others their rights and will not recognize those you disagree with. Within the Association, to this day, Christians, Jews, Muslims, Mormons, Calvinists and Catholics all have the same clout and standing, regardless of numbers. (Not unlike the US Senate.)
2. Experience in other provinces showed that the campaign for public funding cannot be seen to be a Roman Catholic initiative. Hence, the association, by design, kept the Catholics to just one vote out of four. Perfect for public relations!

The association was formed to obtain government recognition and funding for independent schools. But what do you do to get there? It took 11 years of lobbying politicians, public information campaigns, letter writing, booths at fall fairs, pushing resolutions at political party conventions. It was intensive and it was grass roots. It was done by the parents.

Some things were not done. The campaign was non-partisan and non-sectarian. There were no pressure tactics, no strikes, walkouts or sit-ins, no attempts to embarrass the government. And most important of all, there was no discrediting of public schools!

In 1966 when lobbying government first began, the political situation seemed hopeless. Then premier, WAC Bennett, was ardently opposed on principle. To Bennett the public school system powerfully moulds people to overcome differences of religion and ethnicity. To him separate schools would perpetuate differences. The main opposition party had a left-leaning orientation and was beholden to the labour unions, including the very powerful BC Teachers Federation. Both government and opposition agreed on one thing, “No public funds for private schools”, period!

But God had different plans. In 1972, the 20-year reign of WAC Bennett came to an abrupt end with the election of the socialist-leaning opposition party. Bennett’s son, Bill, took over his father’s political party and set out to lure back all who had been alienated by his father, including the parents and supporters of independent schools. When the Federation’s intensive information campaign directed at the public, started to show results and for the first time just over 50% of the general population agreed that some public funding for independent schools was justified, Bennett junior entered the 1975 election with a promise to do just that. Bennett won and kept his promise.

Eleven years of intense lobbying and public discussion came to an end in 1977. Gerry Ensing, member of Burnaby CRC (earlier of Vancouver First) was uniquely gifted to give leadership as Executive Director of FISA during these years. Later, Ensing served as Inspector of Independent Schools for the BC government. Funding for parent-controlled schools precipitated an outpouring of gratefulness and praise to God.

=====

Source:

Justice Achieved: The Political Struggle of Independent Schools in BC,
Cunningham, V., Federation of Independent School Association of BC, 2002.

Nick Loenen

5611 Jaskow Dr., Richmond, BC V7E 5W4

604-274-3868

nloenen@shaw.ca

Corrections, comments and additional information are much appreciated.