April 23, 2015

The Honourable Peter Fassbender  
Minister of Education  
PO Box 9045, Stn Prov Govt  
Victoria, BC V8W 9E2

Dear Minister Fassbender:

As the Board of Education for School District #8 (Kootenay Lake), we are deeply concerned about the ramifications of Bill 11 on the future of public education in the Province of British Columbia and call upon the provincial government for its immediate withdrawal. Our Board, sees Bill 11, as yet another erosion of local governance and autonomy, and a further undermining of the very foundation of public education in this province.

Since being elected, this government has opposed the inclusion of Boards of Education in decisions that have had direct impact on local governance and decision-making autonomy. Through the dismantling of the BCPSEA Board of Directors and the appointment of a public administrator, trustees have lost their voice and representation through a government mandated bargaining structure. Through government directives, such as cooperative gains and administrative mandates, Boards of Education have lost their flexibility to respond with ever meager revenues.

No one can refute, that public education is integral to the future of our children, and our province, and its decline is a matter of great concern to those from the grassroots up. Yet those at the grassroots including our parents, educators, staff and local Boards of Education are not being consulted. We cannot understand why our local voices are not being sought, let alone not heard, when it comes to the education of our own children in our own communities. Boards of Education are the public’s ambassadors, entrusted to provide the best education possible to our future’s most precious asset, our children. We cannot carry out this duty, in partnership with a government, who refuses to include trustees in decision-making.

Our Board is dismayed by the way in which the BC provincial government has chosen to proceed with its initiatives, not only failing to consult with Boards of Education but also by not considering input from those closest to our children in our classrooms. Parents, teachers, school administration and support staff deserve a meaningful voice in the decision making process. Prior to Bill 11 being put forward for second reading, we demand that the provincial government institute a broad-based consultation process, to include Boards of Education and educational stakeholders, to make recommendations as to any changes to the School Act and/or the Teacher’s Act. Further, that this same broad-based consultation process, be implemented in the development of the regulations and/or other defining processes associated with the amended Acts. As the front line providers of education, local Boards of Education have much knowledge and expertise for the Provincial government to draw upon in the upcoming weeks. For the sake and well-being of public education, we believe it is imperative that we have a meaningful voice in the decision-making process.

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The changes proposed by Bill 11 leave many questions as to the direction that the Provincial government is ultimately intending to take. We, like many Boards of Education across the province, recognize that in recent times, we have not been part of the decision-making process around public education and worry that Bill 11 is just the formalization of the muzzling of our local, democratically elected voice. We are also concerned about the continuing erosion of local Board autonomy. Is the shared services plan going to be an impediment to independently and appropriately managing priorities in local districts? Does the provincial government intend to take over control of the land assets owned by school districts? How will the new provisions of the School Act, broadening the Minister’s authority to issue administrative directives, effect the independence of school districts? By all appearances Bill 11 gives the provincial government an increased ability to replace democratically elected trustees. We are left suspicious of the government’s motives and deeply concerned about the future of Boards of Education across the province.

Proposed amendments to the Teacher’s Act are also of grave concern. Teachers’ professional autonomy to make decisions in respect to their own professional development is being undermined. Why would the provincial government choose not to consult with teachers themselves in respect to this initiative? Again, we are left to ponder the motives of the provincial government. School District #8 Board of Education demands that the provincial government engage with BC teachers in a meaningful consultation process to develop the regulation around professional development that respects teacher autonomy.

After years of labour tensions and the chronic underfunding of public education, it is time for new beginning between the British Columbia provincial government and the various players in the educational system of this province. If any trust is to develop, transparency and meaningful consultation must be the starting point. There will be no buy-in to the provincial government plans for educational re-structuring unless the stakeholders can be made participants of the change rather than having change simply foisted upon them. It is up to this government to prove that that they are truly committed to a world class public education system by ensuring that it remains locally driven and managed.

Sincerely,

SCHOOL DISTRICT NO. 8 (KOOTENAY LAKE)

Lenora Trenaman
Board Chair
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cc Board of Education, School District No. 8
Becky Blair and Paul Boscariol, KLTF Co-presidents
Carol Sanders, CUPE Local 748 Vice-President
Sheri Walsh, DPAC Chair
Katrine Conroy, MLA Kootenay West
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