

# Death by a Thousand Cuts: Parent Ad-hoc Organizations Concerned with Education

Anth 516 Final Report by

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December 11, 2003

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## **I. Introduction to Methodologies**

The purpose of this project has been twofold: 1) to gain hands-on experience with a variety of ethnographic and qualitative research techniques 2) to explore the teachers’ and parents’ experiences of recent changes to education funding and legislation. Our primary research objective concerns ad-hoc parent groups and the

following questions: 1. How do they form and, 2. How do they respond to issues of public education in the lower mainland, BC. The researcher team has had no previous involvement or experience with ad-hoc parent groups in the Vancouver area. This project has therefore been used as a platform to experience a range of methodological approaches that reflect each of the student's own future research interests. Through the use of these research methods we have found that some approaches were more successful than others. "What is important to remember, though, is that different research strategies may produce different data, and thereby, perhaps different conclusions" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995: 133). It is important therefore, that we first outline these methodological approaches and include a brief discussion of the tactics employed in the context of our larger data analysis.

#### **Background Research: Web-based**

Research over the World Wide Web was the first point of entry for our investigation. Given more time we would have sought more concrete information on prior research and literature concerning educational issues. However in the case of ad-hoc group organizations the World Wide Web provides a dynamic information base and communication tool. These sites often include statements of their central tenets, principals and issues that inform their mobilization. After completing an initial survey of different ad-hoc groups in the lower mainland our group then proceeded to compare our findings and locate some of the underlying issues concerning public education. Who are the stakeholders? What are the issues? How do they form? Through a comparative analysis of different parent-led organizations we were able to seek out some of the ambiguities within the larger context of the recent budget shortfalls. Furthermore, by examining the different concepts applied by these groups it also provides a framework for asking the kind of leading questions that are central to our data analysis. This is a crucial part of any investigation and without this background information our interviews may have been less effective.

#### **Participant Observation: SOS General Meeting**

At 3:30 pm on October 18, 2003 we had the opportunity to attend a Save Our Schools (SOS) General Meeting at the Sunset Community Centre in Vancouver (see Appendix I c.). This ethnographic setting provided a social space to network, draw on fieldnotes and experience firsthand the dialogue and collaborative interests that are forged through these volunteer initiatives. The gender representation of the meeting involved twenty-seven women and five men. As a volunteer based organization this forum also provided an opportunity to see how the dialogue and organization of the meeting took a particular form. In some ways this meeting was an opportunity to tell stories about the different cutbacks that led to key questions. "After all, counsel is less an answer to a question than a proposal concerning the continuation of a story which is just unfolding" (Benjamin, 1968: 86). What was the breaking point for these parents? One parent asked: "Do government employees have a limitation to their glue stick numbers?" It was also clear that the parent reps wore different hats and were involved in a number of areas that include policy, academics, media and so fourth. But as a volunteer initiative the group mobilizes when things heat up.

Unlike other methodological approaches it is important to be a participant in this ethnographic setting as it provides a window into the emotion of the parents. It was clear that there was a sense of defeat and exhaustion matched with a sense of anger. However at the same time, one had the impression that this medium also provided a space for a sense of empowerment. This is an important voice and for the ad-hoc members it needed to be heard. In the meeting we also had the opportunity to see the different resources and methodologies employed by the group itself. This provided an invaluable amount of data allowing us to have a sense of continuity and timeline to their activities in the past and present. What was most effective? What strategies could be used to apply more pressure? Most importantly, as a networking tool this context provided a social space to locate key actors, negotiate access to the research setting and build relationships with potential informants. Although we had just begun our research activities at this stage, the meeting nonetheless provided a rich source of information. If it was not for time constraints we feel that this form of participant observation would have been a major part of a more expansive research project.

### Interviews: Personal, Phone, E-mail

Interviews have in many ways informed our conclusions in this paper. This has been a crucial methodological approach for gaining hands on experience conducting interviews, drawing on consent forms and collaborating in a two way dialogic relationship with knowledge construction. A breakdown of this methodology is as follows: two personal recorded interviews, two email interviews, and one interview conducted over the phone. Gaining access to informants proved to be quite challenging. "Who is interviewed, when, and how will usually be decided as the research progresses, according to the ethnographer's assessment of the current state of his or her knowledge, and according to judgments as to how it might best be developed further" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995: 138). 'Time' is a central variable among parent ad-hoc groups and many parents expressed a sense of exhaustion due to their commitment to public education as a political and moral statement (to be discussed in more detail). Therefore, our initial response through email and telephone was rather limited. We had to be careful on how we drafted our email and 'letter of introduction' in order to reach as many potential respondents (see Appendix I b ).

Although our representative sample of interviews was a cross-section of different parent ad-hoc cases, we would have liked to have had a broader selection of informants. With regards to our collection of personal interviews, this proved to be a highly responsive space to acquire a broad range of information. Interviews rely heavily upon interpersonal skills and in both occasions we had an opportunity to apply different tactics, tricks and methods we had learned from our class and course readings. Some issues that were encountered include: finding the right order of questions, the use of eye contact and nonverbal language, the challenges of tape recorders, the difficulties in transcribing, and so fourth. We found that it was important to include a final question that provided an opportunity for the interviewee to express a synopsis of the interview process and outline specific areas that we may have overlooked (see Appendix d). This also provides an opportunity for the informant to summarize his or her own narrative and reflect on some of the underlying issues. An alternative interview strategy was employed over the internet.

Although this approach may be more 'time efficient' it was clear that it also had its limitations. Without the interpersonal sphere to guide the interview process it is harder to revisit certain themes, ambiguities and concepts presented in their correspondence. Furthermore, unlike the interview setting one does not have the opportunity to take excursions outside the boundaries of the question which can be a potentially rich form of data. One must also consider issues of privacy, ethics and approaches used to acquire consent forms through this medium. A third interview approach was used over the telephone. If the interview is not recorded this method demands a 'quick and dirty' form of note taking. As a result, there is always the possibility of misrepresentation and it is extremely important, (communication pending) that one provides a copy of the summarized notes for the informant to review. All of our group members agreed that this cross-check of supplied information was an important part of the interview process and both an ethical and collaborative step.

#### Archival: "Growing the Future – Parent Voices for Public Education"

A final component of our research involved an analysis of a short audio visual statement compiled by the ad-hoc parent group: Save Our Schools (SOS). As a cultural document the video – "Growing the Future" is a valuable medium of archival information in that it provides a context for the budget shortfall drawing on a number concerned parent voices. This provides a valuable sense of scope to our research work in that it is a cultural, political and moral statement about a fundamental institution. In other words, one has to bear in mind, who designed this video, for what purposes and who is the audience? Outside of this audio visual document are group also examined some of the local papers to try and tie our analysis of ad-hoc parent groups to more recent trends and issues such as Seismic Safety. If there had been more time we would have done a more thorough archival study tracing social patterns and periods of change overtime. A more extensive analysis of the public and media discourse through the *Courier*, *Vancouver Sun*, *the Province* and *Georgia Straight* would have provided a large historical body of data to tie our research into a larger cultural narrative.

## **II. Background: Provincial Budget Shortfalls**

This section will discuss legislative funding cuts and their impact on Kindergarten to Grade 12 (K-12) education in British Columbia over the last few years. The budget shortfall and its negative repercussions on education have led to the emergence of various parent ad-hoc organizations. For the analysis of this section the websites of the Ministry of Education, Vancouver School Board (VSB), British Columbia Teachers' Federation (BCTF), and different parent ad-hoc organizations acted as primary sources.

The budget shortfall currently experienced in education was exacerbated by the Liberal government elected into power in May 2001. After winning the provincial election, the Liberals began to implement their '90 Day Plan' or 'New Era' program to reform the public sector. Under this program, the Liberals made significant cuts to health care, education, welfare, and legal aid budgets (CISP, 2002). This was in contradiction to their election manifesto that promised not to reduce the funds for public services, particularly in health and education.

Budget cuts in the education sector have led to growing frustration among teachers, students, and parents. Neil Worboys, President of the BCTF, expressed his concern saying that "the 'New Era' reality is hitting hard in schools throughout the province, especially in rural areas" (Creative Resistance-a). Some parents see budget cuts by the government of British Columbia as a step toward privatizing education. One parent said, "It is really upsetting to think that Vancouver is moving towards a system where only the wealthy can get quality post-secondary education". Another parent said, "It seems clear that the current government would like to 'encourage' private education". The question arises, how are parents and teachers experiencing the funding shortfall, and how does this lead to the formation of ad-hoc organizations? Before answering this question it is necessary to examine how funding was reduced over the last few years.

### **Funding Cuts**

In 2002-2003 school year, the Vancouver School Board (VSB) faced a shortfall of \$25.5 million. This shortfall occurred since the provincial grant was reduced by \$7.4 million, not accounting for the increased cost of \$13.2 million, and a structural deficit of \$4.9 million (VSB, 2002a). It is estimated that the combined funding shortfall for 2003-2004 school year will amount to \$3.6million (VSB website-b). The Ministry of Education made six funding announcements since 2003, which for Vancouver includes a one-time grant of \$5 million for 2003/2004 and an on-going future grant of \$2 million commencing in 2005/2006. In spite of the availability of new funds, the Vancouver School Board will still face a shortfall of \$3.2 million in 2003-2004 and \$2.9 million in 2004-2005 (VSB website-b).

According to the Vancouver School Board, "with estimated additional cost, due to inflation and collective agreement requirements, it is expected that the annual funding shortfall will be approximately \$12 million in 2004/2005 and in 2005-2006" (VSB website-b).

The Vancouver School Board claims, "Since the 1991-1992 school year, around \$82.3 million in education services have been cut as a result of provincial under funding" (VSB website-c). The details are as follows:

**Table 1 (Summary of Net Service Level Reduction (1991/1992 to 2002/2003)**

<b>Reductions</b>	<b>Full-time equivalents (FTE)</b>		<b>In Million \$</b>	
1991/1992			3.3	
1992/1993	211.4		17.7	
1993/1994	88.5		7.2	
1994/1995	102.2		4.8	
1997/1998	301.7		16.1	
1999/2000	181.9		11.1	
2000/2001	7.5		2.5	
2001/2002	3.5		0.3	
2002/2003	321.8	1,218.5	25.5	88.5
<b>Additions</b>				
1995/1996	(40.6)		(2.0)	
1996/1997	(16.5)		(0.9)	
1998/1999	(58.8)	(113.9)	(3.3)	(6.2)
<b>Net Reductions 1991/1992 to 2002/2003</b>	<b>1,104.0</b>		<b>\$ 82.3</b>	

Note: Over this period of time, the student enrollment increased from 52,056 in 1991/1992 to 56,635 in 2002/2003. Budget adjustments as a result of enrolment changes over this period are not included in the table. The table only reflects service level reductions and additions. Source: (VSB website-c)

### Impact on Education

The funding shortfall has had a significant impact on children's education. These changes include larger class sizes, teacher layoffs, closure of schools, and reduction in library services as well as support services for students with special needs.

According to the Vancouver School Board, since 1991-1992, 1,104 staff positions have been cut (VSB website). A report published in July 2002 by Caledon Institute of Social Policy estimated that because of funding shortfall nearly 2,000 teaching positions are expected to be cut and more than 50 schools are to be closed, primarily in rural BC. Of these 2000 positions, about 200 will be terminated in Vancouver, nearly 150 in Surrey, and 130 in Richmond. However, from the Creative Resistance website, it estimates that 1,361 teachers will be laid off in 2002-2003 in the province. This estimation has been shown in table 2.

**Table 2: Budget Deficit and Potential Teacher Layoffs per School District**

<b>School District (SD)</b>	<b>Budget Deficit (Million)</b>	<b>Potential layoff of teachers</b>
SD 39-Vancouver	\$21	400
SD 20-Kootenay Columbia	\$3	20
SD 36-Surrey	\$ 17	190
SD 38-Richmond	\$ 9.6	250
SD 43-Coquitlam	\$ 7	More than 50
SD 53-Okanagan-Similakameen	\$ 1.4	18
SD 57-Prince George	\$ 9.2	58
SD 61-Greater Victoria	\$ 8.8	60
SD 67-Okanagan-Skaha	\$ 2.2	60
SD 82-Coast Mountain	\$ 3.5	75
SD 83-Schuswap	\$ 2	30
SD 74-Gold Trail	\$ 3.7	20
SD 85-Vancouver Island North	\$ 1.4	18
SD 73-Kamloops-Thompson	\$ 8.5	65
SD 8-Kootenay Lake	\$ 1	20
SD 33-Chilliwack	\$ 2.5	27



Source: <http://www.creativeresistance.ca/awareness/budget-cuts-to-education-provincial-tally.htm> (accessed, 12/05/2003).

Due to the layoff of both teachers and staff, the remaining employees have had to do more work than before. As a result, a student receives less time from his or her teacher. Beth Mebrassa, a teacher has indicated that these students "can't spend as much time with me individually as I simply have more students. The frustration for students when they need help really increases as they can't see me as often as I would like" (BCTF website-a).

The school districts also have increased class sizes because of demands of employment cutbacks. Fewer teachers are now forced to teach more students with fewer resources. For example, in September last year, a Vancouver high school physics teacher was expected to instruct 35 students in labs designed for 24 students (CISP, 2002, p. 3). The presence of more students in labs is also a safety concern for teachers. Paul Hembling, a science teacher describes the whole situation as follows:

Less access to my time, both in the classroom and out of the classroom. There is less one-on-one in classes, there are fewer experiments in my science labs, both as a result of less lab aid time to prepare them, and too many students in the class to do them safely...Behavioral problems are always a bigger issue in larger classes, and we're certainly seeing that now (BCTF website-a).

Teachers and parents are concerned that students are receiving less attention with the expanding class sizes. The most obvious change students have faced in the last two years are these larger class sizes which have resulted in less individual attention to students with specific needs (Susan Allen, a teacher cited in BCTF website-a). This concern was also echoed by one of the parent interviews. "My eldest daughter was in two 'enriched' programs prior to the cuts. She really enjoyed them and they helped to keep her interested in school. With the cuts her programs were terminated. It is a challenge to keep her motivated now".

Another reason for the increased class size is due to school closure. Due to the budget shortfall, around 91 neighborhood schools have been closed. Of them, 44 were closed in June 2002 and 47 were closed in June 2003 (BCTF website-b). Because of the closure of these schools more than 14,000 students have been

displaced (BCTF website-b, p.2). Parents and students now frequently have to travel much increased distances to attend their new schools. During one interview with us, a parent expressed the problem as: "Our neighborhood school has been closed. We now cycle 10 minutes each way to get to school. If I walked with them it would take them almost ½ hour each day. We also have to cross a four-lane road without a properly marked crosswalk. Some days it is pretty scary!"

Budget shortfall has also reduced the support for students with special needs. Previously, there was a specific rule about how much money a school district could spend on programs, support, and services for special needs students. The Ministry of Education has eliminated this rule and now school boards are no longer obligated to spend a certain portion of the budget for students with special needs. This leaves parents of children with special needs in a position where they have to plead every year for an adequate level of funding and support to meet their children's requirements (BCTF website-c). One parent expressed her frustration saying,

I have a child with severe learning disabilities. I know how hard I've had to work to be able to progress him.....extra tutoring, extra courses. But there is disparity between what is happening in different areas of the city. Public education should mean funding for all kids.

Budget shortfall also reduced the access to special programs such as ESL. A focus group was held in early December 2002 and expressed concern that the support for special programs have been declining over the years because of funding cuts. Each cut in the funding increases caseload and workload of specialist teachers. As a result they cannot provide their service properly (BCTF website-d).

The gradual erosion of services of school libraries is another result of the funding shortfall. The school libraries are often closed because of the lack of full time librarians. In the first year of the Liberal government, schools lost 162 teacher-librarians and in the second year continued to lose more numbers (BCTF website-e). In many schools the library is now closed for a portion of the day or even the week. In Victoria for example, some school libraries are open one day a week on average. In Courtney, there are only two teacher-librarians to serve 17 school libraries (BCTF website-e). A teacher, Elizabeth Eakin, said that funding cuts to libraries have reduced the use of them by students. She notes that although her school has an

exceptionally dedicated librarian she can no longer send small groups to work in the library as the librarian is bogged down more and more with clerical and preparatory work, leaving less time for students (BCTF website-e, p.2).

Despite all these problems, the parents we interviewed are still optimistic about public education for their children and believe that it is the best option. "In public schools they learn about and begin to respect all people: different races, religions, nationalities and people of different abilities" (parent interview). Parents have organized in different groups to fight for a better public education system. They are advocating, lobbying and protesting. This is the premise of the emergence of different parent ad hoc organizations. We will now look at these organizations in detail.

### **III. Analysis of Parent Ad-hoc Groups**

#### **Linking the Stakeholders in Education**

Parents involved in BC ad-hoc groups are embedded in a network of stakeholders. The principal stakeholders we identified include the provincial government, educational staff, students, and parents. It is important to recognize the links between these stakeholders in order to understand how they influence one another. First, BC's budget for education, K-12, is primarily directed and made available by the provincial government and influenced by the political climate of a dominating legislature. Consequently, the government's decision on funding allocation has a direct influence on almost every aspect of education, and for this reason, they become the focal point for responses by other stakeholders in education when there are concerns about funding. Stakeholders who are directly affected by government funding are those who are employed through the system. This includes school boards, teachers and school staff. Changes in the budget for education have a direct effect on their job security, as well as their ability to provide a quality learning environment for students. Public funds support both private and public education; however, public schools are almost entirely dependent on it. Thus when there are funding deficiencies, the public schools, their employees, students and parents start experiencing the effects quickly.

Parents represent an integral stakeholder group as they have a vested interest in the quality of education their children experience. Thus when there are funding deficiencies that undermine their child's education, and perhaps put them at risk, the issue becomes a direct concern for them. Parent involvement occurs on a personal level; however, there are formal and informal parent associations where parents work together for particular goals. Parent Advisory Committees, or PACs, represent the formal parent group established within the public school system. There are three levels of organizations for PACs. Ideally, all schools have a PAC. A PAC then can choose to be represented at the district level, as part of a District PAC, or DPAC, and on a province-wide level, as part of the BC Coalition of Parent Advisory Committees (BCCPAC). Informal parent associations most often are ad-hoc in nature, and form because of the Parent Advisory Committee's inadequacy to advocate for a particular issue. As one SOS member described these differences:

We are an issue based group and that is why we are an advocacy group. BCCPAC is not an advocacy group, PAC's are non-advocacy groups, neither are DPAC - but we are. Because we have an issue and if that issue is resolved we do not have to do anymore. We don't have an alternative agenda outside of the issue.

However, PAC's are a fertile ground for parents from all types of backgrounds to meet and create networks, thus when a PAC fails to address an issue an ad-hoc group has the potential to be formed.

## **BC Parent Ad-Hoc Organizations Concerned with Education**

### **Introduction**

Parent Ad-hoc organizations concerned with education span the entire province. Some represent a provincial parent voice, while others have a regional focus. The term 'ad-hoc' as an adjective refers to both **1 a** : a concern with a particular end or purpose < an *ad hoc* investigating committee> **b** : formed or used for specific or immediate problems or needs <*ad hoc* solutions> **2** : fashioned from whatever is immediately available (Merriam Webster 2003). In the context of parent ad-hoc organizations it describes their impromptu or improvised formation for an explicit purpose, case or end. The political climate in BC has proven to be a fertile ground for parent ad-hoc groups to materialize, especially those focusing on the lack of funding to the public education system and the results thereof.

A list showing the geographic diversity of parent ad-hoc groups directly concerned with proper funding in education can be found at the SOS website (<http://www.vancouverosos.ca/>), and is summarized in Table 3.

**Table 3. Vancouver SOS summary of Parent Ad-Hoc Organization concerned with Education**

<b>Geographic Scope</b>	<b>Parent Ad-Hoc Organizations</b>
Province Wide	Parents for Public Education (PPE)
Lower mainland	Save Our Schools (SOS) - Vancouver Parents Against Cuts in Education (PACE) - Richmond Consortium 43 (C43) - Coquitlam
Central BC	Peoples' Voice Coalition - Kamloops Friends of Education - Salmon Arm
Eastern BC	Enough is Enough - Kootenays, Kootenay Cuts - Castlegar, Nelson, Cranbrook
Northern BC	Wells-Barkerville SOS
Vancouver Island	Save Our Schools Again – Victoria Community Alliance for Public Education CAPE - Cowichan Valley

The focus of our paper will mostly include parent ad-hoc groups based in the lower mainland, whose primary concern are the budget cuts to education and the effects these have on public education.

#### A Sample of Parent Ad-hoc Organizations for Further Analysis

The sample of parent ad-hoc groups selected for analysis includes BC Parents for Public Education (BC PPE), Save our Schools (SOS), Consortium 43 (C43), and Parents Against Cuts in Education (PACE). The selection criterion was largely based upon the feasibility of collecting information from a representative sample of parent ad-hoc organizations within a limited time-frame. All of the selected groups are based in the lower mainland. To provide oversight, Table 4 lists the groups selected, their geographical scope, and time of inception.

**Table 4. Selected Parent Ad-Hoc Group's Geographic Scope and Time of Inception**

Geographic Scope	Parent Ad-Hoc Organization	Time of Inception	
Provincial	PPE	Spring	2002
District	PACE – Richmond	March	2001
	SOS – Vancouver	Spring	2002
	C43 – Coquitlam	January	2003

The following paragraphs will take a closer look at the history and structure of each selected groups.

### History & Structure

#### Provincial Organization – BC PPE

**BC Parents for Public Education** (BC PPE) has the largest geographical scope and thus aims at representing parents from all over BC. On their web-site they state:

We are parents who are concerned with the future of our public education system. We come from all parts of the province. Our children are at every stage of the school system. our [sic] children go to schools in inner-city schools, suburban schools, and rural schools. We watch them play on school teams or in school bands. We volunteer for class field trips, help build props for school plays. We participate in PAC meetings to make our schools more accountable. [BC PPE website]

BC PPE was set up in the spring of 2002. However, a founding member of BC PPE explained that BC PPE never really reached the same grass-roots, parent ad-hoc organizational level as SOS did. In his words, one reason for this was that BC PPE did not grow out of an “actual organic expression of parents in the system.” As well, members of BC PPE made an “active decision to withdraw attempts to organize because SOS really was the place where things were happening...” (parent in BC PPE). There is however, a difference between SOS and BC PPE. The two groups have different political expressions that can be read in the tone of each group's mission statement. There are also differences in geographical scope. For this reason BC PPE still maintains a presence, which is currently linked to activities associated with their website, such as providing information resources to parents.

### District Organizations – PACE, SOS & C43

**Parents Against Cuts in Education** (PACE) represent the oldest parent ad-hoc organization within our survey. This group began in March 2001 as a team of 6 parents who “felt that all parents could make a difference if they tried, that it was important to motivate parents to try” (PACE member). This was a diverse parent organization, but each of their children shared a common enrollment in Richmond’s Alexander Kilgour Elementary. Most of these children had also benefit from the specialty programming, such as high potential learning, speech difficulties, or ESL. A central figure involved in PACE who describes herself as a “stay at home mom” and a “busy bee” stated that she spearheaded the group because she “wanted to encourage others to not just lie down and play dead. I had hoped that people would speak up and come together to protect education”. Her motivation was linked to a previous experience where a local school that her children attended, was targeted for downsizing. However, due to the lobbying of a number of parents they succeeded in preventing this action. The future for PACE as an ad-hoc group appears to have dissolved as only one member remains and the group has “for all intents and purposes folded” (PACE member).

**Save Our Schools** (SOS) is a well-known Vancouver parent ad-hoc organization formed in the spring of 2001 as a response to massive provincial budget cuts to education. This successful group began when a parent hosted the first SOS meeting and approximately 50 parents showed up in her living room. As it is described on the SOS website: “Parents decided to fight for funding for all students rather than to fight with each other over an inadequate budget.” This statement is poignant considering the broad based parent representation brought together at the first meeting. Although most attendees were residents of Vancouver west, the meeting brought together a range of people with varying political interests towards a single issue. Because of this political diversity, there was a need to focus on one key issue and declare their ad-hoc group as non partisan.

Another important variable to consider was that most parents who were at the initial meeting had several other appointments within the school system. Many were PAC chairs, who met at DPAC meetings and had access to existing parent networks.

One SOS member described this as "... you have energetic political people most of whom or have been PAC reps for the same reasons, you know. They tend to be organizers, tend to have a lot of energy, tend to think that they can make a difference in the world." Thus, having access to this pool of resourceful individuals really helped SOS mobilize their first campaign – a letter writing campaign that within two weeks was able to collect 14 000 letters from concerned Vancouver parents who stood behind public education. These letters were then brought to parliament buildings in Victoria by two parents. However, both parents were disappointed as neither Education Minister Christy Clark nor Premier Gordon Campbell received them. Instead they were barred from entering the building and turned away by security personal. SOS has since then turned its focus on alluring the media, maintaining a very resourceful website, and producing a video entitled "Growing the Future."

SOS is an example of a particular ad-hoc structure that is capable of maintaining its composition over time. At its most recent October, 2003 meeting about 35 parents attended. In contrast to their first meeting, there was a vocal representation from Vancouver's eastside along with parents of inner-city schools. This is an indication that SOS's membership is becoming more diverse and is no longer a Westside phenomenon. It is important to note that their list-serve membership continues to grow, and their new website has been very popular. It is however, a small core membership that sustains the overall structure of the group. Their primary responsibility is organizing and maintaining the network of members, and in addition, spearheading group initiatives. A central medium for this expression has been electronic communication, including postings on their website. An example of how this works communication tool is linked with decision making comes from an SOS member: "Our goals for the year and guiding principals were adopted via meeting discussion, followed by email input and eventual approval, then again by email for most members". Hence, SOS seems to promise an active future, as long as their primary issue is not resolved.

**Consortium 43** (C43) is an organization based in Coquitlam (District #43) and was formed in January 2003. The inception of this group "grew from a table discussion at a BCTF education funding conference" (C43 member), where parents, students,



school support staff, school trustees, and several teachers all agreed that “sharing information is the best way we can advocate for proper funding for schools” (C43 member). Currently the group meets every month “to build awareness and involvement, develop and work toward fulfillment of goals and determine how our group will operate” (C43 member). Again a few core members manage general correspondence, record-keeping, and facilitate meetings. This group is very new, but they feel confident that their actions so far have been successful.

### Group Motivations and Principles

The primary impetus for parent ad-hoc groups according to our selective sample is their concern over the lack of funding and its impacts on the public education system. PACE, SOS, and C43 are goal-oriented and issue-based. In turn, they are acting as advocates for their children, and the present and future welfare of the public school system. There was a repeated sentiment that lobbying efforts are aimed at providing children access to a strong and equitable public school system which meets a variety of individual needs. As one parent describes, “it is the child that wants to be taught...that wants to learn...and that has the right to learn.” The ideal situation is that every child will be provided with the required support and equal access to resources. Adversely, the changes in funding are prompting a stratified education system, where children with specific needs (ESL, special needs, lower SES) are losing required resources and support. As a result, parents complain about being forced into an educational triage, where they are pressured to make choices about what is fundamental to education. This leads to conflict, especially evident in the VSB advocacy groups, where parents are compelled to push for their own child’s requirements, at the cost of other children’s needs. As one concerned parent laments, “I don’t want to be voting to decide what should be cut.”

A principle encompassed by all ad-hoc groups interviewed was a desire to provide an open forum for all education stakeholders. Rather than fighting against one another over available funding (as mentioned), parents have made an explicit decision to work collectively to combat the major issue: the restoration of funding to public education. As one parent states:

We are a united voice for the kids- our particular differences on minor issues can be set aside while at the table, because we are working together to educate the public about what is really happening behind all of the smoke and mirrors that seems to be the way the Education Ministry wants to inform the public.

Working together as a group offers the advantage of combining diverse perspectives and bodies of knowledge which can result in wider access to information, and multiple avenues of action. In general, there is little disagreement within ad-hoc groups, because there is a common goal at the loci of these organizations.

The ad-hoc groups researched declare a non-partisan composition. In this context, non-partisan can be defined as having no common political affiliation, or particular agenda outside their issue-based role. Obviously, this is still a highly politicized issue which frames the word "political" in a more abstract sense. In general, membership can be interpreted as a political expression since through involvement members are taking a position on issues of funding. Consequently, members often leave because they are not interested in the political aspect or alternatively favor a particular political slant that is not represented. By denoting a non-partisan composition, individuals from a variety of backgrounds and political leanings are able to work together based solely on their belief in the restoration of funding to education. In order to maintain a democratic unit, groups tend to uphold a "working group" based on consensual decision-making and informal leadership. Rather than establishing a central leader, responsibility shifts between members, resulting in a more democratic and unbiased organization.

### **Methods Employed to Counter Funding**

All groups encourage collaboration with a variety of advocacy groups, and education stakeholders. This was immediately apparent at the SOS meeting we attended, where an assortment of ad-hoc group representatives were present. Through open dialogue, parents from various locales in the Lower Mainland were present to discuss personal education issues and successful strategies. This method creates opportunities for the generation and distribution of information, combining many different backgrounds in promotion of a common sight. Organizations focus on making the parent's voice heard by the government. This has been mildly

successful, since this is at least partially why some money was recently restored to the public schools. As well, the groups interviewed (PACE, SOS, C43), were all in support of the "Tracking Survey," which is a survey established to track the changes to education as a consequence of funding. This program has been used in Ontario over the last 4 years to measure changes in education and how these compare to government initiatives.

Specifically, groups have employed different methods to lobby for restoration of educational funding. SOS for instance, has focused on the use of dramatics, in order to elicit media and public attention. This was most obvious in their initial letter writing campaign, where local celebrities partook in a version of the ABBA song SOS at the Vancouver School Board. Since conception, SOS has continued to expand their audience through the use of media resources, such as a website, and the video: "Growing the Future." As spoken by an SOS member: "We are an advocacy group that has to gain attention, by being confrontational, dramatic and by getting attention- that is our vehicle."

Consortium 43 in Coquitlam, which is a relatively new organization (January 2003), has focused on creating a public forum for parents to work together. They have also established a list of what an ideal school system can be expected to encompass, and utilized these standards as a way to measure present educational provisions, and as a reference point for advocacy. As well, C43 has established communication with local MLA's to communicate concerns and inform media resources to update the public. Consortium 43 encourages membership from all stakeholders, including: parents, students, school trustees, teachers, support staff, district staff, administrators, and community members.

PACE also enacted a petition to the B.C government to reinstate funding to public education. Furthermore, PACE's encouragement of the "Tracking Survey" led to the BCCPAC instituting this in their current policy. The "tracking" survey is presently being formulated by a PACE member and BCCPAC representatives. As well, PACE has participated in forums and conferences which focus on providing an open dialogue and educating the public on present issues.

In general, members are actively engaged in promoting education on behalf of children. This is a very time consuming endeavor, evident in the fact that many active parents expressed feelings of burn-out and exhaustion. This may be especially true for parents who are working full-time, and fulfilling additional commitments, such as fundraising and working on PACs. Additionally, it was expressed at the SOS meeting that it is difficult to maintain initial group stamina. SOS was composed to address the funding issue through a letter writing campaign. It was expected or desired that this would be the beginning and the end of the group, as the goal of restoring funding would be met. Since this has not occurred, members are now forced to look for alternate avenues in terms of lobbying and gaining the public eye. Personal and group exhaustion compounds with the fear of "what next year's cuts" may hold, with an additional 12 million deficit expected. Ultimately, the time commitment required by ad-hoc members takes away from time that could be spent with their children- the reason they are active. As one parent expresses, "The time devoted to this robs me of precious time with my children. It is time I will never recover, many days I wonder if I am doing the right thing."

### Personal Motivations

Individual motivations often reflect group motivations, but also tend to stem from personal experiences with the cuts. Parents may face the threat of a school closure or feel forced to cushion the blow of the cuts through activities like fundraising. One parent's reaction to a cut in the supplies budget is as follows:

I find it fairly pathetic that [in my child's school] the supplies budget was cut from about 240,000 to 160,000 dollars in 2002/2003...and this is so tiny- that is pathetic- I mean that has to buy everything...absolutely everything- pretty desperate. I read a piece in the New York Times about an Inner City Harlem school in NY city and they are moaning about their 300,000 dollars supplies budget which was in US dollars and I thought...gasp...We wish we could. I mean, that's right...it isn't enough, you need that. But as a consequence our PAC spends an enormous amount of time fundraising.

As expressed, parents are covering the costs of necessary educational resources. Gone are the days when fundraising was a means to raise money primarily for extracurricular activities. Now it is required to afford even basic learning tools.

Moreover, fundraising exhibits social disparities, since schools differ in what they can reasonably produce financially. As mentioned in the SOS meeting, the school board could take measures to distribute the funds from these activities, but this is not the “solution.” Fundraising becomes a pertinent problem, because parents don’t want to accommodate the government cuts, but they also don’t want their children lacking necessary resources and support. These mends are not seen as answers, since the root of the problem is inadequate funding.

Parents often become involved out of social responsibility. Members insist that public education is something to be proud of and worth “fighting” for. As stated in the principles of SOS, “public education is the right of every child, and a cornerstone of democratic society...a high quality public education system is an investment in the social and economic future of our society.” As one parent mentions, their personal motivation is for the “good of the greater society in supporting public education.” Aptly, participants become involved in order to seek justice and re-establish the certainty of a healthy society, through an educated population. Furthermore, parents want to bring clarity to the public on the disintegrating value of education by the provincial government. As stated:

I am frustrated that the provincial government has persisted in portraying this as a local problem, caused by poor management on the part of the school trustees and administrators and self-interested teachers and egged on by whining parents. It’s happening all over the province. It can’t be that all of a sudden local authorities have lost their grip!

Parents are disenchanted by a government that exhibits a disinterest in public education, by moving towards establishing education as a business institution, which then reseeds liability within parents and teachers supplied with little resources. Many parents expressed the concern that they want to support teachers in the plight for a strong educational system. Parents do have a vested interest in public education. Feelings of pride for the public system were repeatedly expressed in the desire to restore this institution rather than send children to the private system, even if this was an economic option. Essentially, exemplary education contributes to an exemplary society, by providing a better future for children.

A further personal motivation comes from the lived experience of having children with specific needs. Many involved parents have children with specific learning needs, either gifted learners or children with learning disabilities. Students that require additional resources such as ESL, Inner City students and special needs are typically the first to feel the effects, because it is the enrichment programs which are at risk of being cut. Thus, there is a worry about children “falling through the cracks.” This is particularly potent, since as previously mentioned, there is an advantage in providing children with the primary skills they will need to succeed and cope, rather than spend surmounted costs at a later point in time, and possibly in a more negative context. In short, parents want proactive, rather than reactive solutions.

#### **IV. Conclusion: Underlying Themes and Issues**

##### **Unpacking Education**

One of the challenges of doing research on ad-hoc groups is that one cannot neglect the political, economic, cultural and moral issues that are situated within the context of education. Once you break through the personal affects and responses to funding cuts, the issue becomes much more complicated. Concerns about funding to education and its impact are inextricably linked to a broader picture. Not only do budget cuts in education have a negative impact on stakeholders, but cuts to other major sectors such as health care and social welfare compound the issue. Healthcare was a primary concern mentioned by a member of SOS who said:

Provincial funding is so very complicated. And so much of them are in fact, driven by health care costs, that it is hard to unpack education.

Thus education is not an independent issue. As one parent summarized: “So it is kind of ridiculous to get out there and say education by itself is important and needs to be funded.” Therefore, as our research team began to unravel certain patterns and variables it increasingly led to other questions. Three principal observations we could be addresses in future studies in order to expand the scope of analysis include the social responsibility of women, the description of education as a moral statement, and the shifting dynamics between private and public education.

## Education and the Social Responsibility of Women

The role of gender plays an important part in the social organization of parent ad-hoc groups. At an SOS meeting in October a clear gender bias was visible with 27 women comprising an overwhelming majority over 5 men. An SOS member described this phenomenon as:

Yes. It is quite common. That is sort of reflective of PAC involvement and that is partly an issue of time.....I think perhaps men are drawn to politics and they do not necessarily see the trenches of education as politics, as much as I do. It's not all that glamorous. But we have had some men involved in SOS but it is more of a reflection of who does the work at schools and that is mostly women.

Future studies should consider questions surrounding gender roles, the division in labor and how this form of social leadership emerges. One involved parent provided the following insight:

I think it is important to look at in terms of social leadership. There were people and there were the same people, mostly women; the same people you see in the schools doing fund raising, doing the organizing of the PAC meeting, getting the speakers to the schools, when something .. needs to be done they are some sort of adjunct to the school administration essentially.. they are the people who, for one reason or another, are devoted to involvement essentially.

From our experience with parent ad-hoc groups the gender divide was quite apparent, and this observation seems to be supported by parent members cited. It also draws the structure of parent ad-hoc groups into the broader context of gender identity and roles assumed within society. In particular, that grassroots activism in education appears to be associated with a female parent identity.

## Education as a Moral Statement

Throughout our research, it became evident that for many parents, ad-hoc involvement reflects moral concerns. As one parent mentioned, "the kids fortunately do not see it [effects of budget cuts] that much." Rather than solely being a direct response to the experienced effects of cutbacks, for some parents it is also a reaction to something much larger. With the degradation of values in education it can create a space for the expression of moral values, and a resistance to a system that devalues these components. As one parent states:

I think if you think of your own children ONLY, you know you make choices about schools and those are economic choices and you do not necessarily think of them as political choices and I think I have come to see them on much more political terms. And that it isn't just about my kids or my neighbor's kids...it's a social justice issue

Parents are often making choices that not only reflect the needs of their own individual children, but also reflect the need of a healthy and functional society. In essence, many parents could afford to support their children and minimize the experience of the cuts, but there is a call for social justice. Various members expressed concern over an educational system which perpetuates social classes. This was a pertinent issue in different facets of the research project. From the video, meetings and interviews, parents lamented that their actions were being made for the wellbeing of society via an equitable school system. There is opposition to an education system which ignores various needs, and distributes resources disproportionately. As one parent concludes:

I think one important point that should be mentioned is that this 'problem' is not unique to BC or Canada. The whole world seems to be playing with this ideology- as it moves more and more towards managerial hierarchy in institutional systems as well as business. Our public education system becomes driven by a need to manage it from the top, standardized tests to measure success, devolved responsibility for how to attain that success including how to fund the resources needed to do it, accountability to everyone but the most important stakeholder- the children. But children grow up and become voters and they will remember how they were valued in their time in school.

Many parents reiterated similar feelings. The children need to be 'protected', and are worth 'fighting for.' The price of this 'fight' is often feelings of exhaustion, loss of time with their own children, and frustration with a system which apparently devalues the moral tenets of a healthy society. Most importantly, involved parents believe that children are the future. As such, an investment in children means an investment in the future.

### **Public and Private Education:**

Another significant observation within our research analysis has been the shifting dynamics between public and private education. In each of the interviews it was expressed that parents were feeling forced to consider private schools as an



economic decision since they want the best possible education for their children. They claim that this growing concern is due to the deteriorating quality of public education in recent years. These competing issues are tempting families to abandon public school. One parent has expressed concern that the BC government is encouraging the privatization of education because “it is less expensive for the government”.

This growing tendency of privatization in education will allow only wealthy people to afford education, perpetuating social classes. It would be difficult for parents of low income and children with special needs to ensure higher studies for their children. As one parent stated:

Vancouver is moving towards a system where only the wealthy can get quality post-secondary education. I think it will become more difficult to actually graduate from high school. Whereas it used to be the question...did you graduate from college? We may be facing a setback to like it was in the 50s shifting to the question...did you graduate from high school? In Vancouver there is a large population of wealthy people able to afford private education. There are also Jewish and Catholic schools which are subsidized by their parish/community which is fine...they are maintaining their beliefs and culture. But there is a huge expansion in pure academic private schools. Then you are left with the socioeconomic groups which are not able to enter the private school system, and children with learning disabilities who aren't accepted in the private system.

However, there are parents who are still optimistic about public education. They think private schooling is not the solution. One of the parents noted that she could afford to move her children to private school, but felt that all “our schools need to be good enough so that every child gets the best education for his or her potential, regardless of his or her circumstances and means”.

#### **IV. Recommendations for Future Research**

As a meaningful and socially engaged research project we hope that this analysis can be of some use to those who are interested in the response of ad-hoc groups to governmental funding cuts in education. Both teachers and parents experience these changes in varied ways. But in the context of this analysis it is clear that there

are parents who have felt the need to raise their voice, mobilize and challenge the current decisions by our provincial government.

For future research it would have been important to move beyond the 'official circle' of informants and encompass the competing interpretations and multiple perspectives on education. This could include teacher union reps, administrators, children, provincial MLA's and journalists living and working within the Vancouver School District. Future research should also consider the voices of those parents and teachers who live outside the lower mainland. It is possible that there are other concerns that vary considerably from the interests of ad-hoc groups and PAC representatives based in Vancouver. One should also consider a historical and comparative survey of ad-hoc parent organizations to draw on the links between local and national decision making over a specific timeframe. Although we have sought to provide a survey of different ad-hoc parent groups are data has been limited to those individuals working in the lower mainland.

One must also keep in mind that in all research situations one's respondents may have hidden and ulterior agendas tied to a particular political perspective. As a research team we have had to pay attention to the way in which parents have a view that they may wish to convince you of. As parent activists they bring a particular perspective on the subject matter which may reflect their own individual and group agendas. Although we were unable to form long term relationships with our informants, given more extensive fieldwork our group would have had to navigate between different alliances and connections. "Ethnographers cannot extricate themselves from unequal relationships and should be careful about writing texts that attempt to stand outside the world of struggle, contest, and competition" (Bornstein, 2001:550). It is integral that we question our ethical conduct while doing fieldwork in a multi-stakeholder institution that is saturated with power, politics and moral investment. This research, in our opinion requires us to move through the transparency of our methods and consider the reflexive position of our own political commitment. Is it naïve to suggest that as researchers we can remain unbiased – that are work is non-political? This leads us to consider a final question: as researchers how is this information situated in the context of our own principals and

values? What are the implications of neglecting one's own political slant within a highly politicized context?

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