

Superintendent Kennedy,

It is difficult to imagine a West Vancouver teacher who read your recent blog post entitled “What a Changing Profession Is Trying to Tell Us” without having a visceral and immediate reaction. After a number of informal water cooler chats (the very type you assert are becoming rare), as well as a full-staff discussion, we felt a response was necessary.

The most puzzling element to many, both new and seasoned, was the idea that today’s early-career teachers are starting their profession with larger-scale and more normalized boundaries. This is the time that most would associate with long hours of planning, high-stress, and feeling added pressure to participate in the school community. Many new teachers have managed, during the school day, to find more seasoned mentors. It is often these very teachers that advise their greener colleagues to resist perfectionism and maintain the pause-inducing boundaries you write about. In short, the consensus is that the post felt inaccurate to the experience that West Vancouver teachers are living.

It felt disingenuous, on our part, to not address what felt somewhat out of touch and, to many, demoralizing. We aim to answer the four questions that your blog post asks.

How do we honour both the teachers who give their evenings and those who protect them?

It is critical to recognize that teachers, like everyone else, live complex lives. During our long careers, we may have children, continue our education, deal with grief, or even start businesses (often a financial necessity rather than an excess of free time). The people who give up their evenings and those who protect them are the same people at different stages in their careers.

In fact, the diversity of teacher’s pursuits in their personal lives should be honoured as a strength of our system. Students of all ages benefit from working with teachers who have real passions, skills, and knowledge gained outside of school. Teachers with kids of their own can often more easily understand the pressures facing our students, and teachers with “side hustles” have valuable insight and experience to share with students who will one day do the same. Having a vibrant life outside of the teaching profession makes us better role models and guides. Nobody is better at identifying authenticity in adults than high-school students. Without real life experiences outside of the classroom, we have little to offer in that regard.

You ask how we can honour those who give up their evenings to enrich student’s lives through sports, clubs, activities, and artistic endeavours. This is simple. Honour them in the same way that the coaches hired for West Van’s many Premier Academies are honoured: compensate these volunteers for the hundreds of hours they give to district programs. If not through direct payment, there are options like providing a discretionary day or two each year.

If directly honouring volunteers is unfeasible, properly fund the programs that these teachers run. Show coaches, directors, and club leaders that the activities they love are valued, and they will participate. A yearly BBQ is appreciated, but is far from adequate recognition.

What structures create sustainability without eroding community?

It may seem paradoxical, but teacher autonomy promotes community. When teachers are allowed and encouraged to pursue differing approaches, there is simply more to share with each other and be inspired by. A progression towards uniformity of practice detracts from diversity of practice, reduces teacher autonomy, and ultimately creates an environment where true and open discourse is difficult, degrading community. What is the purpose in a collaboration session, or a committee input meeting, when the resulting direction has been pre-determined?

Achieving sustainability is simple. Allow teachers the autonomy to follow their passions, share their ideas without fear, and develop their methods in directions they value. Give teachers true choice to follow their passions during Pro-D days and Collaboration time, and they will reward you with long careers of serving West Vancouver students. The pedagogical pendulum has swung back and forth more than once. Chasing it without question is certainly not sustainable.

You also ponder the effects that current evolution might have on the community built between teachers and students. We would posit that the foundation of that community can—and should—happen in our teaching spaces. While coaching or volunteering with teams or events provides a unique opportunity to engage with students in a new setting, if teachers have the time, autonomy, and balance mentioned above, they are far more likely to foster community and relationships while they teach, even (and especially) with those quiet or struggling students to which you refer. Suggesting this potential exists largely on a field or bus ride minimizes what can happen in the classroom with the proper supports. You correctly note that “connection takes time” while assuring your readers that you aren’t advocating for expectations that so often lead to burn out. The balance that you question exists in providing conditions that allow teachers to accomplish connection during our work day, which brings us to the next question.

How do we preserve what matters while adapting to what is changing?

Your words hint that you have information we do not: Has anything about the job gotten easier since the days you write about?

As mentioned above, to preserve the time necessary to achieve a true school community, teachers need time. You refer to these as the ‘cracks in the day.’ A vital piece missing from your argument was to clearly address just how much the job has changed in the last thirty years. This omission felt pointed, as it’s impossible to discuss the changing attitudes and orientations of teachers without acknowledging the increasingly complex and demanding job being asked of them. Unfortunately, any cracks in our day have been filled with administrative tasks that either did not exist in the past, or have become inflated beyond recognition. Report cards that were once 2 pages are now 8. We are notified by email of mandatory cybersecurity courses on a Tuesday morning. Optional Pro-D opportunities are held after school, making them impossible for many teachers to attend. Departments and committees often meet at lunch as there is no other time in the schedule. All of these requirements mean that more time is spent away from students. They also make it difficult to connect with staff, as all of these are action items with hard deadlines, leaving little time for discussion. If culture, community, and connection are built during the ‘cracks in the day’, remove the mortar that has sealed them up. Let teachers teach.

Further, these requirements are unseen by most of the general public—the same public audience that has access to your blog. To paint teachers as less involved, focused, or enthusiastic without sharing the circumstances that have brought them here doesn't feel like it's in good faith, and perpetuates the evergreen “lazy teacher” trope. In a bargaining year, we need, more than ever, for the public to understand the realities of our job and support us in acquiring better learning conditions for students. Instead, an uninformed reader may skim your blog and decide that we're asking for more while doing *even less*.

The other aspect of our practice worth preserving is student learning. There has been plenty of change in this regard, with new curriculum, assessment methods, and reporting mandates. Students are crammed into classrooms with 30 other increasingly complex students, whom teachers are expected to manage in the general classroom. There is no district language around class size or composition to slow this trend. At times, teachers spend more time managing IE reports than the students they name have spent in class. Student learning has been negatively affected by a number of societal and technological forces. While many of these are out of our control, teachers must be able to be honest about their standards to preserve what remains. We require the time and space to meet the needs of students who struggle. They deserve it.

How do we avoid romanticizing the past while still naming real losses?

Romanticizing the past is human nature—science shows that we craft our memories in a way that makes the past shine. The truth is that there is nothing magical about burning the candle at both ends. Resilience, experience, and perseverance can be celebrated, but difficult conditions that led to these do not have to be. Simply, healthy, happy teachers are better teachers.

Naming losses is important. We have already discussed the loss of time and autonomy. We believe these factors are the water and sunshine that lead to growth. With time and autonomy, we become artists. Without them, we are factory workers. These losses lead to others. To stop this vicious cycle, it is critical to put teachers back in control of their time, methods, and classrooms. Only then, will we have the energy and conditions to truly do what we all came here to do. To teach.

In all, we agree with your concluding remarks that conversation is a necessary first step to enacting meaningful change. With that in mind, we look forward to being in conversation with you and await your response, whether it be in person, or on the public blog where you made these sentiments known. Either of these would be a good place to start to make the teachers feel valued in the district you yourself note needs to be a “value-add.” Ultimately, we want the same thing: a productive conversation about how we can work together to make West Vancouver schools' a culture of “yes” for *everyone*. To us, that is a district with quality teaching and learning conditions in which teachers love to teach and students love to learn.

Thank you for reading this letter, which represents the broad consensus of the West Vancouver Secondary staff.