

Suzanne Hoffman  
Vancouver Board of Education  
Superintendent

Janet Fraser  
Vancouver Board of Education,  
Trustee & Chair

Carmen Cho  
Vancouver Board of Education,  
Trustee & Vice-Chair

Fraser Ballantyne  
Vancouver Board of Education, Trustee

Lois Chan-Pedley  
Vancouver Board of Education, Trustee

Estrellita Gonzalez  
Vancouver Board of Education, Trustee

Oliver Hanson  
Vancouver Board of Education, Trustee

Barb Parrott  
Vancouver Board of Education, Trustee

Jennifer Reddy  
Vancouver Board of Education, Trustee

Allan Wong  
Vancouver Board of Education, Trustee

Joshua Harris  
Vancouver Board of Education,  
Student Trustee

**Via Email**

June 19, 2020

Dear Superintendent Hoffman and Vancouver Board of Education Trustees,

**RE: Police-Free Schools are Safer Schools**

We are writing to express Pivot Legal Society's support for the petition released by a group of concerned parents, community members, and educators calling for the Vancouver School Board ("VSB"), Superintendent, and trustees to take immediate action regarding the role of Vancouver Police Department ("VPD") officers in schools.

**About Pivot Legal Society**

Pivot is a non-profit legal advocacy organization that works to undo the social stigma faced by marginalized people. Pivot's mandate is to take a strategic approach to social change, using the law to address root causes of issues that undermine the quality of life of those most on the margins. Pivot takes a responsive approach to community needs

through direct consultation with people most affected by laws, policies, and actions that entrench poverty and stigma.

Pivot's police accountability campaign has historically emphasized adult communities who are criminalized; however, we recognize that systemic issues permeate interactions with any marginalized or vulnerable communities. In previous campaign-work relating to youth justice, Pivot called attention to issues including concerns about sentencing<sup>1</sup>, incidents of police brutality<sup>2</sup>, police responses to youth mental crises<sup>3</sup>, inappropriate youth outreach programs<sup>4</sup> and we have partnered with organizations to provide public legal education to youth.

We recognize that policing in schools impacts the experiences of many students, including students who are Black, Indigenous, racialized, Two-Spirit, Indigiqueer, queer, trans, disabled, (im)migrants, substance users, low-income, engaged in criminalized economies, and/or involved with the child welfare system.

## **Police Free Schools are Safer Schools: The end of policing in Vancouver schools**

A multilingual petition, entitled "Police Free Schools are Safer Schools: The end of policing in Vancouver schools"<sup>5</sup> has made demands regarding the role of police in schools, specifically:

1. Vancouver School Board to advocate for an immediate end to School Liaison Officer programs.
2. Vancouver School Board to undertake direct consultation with school communities - particularly Black and Indigenous parents and students - to create community-led programs that take a restorative and trauma-informed approach to creating safety and well-being for all students.

This petition notes that "many Black, Indigenous, and racialized students and their families do not feel safe at schools where police are present."<sup>6</sup> Given the lack of evidence

---

<sup>1</sup> Pivot Legal Society, "Harper's crime bill equals more kids behind bars," 2011. <https://www.pivotlegal.org/pivot-points/blog/harpers-crime-bill-equals-more-kids-behind-bars>

<sup>2</sup> Pivot Legal Society, "12 year-old girl bitten by police dog sparks call for reform," August 2012. Available at [https://www.pivotlegal.org/12\\_year\\_old\\_girl\\_bitten\\_by\\_police\\_dog\\_sparks\\_call\\_for\\_reform](https://www.pivotlegal.org/12_year_old_girl_bitten_by_police_dog_sparks_call_for_reform)

<sup>3</sup> Pivot Legal Society, "In the midst of a mental health crisis, we are failing Aboriginal youth," May 2016. Available at: [https://www.pivotlegal.org/in\\_the\\_midst\\_of\\_a\\_mental\\_health\\_crisis\\_we\\_are\\_failing\\_aboriginal\\_youth](https://www.pivotlegal.org/in_the_midst_of_a_mental_health_crisis_we_are_failing_aboriginal_youth)

<sup>4</sup> Pivot Legal Society, "ON TRACK program misses the mark," 2011. Available at: <https://www.pivotlegal.org/pivot-points/blog/on-track-progam-misses-the-mark>

<sup>5</sup> Police Free Schools are Safer Schools: The end of policing in Vancouver schools (online) [https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdw7TzWwIzUCAdBTAewwwckxjwuYOb9uwUeFyFZv14\\_vRAOBg/viewform](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdw7TzWwIzUCAdBTAewwwckxjwuYOb9uwUeFyFZv14_vRAOBg/viewform)

<sup>6</sup> Police Free Schools are Safer Schools: The end of policing in Vancouver schools (online) [https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdw7TzWwIzUCAdBTAewwwckxjwuYOb9uwUeFyFZv14\\_vRAOBg/viewform](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdw7TzWwIzUCAdBTAewwwckxjwuYOb9uwUeFyFZv14_vRAOBg/viewform)

with regards to the effectiveness of such programs and the clear demands by racialized students and parents to end police involvement in schools, we urge you to read the letter at the next Board meeting and ask the Board and trustees to consider the above proposals in full.

## **Role of the Vancouver School Board**

Police violence is a local and urgent issue that impacts youth in Vancouver, and the Vancouver School Board has the opportunity to take leadership from directly-impacted communities.

We note promising work that has recently been undertaken by the Vancouver Elementary School Teachers Association<sup>7</sup> and the Anti-Oppression Educators' Collective.<sup>8</sup> It is now the time for the VSB to make an organizational commitment to the demands made by concerned parents, community members, and educators. The VSB mission statement states that it seeks "to enable students to reach their intellectual, social, aesthetic and physical potential in challenging and stimulating settings which reflect the worth of each individual and promote mutual respect, cooperation and social responsibility." Police in schools undermines this mission.

At this time, we must reckon with longstanding and foundational issues with policing, and recognize we are at a crisis point. In a society where police cause harm, including fatal harm,<sup>9</sup> educators, administrators and trustees cannot normalize police presence at schools.

## **Vancouver Police Department's Role in Schools & Youth Engagement**

Currently, the VPD presents its School Liaison Unit as a program which "combines education, investigation, law enforcement, counseling, crime prevention and community relations to meet the diverse needs of residents in the school community" and School Liaison Officers undertake a number of roles which include: acting as a legal resource, counselling, coaching teams, club involvement and liaising between the school and the criminal justice system.<sup>10</sup> These roles extend well beyond the typical role of law enforcement and extend policing into the everyday lives of students. Signatories to "Police Free Schools are Safer Schools: The end of policing in Vancouver schools" have

---

<sup>7</sup> Emily Lazatin, "Police officers may be barred from Vancouver elementary schools after teachers' motion," *Global News*, June 17, 2020. Available at: <https://globalnews.ca/news/7078854/vancouver-schools-police-officers-motion/>

<sup>8</sup> Anti-Oppressiveon Educators Collective, "AOEC Townhall Confronting Anti Black Racism in our School Communities," June 13 2020. Available at: <https://aoec.ca/aoec-events/>

<sup>9</sup> Peter Kim, "17 years of police violence in Canada," *Pivot Legal Society*, March 28, 2019. Available at: [https://www.pivotlegal.org/17\\_years\\_of\\_police\\_violence\\_in\\_canada](https://www.pivotlegal.org/17_years_of_police_violence_in_canada)

<sup>10</sup> Vancouver Police Department, "SCHOOL LIAISON UNIT." Available at: <https://vancouver.ca/police/organization/investigation/investigative-support-services/youth-services/school-liaison.html>

now come forward to identify numerous concerns related to police presence in schools, including the role of School Liaison Officers.

In addition to broad concerns regarding police in schools, we are also aware of several gravely concerning incidents related to VPD police conduct involving youth, including:

- **March 2018:** Detective James Fisher, a member of the VPD Counter-Exploitation Unit, was sentenced to a 20-month jail sentence after he pleaded guilty to three sex offence charges, two counts of which involved a minor.<sup>11</sup>
- **July 2019:** An investigation ordered by the Office of the Police Complaint Commissioner found that an unidentified VPD officer, acting without lawful authority, used confidential police databases to conduct searches for personal reasons, including searches concerning a youth covered by the Youth Criminal Justice Act, and improperly disclosed information about the young person to a member of the public, resulting in a 15-day disciplinary suspension.<sup>12</sup>
- **November 2019:** The Office of the Police Complaint Commissioner confirmed three VPD officers are being investigated regarding allegations of misconduct, related to Detective James Fisher's misconduct on the Counter-Exploitation Unit.<sup>13</sup>
- **May 2020:** Disturbing footage of a police incident involving several youth at Robson Square surfaced, including footage of officers clearly escalating an already-tense situation and the forcible take-downs of two young people.<sup>14</sup>

## Addressing Stigma & Systemic Issues

We further encourage the Vancouver School Board to undertake stigma auditing<sup>15</sup> to identify how existing policies impact the experience of students within communities that experience high levels of criminalization. A 2018 Report from Public Safety Canada<sup>16</sup> identified the following "adverse factors" associated with the criminal justice system, including: criminalization of Indigenous youth, child and youth poverty, mental health

---

<sup>11</sup> *R. v. Fisher*, 2018 BCPC 210; appeal dismissed 2019 BCCA 33

<sup>12</sup> REVIEW ON THE RECORD DECISION, OPCC File: 2017-14249 [https://opcc.bc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/decision-Review-on-the-Record\\_Redacted.pdf](https://opcc.bc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/decision-Review-on-the-Record_Redacted.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> Bethany Lyndsay, "3 officers with VPD sex crimes unit under investigation for corruption, court hears," *CBC News*, November 20 2019. Available at: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/bc-court-of-appeal-corruption-investigations-vpd-counter-exploitation-1.5367274>

<sup>14</sup> Alyssa Therrien & Megan Devlin, "Vancouver police forcefully arrest youth at Robson Square for having knife," *DH News Vancouver*, May 24, 2020. Available at: <https://dailyhive.com/vancouver/skateboarding-arrest-robson-square>

<sup>15</sup> Darcie Bennett & DJ Larkin, "Making Stigma Visible" in *Project Inclusion: Confronting Anti-Homeless & Anti-Substance User Stigma in British Columbia*, Pivot Legal Society, December 2018. Available at: [https://www.pivotlegal.org/project\\_inclusion\\_full](https://www.pivotlegal.org/project_inclusion_full)

<sup>16</sup> Public Safety Canada, "A Statistical Snapshot of Youth at Risk and Youth Offending in Canada," January 2018. Available at: <https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/rsrscs/pblctns/ststclsnpsht-yth/index-en.aspx#sec01>

issues, substance use issues, impacts of neurobehavioral symptoms, and child welfare involvement. These adverse factors are not criminal justice matters, and youth would be better served by peer support, as well as income security programs, access to dignified and responsive healthcare interventions, overhaul of racist child welfare practices, and educational institutions that uphold principles of Indigenous sovereignty, cultural safety, and tenets of anti-racism which prioritize eradicating anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism.

We hope that the Superintendent and Trustees commit to the demands of the petition, and further advocate for upstream interventions to inequalities that generate youth criminal justice issues.

Sincerely,

**Pivot Legal Society**

Trevor McEachran  
Community Educator

Meenakshi Manno, MSW RSW  
Criminalization & Policing Campaigner

cc: Jill Barclay, Vancouver Elementary School Teachers Association President  
Katharine Shipley, Vancouver Secondary Teachers' Association President  
Shanee Prasad, Anti-Oppression Educators' Collective President  
Vancouver Police Department, Youth Services Section