

## **Geoff Johnson: 'Do more with less' is empty reasoning**

GEOFF JOHNSON / TIMES COLONIST

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“We’ll just have to do more with less.” Anyone who has ever been a manager in any sizable organization comes to love that suggestion.

It is advice usually provided by people in “non-do” positions within the organization, perhaps elected persons, or somebody who has no idea what they are talking about and will later explain that the ensuing chaos has nothing to do with them: “Talk to the doers. They did this.”

It is an attractive proposition that imagines those wastrels in school-district administrative offices should be bearing the brunt of further cuts.

And it is important for those wielding the provincial budget guillotine to mention that the cuts “will not affect classrooms,” as the B.C. government did in this week’s budget, which demanded \$29 million in cuts from school boards.

That accomplishes two communications objectives at once: It depersonalizes any mention of service to actual kids, and it implies that what happens in classrooms is the only worthwhile thing happening in a school district.

It also implies that those laggards in district offices better pay more attention to classrooms.

The reality, the inescapable fact, in most effective organizations is that you cannot really do more with less, you can only do less. And school districts, by any standard, are effective and cost-conscious organizations.

What districts can do when faced with an arbitrary, pick-a-number-out-of-the-air unanticipated budget reduction by the province is decide to do less with less and then figure out how much less they can get away with and whom it will affect, who is less likely to go monkey-crazy because a support service they had come to rely upon is no longer available.

So school districts will absorb the cuts announced in the provincial budget. They will do it this year and they can do it next year.

The allocations within a school district's operating budget that provide grounds, building and classroom maintenance, student transportation (in the majority of B.C. school districts), financial services, human-resources management, educational support services and all the rest of the "non-classroom" services can all be reduced.

There will, as a result, be less done in those areas.

Grounds will not be maintained as frequently, buildings and classrooms not cleaned as thoroughly, repaired or painted as often. Buses will not be not cleaned after every run, preventive maintenance will be put on hold.

Financial projections and payroll updates, because of staff reductions, might be a little slower coming.

Issues that arise from contract issues might not be handled with the same attention to detail and with less willingness to argue grievance issues.

Payroll errors might occur more frequently; labour relations between the district and the teaching and non-teaching unions might become a little testy.

Secretarial support to schools could be reduced. Teachers and principals can do some of their own typing and answer the phone when parents call.

To those who know nothing about how a school district operates, those cuts will be more or less acceptable.

Acceptable, that is, except to parents who drive by their increasingly scruffy local school. Less acceptable to the kids who have to walk further to catch a school bus or stay home because the bus broke down.

Acceptable except to the 20 to 30 kids who, if the teacher is absent that day, are redistributed throughout other classes or sent to the gym because the teachers-on-call service is now down to one employee and a phone and there will not be a TOC until lunchtime, if at all.

"Less with less" will become less acceptable to parents, who, when they phone the school, get the same kind of "your wait time is 20 minutes" they get when they phone banks or cable companies.

Parents will learn to wait patiently in the lineup behind that mark on the floor at the office until a secretary, the only secretary, is available. Please take a number.

Much of this might begin to sound familiar because that's how most businesses do less with less. Customer service is no longer a priority. A budget balanced by cuts in service is now the goal.

We accept that. We accept less customer convenience from our banks, our cable company, insurance company, most service providers.

And, with continued cuts "that don't affect classrooms," we will have to become accustomed to the "do less with less" results in our schools. Provincial resources have been reallocated.

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