

“From the perspective of a student... not from far away VSB executives” “It’s really disappointing to see the VSB say they are making certain choices because they will benefit students in a certain way, but then students don’t have any input” “I think that teachers, counselors or admin might get a biased view of what students really think of school” “Students are a major part of the education system and not truly hearing their opinions and thoughts when it comes to deciding on what and how to make the education system better is like ignoring a majority of the population” “[I could contribute by] bringing up issues that student are worried about that the VSB has missed or chose to ignore.” “[Student voice is] standing up to adults who think that their opinion is the only thing that matters.” “It would be nice if the VSB payed attention to students needs” “Students are the ones learning so the voice of them is most impactful” “I think more of the student body should be involved” “I wish the VSB knew that when making decisions, those decisions not only impact our education but mental wellbeing” “[I wish] the VSB was transparent about their decision making process and ran their final decisions by the people who are most affected by their decisions, the students.” “In light of hearing about the switch to a semester system, I hope the VSB will know that students are worried and uncomfortable with the transition” “I would like for myself and other students to be able voice our opinions on changes the VSB is making and have someone listening to us” “The Quarter System and it’s heavy workload is

hindering students’ learning and mental health” “Having our voices heard in order to make our own education system more effective is a must” “There’s a lot of speculation and uncertainty until they release their new book of changes which are already set to start” “I would want to contribute to the VSB by encouraging them to have more wide-scale surveys that are accessible to a larger number of students with a larger range of experiences and who experience the pandemic in more diverse ways” “Student voice is very important, but currently non-existent” “It would be really nice to feel like our opinion matters to the VSB”

“The quarter system is really hard to cover every part of the class’ syllabus and it difficult to learn things well” “As a student our voices should be the most important” “I think that giving students/teachers a short break, within their class time, to recollect themselves from their repetitive routines should be considered” “I think it would be a great idea to give students more input on important decisions, such as what the new school schedule should look like” “School-work often gets in the way of maintaining a balanced and healthy lifestyle” “Some students may be able to handle it, some cannot” “[Student voice is] letting other students be involved and not the same ones every time” “Shut down the school, COVID is going crazy” “I think that the only opportunities that I was given to share my opinions was probably only during a student lead survey by a club” “Maybe having the VSB actually listen to the student’s questions and concerns about what can help us have a better learning experience?” “I’d like the VSB to be more open” “To me, [student voice] means being able to express an opinion or introduce info and actually be heard by everyone instead of being ignored or forgotten about”

“During this school year the VSB has done a poor job at communicating with students while changing the schedule for us multiple times during the year” “I feel like the VSB doesn’t do a great job at asking for feedback from students” “I haven’t had the greatest platforms to voice my opinions regarding the VSB decisions” “I often feel overwhelmed and cannot get an escape from the workload” “I’d wish the VSB would consider that having this quarterly system is very hard to manage and reverting back to a more spread out schedule would be best” “Take students more seriously” “Having a student voice is important so that all student can feel invested in their learning” “Perhaps if they took further consideration into some of the student surveys that they conduct instead of not using the information to make change” “Students want the opportunity to be involved within their school” “Ask kids why they are struggling instead of assuming” “Listening to students voices is crucial when it comes to the future of the school and education system” “A student’s voice is very important because they’re complaints and ideas come strictly from experience” “As a student I would be contributing a unique perspective that teachers and superintendents don’t necessarily have” “Having a voice results in students being more involved in their community” “Not every student is the same” “Make it easier to give feedback, rather than having parents bully the VSB into giving students more in-person learning \*despite\* case numbers rising, particularly over spring break” “I wouldn’t want a

## EDITORIAL

# VSB DECISION MAKING

*The Griffins’ Nest is editorially independent from Eric Hamber Secondary School’s Administration and does not speak for nor represent their views.*

**ANONYMITY DISCLOSURE:** *All interviewees will remain anonymous in accordance with CAJ & SPJ guidelines due to retribution/social discomfort concerns.*

**Survey Methodology:** The Nest’s Survey, entitled “VSB Decision Making: Student Response”, collected 103 responses between April 17 and May 5. Respondents were asked 5 written-response questions regarding their involvement and opinions in the running of their school district. Respondents were also asked to submit their school, grade, and student number (used only to confirm their registration as a student of SD39). The quotes that surround this article are taken directly from the responses, as well as responses from teacher interviewees.

## Introduction

Students and teachers lack legitimate forums to make themselves heard in the Vancouver School Board’s decision-making process. For the most part, teachers and students believe they are excluded from the decision-making process, and that their opinions are not valued, even when the VSB states their involvement is “extremely important” to them.

This feature reviews the status quo regarding student and teacher involvement, citing information collected from VSB videos, documents, and statements, the testimony of over 100 students and teachers across the District, and the collective discussions of the Editorial Board. The report is informed by real opinions, real stakeholders, and real people.

## Part 1: Students

Although students play a central role in the operations of the VSB, there is a disparity in how much impact students’ voices have in the decision-making process. In a survey of 103 anonymous District secondary students, 29 stated that they had the opportunity to voice their opinion regarding VSB decisions. Of those 29 respondents, the majority stated that they had done so through VSB surveys. Many others had never been contacted for VSB consulting, with a student stating that they “have not had the greatest platforms to voice [their] opinions regarding the VSB decisions.” Overall, the VSB’s decision-making process has left students feeling disconnected and silenced, despite having many meaningful ideas to contribute.

The survey revealed that even when students were given the opportunity to voice their opinion, they did not feel that this influenced adjustments to their schooling. A student stated that they were surveyed regarding the Quarter System, but were “not sure if anything was changed or adjusted because of it,” commenting that the VSB should “[seek] out student opinion rather than making students have to struggle to be heard.”

Students overwhelmingly called for more surveys to be conducted, and criticized the poor efficacy of the current VSB survey system. One student stated that “the VSB [surveys] did not allow [them] to share [their] thoughts completely,” adding that the questions were “multiple choice”, agree/disagree responses. “I would like to fill out surveys that aren’t multiple choice, but written response instead, like [The Nest’s survey]”, wrote another student. The VSB’s current surveys provide an insufficient forum for expression, yielding results unrepresentative of students’ true opinion.

Laura Wronski, a research scientist at SurveyMonkey, wrote

in a blog post “agree/disagree questions can cause respondents to answer in a way that doesn’t always reflect their true opinions.” Wronski’s post was cited by Dr. Jan Karem Höhne from Stanford University and Dr. Timo Lenzner from GESIS-Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences.

When asked what student opinions they wished the VSB knew about, survey respondents provided ideas on topics from COVID-19 safety, scheduling, student engagement, and diversity to students’ struggles with mental health.

## Part 2: Teachers

When large-scale district or school-wide changes are being made, Hamber’s teachers reveal that their input is occasionally asked for through surveys. However, many admit to having concerns about the consultation method. A Hamber teacher commented on the insufficiency of the surveys, revealing that “there are very few questions and [they are] very broad.”

Additionally, doubts regarding the consideration of their responses have risen. While Hamber’s teachers are encouraged to share their thoughts, one member expressed that “what is done after those surveys [are completed] is unclear.” Another teacher claimed that their input “falls onto deaf ears,” as when they suggest one thing, often, “the opposite occurs.”

The futile process has elicited a common thought amongst teachers: their consultation is “tokenism.” “Sometimes I feel the survey is there to simply check off the box that they asked [teachers],” one teacher revealed. On the topic of decision-making, another explained that “they make it appear to be an inclusive process,” while teachers are veritably excluded from it.

In order to advocate for their suggestions, teachers have even contacted the District using alternative methods. One Hamber teacher revealed that they sent “numerous emails to VSB reps” with the hope to get more involved. Despite their persistent efforts, they did not receive a response. “We contact, but they don’t listen,” a teacher stated, “I think all of our ideas are received, but I’m not sure. They’re lower on the priority list than other stakeholders.”

Many staff felt they have been adaptable while approaching potential changes, yet still felt as though they were blindsided by the District. Speaking on behalf of themselves and their fellow colleagues, on the subject of scheduling, Hamber teacher shared “[teachers] were open to change, but we didn’t know that *this* would be the change.” Another staff member revealed the limited say teachers had in the matter, stating “We [as teachers] have tried to be as flexible as possible with the changes this year. Because we had to.”

ances of exposure, risks mixing cohorts even more, and throws a wrench into teachers’ plans at the last minute” “I wish the VSB could really understand the stresses from school that people are dealing with” “Seek out student opinion rather than making students have to struggle to be heard” “I’d like students to be polled on the best decisions instead of a small group of parents not representing students interests lobbying for what they want” “Have my advice for COVID-19 scheduling taken seriously?” “[Student voice] means not just listening but actually taking action on the advice or student perspective” “Scheduling decisions are made for parents to not complain, not for the students” “I wish that the VSB would show some more consideration towards student’s opinions regarding the changes of the school year” “I would like to understand why decisions are made and have the ability to voice my opinion” “[The VSB] spend a great deal of effort ‘trying’ to get feedback, yet their efforts seem largely to be biased in an effort to make the VSB appear to be making progress when the opposite is clearly taking place” “I was interviewed about my opinions on the Quarter System by the Griffins’ Nest newspaper a few months ago, but other than that, I haven’t had many opportunities to voice my opinion” “[Student voice is] being heard by the people in power” “Why is full time online inaccessible to students who need it/would feel safer doing so?” “Even if they do listen, it’s rare that they do something about it” “I would like to contribute my ideas and opinions” “I feel that they are out of touch” “It would be

Teachers felt that overall, decisions made at the hands of the District were often without their best interests in mind. In many cases, the disregard of their input led to situations in which teachers felt concerned for their wellbeing. A Hamber teacher spoke to the consensus among many colleagues, stating “we’re exhausted”, with many others expressing concerns of burnout.

The current status quo regarding the VSB, has not always been the case. With different leadership, the approach to receiving feedback had been a more inclusive process. “They aren’t as good as two district teams ago, who had made it a priority to get into classrooms and learn as much as they could,” a Hamber teacher revealed, referring to the team that operated under VSB’s now retired superintendent, Chris Kelly. They continued, stating “I can remember that they came into the school and took the time to sit in my class and just talk. I know that when I see a board member come into our school, it makes me feel valued and it makes it known that we’re a priority.” It was then expressed that such interactions and opportunities would better the dynamic and process, as it would be meaningful to know that the VSB is “not just a distant person.”

## Part 3: The Board Responds

The Nest sought comment from the VSB on student and staff involvement in their decision making process, and on the role school wide surveys play in District decisions. Their response, sent by the VSB Communications Department, was received on April 28, 2021. In their response, the VSB stated that “the District is committed to developing plan[s] that [are] reflective of its diverse school communities. Involvement of students and staff in these, along with many other initiatives, is crucial to arriving at decisions that are in the interests of school communities.”

The VSB also sent The Nest a copy of the April 26 Superintendent’s Update, focused on Student Voice. Between December and April of this school year, Superintendent Suzanne Hoffman conducted virtual conferences with students from seven district secondary schools, discussing students’ thoughts on the education system. The Superintendent’s update was an amalgamation of those focus group’s discussions and represented student’s expressed opinions.

Said conferences took place over Microsoft Teams, Superintendent Hoffman joined by approximately nine students from each school, as well as their respective principals. At Eric Hamber, students were selectively invited to participate by the school’s Administrative Team.

The update was presented at the Board of Education regular meeting, the recording of which was uploaded to YouTube. The Nest encourages all stakeholders — students, staff, and parents alike, to spend a few minutes viewing 7:15 to 29:38 of the April 26 meeting.

The Nest’s Editorial Board viewed the recording and was concerned by the lack of illustrative and in-depth discussion regarding students’ real concerns, even of the few that made their way past the inevitably biased filtration process.

When it came time for the Student Trustee to give a report to the Board, a majority of the time was spent communicating the feedback received following the inaugural district-wide talent show, titled “VWSC’s Got Talent.” Though the 36-minute long event was viewed by approximately 1,500 individuals, it was allotted a disproportionate amount of time in the report in contrast to opinions regarding the state of the education system, opinions representing the 50,000 students across the District. When the Trustee got to students’ issues, they presented very briefly without context of the source or gravity, raising concerns regarding retention rates during the Quarter System. Not a single question was asked of the Student Trustee following the presentation’s conclusion.

The response from the VSB Communications Department also listed several examples of student and staff involvement in recent decisions, including the removal of School Liaison Officers across

VSB schools.

“The voices and perspectives of students with lived experience with the program and of students who identify as part of Indigenous, Black and People of Colour (IBPoC) communities were sought out as part of this engagement,” wrote the representative. They also mentioned hiring a contractor to gather feedback from marginalized communities for the VSB’s 2022-26 Strategic Plan.

Statements from Justice for Girls and Cops out of Schools, grassroots organizations involved in this decision, indicate that this was a decision fought for by IBPoC, rather than an instance where their opinion was actively sought by the VSB.

Yet it was VSB’s response to the Nest’s inquiry about the effect of school-wide surveys on policy-making that raised the most concern.

Collected feedback is “compiled and presented to trustees to inform their discussions, questions, or decisions about a particular issue,” stated the VSB. However, it remains uncertain as to the meaning of “compiled and communicated”, as in what specific forum and style results are communicated.

Ultimately, students are the ones who are learning, the structure of that learning dictated by District changes to the education system. Statistically, VSB surveys have had parent responses greatly outnumber the number of student responses. What is strange is the fact that parents ultimately have the most say in the lives of the students, as opposed to the students themselves. Parents also seem to have disproportionate say in relation to teachers, who are the ones burdened with the outcomes of the decision-making process.

## Part 4: A Call for Action, Assurance, and Accountability

What the Nest asks from the VSB is simple: that they uphold their commitment to listen to both staff and students. But what does this look like?

While many of the VSB’s responses state what the District has reportedly done to ensure students and staff are involved in the decision making process, The Nest found the majority of these statements to be a poor reflection of students’ and teachers’ perspectives on events. It is often unclear when, if, and how the VSB uses student and teacher input to create policy. There needs to be greater transparency on the direct correlation between student and teacher voice and Board action. Before more major decisions are made, the Nest urges the VSB to publicly answer a few questions: how is student and teacher voice being heard, how has this impacted the decision, and is this decision ultimately reflective of what students and teachers want and need?

The Nest’s Editorial Board’s stance regarding the issue of student and teacher involvement in district affairs is rooted in the idea of a free and democratic society, inspired by the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Applying to governments, the Charter sets a tone of enshrining democracy as a kind of legalistic national identity. By referencing the Charter, The Nest does not contend that the current lack of meaningful student and teacher engagement equates to a suspension or limitation of Rights. By referencing the Charter, The Nest wishes the VSB recognize their government-akin role, and extrapolate the idea of a “free and democratic society” by turning to their core figurative constituency — students and teachers. That constituency’s participation should be marked by the purposeful and consequential expression of feedback to the VSB. Students and teachers have a multitude of legitimate concerns, which deserve to be addressed properly, starting with a forum for expression to do so. The Nest itself is indeed a forum for student expression, but it is the VSB that must create more valuable opportunities, and do better as a whole, across the entire district.

It is in the best interest of everyone, superintendent to student, to hear the on the ground, day to day, opinions and perspectives of the 50,000 students and 9,000 staff of District 39.

have associates visit the schools specifically and interact with individuals and even see teachers and classrooms” “Yes, I feel comfortable voicing concerns. Are they going to be heard? I don’t know” “The VSB is more beholden to the parents than to their teachers and staff” “I think all of our ideas are received but I’m not sure, they’re lower on the priority list than other stakeholders” “Many voices aren’t recognized” “They make it appear to be an inclusive process” “I’m not always convinced that they always hear us” “We’re saying one thing, and the opposite occurs” “No procedural help, no training” “Right now, the challenge is there is no direct input from teachers in the decision making process at all” “They switched from semesters to linear 20 years ago because it wasn’t conducive to student learning and retention. Why are we going back?” “I’m giving them my input and I’m not being heard”