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Reduced school week on Gulf Islands wasn't necessary

GULF ISLANDS—Gulf Islanders sent more money to Victoria last year than ever before yet provincial allocations for public schooling on the Island were decreased. In addition, mistaken projections for anticipated total revenue and enrolments expected in Gulf Island Schools propelled the school board to shorten the school week by one day per week – an action that has caused chaos this school year.

This according to details found in a report by independent researcher John Malcolmson, commissioned by CUPE local 788, Gulf Island Schools, as a means of getting to the bottom of the apparent funding crisis in their school district, a crisis that affects students, parents and support staff in particular.

Information in the Malcolmson report, which examined funding allocations, budget and staffing in District 64, Gulf Island Schools, makes it clear that panic was the driving force behind the Gulf Island School Board's reason for cutting the school week from five days to four.

"It's ironic," says Barry O'Neill, president of CUPE BC "that a community, like the Gulf Islands, nationally hailed to be growing in leaps and bounds and sending increasing amounts of money to Victoria via property tax revenues, can't afford to send its own children to school five days a week. Something is wrong with the picture."

The Malcolmson report on Gulf Island Schools is one of a series of reports, commissioned from him by CUPE local unions across the province. Communities across B.C., particularly rural communities have seen budgets cut to the bone while the provincial government has effectively tightened the screws on school boards, making board Spring "budget planning" perhaps more conservative than they need be.

According to Malcolmson, many of the operating assumptions upon which Gulf Islands built their budget last year did not pan out. Revenues were higher than projected and so was enrolment. In the end, the district really only had a shortfall of \$20,000. Yet, because of the board's refusal to turn around their Spring decision, the unpopular and academically inferior four-day school week was put into effect—a move that could create an even greater drop in enrolment next year.

"The problem of funding K-12 on the basis of enrolment is proving to be a disaster. That has become patently clear," says O'Neill. "Our provincial government slashed budgets by refusing to fund inflationary costs in the operation of schools or the collective agreements they imposed."

Provincial government funding policies have caused school closures and calendar changes affecting schools throughout BC including the Gulf Islands.

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For more information go to www.cupe.bc.ca and click on the green tower.

Attachment: Executive summary
John Malcolmson is a consultant who has worked in the research and evaluation fields for the past 20 years, with a special focus on public education and education finance, literacy, labour relations, justice issues and social policy analysis. He has worked as a treaty negotiator on behalf of First Nations and as a research analyst for the BC Teachers' Federation.

