

Two elections, two votes: Why both matter for Nisga'a schools

This October, Nass Valley residents will vote in two elections, just one week apart—and both will shape the future of public education.

On October 17, we'll elect the school trustees who govern our local school district. Then, on October 24, we'll choose the MLAs and provincial government that set education funding and the broader direction of our public schools.

As teachers, we spend a lot of time telling our students that their voices matter. This month, the same is true for all of us.

And while both votes matter, school board elections have historically struggled to get voters to the polls. People routinely research who deserves their vote for mayor or councillor. Then they reach the school board section of the municipal ballot, realize they don't know a single name, and decide that vote doesn't matter.

That's a mistake.

School trustees make decisions that affect almost every kid and teen in our community. They set financial priorities and district policies, decide which programs get funded or cut, prepare and approve the district's operating budget and capital plans, determine key leadership appointments, and hear appeals from parents, students, and the public.

The next Nisga'a school board must evaluate the district's \$2.8M administrative expenditure, which currently accounts for 25% of the budget and ranks highest across BC. In contrast, S.D.92 Nisga'a's instructional spending is among the province's lowest at 52%, which constrains their ability to provide sufficient certified staff and essential student supports.

<https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/education/administration/resource-management/school-district-financial-reporting/revenue/2526-tables.pdf>

Yet trustee elections receive remarkably little attention. Candidates have limited budgets, media coverage is sparse, and now they have a provincial election to compete with too.

That matters because these elections can be incredibly close. In 2022, the final trustee seat in New Aiyansh was decided by 13 votes. In Gitwinksihlkw, it was 16. In Laxgalts'ap, 31. In Gingolx, 4 votes. And in Nass Camp, 7 votes decided the trustee race.

Your vote really does matter.

Outside of Gingolx and Nass Camp, all trustee candidates are running unopposed and will be seated by acclamation. Regardless of the election outcome, our expectation for transparency and accountability remains unchanged for all publicly elected representatives.

So how do you figure out who deserves your vote? Read candidate statements, attend local forums, and look at endorsements from organizations whose values you trust.

If fully funded, fully serviced and supported, safe, and inclusive public schools matter to you, check the recommendations from the Regional District of Kitimat-Stikine. Labour councils evaluate candidates on issues including public services, healthy working and learning environments, equity, and investment in public education.

An endorsement shouldn't replace your own judgment. But when you're staring at a list of unfamiliar names, it can be a useful place to start.

Then, one week later, we vote again.

School trustees make important decisions locally, but the provincial government sets education funding and province-wide policy. Decisions made in Victoria shape student services and support, teacher recruitment and retention, curriculum, school construction, bargaining frameworks, and the overall direction of public education.

S.D.92 Nisga'a is experiencing strain due to provincial mandates, resulting in teacher turnover, reliance on uncertified staff, and diminished student support.

Recent events elsewhere in Canada show why those choices matter. In Alberta, Danielle Smith's government used the notwithstanding clause to end a teachers' strike and undermine collective bargaining rights. Other governments in Ontario and Saskatchewan have also invoked the notwithstanding clause in legislation affecting teachers and students.

These examples are a reminder of the risks when governments use extraordinary powers to override rights—and why voters should pay attention to what candidates and parties are proposing for public education, students, and the people who work in our schools.

Public education is one of BC's greatest shared investments. Strong neighbourhood schools benefit everyone, whether or not you have kids in the system.

Two elections in two weeks asks a little more of voters. Our schools and students are worth the effort.

Thank you all for your time and get out the vote.

Si'aamhl wilsim'!

Continue to do good work!

Derek Azak
Local President
Nisga'a Teachers' Union