

OPINION

Politics gets in way of finishing seismic upgrade work

Lagging others: Vancouver School District should have completed more than half its projects by now

PETER FASSBENDER



For more than a decade, the B.C. government has been making schools safer from earthquakes to protect students and staff. So far, we've spent over \$2 billion.

Today, 145 projects are completed, 11 are under construction, and 48 projects are in various stages of planning. By any measure, the program is an award-winning success story.

Our seismic mitigation program is recognized worldwide. Experts from around the world come here to learn from B.C.'s work. We have worked closely with the Association of Professional Engineers and Geoscientists of British Columbia, and our plan is safe and achievable.

While it is true we've made great progress, there's no question that the pace of projects in

Vancouver has been too slow. Compared with other school districts, they take twice as long to have seismic work done.

Less than half of the seismic upgrades have been completed. Four projects the ministry supported to proceed almost 10 years ago are stalled due to Vancouver's insufficient planning. They are John Oliver secondary, Sir Sanford Fleming, Sir Guy Carleton, and Sir Matthew Begbie elementary schools.

A fifth, Lord Nelson elementary, was only recently approved after we created a jointly managed project office to help speed the rate of seismic upgrades and replacement projects in the district. At the rate Vancouver district was going, it would have taken another 30 years — to 2045 — to address the remaining high-risk schools.

One need only look beyond the Vancouver School District to see the speed of project completion in other districts. South Delta secondary was completed within 18 months from the time we announced support for the project. In Campbell River, Ecole Phoenix middle school was



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In Greater Victoria, Quadra elementary school's seismic upgrading project was completed within 27 months.

completed within 19 months. Also on Vancouver Island, in Greater Victoria, Quadra elementary was completed within 27 months.

Schools in Victoria are similar in construction, age, and complexity. Yet, in spite of facing similar obstacles, Victoria has completed 12 of 18 projects while Vancouver has completed just 20 of 49. What's different in Victoria? For one, the Greater

Victoria board of education has worked collaboratively with the education ministry to properly define the scope of the seismic upgrades.

For another, Victoria has made effective use of "swing space" such as Richmond elementary to house students during upgrades at other schools, such as the recently completed Quadra elementary. They've also used Richmond to house students when

upgrades were being done at Margaret Jenkins and Willows elementary as well as Central middle school. Richmond is now being used during the upgrade to George Jay elementary. There's plenty happening to make students safer in the capital city.

Vancouver could have done the same.

There are 9,000 empty school seats in the district that could be used to house students during seismic upgrades. But instead, for reasons that defy logic, the district keeps asking for portables. It's also worth keeping in mind the Vancouver School District has an accumulated surplus of \$28 million. It could have been using this money to fund the additional work it claims it wants done to schools, such as heritage preservation, while the province funded the seismic work.

Even by the most generous assessment, there's no question the Vancouver School District should have completed over half of its seismic projects by now.

The B.C. ministry of education is committed to working with Vancouver and staff at the new co-governed project office to move these projects forward and have the work done.

Students deserve nothing less.

Peter Fassbender is B.C. Minister of Education.