



RICHARD LAM/PNG
Cyndi Gerlach,
North
Vancouver's
school board
chairwoman,
hopes money
saved from
closing schools
will enable the
board
to rebuild
Argyle
secondary
school.

EDUCATION

'Heart-wrenching' closures do pay off

Districts where schools have already been shut say tough decisions helped them save money

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VANCOUVER SUN

While some districts struggle to decide whether to close schools, other districts have been there, done that, and hope to never have to close a school again.

Since 2002, nearly 250 public schools have closed throughout the province, according to a B.C. Teachers' Federation tracking site.

The Ministry of Education pegs the number at 300 schools closed since 2001, while 42 new schools have been built in the province and 70 have been replaced.

To put those numbers in perspective, last year there were 1,385 public schools in the province.

In total, 67 school properties throughout B.C. have been approved by the education ministry for sale, or lease for longer than 10 years, since 2008.

The Sun spoke to trustees in several districts that had closed schools and, in every case, trustees said closing schools was emotional and painful, but that it made a positive difference to the bottom line in the end.

The Greater Victoria school board has closed eight elementary schools since 2003 due to declining enrolment and budgetary pressures, said Peg Orcher-ton, longtime school trustee and former board chair.

She said the process is "heart-wrenching."

"It's very disruptive and hugely emotional," Orcher-ton said. "No matter what the reasons are, none of the reasons are ever good enough to close what people see as the heart of the community."

However, she is able to see the upside of those tough decisions today. One plus of closing schools is that Victoria has been able to use one of the empty

buildings as a swing space for seismic upgrades, she said. That means kids from a school that is being seismically upgraded are bused to and from the swing space school for one year while the upgrades take place, a plan that has sped up the upgrading process. Of the closed schools, one property was sold, one is now used by the district to house its international student program and four are leased out.

Closing schools has made the district's structural budget deficit — the amount that must be cut to balance the budget — smaller each year because of savings in maintenance and salaries, she said.

In North Vancouver, where 11 schools have closed since 2002, school board chairwoman Cyndi Gerlach said that although shutting down schools was difficult, she definitely sees the reward today.

At a time when most other districts in the province have to make cuts to balance their budget, North Vancouver has not had to make any further cuts

since 2010 and has even been able to add services back in, Gerlach said. Gerlach was not board chair when the majority of the cuts were made, but she was an involved parent.

She says the savings were apparent almost immediately once schools were closed.

"If you have a school operating at half-capacity, you're still paying a full-time principal, you're still paying for a custodian and you're still paying for heat, hydro and the lights. You pay for the operation of that building, whether it's at 90 per cent capacity or 40 per cent capacity. By strategically looking at where we could reduce those costs, that enabled us to put money back into programs."

North Vancouver has leased out some schools to a franco-phone school, an independent school and a faith-based school, while two are empty and two were sold and are being developed into housing.

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