



Jennifer Stewart's son attends Simon Fraser elementary school, but she wonders if the nearby Tupper secondary school will still be open when her children reach high school. PHOTOS: ARLEN REDEKOP/PNG

Closing the books on B.C. classrooms

Many of province's schools saddled with declining enrolment, aging buildings

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VANCOUVER SUN

Several B.C. school districts, including Vancouver, are wrestling with the emotional prospect of school closures this fall, with as many as 40 schools facing the chopping block.

Vancouver was told by a provincially appointed adviser to close as many as 19 schools, while Richmond has excess capacity equal to seven schools, and Nanaimo, Summerland and Penticton and Campbell River are also considering multiple closures.

The main reason schools are closing is because the number of school-aged kids is declining in the province, but the issue is more complex than that. People with kids are choosing to live in more urban areas, which means that in some cities downtown schools are bursting while schools in single-family home neighbourhoods are losing students. This means cities like Vancouver or Richmond are in need of new schools in some areas of the city, but have schools with few kids in other areas.

Another factor is that many of the province's schools are aging and in need of significant maintenance, including seismic upgrades to make school safe in an earthquake.

It may not make sense to upgrade or rebuild a school that's filled with empty seats when the money would be better spent building a new school in a more popular area, or so the logic goes.

Still another factor is that more and more students are attending private schools. In the past decade, enrolment has grown by about 14,000 students at independent schools in B.C.

The process of closing schools is slow — policies call for a several-months long decision-making process that includes public consultation.

The issue of what happens with a closed school is controversial. Should the land be sold and used to pay for new schools or seismic upgrading? Should the land remain a public asset for use in the future when population grows? These are questions school trustees throughout the province grapple with as they

juggle the wishes of their communities and a demand from the province to get school usage up to 95 per cent.

Jennifer Stewart, a Vancouver parent of two, says she's concerned because she sees closing schools as short-sighted.

"If we're talking about selling schools, we really need to make sure that we're looking at the number of kids coming up and also plans for the future in terms of redevelopment and large numbers of people coming into the city," Stewart said. "We shouldn't be doing planning for

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JENNIFER STEWART



School closures by city 2002-2015



education, which is an extremely long-term thing, with an eye on balancing the budget next year or making short-term gains in terms of selling off our capital and not getting it back."

She's particularly worried that if school lands are sold, the district will never be able to buy similar properties in the future.

"The board has said it won't sell school land, but the ministry is very adamant that they want the board to start selling off and start closing schools. That's worrying as a parent," Stewart said.

Her son is in Grade 2 now at Simon Fraser elementary and her daughter is three. Their home is in the catchment area for Hamber secondary, but Tupper secondary is physically much closer. Tupper is one of four east-side secondary schools with low enrolment, which means it could be at risk of closure.

"(If it closes,) that's really short-term thinking because I look at the numbers of kids in my son's school — there's this huge bulge of kindergarten to Grade 3 and they need to take that into account," Stewart said. "You can't look at schools that are 70 per cent full today and say we should close them because nobody's using them, because in five years there may be a lot more people."

Richmond has already closed six schools since 2003, but they are now faced with closing more. School board chairman

Erie Yung says areas with a lot of single-family homes remain out of reach for young families, so schools in those areas of the city face low enrolment. At the same time, 21 of the city's 38 elementary schools are at the highest risk in an earthquake.

"We've got a large problem. The ministry has said they're not going to give us any money for seismic remediation until our utilization rates go up. They don't see the point in fixing all of the schools when we currently don't need all of the schools," Yung said.

"Unless someone has a magic wand and puts more kids in the seats ... the ministry simply won't allow us to remediate all of our existing sites."

In 2007, Richmond closed Steveston secondary school and merged the student population with London secondary into a new school called Steveston-London.

The Steveston property sat empty for years, but was sold for \$41 million in 2013 to a developer who plans to build townhomes on the site.

The money has not been officially allocated yet, but it is designated for three projects: schools in the city centre, in Dover and in Hamilton, three areas that have seen or will see tremendous growth.

Surrey is well known for its overflowing schools. But even there, several schools have been

closed and four sites have been sold. The school district has used the money either to build replacement schools nearby or to build new schools elsewhere, in the case of two older schools with declining enrolment.

The Vancouver school board recently decided it would not sell school lands, although it may sell lands not used for schools, or portions of those lands.

Sometimes a school property can be leased to another user, such as a child care centre, but if the school needs seismic or other upgrades, that can be difficult.

The Vancouver school district recently submitted a five-year capital plan to the ministry of education asking for four new schools, 39 seismic upgrade projects, 10 other upgrade projects and additions to King George secondary and Laurier annex. The proposed new schools are elementary schools in Olympic Village, Coal Harbour, University of B.C. South Campus and East Fraserlands.

With lofty Vancouver real estate prices, a lot of money could be made by selling school lands; however, if demographics change, more land for schools may be needed.

B.C. Stats projects that by 2025 there will be over 8,000 more school-aged kids living in Vancouver than there are today, a number that would pretty well bring Vancouver up to 95 per cent capacity, assuming the majority of those kids attend public schools. By 2041, the number of school-aged kids will be another 17,000 higher, B.C. Stats projects.

Urban planner Andy Yan of BTAWorks, the research and development division for Vancouver-based Bing Thom Architects, urged trustees to put schools in "hibernation," but not to sell school lands, because so many more school-aged kids are expected in Vancouver in the next decade.

"There is a caveat to the projections, which is that if housing prices for families with children remain unaffordable and in short supply) and economic activities remain limited, we could have a problem," Yan said.

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“But that being said, the projection is that the city is going to grow by 160,000 people by 2041.”

Given those projections, former VSB chairwoman and Vision school trustee Patti Bacchus can't see the wisdom in closing schools.

“It takes 10 years to get a school built. With International Village it was over 10 years from when we started asking for funding and we're just getting started on building it now,” Bacchus said.

“For us to start looking at closing down schools, which does take a while, the fact that we would need them again is insane.”

In California's Silicon Valley, school lands have been used to build affordable housing for teachers, an idea San Francisco is considering, according to the Los Angeles Times.

Building affordable housing for teachers isn't being considered at this time, but a few years ago VSB considered selling off slices of land at John Oliver secondary and Carleton elementary for development to pay to rebuild those schools, Bacchus said.

The province will pay for seismic upgrades for those schools, but Bacchus said they're in need of replacement.

Carleton was considered for closure in 2010, but after trustees rejected that idea, the board signed a long-term lease for part of the school with the Green Thumb Theatre, which Bacchus said has worked out well as a partnership.

Bacchus takes issue with the ministry's 95 per cent capacity goal, saying it leaves no flexible space.

“If you ask any community if they want their school to be that full, they'd say no. If they want the school to close, they'd say no. Do they want the kids to be safe? Yes,” Bacchus said.

“They shouldn't have to make that kind of compromise. What is wrong that we have to give up so much to make our kids safe? They made this promise (to seismically upgrade all schools) and they're trying to weasel out and stall and blame it on the school boards.”