

EDUCATION

Province trying to strong-arm school board, parents say

Enrolment ultimatum disregards safety needs of children, association warns

TRACY SHERLOCK

VANCOUVER SUN

Parents blasted the province for putting the Vancouver school board in an "untenable" situation by demanding a plan that schools be 95 per cent full before the government will pay for seismic upgrades.

Parents and teachers were responding at a Vancouver school board meeting Wednesday night to study a report calling for as many as 21 schools to close over the next 14 years.

"(We) are very concerned about the potential long-term negative effects of closing schools in already disadvantaged neighbourhoods in the city," the district parents association said in a statement.

Between 11 and 12 schools would be closed outright in the next 14 years if the report is approved. Another eight would be repurposed as temporary homes for students displaced while their schools are getting seismic upgrades. At the end of the 14 years, decisions would be made about the repurposed schools, which could be closed unless unexpected population growth makes them necessary.

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Province trying to strong-arm school board: parents

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The group said the report has the potential "to set the social blueprint for this city for the next several decades," and would influence whether parents perceive Vancouver as a good place to raise their children.

Although the report promises consultation and notice of closure, those promises "seem to amount to little more than a handshake and a wave goodbye," the parent group said.

Another parent group also criticized the 95 per cent enrolment target in a letter to Mike Bernier, the B.C. minister of education.

"We are deeply concerned that the government is using children's safety as a bargaining tool to force the VSB to comply with its agenda for meeting a district-wide capacity target of 95 per cent and initiate the closure of schools without adequate consultation and consideration of the long-term impacts on communities," the Parent Advocacy Network for Public Education wrote in a letter signed by more than 50 parents.

"This capacity target is based on corporate efficiency formulas rather than on the spatial requirements necessary to meet the educational needs of children currently or in the future. As taxpayers and citizens, we expect you, as the minister of education, to have the needs of students as your first priority."

The letter urged the minister to proceed with seismic projects that have already been approved, without demanding the plan to get to 95 per cent. Vancouver schools are only 84.6 per cent full on average.

It also urged the minister to consider spaces in schools dedicated to fine arts and special



Vancouver's Admiral Seymour Elementary School is one of the schools believed at risk of closure because it has both "low utilization" (it is at 53 per cent capacity) and is in need of a seismic upgrade.

needs learning as essential to education, rather than consider them "empty" space.

Katharine Shipley, vice-president of the secondary teachers association, asked what the procedure would be for repurposing schools, which to teachers "feels like a school closure."

David Nelson, the VSB's director of instruction, said the process for school repurposing would not be the same as the procedure for a school closure, though it may be just as painful for the students and the staff.

About \$16 million could be saved every year and about \$100 million could be saved in one-time expenses such as deferred maintenance if the staff report is implemented, Nelson said.

The VSB report, which does not name specific schools for closure, does have a list of schools that have been named in some reports as at risk of closing. The schools listed are not schools

projected to close, rather they are schools that have already been supported by the government for seismic upgrades, but that haven't proceeded to construction.

The report divides those schools into two lists — those with more than 95 per cent utilization, which will be prioritized for upgrades, and those with smaller populations, which will be reconsidered, subject to increasing utilization in the district overall.

Another three schools — Hudson, Livingstone and False Creek elementary — are on a separate list. These schools have high populations and are priorities to be upgraded, but they are among the 40 schools in Vancouver that have not yet been supported for upgrades by the province.

The Supreme Court of Canada decided last week to hear the appeal of a long-running teachers' court case about class size

and composition. If the court rules in favour of the teachers, it could mean thousands of teachers would need to be hired and classrooms found throughout B.C. to accommodate the new rules. If that happens, the long-term facilities plan will need to be adjusted.

In 2014, the VSB calculated if the teachers won the right to have those class size and composition rules reinstated, it would mean an average of one extra classroom needed in each elementary school, VSB superintendent Scott Robinson said. For secondary schools, the calculation is more complex.

Robinson said the figures need to be updated because enrolment has changed since 2014.

The report has not been approved by trustees, who will vote on it Jan. 25.

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Schools: What class empty space?

What's empty is rapidly becoming a key factor in assessing which schools close or survive. The rules are as Byzantine.

There is widespread confusion about the calculation of capacity and utilization in Vancouver schools.

- StrongStart centres, with early learning drop-in for young children and the are not counted as empty while leased child care is counted as empty space in classrooms.

- If an entire school or a portion is leased on a long-term basis, it isn't counted as excess portions of schools that for offices or adult education rooms are counted as empty.

- At first, international students were not included in the province recently account them.

- Adult education students count in utilization percent this time.

- All elementary schools art and music content, separate class time, to students. But, in some cases there are stand-alone rooms, they may be counted empty space.

- However, school capacity include some extra space. For example, a kindergarten class is limited to 22 students the ministry uses a figure calculate capacity of the 100%. A secondary school is limited to 30 students the figure used to calculate. These variations mean some extra space beyond classrooms in every school.

- Operating capacity do include gym, cafeteria, multi-purpose spaces, etc. Nelson, a VSB director of education, said.

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