

## EDUCATION

# Funding delays, feasibility studies, political squabbles delay schools' seismic upgrades

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VANCOUVER SUN

As the finger-pointing continues over a decade-long delay to make sure children are safe in the event of a major earthquake, the example of one school shows the myriad reasons why seismic upgrades take so long.

Although the provincial government had set a deadline of 2020, it now says all seismic upgrades at high-risk schools outside of Vancouver will be complete by 2025 and the 69 high-risk schools in Vancouver won't be finished until 2030.

Some of this delay is because of disagreements over the scope of the projects, such as whether schools should undertake other maintenance at the same time as seismic upgrading, or whether only the seismic work should be done. Also, the Ministry of Education does not want to pay for students to be accommodated in portables while their schools are being upgraded.

Education Minister Peter Fassbender said the program has changed since it was first announced 11 years ago — and that is part of the delay.

"When this program was announced, the objectives were very clear — to make schools safe for every single child in the province," Fassbender said.

"What we didn't know was the reality when you start getting into it and you take down walls and you look at foundations and all of the engineering that's necessary to achieve that goal. We not only have continued to work very closely with every school district, we have also doubled the budget."

Fassbender also placed some blame for the delay on the Vancouver school board.

"The government has been pushing very hard with the city and the Vancouver school board to get project definitions done. In the time since this program was announced, we've been only able to complete 20 in Vancouver," he said. "The funding has never been an issue. What has been an issue is the inability of the VSB to bring forward project definitions that are bathed in good science and good engineering to ensure that those projects were done properly and ensuring the safety of students."

The VSB said Friday it remains committed to the 2020 deadline and any revised schedule could put the safety of Vancouver students at risk.

"Our goal is to upgrade all of our schools as soon as possible," VSB chairman Christopher

**Lord Nelson Elementary**, a 104-year-old school on the city's east side, was among the first schools supported for seismic upgrading in 2004 when then-premier Gordon Campbell announced the program. Eleven years later, the old school is still there and a replacement is still 3½ years away.

**The timeline of events provided by Meschino shows many glitches that have stalled upgrading work at Nelson:**

**2007:** An initial feasibility study is completed. It finds it will cost \$17 million to seismically upgrade the school and just \$15.6 million to rebuild it completely. The VSB decides to build a new school.

**Around the same time**, Charles Dickens Elementary is rebuilt and some parents are upset to discover the new school was much smaller than the old school. New schools built at that time were significantly smaller than older schools because they no longer had cloakrooms or basements for kids to play in. The provincial ministry sets the space requirement per student.

**2008:** Campbell agrees schools could be 15 per cent bigger if they would share space with the community. The Vancouver School District spends about a year doing a study on this, at the behest of the ministry.

**Fall 2009:** Latest study completed.

**Early 2010:** The province and the VSB do a comprehensive audit of all Vancouver schools to determine the extent of seismic work required. It takes a year to complete. At the same time, the VSB is enmeshed in a debate over closing some schools. After giving notice of possible closure to parents at 11 schools, trustees ultimately approve a staff report in 2010 that recom-

mends against closing five of the schools, a move it said would save only \$1.5 million a year.

**2012:** New seismic standards are completed by the Association of Professional Engineers and Geoscientists of B.C., which means that new feasibility studies are needed. VSB director of facilities Jim Meschino said the new study was done in six months, while it usually takes a couple of years. He said they wanted to get the backlog of schools waiting to be upgraded out of the way.

**Dec. 2012:** VSB staff has the new feasibility done and presents it to the board. Again, the option of replacing Lord Nelson Elementary is approved.

This time, it cost \$14.1 million to replace it or \$22.5 million to seismically upgrade it. This proposal keeps students in the old school while the new one is being built, so there is no extra cost to house students in the meantime.

**Jan. 2013:** The proposal is submitted to the ministry, but it and the VSB do not agree on enrolment numbers. The VSB argues for a bigger school while the ministry wants a smaller school.

**Dec. 2013:** Debate over enrolment is sorted out. Meanwhile, construction costs have increased, so the VSB wanted the new rate, but the province didn't agree.

**May 2014:** The province's new seismic mitigation project office is announced and the ministry puts a hold on new projects until the office was running.

**Jan. 2015:** Project agreement is signed by the ministry, allowing a \$15-million new school with capacity for 460 students.

**Today:** An architect is designing the new school. This is projected to take about a year, after which the project will go to tender.

**March 2017:** Projected start of construction.

**Sept. 2018:** Projected opening of school for classes.



JENELLE SCHNEIDER/PNG

Lord Nelson School in East Vancouver will finally be replaced — but building isn't projected to start until March 2017.

Richardson said. "We recognize that these projects are very complicated and complex and we trust that the provincial government will continue to work in partnership with us to get this job done."

Vancouver still has 69 schools that are not seismically upgraded, including four on which work is underway, two that are proceeding

to re-construction, 23 that are "supported" — meaning the government has approved them to be eventually upgraded — and 40 that have not yet been approved to proceed.

There are 38 "supported" schools throughout the rest of the province, including one in Abbotsford, one in Langley, one in Richmond, two in New Westminster, three in Coquitlam,

three in North Vancouver and four in Burnaby.

And there are 126 schools outside of Vancouver that are identified as high-risk, but are not yet approved to proceed, including seven in Surrey, eight in Coquitlam and 24 in Richmond. Not every district in B.C. is subject to seismic risk.

Jim Meschino, director of facilities for the Vancouver

school board, said the complexity of the problem is huge and that the rules are constantly changing.

"I don't think that's abnormal," Meschino said.

"We know a lot more now about how to seismically upgrade a building."

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