

# north shore news

## Playground fracas opens debate over public use

Jane Seyd / North Shore News

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A sign on Cousteau school grounds states the property is reserved for school use Monday to Friday, 8 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Photo Paul McGrath

A playground dust-up between a Lynn Valley mom and the principal of a private French international school in North Vancouver has raised questions about closing playgrounds to the public.

Anne Fischer, a mom of three, posted a YouTube video of a verbal altercation that blew up after the principal of Cousteau L'Ecole Francaise Internationale de Vancouver asked her to leave school property Monday afternoon.

Fischer said she walked to the playground — a few doors from her house — with another mom and a group of five children sometime after 4 p.m.

But shortly after the kids began playing, Fischer said she was approached by a school security guard who told her to leave.

Fischer said as someone who helped raise money for the playground when the former Fromme elementary was still a public school, that didn't sit well with her. "This is a community space we should be allowed to use," she said.

Soon after, Gerard Martinez, the school principal, also came out to the playground to ask Fischer and her group to leave.

Fischer described Martinez as "in my face" and "yelling" during the confrontation. Martinez denies that.

Fischer said Martinez told her her presence was a "security issue."

"I don't buy that," she said. "We were just playing soccer."

Fischer added she thinks it's sad that a school has hired a security guard "to kick off neighbourhood kids."

The decision by the North Vancouver School District to close Fromme elementary in 2010 was an especially bitter one, which came after concerted efforts by parents to keep the school open.

Five years before that, the parents' advisory council had raised more than \$100,000 to install the playground at Fromme.

"One of the dads said to me 'I probably spent 600 hours on the playground,' " she said. "To lose it as a community asset is a blow."

But Martinez said what happened between the school district and the neighbourhood parents isn't his concern. "It's not my problem the school was closed," he said.

Martinez said the terms of the private school's 10-year lease provide for the school grounds to be off-limits to the public from 8 a.m. until 5:30 p.m. because both an after-school care program and extracurricular activities take place at the school until then.

Liability concerns are one issue, he said. "If an accident happened I am not covered by insurance." He added there are signs posted around the playground clearly stating the hours it is off-limits.

Martinez said he tried previously to be more flexible with neighbourhood use but ran into problems with activities that were disruptive and people bringing their dogs on to the property.

Now, Martinez said his position is the community can use the playground after 5:30 p.m. and on weekends. "It's a private property," he said. "We pay a lot of money to the (school) district."

The Cousteau school pays approximately \$350,000 annually to lease the property.

Victoria Miles, spokeswoman for the North Vancouver School District, said when the school district signed the lease with the private school, there was a verbal agreement that the school would have some flexibility with community use of the playground.

She added a final decision remains up to the principal's discretion, as it does at most public schools in North Vancouver. While classes are usually over at around 3 p.m., other school activities can frequently continue until after 5 p.m., she added.

Miles said even when parent groups raise money for playground equipment that becomes the property of the school district once it's installed.

School trustee Jessica Stanley said the conflict represents a dilemma for the school board when it comes to leasing closed school sites.

"I would love to think there could be a discussion. It breaks my heart to see signs saying playgrounds are closed," she said.

Fischer said she's since put in a phone call to Martinez and is hoping to have another, calmer discussion with him on the issue.

With the number of kids she was looking after that day, "If I had to get in my car and drive to Lynn Valley elementary, there's no way that would have happened," she said. "My ask of them is to be integrated with the community and to allow us to use the facilities we helped build."