

EDUCATION

No details on endangered schools

Low enrolment prompted call for up to 19 closures

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Five months after a special adviser's report called for as many as 19 schools to close in Vancouver, parents are still mostly in the dark about which schools are on that list.

The Ernst & Young report didn't name specific schools and the school board isn't naming them either, instead waiting until it completes a long-term facilities report expected to be made public late this year or early next year. The report used the following criteria to identify schools that could be closed in Vancouver: low enrolment, the need for seismic upgrades, the physical condition of the school, a preference for closing annexes instead of full elementary schools, and the availability of neighbouring schools to take students.

The school board says it will consider a target of having 95 per cent of school seats full across the district. At the time of the report, there were more than 10,000 empty seats in Vancouver, not including international students. That number would need to be reduced to just more than 2,500 to meet the goal. The report said two secondary schools, seven annexes and 10 elementary schools should be closed. The vast majority of the underused schools are on the

city's east side. Although the 19 schools were not named, the report did identify 42 schools with low enrolment and, of those, 23 that have not been approved for required seismic upgrades.

The board's facilities report will address whether schools will be closed and exactly which are being considered. But for now, its 66-page staff response to the Ernst & Young report gives the public some idea of how the process of school closures might proceed. The response is written by staff and the recommendations have not yet been approved by the board.

The Ernst & Young report, released last June, found closing schools could save the school board nearly \$300 million in operating costs, seismic upgrades and maintenance. School board staff, in their response, agree with the recommendation that it should take into account seismic upgrades and deferred maintenance costs when deciding which schools to close.

While the report said the school board could make more than \$350 million if it sold schools and called for it to "immediately engage a real estate professional," the board has since decided not to sell any school lands. However, staff agree in their response that the board could sell non-school properties such as Kingsgate Mall, but the

response also says the province and school board should agree on how the money will be used before any properties are sold or leased. The board wants the funding to "augment" the seismic upgrading program and "not just replac(e) funding that would otherwise be provided by the province."

The adviser called for the board to use a template for school design work, but the staff report says it does not agree with this suggestion because "both the City of Vancouver and UBC, through its development permit process, requires a contextual design for each school to fit its neighbourhood."

Examples include the four-storey International Village school and a planned Coal Harbour school that will be built as part of a highrise development.

Since the report was released, the school board decided not to close Macdonald elementary and to have it moved up the seismic priority list due to its aboriginal focus program. Also in the meantime, one school, Maquinna Annex, has closed.

The public has an opportunity to comment on the report at a meeting Nov. 10. The final report is expected to be sent to the minister of education after approval by the board Nov. 23.

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