

Penticton-area teachers blame B.C. government for possible school closures they say will cost jobs, overload classrooms

JOE FRIES | Posted: Wednesday, October 28, 2015 5:14 pm

Teachers blame the B.C. government for proposed school closures and reconfigurations in the Penticton area they fear will lead to job losses and overflowing classrooms.

"First of all, we wouldn't be in this predicament if the government had funded education properly," said Okanagan Skaha Teachers' Union president Leslea Woodward.

http://www.pentictonherald.ca/news/article_756905a0-7cf9-11e5-8a3f-83d950616707.html

"The bottom line is, yes, schools are very expensive to run and the government should be providing the cost to run these schools so at the district level we can worry about providing the best education we can for kids."

The Okanagan Skaha School District on Monday released seven options it's considering to cut costs and excess capacity.



Wheels on the bus

Carmi Elementary is one of five schools flagged for a possible closure

A total of five schools – four in Penticton and one in Summerland – are flagged

for possible closure as the district grapples with enrolment declines that have left classrooms at 75 per cent capacity and a coming budget shortfall pegged at \$1 million.

School trustees are now embarking on a public consultation process before making a decision Jan. 20.

Penticton MLA Dan Ashton said his Liberal government has increased annual education spending in B.C. by \$1.2 billion since taking office in 2001, while total enrolment decreased by 75,000 students over the same period.

"Penticton is feeling that. Respectfully, you can't run half-empty schools. It's just not right. You just can't do that," he said.

Ashton acknowledged trustees have a tough task ahead of them.

"I'm confident they'll get it right and they'll make the best decision for the students, and that's imperative," he said.

According to the district's estimates, job losses from school closures could range from a low of 1.7 full-time equivalents if Carmi elementary is shuttered to 5.4 if Giant's Head Elementary is no more.

In the wake of closures, some staffers would be transferred along with students to the other schools, although Woodward suspects learning conditions will suffer.

"We don't particularly condone stuffing classes with fewer teachers," she said.

"There are going to be teachers who won't be getting jobs with these closures. It's less support, it's less one-on-one for kids."

The district's secretary-treasurer told a public meeting Monday night that job losses are even more likely if the school board chooses to maintain the status quo.

"Faced with substantial budget cuts in the future, there is no question that staffing levels will need to be reduced in order to meet budget targets," said Bonnie Roller Routley, before going on to note that labour costs account for 85 per cent of the district's expenses.

"All other areas have been reduced year after year with (support staff) bearing the brunt of the reductions. In this scenario, teaching staff will be affected."

A spokeswoman for the Canadian Union of Public Employees, which represents support staff, agreed and said she'll take an active role in the upcoming consultation process to minimize casualties.

"CUPE is committed to working with the school board to maintain a safe and supportive learning environment for our students," Alison Reigh said in a statement.

"Each CUPE member performs a valuable service, and CUPE will strive to limit the effect that possible school closures and reconfigurations will have on our member's jobs."

Impact of proposed school closures on staff:

SCHOOL	CAPACITY	ENROLMENT	EMPLOYEES*	JOB LOSSES**
Carmi	268	150	14.7	1.7
Giant's Head	354	366	24.9	5.4
McNicoll	475	198	19	4.9
Parkway	240	257	21.8	1.8
West Bench	155	92	9.7	4.1

*Current full-time equivalents

**Net of new jobs at incoming schools

SOURCE: SD 67 handout