

## South Okanagan schools on chopping block

Joe Fries | Posted: Tuesday, October 27, 2015 8:32 pm

As many as five schools in Penticton and Summerland could close next year, according to a list of options unveiled Monday as the Okanagan Skaha School District looks to cut costs and excess capacity.

Schools potentially on the chopping block are Carmi, Parkway, West Bench and McNicoll Park in Penticton and Giant's Head in Summerland.

Schools not on the list include Naramata and Kaleden elementaries, which are currently running at half-capacity, but were protected by trustees partly because they attract special grants of \$158,000 annually due to their rural settings.

In addition to closures, the district is also considering a range of reconfigurations that could leave Penticton with only one high school.

With seven options now on the table, the school board, which has already discarded 11 other staff proposals, will begin a series of public meetings to discuss the possibilities ahead of a final decision on Jan. 20. It's possible trustees could move forward with one, some or none of the proposals.

"We just want the community to be aware of what those choices are and to give us feedback on what they would prefer and provide some guidance. They're not easy decisions," said superintendent Wendy Hyer.

"People may prefer one option over the other and that's what we want to hear."

Approximately 100 people who showed up at the Shatford Centre on Monday night to hear the options were told the district is running at 75 per cent capacity and facing a \$1-million budget shortfall for 2016-17, and at least \$750,000 annually in subsequent years as a result of declining enrolment.

Secretary-treasurer Bonnie Roller Routley acknowledged the proposed cuts, the deepest of which would save an estimated \$860,000 annually, will only buy some breathing room.

"We will still have to balance the budget with that, but every little bit helps. It's a big drop in the bucket to do this, rather than having to cut teachers or reclassify classrooms and do that kind of thing, which is very inefficient," she said.

Doing nothing, Roller Routley added, could result in parts of some schools being shuttered, playing fields closed to community use and deep staffing cuts.

She also confirmed that if a school is closed and sold, the Ministry of Education keeps 75 per cent of the proceeds, while the district must spend its share on capital works. If the district leases out a building for five years or less, it can keep all the rental income and spend it as it pleases.

However, staff's recommendations for closures and reconfigurations did not take into consideration each facility's ability to generate, Roller Routley continued, since trustees want to keep their focus on

education.

Naramata parent Rob Van Westen encouraged the board to make incremental changes rather than “clear the field.”

“What’s the government going to come back and want us to do next? There will be nothing left to cut,” he said.

Penticton teacher Lesley Lacroix warned against overcrowding schools.

“There needs to be a balance between the money savings, but also the best things for our kids, because you might find you’re paying a whole lot more down the road,” she said.

Derek Hurst, chairman of the district parent advisory council, said afterwards he was impressed with the range of options presented and favours the “hybrid” models that combine grade reconfigurations with closures.

“Those are the things that seem to me at first glance to be the biggest bang for our buck and getting some of those economies of scale and efficiencies that we need to get,” he said.

The full list of upcoming meetings is available at [www.sd67.bc.ca](http://www.sd67.bc.ca), where the public can also view the proposed options and send feedback.