

**Presentation to the Select Standing Committee
on Finance and Government Services**

October 4, 2016

**Presented by Kelly Greene on behalf of
Richmond Schools Stand United**

About Richmond Schools Stand United:

Richmond Schools Stand United is a grassroots non-partisan group advocating for improved public education. The Richmond School District represents over 20,000 students in 48 schools, and we are helping our communities to connect and speak with a voice that is stronger together.

Problems in Public Education in Richmond:

Every school in Richmond is facing the same challenges, and these challenges are being felt throughout British Columbia. Schools are lacking basic resources, which are either fundraised through PACs or directly paid by parents; schools are lacking sufficient support teachers and staff, such as teacher-librarians and educational assistants; and a disproportionate number of schools in Richmond, when compared to the rest of the province, are physically deficient, for example with lead piping, building envelope failures, and seismically dangerous structures. The fundamental root of these problems is the lack of stable and sufficient funding, the incorrect calculation of capacity, and the approval process for the seismic mitigation program by the Province.

Seismic upgrading:

Starting with the most easily remedied of the problems Richmond students are facing, is the extreme vulnerability of schools in an earthquake. Currently, 19 schools in Richmond are rated H1 & H2, which were to be repaired on a priority basis, plus another 4 schools rated H3, which are also vulnerable, but to a lesser catastrophic extent. In Richmond, if the “Big One” strikes during school hours, almost half of our schools will collapse on the children, educators and staff inside. The BC government has delayed seismic remediation funding in Richmond on the basis that our district is not at a high enough utilization, with no upgrading since 2011. However, of the most vulnerable schools, many are operating at 100% or greater. We find withholding life-saving seismic remediation to be morally questionable. Minister Bernier has recently recanted the 95% capacity rule, but is still asking for utilization improvements before releasing seismic funding to our district. The parents and communities of Richmond do not find this acceptable and are asking for the immediate release of funding for multiple seismic projects throughout our city. The world watched in horror as schools collapsed in Sichuan, China in the earthquake of May 2009. The province has an obligation to prevent that from happening in BC.

Capacity calculation:

We would also like to dispute the way that the provincial government calculates capacity. Not only is the Ministry asking for a high utilization, but the Ministry calculates utilization in a way that overinflates the number of seats available in a District. In Richmond the difference between what the District knows will fit into its schools, and what the Ministry has calculated will fit, amounts to 8%, or 1,135 seats. So when the Ministry asks districts to aim for the loose target of 95%, what that does is force the District to operate at 102%. There is no educational benefit to operating at such a high rate, and in fact many negative outcomes arise from operating so close to or over capacity. A school near capacity does not have the flexibility to adapt to fluctuations in enrollment rates, nor does it have the ability to offer space necessary for quality education, like a music room, nor can it offer specialized spaces, such as a quiet room, for students with learning disabilities or undiagnosed challenges. Additionally, there is a critical shortage of space available for licenced childcare, and the government currently considers childcare rooms in schools to be empty classrooms. These childcare facilities are invaluable supports that our families in Richmond depend on.

The Richmond School Board has also noted at the October 3rd board meeting that the Ministry does not give consideration for school classrooms which are used for adult literacy, or the provincially supported Strong Start preschool program. Again, school facilities are in use for education, but those rooms are still considered “empty classrooms.”

With respect to an ideal operating rate, I have personally consulted with many business people, from manufacturing to high tech to professional consulting, and they have all stated that no business should aim to operate at over 85% capacity, due to the risk of complete failure of the business. So a high capacity rate is not a best educational practice, nor is it a best business practice. We are asking for a maximum utilization rate of 85%.

Stable and Sustainable Funding:

Finally, we are asking for the current per-pupil funding model to be reconsidered and changed to provide districts with stable, predictable and sufficient funding. Support staff has been cut to an all-time low. Teacher librarians and in-class supports are a fraction of what they used to be. In my son's school, for example, the year the teacher librarian was cut from a .9 position to a .7 position. Why is this a problem? Because there are more students than ever in classrooms, and early literacy is so important to a student's success throughout their lifetime. Prior to the cutbacks, multiple times per week, primary classes would be divided into smaller work groups, and half sent to the library. Without the one on one support made possible by a teacher librarian, it would be impossible to develop strong reading skills with 22 or more, 4, 5, and 6 year olds. That is just one example. There are hundreds more.

Even with these record level cuts to educational services, administrative costs, and building maintenance, Richmond School District was not able to cut enough to meet the shortfall of \$3.3 Million dollars this year, which was the total amount after the Ministry rescinded part of the cuts asked for earlier in the year. Our school District is in the process of closing three schools and the estimated operating cost savings is \$750,000. To Richmond residents, the cost savings of closing schools seems minute compared to the Province's \$1.9 billion surplus. As parents and taxpayers, we are left with two questions, how will the

next year's \$3 million dollar shortfall be paid for by the Richmond School District? Will the closures guarantee seismic upgrading projects to be started in our city?

Necessity of Quality Public Education:

The long term negative consequences of closing schools will be felt by students, parents, staff and communities and greatly outweigh the savings for the Province should these schools close. Educating and supporting the next generation of citizens will create a prosperous British Columbia, and a robust, inclusive society. A quality public education is a social good, that benefits every member of society, whether they have a child directly enrolled or not.

RSSU Requests to the Select Standing Committee:

We concur with the recommendation of the last two standing committees to provide adequate, stable and sustainable funding to school boards to provide all children with the well-rounded educational opportunities they need to reach their full potential. We further ask for a revised calculation of school facility capacity, so that students can learn in a facility which supports the BC curriculum. Finally, we ask for multiple seismic upgrade projects to be funded and commenced immediately, with the expectation of continuous upgrading of Richmond schools until our over 7,000 at-risk children are safe.