

August 5, 2016

Attn: Office of the Superintendent of Schools

This is a request for Richmond Schools Stand United to present to the Richmond School Board at the next regular Board meeting on September 6, 2016. We would like to present our petition which was submitted on July 26, 2016 to the BC Legislature, as well as discuss the issues addressed by the petition. In particular, we are advocating for a maximum 85% capacity utilization rate, and for seismic funding to be released immediately to address the extensive remediation required in Richmond. The consideration of these issues is urgent, due to the threat of imminent and multiple school closures.

Please see attached a copy of our petition and our brief. For any interested individuals, we also maintain a Facebook account, www.facebook.com/RichmondSchoolsUnited, a Twitter handle, @richmondschoolsunite, and a website, www.RichmondSchoolsUnited.ca.

We look forward to confirmation that we will be on the agenda for the September 6th meeting.

Best regards,

Kelly Greene

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Richmond Schools Stand United – Brief

The Ministry of Education (MoE) in British Columbia has set an arbitrary and unreasonably high School District minimum utilization rate of 95% in order to qualify for seismic remediation. Recently, they have recanted a minimum utilization rate to qualify for seismic remediation, but have stated an “improvement” in utilization rates are required for funding. Essentially, this amounts to the same directive. A 95% enrollment threshold has drastic impacts on learning. When considering a school’s enrollment, many utilized resource rooms are counted as empty classrooms: fine arts, multi-purpose, special education, and childcare, for example. A student’s learning environment is so much more than just a desk and a chair. Fundamentally, the BC government places no value on the resources which make education a *quality* education, and no value on the resources necessary for working families.

Due to the variability of resource classrooms between schools, it would be a very challenging, if not impossible task of looking school to school to exempt a fair amount of those rooms per school. We are advocating for a maximum capacity utilization threshold of 85%, to allow schools to develop the resources that meet the needs of their student population. An 85% target will bring us closer to standards in the rest of Canada. For example, Alberta has set an 85% maximum enrollment target; meeting this number triggers expansion evaluations. Other cities, such as Toronto at 65%, have even lower enrollment targets. In Manitoba, schools are built with core facilities (gym, library, multi-purpose, washrooms) significantly in excess of current enrollment predictions so that they can be adjusted as necessary in the future.

We have been trying to find the MoE’s rationale behind their 95% “preferred” enrollment target. During a meeting with MLA John Yap on June 27, we learned that “public service assets” are subject to a 95% utilization target. Public service assets can be anything from prisons to office blocks. To completely ignore the unique needs of the public school system is reckless and irresponsible.

In Richmond, the utilization rate falls between 81–85%. The reality of school closures in a school district that has such high utilization rates means that schools that are well attended are being considered for closure. Of the 16 schools that could be closed, four are at over 75% utilization, and another four are at or over 100% utilization. This is a direct result of a MoE that places no value on vital components of education, such as fine arts or childcare rooms, and a School Board which believes that French Immersion and Montessori classes are portable anywhere in the city, contrary to the reality that parents apply for a seat at a particular school.

Further, it is morally questionable to hold back seismic upgrade funding to force a School Board to adopt a political mandate. The very lives of children are at risk. Fully half of all Richmond schools will have structural failure (collapse) in the event of a major earthquake. Twenty-four Richmond schools require life-saving improvements, while 16 are being considered for closure. It could be reasonable to conclude that eight Richmond schools should be proceeding to seismic upgrading, however not only is this *not* happening, the last Richmond school upgraded was completed in 2011. Over 3,000 sons and daughters attend those eight schools on a daily basis.

It takes 5 years from accepted proposal to completed construction on an elementary school seismic upgrading project, per the Vancouver School Board's published data. The provincial government has pushed back the date that seismic upgrading will be completed outside of the City of Vancouver from 2020 to 2025. Based on that timeline, schools in Richmond to be upgraded must have proposals accepted between 2016 and 2020. Assuming that the Richmond School District closes four schools, that means that the BC government must accept and act upon five upgrade proposals from Richmond per year for the next four years. (Not including Ecole des Navigateurs, which is an SD38 owned facility.) As of today's date this seems unlikely, even wildly imaginative. The BC government is forcing schools in Richmond to close by tying seismic remediation funding to increased utilization numbers. However, even with improved utilization numbers it is highly unlikely that the MoE will make Richmond schools safe in the next 10 to 15 years. The government is not taking the safety of children seriously.

On the BC government's website, it notes that 128 schools in BC require seismic remediation. Twenty four of those schools are in Richmond (25 including Ecole des Navigateurs), which means that of all the districts in British Columbia, 20% of non-upgraded schools are located in Richmond. We are bearing a disproportionate risk to our children and are faced with ever-increasing delays. Richmond Schools Stand United is asking for immediate release and approval of seismic remediation funding so that we can begin to make our children safe in the event of an earthquake.

We are asking you, Richmond School Board Trustees, to adopt a maximum utilization target of 85% to ensure our children have access to the resources necessary for a quality education. In addition, we would like the School Board to acknowledge that French Immersion and Montessori programs are not portable anywhere within the city. We are also asking you to vigorously and vocally petition the MoE to fund multiple seismic upgrading projects without delay, so that the life-saving work can begin immediately.