
Report to the Board of Education (Richmond) Public

DATE: September 19, 2016
FROM: Sherry Elwood, Superintendent of Schools
SUBJECT: Superintendent's Report on School Closure

PREAMBLE

The purpose of the information contained within this report is to provide the Board of Education with recommendations in regard to a school closure process that identified sixteen elementary schools for consideration of closure. These schools were identified in a public report entitled Long Range Facilities Plan dated March 30, 2016 (this report can be found at <http://letstalksd38.ca>). Subsequent to the presentation of the report to the Board, in April 2016, district staff conducted a consultation process with the sixteen schools seeking questions and feedback from each school community.

It is incumbent on the Superintendent to note that both the action of school closure and the closure consultation process is difficult for all stakeholders involved. The Board of Education and Senior Staff have noted publically that this topic is difficult for parents, students, school staff, as well as, trustees and Senior Staff. Elementary schools are communities of learning and social connection for neighbourhoods. Schools create a sense of belonging, caring and safety for families and staff. They are seen as resources for neighbourhoods, sometimes housing before and after school care, community programming and recreation activities as a complement to the education that occurs during the school day. As such, we do not take the consideration of school closure lightly, recognizing that District decisions impact the families that we serve.

PROBLEM

Like many districts in the Metro Vancouver area, and in many communities across the province, for several years Richmond School District has been managing a declining student population. Declining student populations and shifting demographics have changed the resources available in schools. Many of our schools are clustered close together in neighbourhoods with fewer children, while other neighbourhoods have experienced increasing enrolment and the local school is over capacity. Some elementary schools have significantly less enrolment than others and smaller student populations are housed in buildings which were originally built for more students. These schools have less possibility for robust educational programs and may not be able to support curricular and extra curricular opportunities for students in ways that are often found in larger schools. With shrinking resources the District continues to be challenged in the efficiency of our schools.

The impact of declining enrollment is also combined with the serious challenge of a large number of schools needing seismic upgrading. The Ministry of Education requires Districts to apply for funding for both seismic mitigation and the building of new spaces. Applying for this funding requires the District to work as efficiently as possible. The Capital Planning Instructions published in June 2016 outline a 95% utilization efficiency as a benchmark for Ministry funding. The need for seismic upgrading in the majority of our elementary schools was identified in October of 2015 at a series of Open Houses within the school district.

The community was invited to attend and provide feedback on both the problem and solutions for both the decline in enrolment and the seismic difficulties that we face. (<http://letstalksd38.ca>) Let's Talk Website.

At the October 2015 Open Houses the problem was stated as:

"In most of Richmond declining neighbourhood enrolment has resulted in underutilization of school capacity. In some schools student populations are so small that the School District cannot offer the optimal range of programs. Trustees need to make a decision on which schools to close to ensure that facilities are used in an effective and fiscally responsible way."

Richmond School District has policies and practices that would guide a school closure process. Policy 704R is the policy that shapes the consideration of schools for closure. This policy speaks to sufficient space in neighbourhood schools, (<http://www.sd38.bc.ca/board/sd38policies/700/S293F52AB-293F52F0.0/704-R%20>).

In addition to Policy 704R, the closure process must comply with provincial and district legal requirements. The *School Act* establishes the authority of the Board of Education to establish and close schools. There is also a Ministerial Order 194/08 which includes the following direction:

- Boards must develop and implement a policy that includes a public consultation process with respect to permanent school closures and this policy must be made available to the public.
- Boards must apply that policy to the consideration of school closures.
- There must be fair consideration of the communities' input and adequate opportunity for the community to respond to a Board's proposal to close the school permanently.
- The Board must exercise its power to close a school by bylaw.

(see attached Ministerial Order and relevant provisions of the School Act)

PROCESS

The District has used a variety of methods to gather feedback from the community since the presentation of the 'problem' in the Fall of 2015. As mentioned, there were meetings with the Superintendent and Secretary Treasurer in May of 2016 for each of the sixteen schools. Each school had a representative School Consultation Committee which included parents, teachers, support staff and administrators. These committees gathered feedback from their members and presented the summary of concerns, requests for clarity of data and information to the Senior Staff. The Committee also confirmed the District's data about each school. These committees shared their feedback in a variety of ways to the Superintendent and Secretary Treasurer, who made record of the feedback, returning these records back to the committees for confirmation of accuracy.

These records of feedback became the artifact of consultation for each school. These artifacts were shared with trustees and became the public record of discussion for each school (<http://letstalksd38.ca/>). All of these documents were published on the Let's Talk District website which is the centralized hub of feedback for the school closure process.

The Let's Talk website (<http://letstalksd38.ca/>) continued to be used throughout the consultation process as a clearinghouse for comments and questions from any citizen in Richmond. Staff used the online site to answer questions, provide information and to provide notice of workshops. Most critically the Let's Talk website was one of several methodologies used to solicit and receive feedback strengthening our attempts to reach as much of the Richmond community as possible. To date, over 17,000 visits to the site have occurred. In May 2016, three LRFP Public Workshops were held across the district. Through advertisements in the media, the Let's Talk website, newsletters in schools and social media, the Richmond community was invited to discuss the consideration of the closure of sixteen elementary schools. Trustees, District Staff and Administrators, were present to facilitate discussion of the information presented and to listen to the feedback of parents, students, staff and interested community members. There were opportunities for the community members to ask questions directly to staff and trustees or to communicate their feedback in writing.

At the same time that the LRFP Public Workshops were taking place, the Let's Talk Website mirrored the workshop events virtually and community members who were not able to attend in person could do so online. The feedback and questions that were shared at all these workshops was synthesized and placed on the Let's Talk website as a resource for the community to access. Staff used this feedback to inform their work in the consideration of school closures. In addition, staff worked over the summer to confirm data, reconfirm enrolment projections and to review school capacity data with the Ministry of Education.

WHAT DID WE HEAR?

Throughout the process that began in the Fall of 2015, continuing with the meetings with the sixteen schools to be considered for closure and the LRFP Public Workshop sessions, themes of feedback emerged. Most notably parents were concerned about the safety of their children and the distances that students may need to travel to nearby schools.

Parents, students and staff noted their concerns about the loss of the caring community and the sense of belonging that each school brings to their neighbourhoods. There were concerns from families about keeping sibling students together as schools were closed. There were hundreds of pieces of feedback that spoke to the questions that individual families needed answering. As much as possible staff provided answers and information throughout the process.

District Staff have worked over the summer to combine feedback from the schools and communities with the application of Policy 704R to each of the sixteen schools. Closure of the schools as recommended below would increase the District's current elementary school capacity utilization percentage from 85% to 91%.

The result of that work has led to the Superintendent's recommendations to the Board of Education as follows:

That the Board of Education consider the closure of the following elementary schools, these closures to be effective July 1, 2017.

Woodward Elementary School

The Public Workshop Presentation Boards from May 2016 indicated that it was possible to close Woodward and consolidate the catchment with Kidd.

Rationale:

Woodward's projected September enrolment of 120 students are currently organized in 6 divisions.

Space in a nearby school: July 2016 enrolment numbers were reviewed and this data indicated that there were 8 division spaces available at Kidd that could accommodate the 6 anticipated classrooms at Woodward. Siblings could be kept together as they attend Kidd Elementary School.

15 minute walkshed: It was noted that most students in the Woodward catchment could be within the 15 minute walkshed of Kidd Elementary School. If Woodward Elementary School is closed there would be no students in the Woodward catchment beyond a 15 minute walking distance to a school nearby.

Educational Impact: Combining the student population of Woodward Elementary School with the student population of Kidd Elementary School would provide the resulting population of 280 students with more opportunities for programs and supports, as well as creating new opportunities for increased extra curricular activities.

Financial Implications: Estimated annual operating cost savings are \$250,000.

McKay Elementary School

The Public Workshop Presentation Boards from May 2016 indicated that it was possible to close McKay and consolidate the catchment with Grauer.

Rationale:

McKay's projected September enrolment of 143 students are currently organized in 6 divisions.

Space in a nearby school: July 2016 enrolment numbers were reviewed and this data indicated that there were 11 division spaces available at Grauer Elementary School that could accommodate the 6 anticipated divisions at McKay. Siblings can be kept together at Grauer Elementary School.

15 minute walkshed: It was noted that most students in the McKay catchment could be within the 15 minute walkshed of Grauer. If McKay is closed, there would be no McKay students beyond a 15 minute walking distance to a school nearby.

Educational Impact: McKay currently houses 6 divisions in a K-7 grade configuration. Combining the student population of McKay Elementary School with the student population of Grauer Elementary School would provide the resulting population of 318 students with more opportunities for programs and supports, as well as creating new opportunities for increased extra curricular activities.

Financial Implications: Estimated annual operating cost savings are \$250,000.

Dixon Elementary School (English track and Early French Immersion School)

Dixon Elementary School is currently a dual track English and French Immersion school. English and Early French Immersion students attend the school with 132 English track students attending from within the Dixon catchment area, 222 Early French Immersion track students attending from within the catchment area and from outside the catchment area. Early French Immersion programs are considered as programs of choice within the district.

There are two options presented for this school closure. It is recommended that the Board of Education consult with the Dixon community on both options presented below:

Option 1

Dixon Elementary School receiving schools **Gilmore Elementary School** (English track) and **Diefenbaker Elementary School** (Early French Immersion)

The Public Workshop Presentation Boards from May 2016 indicated that it would be possible to close Dixon Elementary School and consolidate the English program students with Gilmore Elementary School and the Early French Immersion students with Diefenbaker Elementary School. (Diefenbaker has an existing Late French Immersion program).

Rationale:

Space in a nearby school: July 2016 reviews indicated that there were 6 division spaces available at Gilmore that could accommodate the 6 anticipated English track divisions from Dixon.

There are 9 Early French Immersion divisions anticipated at Dixon. Option 1 would relocate these students to the 5 division spaces available at Diefenbaker and would add 4 classrooms of temporary accommodations onsite with the anticipation that demographics in the surrounding communities will settle over time.

15 minute walkshed: In Option 1, 50% of the English track students attending Gilmore would be within a 15 minute walking distance. The remaining 50% will be within a 15 minute walking distance of Steves Elementary School. Early French Immersion students currently enrolled at Dixon could move to Diefenbaker as a cohort, however there may be a small number of families who currently enroll siblings in both English track and Early French Immersion and those families could choose to enroll siblings together at Gilmore. In the case of Early French Immersion students there may be students who remain outside the 15 minute walkshed by virtue of their decision to attend a program of choice outside of their home neighbourhoods.

Educational Impact: Combining the English track population of Dixon with the student population of Gilmore School would provide the resulting population of 429 students with more opportunities for programs and supports, as well as creating new opportunities for increased extra curricular activities.

Combining the Early French Immersion program population from Dixon Elementary School with the student population of Diefenbaker Elementary School would provide the resulting population of 572 with more opportunities for programs and supports, as well as creating new opportunities for increased extra curricular activities.

As a program of choice, the Early French Immersion students from Dixon Elementary School could join the Late French Immersion students at Diefenbaker Elementary School consolidating the EFI and LFI into one complete French Immersion program. This would be a positive benefit for both the Early French Immersion program and Late French Immersion program as the blending of the resources and connection with more Immersion students would be supportive of language acquisition for all French Immersion learners.

Financial Implications: Estimated annual operating cost savings are \$250,000.

Option 2

Dixon Elementary School receiving schools **Gilmore Elementary School** and **Steves Elementary School** – English track

Dixon Elementary School receiving schools **Gilmore Elementary School** and **Diefenbaker Elementary School** – Early French Immersion

Space in a nearby school: Option 2 recommends that the Dixon student population be divided geographically, north and south. The Dixon catchment is located within this cluster of four schools and families might find that a geographic accommodation which maintains a 15 minute walk to school is more feasible. In this option, Gilmore Elementary School as a northern nearby school has division space for 3 English track divisions from Dixon. Steves Elementary School as a southern nearby school has division space for 3 English track divisions from Dixon.

Gilmore Elementary School has additional divisional spaces for 3 Early French Immersion divisions from Dixon. Diefenbaker Elementary School as a southern nearby school, has additional division space for 6 Early French Immersion divisions from Dixon. The addition of one portable at Diefenbaker Elementary School may be needed for a short term. In this option students would remain in their neighbourhood and family groupings.

15 minute walkshed: Dividing the Dixon catchment north/south geographically will increase the number of English track students who will be within a 15 minute walkshed of Gilmore Elementary School and Steves Elementary School. In the case of Early French Immersion students there may be students who remain outside the 15 minute walkshed by virtue of their decision to attend a program of choice outside of their home neighbourhoods.

Educational Impact

Adding the English track population of Dixon Elementary School with the student populations of Gilmore Elementary School and Steves Elementary School would provide the resulting larger enrolments at both schools (Combined enrolment: Gilmore 372 students and Steves 355 students) with more opportunities for programs and supports, as well as creating new opportunities for increased extra curricular activities.

Similarly, combining Dixon Early French Immersion students with existing programs at Gilmore Elementary School and Diefenbaker Elementary School, (Combined enrolment: Gilmore 457 students and Diefenbaker 498 students) will strengthen educational and extra curricular opportunities for these larger populations as described above.

Financial Implications: Estimated annual operating cost savings are \$250,000.

FURTHER RECOMMENDATIONS

Review Policy 704 and 704R

As the District moves ahead from this school closure process it would be good practice to review the school closure policy to determine whether changes are warranted, especially since the policy has been unused for a number of years. Current expectations around public consultation, as well as other policy aspects should be taken into account as part of this review.

Sea Island

Currently there are 29 students at Sea Island which is an annex of Brighthouse Elementary School. These students range from Kindergarten to Grade 3 and are organized in two multigraded classes with the support of 2 teachers. Siblings of these students currently attend Brighthouse Elementary School beginning in grade 4. Sea Island and its grade configuration is an anomaly which should be reconsidered, both in its merits as a best practice learning situation for its primary students, and in the determination of its efficiency as a school building.

I would recommend that the Board consider the enrolment of Sea Island primary students to Brighthouse Elementary School in the near future and that discussions regarding this recommendation with the Sea Island community begin in the late fall of 2017.

Secondary Schools

The focus of the work to date, both in the school closure process and in facility planning, has largely been at the elementary level. Any change in the number or configuration of elementary schools will have a district ripple effect to our secondary schools. This will require fairly immediate discussions about the future of our current secondary model. It will be important that these secondary discussions include the same questions about declining enrollment, seismic challenges, as well as the need for long term safe, sustainable facilities to be available for our secondary students and their families of elementary schools.

Long Term Facilities Plan

Throughout the school closure process there has been reference to our District's need to have safe, sustainable facilities for our students today and into the future. The school closure process is only one part of a long term facilities work plan. As the District moves forward into the future it will be important that we design a facilities plan that directs our decisions and our resources. It is my recommendation that the Board and Senior Staff begin to work on a Long Term Facilities Plan that moves us to 2030 and beyond.

In addition to providing a road map for our seismic mitigations, a supported plan would provide guidance for decision making about land acquisition and disposition, new schools and right sizing our existing buildings. This plan could be a living document responsive as needed and could provide overall facility and financial support to the 21st century learning programs needed by our students.

Part of the work that will create a supported and sustainable Long Term Facilities Plan is to be purposeful in the decisions connected to land acquisition and sale. It will be important that the District is deliberate in their consideration of the current Richmond real estate landscape, its volatility and potential to remain so into the future. Shifting demographics may continue to occur in the Richmond community and the need for the School District to be able to respond to changing facility capacities and catchment enrollment changes will be as important as we plan for future years.

GOING FORWARD

In the event that the Board chooses to close any or all of the schools recommended for closure, it will be important that affected school communities will be supported. To that end, I would recommend the following:

- Closure Committees continue at each school. These committees will have representatives of parents, staff, administrators and students (wherever possible). The Chair of these Committees will be the Area Assistant Superintendents assigned to the school.
- The Terms of Reference for these Committees will be:
 - a) To address the concerns of the school community
 - b) To access the resources necessary from the District that will ensure as smooth a transition as possible
 - c) To develop a school based process for the closure of the school including transition planning for students, staff and parents
 - d) To advise on the distribution and reallocation of resource to receiving schools
 - e) To communicate regularly with parents and staff, seeking feedback and sharing information

Each school community is unique and its local context regarding the issues outlined above will be acknowledged and honoured. It will be essential that this work is focused on supporting our students, ensuring any transition for them is managed in the best way possible.

District staff and resources remain committed to working with each school community. We will appreciate the assistance of our partner groups in the transition process as we work toward ensuring that "our focus is on the learner" today and into the future.

I must thank the parents, students, staff and school leaders in all sixteen schools for their feedback and participation in the school closure process. We are grateful for your thoughtful advocacy for your school. Your questions were insightful and reasonable and helped shape our thinking.

I also acknowledge the work of dedicated District Staff in the support of the consultation process. The thoroughness of your work is appreciated.

Respectfully submitted to the Board of Education,



Sherry Elwood
Superintendent of Schools
Attachments

Attachment: Ministerial Order and relevant provisions of the School Act

SCHOOL OPENING AND CLOSURE ORDER

Authority: *School Act*, section 73 and 168 (2)(p)

{ Ministerial Order 194/08 (M194/08)..... Effective September 3, 2008
{ Repeals 320/02

Interpretation

1 “**alternative community use**” means alternative community use as defined in Ministerial Order 193/2008, the Disposal of Land or Improvements Order.

Opening of Schools

2 If a board decides to open a new school or to reopen a previously closed school under section 73 of the *School Act*, the board must, without delay, provide the Ministry with written notification of the decision containing the following information:

- (a) the school’s name,
- (b) the school’s facility number,
- (c) the school’s address, and
- (d) the date on which the school will open or reopen.

Closure of Schools

3 (1) In this Ministerial Order, closing a school permanently means the closing, for a period exceeding 12 months, of a school building used for purposes of providing an educational program to students.

(2) Despite subsection (1), the closing of a school for the purposes of effecting repairs, renovations or additions to a school building shall not be deemed to be a permanent closure of the school if the board intends to reopen the building upon completion of the repairs, renovations or additions.

4 (1) The board must develop and implement a policy that includes a public consultation process with respect to permanent school closures and this policy must be made available to the public.

(2) When considering closing a school permanently, the board must apply the policy referred to in subsection (1).

5 (1) The public consultation process must include:

- (a) a fair consideration of the community’s input and adequate opportunity for the community to respond to a board’s proposal to close the school permanently;
- (b) consideration of future enrolment growth in the district of persons of school age, persons of less than school age and adults; and
- (c) consideration of possible alternative community use for all or part of the school.

SCHOOL OPENING AND CLOSURE ORDER

6 The power of a board to permanently, close a school under section 73 of the *School Act* must be exercised only by bylaw.

7 If a board decides to permanently close a school under section 73 of the *School Act*, the board must, without delay, provide the Minister with written notification of the decision containing the following information:

- (a) the school's name,
- (b) the school's facility number,
- (c) the school's address, and
- (d) the date on which the school will close.

8 This Order comes into effect on September 3, 2008.