

Richmond Schools Stand United

October 12, 2016 – Response to Question from Hon. Robin Austin

*Provide this committee with the details as to why there's a discrepancy between the Ministry of Education's way of saying what your student capacity is in Richmond and that which the Richmond school district is bringing together?*

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Hello Honorable members of the Select Standing Committee on Finance and Government Services. Thank you for the invitation to provide additional information regarding capacity calculations in Richmond public schools.

The main reason for the discrepancy between the Ministry of Education's (MoE) and School Board's school capacity measures, derives from the way that school space is actually used, with different issues identified at the elementary and secondary levels.

At the elementary school level, a main driver for over stating the number of seats available is non-enrolling classrooms. Examples of non-enrolling classrooms are music rooms and recovery (quiet) rooms. While these classrooms do not have a regular class seated in them, these rooms are necessary for the deployment of quality education and are well-utilized by the school population. As support for students with special needs is reduced due to budget cuts, and as diagnosis of special learning needs is delayed due to budget cuts, recovery rooms become even more important to teachers as a way of supporting children who need more help.

In addition, lower density classrooms used for very high needs children are counted at the full classroom rate, which makes schools which offer specialized programming appear very empty. For example, in the Errington Learning Centre, there is dedicated space modified especially for the needs of these children. However, there are now 12 children using a space that the MoE states will house 100 children. Again, the true number of seats available is overstated by a large margin.

Throughout BC, and especially in urban areas such as Richmond, there is a high need for childcare, both for preschool aged children and school aged children. Rooms which are dedicated to childcare in our schools are considered empty classrooms, despite the vital support they provide to working families. The StrongStart preschool program is a Ministry directed program, yet schools that house that program will be identified as having an empty classroom, unless there was a designated space made for the program when the school was built.

A big point of contention is that the MoE will recognize music rooms and childcare rooms, for example, if they are designated as such in the original design of the school. Due to the fact that Richmond has many older schools (pre-1980), where there was no forethought of officially designating spaces for specific uses, we have a great deal of rooms that are "empty classrooms" but are in fact being well-used by students and the community. There is no recognition that

schools are used differently over time, and no flexibility to redesignate space as a school naturally evolves.

At the secondary level, many of the empty seats can be accounted for by specialty classes offered through the regular curriculum, such as art, laboratory, shop, and foods classes. These rooms have a very specific use and maximum number of students they can hold. In a textiles class, only as many students as sewing stations can attend. Further, if these rooms are not used 100% of the time by at least 25 students, those are empty seats according to the MoE.

Ultimately, the MoE does not allow for any variance from the original build contract for any school. Richmond Schools Stand United strongly disagrees with the position of the MoE when they identify empty seats. Rooms which are actively used for the support and deployment of education as prescribed should never be counted as empty classrooms. Additionally, rooms which are used for childcare which is vital for working families, whether preschool or before- and after-care, should never be counted as empty classrooms. Common sense allowances should always be made for lower density classrooms, whether they are for special needs children or for specialty secondary school classes. When these issues are taken into account, Richmond's actual utilization rate is much higher than the MoE has stated, a fact that is true in cities throughout BC.

A technicality in the way the MoE calculates capacity exacerbates the problems described above. There are two ways of calculating capacity for a school, the nominal capacity and the operating capacity. The nominal capacity is a contracted number in agreement with the Ministry, which is always significantly higher than the operating capacity, the number of students that the school can actually support. The MoE prefers to talk about nominal capacity, which does not reflect the true maximum number of students a school can hold. When decisions are made about adding portables to a school, the school board will use the operating capacity. We argue that when portables must be added, that is more likely to be an accurate reflection on how full a school is, since districts do not want to place children in portables unnecessarily.

For example, Diefenbaker elementary has an operating capacity of 433 students. This is the actual maximum number of students that can be enrolled at the school. However, the nominal capacity is 465, which derives from 2 kindergarten classes at 20 children each and 9 regular classes at 25 children each. The way in which the school actually works only supports 433 students, while the MoE prefers to say 465. By choosing the nominal capacity over the operating capacity, it gives the illusion of 1,135 empty seats in Richmond, amounting to 7% of the total capacity.

Combining the operating capacity of Richmond schools with common sense allowances for non-enrolling classrooms and specialty learning spaces, gives a more accurate picture of a school district that is well utilized and offering the spaces its students need to thrive.