

October 20, 2016

Right Honourable Justin Trudeau, Prime Minister
Honourable Ralph Goodale, Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness
Honourable Amarjeet Sohi, Minister of Infrastructure and Communities

via email

Re: Funding for BC school seismic upgrades, a public safety emergency

Dear Mr. Trudeau, Mr. Goodale, and Mr. Sohi,

We write to you today to ask that the Government of Canada direct infrastructure funding towards urgently needed seismic upgrades in British Columbia's public schools. Doing so will enable the federal government to ensure the health and safety of thousands of Canadians (most of them children), provide post-quake emergency shelters, and meet its goals of investing in social infrastructure in order to lay the foundation for Canada's future.

Background & Context

The BC provincial government initiated its Seismic Mitigation Plan (SMP) in 2004 and identified 342 "High Risk" schools across the province. Buildings that are designated "High Risk" are likely to suffer structural failure (collapse) during even a moderate earthquake and be unusable afterwards. In 2005, the BC Liberal government promised British Columbians that "all at-risk schools in BC would be seismically upgraded by 2020." In 2008, the [BC Auditor General reported](#) "Southwestern BC is an earthquake environment similar to that of the coasts of Japan, Alaska, and Central and South America."

As of [September 2016](#), 155 upgrades have been completed, 6 are "proceeding to construction" (but work not begun), 21 are "under construction" (but several have not yet broken ground), and 42 are at the business-case stage. A staggering 118 have not even begun the process yet—44 of these are rated H1 and the majority are in Vancouver, Richmond, and Surrey—resulting in 35 percent of "High Risk" schools that have not even been discussed after 12 years. The initial 2020 completion date for 342 upgrades has now been pushed back to 2025, and for Vancouver as late as 2030. Currently thousands of BC kids—for example, there are 28,000 in Vancouver and 7,000 in Richmond, in addition to thousands of teachers, administrators, and support staff—spend their days in "High Risk" schools.

Why aren't all the remaining SMP projects across BC moving full-steam ahead? In 2013, the provincial government stated it would be up to school districts to "confirm the scope, schedule, budget and risks" associated with individual seismic projects before they will receive approval to move to the design and construction phase. In 2015, delays were caused by disagreements over the scope of the projects. Additionally, the Ministry of Education did not want to pay for students to be accommodated in portables while their schools were being upgraded. This is

reflective of a general failure to prioritize public education spending in BC. As a result, the process has become glacial.

Replacement Schools – Better Long-Term Investment than Retrofit

The BC government’s steadfast reluctance to properly fund education extends to the type of seismic upgrade projects it chooses to pay for. It has taken a “lowest-cost” approach that disregards long-term economic considerations and the public good that is served by well-built school buildings. Retrofitting a school so that it can stand up long enough after an earthquake for kids to get out alive is often the lowest-cost choice, as opposed to replacing it with a new building. But consider the ramifications.

Replacing an old school can eliminate millions in deferred maintenance costs—Vancouver alone has over \$700 million in deferred maintenance. These are buildings that, in addition to being seismically unsafe, are over 100 years old, are not easily accessible, don’t have enough facilities like washrooms, and aren’t designed to enable 21st-century learning. They are less energy-efficient than newer buildings and contain lead pipes, lead paint, and asbestos. These issues are not necessarily addressed during a seismic retrofit. Retrofitting will reduce the chances of children being crushed by their schools, but they might still have to run through clouds of asbestos dust to get to safety.

Retrofitted buildings are designed to meet the standard of letting occupants get out alive; they are not designed to be usable after a huge earthquake. Replacement buildings are designed to be usable the next day. So saving a bit of money now by taking the retrofit option would be more expensive later if we need to rebuild these schools after an earthquake. Given the enormous impacts (including financial) of such a disaster, why not get it right the first time—build new, safe, usable buildings—and save money in the long term as lives depend on it?

Families and communities need these buildings to be usable after the earthquake. Schools are the very heart of a neighbourhood and will be required as emergency shelters for individuals and families who’ve lost their homes. In times of crisis, when people need to flee their homes, they go to the hearts of their communities: schools. They sleep in rows of cots in the gym; they camp out on the playing fields. The City of Vancouver has designated 25 community centres as disaster support hubs. Given the distance between these hubs and the numbers of people that will be affected by a catastrophic earthquake, schools too will be needed as additional safe places.

It’s an Infrastructure and Public Safety Issue, Not an Education Issue

The buildings in which our children spend the majority of their day should keep them safe in an earthquake, not present a compounded threat and jeopardize their safety. Seismically upgrading schools is an urgent matter of public safety.

Why is the safety of our children discussed in the context of political games and priorities and treated as an education budget item? The structural and seismic safety of public school buildings should not be linked to the education budget.

Across Canada, roads, bridges, tunnels, libraries, and arenas are public safety and infrastructure projects. Public Safety Canada’s mandate is to keep Canadians safe from a range of risks such as natural disasters. Infrastructure Canada is responsible for building stronger communities by making new investments in social infrastructure such as early learning and child care and arguably public schools. For the first time in Canadian history, youth is now part of a prime minister’s portfolio—children and youth under the age of 24 represent almost 29 percent of Canadians.

An injection of federal funding for “shovel-ready” projects will have multiple benefits: it will enable projects that are fully planned but have been waiting for years for Treasury Board funding approval to finally get started; it will assist schools that have not even begun the process yet to finally see light at the end of a long tunnel; and it will take some of the funding pressure off of the provincial government, thus enabling it to devote adequate funding to school districts’ operational budgets.

As the Federal Government is responsible for public safety and infrastructure and Prime Minister Trudeau himself has retained the Portfolio of Youth, we the undersigned call on the Prime Minister and the Federal Government to fulfill their responsibilities and to immediately make federal funds available to seismically upgrade BC public schools. It’s time to do right by our children and stop putting their lives at risk.

Signed on behalf of these parent and advocacy groups:

[Parent Advocacy Network for Public Education](#)

[Vancouver District Parent Advisory Council](#)

[First Call: BC Child and Youth Advocacy Coalition](#)

[Richmond Schools Stand United](#)

[Surrey Students Now](#)

[Comox Valley Families for Public Education](#)

[Families Against Cuts to Education BC](#)

CC:

Hon Christy Clark, Premier of BC
Hon Mike Bernier, BC Minister of Education
Hon Naomi Yamamoto, BC Minister for Emergency Preparedness
Hon Alice Wong, MP Richmond Centre
Hon Dianne Watts, MP South Surrey — White Rock
Hon Don Davies, MP Vancouver Kingsway
Hon Gord Johns, MP Courtenay — Alberni
Hon Harjit S Sajjan, MP Vancouver South
Hon Hedy Fry, MP Vancouver Centre
Hon Jenny Kwan, MP Vancouver East
Hon Jody Wilson-Raybould, MP Vancouver Granville
Hon Joe Peschisolido, MP Steveston — Richmond East
Hon Joyce Murray, Vancouver Quadra
Hon Randeep Sarai, MP Surrey Centre
Hon Sukh Dhaliwal, MP Surrey — Newton