



June 19, 2016

To VBE Trustees,

RE: School closure list and repurposing policy

We are writing to express our grave concerns with respect to the school closure list to be announced on Monday, June 20th. We understand that this list is intended to expedite a large number of school closures (perhaps as many as 15-18) within the next two years. Since this course of action appears to deviate from the timeline articulated within the consultation process, and the impact of school closures will be felt most acutely by families, we ask that you thoughtfully consider the perspective of parents.

We accept the necessity of repurposing (closing) a number of schools as swing sites for moving the SMP forward and ultimately to reduce surplus capacity where current and future catchment populations are truly in decline and are unable to sustain a neighbourhood school. However, we continue to oppose the degree of closures being forced under the 95% utilization targets set by the provincial government as a condition for seismic upgrading. This capacity target, which is not based on educational research or priorities, will severely limit the VSB's ability to provide appropriate learning environments for all children, and we feel particular concern for special needs programs, tier 1 & 2 schools, and the loss of spaces for core educational purposes such as the arts.

Now it seems that "affordability measures" are not only forcing this capacity utilization, but accelerating school closures in advance of the timeline originally put forward in the approved LRFP (14 years). We are deeply concerned that the drive to reduce expenditures in the short term is expediting school closures much faster than would be otherwise advisable, and that there will be repercussions for this action that will certainly outweigh some of the short term financial gains.

We know from research that school closures will have profound impacts on children and communities, with disproportionate trauma felt by vulnerable populations for whom schools are the primary source of stability and family support (not just services, but also the relational networks which are a life line for many). Though these impacts may not register as itemized 'cuts' on a spreadsheet, for many, they will be no less devastating. Vulnerability is more pervasive than it may appear — 22% of children in Vancouver (approximately 11,000 children within the VSB) live in poverty. We are concerned that the VSB has not had sufficient time to gather a 'deep inventory' of schools to protect these communities for which proximity and community stability are critical.

An expedited timeframe and the simultaneous displacement of thousands of children will severely limit the ability of the VSB to adequately support affected families and school communities through this upheaval. Furthermore, fast tracking closures rather than working through the SMP timeframe, will mean that many children will be twice dislocated – first through closure and then for seismic upgrades. This is a heavy toll to place on children and families.

The LRFP public consultation built up a great deal of trust with the public particularly around trade-offs that would offset the loss of a neighbourhood school (which is an anchor within a community), with alternate services that would enhance community life. Leasing a vacated school site on publicly reserved land with a playground paid for by



parent/PAC funds, to independent/private schools would be a source of tremendous outrage for parents. This point is categorically stated within the LRFP Public Consultation Report. It is crucial that the VSB honour its commitment to affected communities in the appropriate and timely repurposing of vacated sites, consistent with the priorities identified by the public within that consultation process. A compressed timeframe of mass closures would make this extremely challenging.

An expedited process would also diminish the district's ability to develop and advocate for creative proposals that could reduce surplus capacity while mitigating the overall number of school closures. Unlike other districts, the VSB has the potential for generating revenue through mixed use vertical schools (commonplace in Toronto, New York and other major urban centres), community focused partnership leases (or partial repurposing) with other service providers (ECE for example) or the partial sale of land to offset rightsizing costs. This would preserve the value of neighbourhood schools, and provide long term revenue sources, while allowing the VSB to continue to design schools for 21st century learning needs. An expedited process of school closure removes any ability to pressure the provincial government to entertain proposals outside of a “stuff and close”, “lowest-cost” seismic procedure, rendering any advocacy to this end moot.

Finally, expediting a large number of closures would severely limit the VSB's ability to respond to changing demographics over the next 14 years (the actual SMP timeframe). A high degree of choice mobility has already been identified as a factor in “under enrolled” schools and, unless the district wishes to engage in a widespread forced expulsion of children, it will take many years to restore balance. In addition, the increasing volatility of the housing market in Vancouver, and the forced migration of families east, will likely change the demographic landscape of this city markedly, even within this timeframe.

We believe that there is an inevitability to this closure list that is different than the last time. Simply naming these schools will set in motion a chain reaction of decisions that will begin the decimation of school communities, making the subsequent retraction of any school from the closure list nearly impossible. Osoyoos being a case in point.

Therefore, we strongly urge the Vancouver Board of Trustees to slow down this process and limit the public declaration of schools for expedited closure to swing sites (and non-enrolled schools) as originally intended. This will allow the VSB the flexibility it needs to work within the original timeline of the LRFP, to honour the feedback of the public consultation process, to protect the well-being of communities and provide the best educational environments for the children of our city today and the future.

Sincerely,

The Parent Advocacy Network for Public Education