



September 23, 2016

Vancouver Board of Education Trustees  
Vancouver School Board  
1580 W. Broadway  
Vancouver, BC V6J 5K8

Dear Trustees,

We write today because we are deeply troubled by the process and the approach the VSB is currently taking with respect to school closures.

We understand the pressure to eliminate “inefficiencies” in facilities usage to secure seismic funding (despite the Minister of Education’s recent removal of a firm 95% capacity utilization target), and we understand the fiscal pressures that are driving the recommendation of multiple school closures on a much faster timeline than is laid out in the Long Range Facilities Plan (LRFP). However, we are extremely concerned that closures of this magnitude, which will have a massive and long-term impact on the provision of education within our district, are being executed without sufficient time or public input to consider the complexity of factors that affect students and neighbourhoods.

Such factors include the distribution of enrolment within and outside catchment areas, the needs of vulnerable students and communities, and changes in the distribution of school-age children within the city. We urge you to halt the closure process now, and to draw up a revised proposal that better serves the long-term interests of students and communities.

The Parent Advocacy Network (PAN) cannot support the process by which the current list of proposed schools for closure was created, as it did not adequately consider both Factor 1 and Factor 2 criteria as stipulated within the LRFP. This oversight has marginalized the human cost of school closure and has ignored the harmful impact of closures particularly on communities with a high proportion of vulnerable students.

The data presented to justify the identification of schools for closure do not take into consideration the broader context of where students reside and how mobility patterns are impacting school enrolment.

Further, the reliance on Baragar projections precludes the examination of crucial information on where students actually live – information that is essential to making decisions that must serve the long-term educational needs of the city and not perpetuate spirals of decline in some schools perceived by parents to be undesirable. Even a cursory examination of 2011 census data clearly shows that enrolment in a particular school does not necessarily correlate with population growth, stability or decline within its neighbourhood. For example, extrapolating from 2011 census data, the neighbourhood of Sunset has an elementary-school-age population of 3,148. The current capacity of schools in the area is only able to accommodate 50% of the population, and the proposed closure in this neighbourhood would decrease this to 40%.

It is imperative to consider the impact on enrolment at neighbourhood schools of new schools being constructed nearby, of the location of district programs, and of choice mobility. Given the severe and long-term impact of school closures, we believe trustees should have a full understanding of enrolment patterns and neighbourhood populations – including that provided by 2016 census data, due to be released in February – before making irrevocable decisions.

Parents have not been offered any alternative solutions to closure, such as the rightsizing of too-large buildings so that we may retain neighbourhood schools for viable student populations. Perhaps the Minister of Education's recent revocation of the 95% capacity utilization target opens up such possible solutions where only recently they were perceived to be impossible.

In addition to reducing surplus capacity, rightsizing would eliminate deferred maintenance costs and provide sufficient space for specialty facilities like arts rooms, and early childhood learning or after-school care to support families. Such facilities would be consistent with the vision of schools as Neighbourhoods of Learning, reflecting community needs and creating an environment for the proactive retention of local enrolment.

We've seen no indication that the VSB has considered revising catchment boundaries where oversubscribed and undersubscribed schools lie adjacent to one another, grandfathering existing students, but better redistributing capacity needs for the long-term.

We urge you to consider the public's experience in receiving and trying to make sense of the information they've been given. We hear every day from parents that they are very unclear about what's going on and why. This level of confusion has the practical effect of disenfranchising the residents of our city. It is imperative that families in Vancouver fully understand what is at stake, what is being lost, and how the losses will affect all children across the district.

Almost no attention has been paid to the dozens of schools that will be affected by a large, and unpredictable influx of students. Parents of these schools have not received notification or been given voice within this process, nor is it at all clear what the definition of "reasonable accommodation" might mean in practical terms for these school populations.

Moreover, there has been a failure to acknowledge the high degree of uncertainty inherent in this process. The experience of Carleton Elementary after the recent fire can be seen as a cautionary example. A thoughtful plan was communicated to accommodate the full student population at Cunningham Elementary, but things didn't proceed according to that plan. Parents didn't unanimously follow what was laid out, and a sizeable proportion of Carleton students scattered, creating an unanticipated strain on three nearby schools and the need to surplus a sizeable number of staff and teachers.

What will be the unanticipated ripple effects of 11 simultaneous school closures that will displace 3,188 students? More concerning, how will the VSB manage the scale of confusion and trauma that will result from this many students — a large proportion of whom are already vulnerable and coping with social and emotional challenges — transitioning into unknown school environments without any "safe" or familiar adults who understand their needs and support them in through this disruption?



Though PAN is not, in principle, opposed to the notion of closing schools if there is a redundancy of facilities or true population decline that's unable to support a viable neighbourhood school, we firmly believe that public support for closures is conditional on confidence in the process and the completeness of any supporting data used. PAN has, with due respect, lost confidence in this process.

The consequences of closing this many schools based on narrow parameters and a flawed selection process are so grave that we must urge you to vote **NO** on September 26th.

We ask you to redirect VSB staff to revise their approach to encompass the contextual information needed to fully understand population needs and trends, and to create a proposal that reduces surplus capacity in ways that promote healthy communities through the retention of neighbourhood schools, utilizing a combination of creative options for rightsizing and partial repurposing.

We also ask you to demand assurance from the provincial government that the VSB will receive the funds and flexibility needed to advance projects through the Seismic Mitigation Process in a timely manner that will provide safe and educationally appropriate facilities for students, to serve the needs of current and future generations.

We do not underestimate the risks inherent in this decision, and the fiscal implications for delaying this process. However, the only thing worse than deciding to dismantle neighbourhood schools would be to make a decision without sufficient evidence that this is in fact the only course of action. Your vote on September 26th will determine the future of public education in this district. We urge you to resist the pressure to move to an economies-of-scale model that will see the dismantling of the progressive vision of neighbourhood schools that the Board has fought so hard to maintain. Consider the legacy of the decisions you make.

Sincerely yours,

Parent Advocacy Network Steering Committee