

Dear Trustees,

Please accept this letter on behalf of the Parent Advocacy Network for Public Education (PAN) which outlines concerns for consideration with respect to the interim LRF that the VSB will submit to the Minister of Education by January 31, 2016.

We understand the Board is under extreme pressure to comply with the Minister's demand of 95% capacity utilization to secure funding for seismic projects. We are concerned that any unqualified solution presented in the interim plan will be taken as a final obligation for the VSB by the Minister and therefore not subject to further refinement based on public consultation as the VSB intends. We are concerned that the language of 'economic efficiency' and 'surplus capacity' is being accepted without qualification as the overarching criteria for the LRF without reference to the impacts or actual educational needs of school communities. If carried out, as written, this plan will have lasting and devastating consequences for families and communities across the Vancouver District, *disproportionately impacting those with the least ability to compensate.*

Loss of Integral Educational and Community Spaces

While a 95% capacity target using operating capacity (rather than nominal capacity as in the EY report) is educationally sustainable for most enrolling classrooms, it still does not recognize non-enrolling spaces (primarily in elementary schools) used for core educational purposes such as the arts, resource rooms used for additional learning supports, nor does it accommodate community services such as ECE, daycare, English language, counselling services and Adult Ed. that serve extended school communities in Vancouver. This creates a distorted perception of the actual 'surplus' space within the district, both on paper and for the public.

Following is a list of programs and services that would be eliminated under a 95% capacity target from a random survey of only 31 out of the 110 schools in the district: 10 music rooms, 4 art rooms, 8 classroom sized resource rooms (including 4 sensory rooms), 1 reading recovery room, 5 computer rooms, 1 dance room, 1 drama studio, 2 preschools, 2 daycares, 1 ESDL adaptive program (PIRS) and 2 family rooms. *These spaces support programs that are important to children and parents.* In addition, the social and emotional well-being of all children, particularly in schools that will be operating at full capacity, will require alternative spaces to breathe. Nowhere in the report is there an acknowledgement of the potential loss of these spaces and the activities that depend on them.

The VBE is advised to use as a guiding principle "facilities that support innovative, educational approaches providing effective learning." How will this be possible in 'upgraded' and rationalized buildings under a 95% capacity target as currently defined? Will the savings in operating and maintenance costs actually be used to recoup the loss of these programs? How will a restored band or strings program operate without a music room? We have already requested that the Ministry adopt a per school exemption to enable every school to accommodate education in the arts, as well as sufficient resource spaces and much needed community partnerships for educationally related services. *We would request that the VSB also make the reasonable request that every elementary school be granted a small exemption for non-enrolling spaces consistent with the principles of the NLC in new builds.*

Criteria for the Identification of 'Repurposed' schools and School closures

We acknowledge the necessity of identifying a large number of swing spaces to house children while schools are being seismically upgraded. However we are concerned that the criteria (as written) for identifying these sites does NOT consider the impact that this de facto closure would have on families and the local communities. Schools are more than bricks and mortars to facilitate the delivery of education - they are anchors in neighbourhoods that provide the context for friendship and extended 'family' support networks that are built over time, and the many community services before, during and after school that are an integral part of sustainable family life and the health and well-being of communities. For example, again from our small survey, these include before/after school care, PRO-D day workshops, boys and girls clubs, daycare, ESL classes, More Sports, Adult Ed, Spare Time Community Program, homework club, KAMP, Engage Immigrant Youth Program (VSB/SWIS).

Even the 'temporary relocation' of students (for at least 8 years!) to free up space for a swing site will start a chain reaction of events that will have significant impact on the surrounding neighbourhood, likely causing decline in property value and community vitality. Neighbourhoods are not equal in their ability to navigate these disruptions and any decision to 'repurpose' a school MUST consider the relative impact that it will have on families of that community, and not simply numerical efficiencies.

We strongly urge the Board to consider options for swing spaces that will have the least impact on communities, such as the shared use of available high school space, current swing spaces including Khalsa school and MacQuinna Annex in addition to South Hill and the portable site on the west side, the use of annexes whose amalgamation and restoration into a main school still retains community cohesion, relocating district program like Tye to a more appropriate facility and utilizing the vacated site, retaining 'old building' on new build sites for successive temporary schools, and creative cohosting of schools. In addition, *we urge the Board* to refrain from identifying schools for possible closure until such research and consultation is completed, to determine the course of action that minimizes the impact on neighbourhoods and community. Excepting situations where schools are geographically within the same immediate community, *we urge the Board* to present the case to the ministry for 'rightsizing' a larger number of schools over compacting school populations into a fewer number of older building. In addition to being consistent with best practice in research, it would enable communities to retain the educational spaces and services that are integral to the cohesion of their communities through the NLC grants.

Priorities for Seismic Upgrade

We are concerned that the priority for seismic upgrade, based largely on current capacity, disadvantages schools in areas of high poverty and low socioeconomic status. In particular, tier 1 schools whose low capacity is endemic to its ability to provide the educational services and supports necessary should be exempt from standard capacity thresholds and targets. We have already brought this to the attention of the Minister of Education. *We urge the school Board* to recommend that schools such as MacDonald and Seymour whose proximity to their communities is crucial, should be given due consideration for seismic mitigation priority and provided, through the LRFP, purpose-built facilities tailored to meet their educational needs.

Vision for the Future

Finally, we are concerned about the inconsistency between Barager's enrollment predictions of a 1% increase over 15 years, with the anticipated *net annual* growth of 2.8% for the population at large according to city statistics. Furthermore, we are concerned that the current distribution of enrolled children in VSB schools does not accurately reflect the actual distribution or composition of school aged children living in each neighbourhood. We are concerned that migration patterns as a result of choice legislation or a shift towards independent schooling are not clearly understood. Why are west side schools all at capacity and anticipated to remain so, when daycares are closing in the west because the growing school age population and housing affordability is largely located in the east? Decisions around facilities should be based on the 'actual' population projections of local neighbourhoods rather than the current enrollment and migration trends to ensure that neighbourhood public schools will be able to meet the need of future generations.

We urge the Vancouver School Board, to consider, that decisions made around facilities, *are not simply a response to enrolment trends, but will be active determiners of the future composition and vitality of neighbourhoods*; whether families will choose to stay and raise children will in part be dependent on the local schooling option available to them.

Healthy schools are schools that reflect the diversity of the neighbourhood. If the school board wishes to retain the support of families for neighbourhood schools it must have a vision for providing facilities that continue to provide, and seek to augment essential services such as preschools, strong start programmes, and other early learning opportunities, ESL classes for parents as well as providing additional educational spaces for core curricular subjects such as art and music.

These are parent priorities. If the school board must close facilities, then as stewards of public land, it must commit to working in partnership with the city to repurpose those sites in a way that respects and improves the life of that community. We believe this is intimated in the guiding principles of the LRFP, but we strongly urge the Board to make this commitment explicit for parents. The LRFP could be the opportunity for the VSB to work in partnership with the city and form a vision for neighbourhoods that would strengthen rather than diminish communities.

Thank you for your consideration,

Sincerely,

Maggie Milne Martens
on behalf of the Parent Advocacy Network for Public Education