



February 26, 2019

To whom it may concern:

The Parent Advocacy Network is pleased to submit feedback on the Long Range Facilities Plan (LRFP) that was made available to the public on February 22, 2019.

We recognize that there has been substantial decline in enrollment in VSB schools over the last two decades resulting in extra capacity in schools within the district. We also recognize that the distribution and make up of families in terms of both location and dwelling type has changed considerably. We understand the need for the school board to efficiently and responsibly manage its facilities to ensure money is directed to maximize benefits for K-12 students. This LRFP document and the Seismic Mitigation Program (SMP) have the potential to enable the district to create a forward vision for facilities that will shape learning environments for students across this city for decades to come. If this is to enhance educational opportunities for students rather than diminish them, the LRFP must be contextualized with an understanding of how space utilization supports student learning and curricular goals including the district's own vision and strategic plan. To this end, we raise the following questions and concerns to help ensure that district decisions regarding school closure, consolidation and seismic mitigation of schools are directed towards the best possible outcomes for student success.

### **Calculation of Overall Capacity**

The LRFP enumerates the total operating capacity of the district and measures this against the current enrollment to determine the number of "empty seats" that the district must eliminate in order to "optimize" space over the next ten years. Using abstracted numbers masks the actual real-life application of space utilization within schools. The majority of these seats are not 'empty' as suggested, but used for a variety of educational and community services that support student learning. In order to "plan for innovative learning environments that promote student engagement, student inclusion, and the delivery of diverse high-quality programs" identified as a guiding principle within the LRFP, it is essential to understand what programs and student supports would be impacted by this degree of capacity reduction.

Without disputing the existence of excess space PAN raises the following concerns:

1. That calculations for existing operating capacities in schools are based on architectural blueprints that span a 100-year history. These are inconsistent in the identification and designation of essential educational spaces required within any given school for classroom instruction, non-enrolling specialized teaching spaces and educational supports. For example, depending on the date of construction, in some elementary schools, music rooms are considered excess capacity and in others they are not. A comprehensive vision for facilities within the VSB must be based on an agreed upon understanding of what essential spaces should be within a school to meet curricular and competency goals i.e. all elementary schools should have sufficient classroom space to meet current and future enrollment needs as well as a library, gym, music room, art/science room and resource spaces for learning support. Current Ministry Area Standards, that informs operating capacity calculations, does NOT recognize the

need for non-enrolling space for specialized instruction. Eliminating all excess capacity based on this rubric will structurally eliminate quality education in the arts for all elementary schools across the district. If the VSB is choosing to eliminate spaces for core curriculum, then this needs to be explicitly stated for the general public.

2. Operating capacity calculations based on a standardized understanding of classroom size and composition do not take into consideration the varied spatial needs of students with specialized learning needs. For example, the calculation of operating capacity does not take into consideration the extra space needs for the 25 district special needs programs that operate with significantly reduced classroom sizes and sometimes requiring a second classroom. Nor does the operating capacity take into consideration the needs of schools that serve predominantly vulnerable populations.

For example, Queen Alexandra has an operating capacity of 270, which according to the Ministry formula allows for 2 k classes and 10 grade 1-7 classrooms. The current enrollment for Queen Alexandra is 146, putting it at only 41% capacity. However, because of the high number of designations within the school, they currently require 9 enrolling classrooms to accommodate the reduced class size needs. The remaining 3 classrooms are used for music, a sensory room and an art room. Based on the abstract surplus capacity calculation, Queen Alex would appear to have 5 empty classrooms. But this is not the case. The operating capacity required to meet the educational needs of students is not the same across the district. The VSB must calculate the additional classroom space currently needed to accommodate special needs programming and classroom expansion due to class composition and factor this within their calculation of excess space.

3. The ministry calculations for operating capacity are based on the formula located within the Area Standards document. The VSB has already identified this document as problematic. In 2016, the VSB was required to reduce capacity to a 95% capacity utilization rate calculated using the same formula that this current LRFP utilizes. At that time trustees moved that 95% capacity was not educationally supportable because it did not allow for sufficient flexibility to manage fluctuating enrollment and/or educational needs of students. It also eliminated core curricular opportunities, such as education in the arts. This current LRFP not only uses the same formula, it appears that it is attempting to eliminate capacity to a 100% utilization rate. More problematically, the Area Standards formula for operating capacity has not been updated to reflect restored language on class size and composition. Whereas previously, the operating capacity might reflect a median operating capacity that still retained a degree of flexibility within a school, with restored language, it now represents a maximum operating capacity within a school. Further to this, classrooms in new and replacement schools are often as small as 70m<sup>2</sup> for up to 30 students plus a teacher. Eliminating all flexibility within a district will have severe impact on families and communities resulting in enrollment lotteries, dispersed communities and crowded schools. VSB should determine an educationally appropriate district capacity utilization target that would give the district flexibility to respond to educational needs.

### **Families of Schools**

We are pleased that the LRFP is looking at understanding capacity distribution and looking at matching capacity to population needs within regions or families of schools. However, this document does not look to understand the factors that contribute to low enrollment in particular schools and whether this

in fact correlates with actual school aged child population decline within that area. There are a number of factors that are at play; choice mobility, gentrification in areas of low socio-economic status, and seismically unsafe schools. Barager, while accurately predicting enrollment projections based on existing patterns of enrollment, is not a necessary indicator of decline in school age student population within that catchment. Any comprehensive and responsible plan to reduced capacity in a way that supports strong communities and neighbourhood schools should consider the following:

4. In order to ensure there is sufficient capacity for future school age populations who wish to attend their catchment school it is essential that VSB also conduct a comparison of January registration (that more accurately reflects VSB K students residing in the area) and September enrollment. For example, at Queen Alexandra January 2017 registration was for 26 in catchment students with only 13 enrolling in September. Due to a restriction placed on cross boundary attendance, only 3 students of 9 cross-boundary applicants were accepted. It is important to identify whether 'choice' or population decline is the cause of declining enrollment. In that way, the VSB can make decisions around closure and consolidation in conjunction with the SMP process that seek to revitalize and strategically shift mobility patterns towards strong neighbourhood schools and communities. A second example is Champlain Heights annex and elementary. The annex has a capacity utilization of 110% while the main school, an H1 high risk facility, has a capacity of 55%. This would suggest a poor retention rate of students moving from the annex to the main rather than population decline. Understanding the factors that contribute to this, would be crucial in making decisions around facility consolidation in that area.
5. An even distribution and access to choice programming (French immersion, Montessori etc.) across the district is also essential in supporting neighbourhood schools. For example, in south Vancouver, Douglas Elementary, that has a new school facility and the only French immersion program in south Vancouver, is a full school even though, according to city census data, the school aged population in that area has declined. In schools within the neighbouring Killarney area, where population is steady, there has been a relative decline in elementary enrollment. The construction of new facilities and/or relocation of choice programs in areas of low enrollment but not population decline would have significant impact on strengthening the diversity and vitality of neighbourhood schools and could reverse mobility trends.

### **More and Better Programming?**

Consolidation is often justified on the premise that larger schools are educationally beneficial as they provide access to more programs and services. Research does not support this claim. In fact, smaller schools (between 200-400 for elementary and 800-1200 for secondary were endorsed by the VSB during the 2016 closure procedures) are more likely to support student success (in academic achievement and social/emotional wellbeing) with marked benefit to students of low socio-economic advantage.

Research also points to greater student and teacher satisfaction and sense of belonging in smaller schools. Practically, programs and services require space. For example, a school with 25 divisions is able to provide all students with one 45-minute gym period. A school with 13 divisions would enable every class to have gym time twice a week. It goes without saying, that a school without either a music or an art room, will not be able to provide quality programming in either of those curricular subject areas.

Queen Alexandra, as a tier 1 school, is a multicultural fine arts school that has a full music program and an art studio that is used for the AIRS program and Big Rock Candy Mountain. It has a subsidized before and after school care that accommodates 27 students and currently has a 5 year wait list. In addition,



Community School Teams provides after school programming every week day which is crucial to family survival within the neighbourhood. Would a consolidated school be able to absorb the additional before and after school care needs? In a consolidated school, would students have access to Community School Teams (CST) after school programming every day, or would it be reduced, thereby placing additional burden on families? Might it result in a larger pool of students vying for the same number of spots? Would Queen Alexandra students still be able to receive hot breakfast and lunch? In a consolidated school with optimized capacity, would these students have a quality music program or art program if the spaces that support it were no longer available? Would they have access to piano and violin lessons provided afterschool in the music room? Would they be able to retain the weekly dance and drumming program? Some of these services would be transferable or available within another school, but others, those that are 'space dependent' would not. This case study is not intended to single out Queen Alexandra but merely to illustrate the extent to which smaller schools cultivate a community of care and provision and rich educational experience for students in which space is crucial. The value of this to a community should not be underestimated nor rendered invisible by decisions based purely on abstracted spreadsheet data.

### **Closing remarks: Procedural considerations**

Research also shows that school closure negatively impacts student performance for both the closed and the receiving school, and may take several years to fully be recovered. Closure and consolidation of schools should happen slowly and across the full SMP lifespan to minimize trauma. Schools should never be consolidated into receiving schools unless that school has been seismically upgraded first and adjusted to fully accommodate that community. In addition, consolidation should at a minimum retain the same or improve levels of educational opportunity for students.

PAN is very concerned that a reduced district capacity to the degree that meets Ministry requirements for SMP funding will have significant, lasting and detrimental impact on student learning and educational opportunity, family liveability and neighbourhood vitality. Operational capacity and utilization statistics do not reflect the real day-to-day educational needs of students.

We again urge the district to use this opportunity to create a clear vision of how school facilities should support and grow educational opportunities for students to help guide decisions around reducing excess capacity. This would include a reasonable utilization target that accounted for the true spatial needs of successfully implementing the BC curriculum including teaching innovation, student inclusion and diverse programming.

Thank you for your attention and consideration to these concerns.

Sincerely,

Parent Advocacy Network for Public Education.