

Costs soar for earthquake-proofing B.C. schools

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As students return to school Tuesday, there are renewed concerns that rapidly rising costs of seismic upgrading at B.C. schools mean some of the work may not be completed on time.

Last year, the provincial government committed \$254 million for safety improvements to be made by 2009 in 80 schools considered most at risk.

Fifty-six of the schools are in the Lower Mainland, 19 are on Vancouver Island and the other five are in other parts of B.C.

But the amount of money allocated for the upgrading was based on 2004 cost estimates, and school officials say it's no longer realistic.

Les King, who is in charge of seismic upgrades for the Vancouver school board, says the board can no longer afford to do the work on time and on budget.

"We are looking at almost doubling of costs between the summer of 2004 and the summer of 2006 until now. If we don't have the money, not all the schools are getting upgraded. That's the simple story."

But the province says there is no money to cover rising costs, and Education Minister Shirley Bond says school boards will just have to make do.

"I'm not going to speculate on projects moving forward or how. We are committed to the plan we have in place. But I do expect there to be efficiencies. I expect school boards to find creative ways to deal with projects."

However, King says, so far, those "creative ways" have yet to be found.

More than 300 schools across the province are considered at high risk of collapsing in an earthquake.