

THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT ON THE ROAD TO SCHOOL SEISMIC SAFETY IN BRITISH COLUMBIA: THE OBSTACLES AND CIRCUMVENTING THEM

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SUMMARY

This paper outlines the road to a 1.5 billion, 15 year commitment by the government of British Columbia to school seismic safety. Over the course of a concerted one and a half year public education, media and lobbying campaign, school seismic safety has come to grip the collective social conscience and is becoming a focal point for promoting broader mitigation measures. The recognition of schools as an infrastructure priority has built a sense of community across the political spectrum

Key components to the approach were an alliance with the scientific community in educating government and the population about the risks and the solutions, and the incorporation of a public health approach to the problem. From a public health perspective, if there is any population in whom an expensive preventive intervention is worthwhile – it is children.

The paper reviews general obstacles to mitigation, including fatalism of the population and perceived lack of short-term political gain for governments. The specific obstacles to mitigation of schools in BC will also be examined. These obstacles have included: 1) Failure to designate the buildings as a priority for retrofit. 2) Locus of responsibility placed within the already cash-strapped education sector. 3) Discomfort at the price tag.

A return to basic social principles assisted government in setting priorities and funding this work. These basic principles include the recognition of the 2 following facts: 1) Children are number one on the public safety agenda 2) The 2 basic human rights of children, to physical safety and an education must not compete for the same funds. We don't need equations or calculations of cost-effectiveness to tell us what our guts already know and millennia of evolution have wired us to feel, there is no greater treasure to a society than its children

In engineering, as in public health, there is much work left to be done in educating the population about risks and prevention. Hopefully, the case study of BC can be an example of the broader benefits which flow from taking a multidisciplinary approach to the issue and creating an alliance between engineers and the community.