

B.C. schools at high risk of collapse in earthquake

Nicholas Read

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VANCOUVER -- Hundreds of thousands of children are not safe in most British Columbia schools in the event of an earthquake, a delegate to a world earthquake conference said Tuesday.

Andy Mill, chairman of the Association of Professional Engineers and Geoscientists of B.C.'s Seismic Risk Task Force, told reporters Tuesday that the 800 B.C. schools where seismic activity is strongest are at greater risk of collapsing in an earthquake than other building types. But upgrading the schools could cost \$1 billion, he told the 13th World Conference on Earthquake Engineering.

In June, Premier Gordon Campbell announced \$89 million in funding for seismic upgrading, but that money will not be forthcoming until 2006 at the earliest, after the next provincial election.

During the same month, several B.C. candidates in the federal election also expressed concern about potentially faulty school structures, but no federal money has been committed to the problem so far.

Mill's association is conducting a \$2-million comparative assessment of B.C.'s most at-risk schools to prioritize where and when the most urgent upgrades should occur. That assessment should be completed by October.

"We want to get a better handle on how bad the problem is and how we need to fix it," Mill said. "I think quite frankly that we've been lucky to date in this province," he added when asked about how pressing the problem is.

Schools are particularly vulnerable because of three factors, Mill explained:

- Most were built before the 1970s, the time when current earthquake building codes were enacted;
- Schools are usually built of brittle materials such as unreinforced masonry or brick that don't withstand earthquakes well;
- Because of the nature of earthquake wave motions, low-rise buildings are much more likely to be damaged than high-rise buildings.

The City of Vancouver is about 10 years behind Seattle when it comes to preparing its

schools for an earthquake, said Dr. Tracy Monk, a director of the parent group, Families for School Seismic Safety. In the last 14 years, only 11 Vancouver schools have been fully upgraded, she said.

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