

B.C. vows quake fix for schools  
\$2-million probe to assess risks; upgrades to follow

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As many as 800 British Columbia schools will be assessed for earthquake risk in a \$2-million first step toward a plan to fix every school that needs it, the B.C. government said Friday.

The assessment will cover all public schools in B.C.'s "high-risk" earthquake zones, including all of Vancouver Island's school districts. It will be completed between June and October and enable the Ministry of Education to develop a long-range repair plan.

"One of our top priorities is to ensure that we're keeping students safe," said Education Minister Tom Christensen. "Once this assessment is done, we'll be in a very strong position this fall to be pretty solid on a fixed plan to upgrade every single school that needs it."

Christensen said the assessment will provide a much clearer indication of future costs.

"At this point, we don't know if it's a couple of hundred million or a billion," he said. "We recognize it's a need, and for me and for this government it's a priority to move forward with this."

The mass seismic assessment will use methods developed by Dr. Carlos Ventura, director of the earthquake engineering research facility at the University of British Columbia, in consultation with the Association of Professional Engineers and Geoscientists of B.C.

The latest seismic science will be used, allowing for a consistent assessment across 39 B.C. school districts, Ventura said in an interview Friday.

"In the past, there was not a very consistent way of doing it," Ventura said.

The provincial government is also contributing \$185,000 to the engineers and geoscientists association to "co-ordinate research on seismic upgrades and to deliver a training program for engineers who conduct seismic assessments."

The Greater Victoria school district estimates that it will need \$6 million to address its significant seismic problems. Twenty-seven of its schools are unacceptable safety risks in the event of a sizable earthquake, according to the district's own assessment done last year.

"We welcome any announcement that helps make our schools even safer for our kids," said trustee Michael McEvoy, adding that the district also looks forward to "receiving the dollars necessary to fix our problems."

"There is no question that we are in further need of funds."

Last December, the district approved upgrades to eight of its highest-risk schools. It also adopted a capital plan to upgrade the next seven most at-risk schools.

Among high-risk schools identified were Monterey elementary, where most of the work has been completed; Margaret Jenkins and George Jay elementaries, where most high-risk elements will be addressed this summer; and Reynolds secondary, which is slated for an upgrade next summer.

Work on South Park elementary, made possible through a capital grant from the province last year, is also slated to be done this summer.

Christensen said the assessment, first promised by former education minister Christy Clark last October, will allow the province to rank future projects and formulate a long-term plan.

He said the province has already committed \$71 million over the last four years to non-structural and minor structural seismic safety improvements as well as significant funding out of its capital projects budget.

In its February budget, government committed to \$50 million annually toward major earthquake-proofing upgrades beginning in 2006-07.

Dr. Tracy Monk, a family physician in Burnaby and co-founder of Families For School Seismic Safety, said she is pleased the assessment will take advantage of the latest science and provide a clear snapshot of the condition of B.C. schools.

Monk said her organization will continue to press the government to commit to a 10- or 15-year program in which to address all schools that need upgrades. The B.C. Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils is also pushing for such a time frame.

"This (assessment) is a really important first step," Monk said.

Monk's grassroots group has been lobbying government since October.

"In government terms, this is probably a fairly quick response," she said.