

Parents call for federal funds to hasten seismic school upgrades

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Victoria has pledged \$2 million to assess earthquake safety in 800 B.C. schools but parent groups urged the province to get on with the job of making classrooms safer within a decade by asking Ottawa to buck up.

Education Minister Tom Christensen was at Vancouver's recently upgraded Sir W.M. Van Horne Elementary Friday to announce the seismic assessment of all public schools in high-risk zones, which is to be done by October.

"The goal is to move forward as quickly as we can to get an assessment mechanism that can be applied across the province, so that we are not comparing apples and oranges when we are determining our priorities," Christensen said. "There has been a lack of agreement among the engineering community as to what is the appropriate [assessment] tool to use."

Christensen said the three-year service plan calls for \$70 million in seismic upgrading by 2007, which will be based on the assessments, with the schools at greatest risk getting the funds first.

Students attending schools in the Queen Charlotte Islands, Victoria and Vancouver are in the highest-risk categories.

With geologists warning of the pending Big One expected any time, parent groups have been after Victoria to improve school safety since the 1980s.

Dr. Tracy Monk of Families for School Seismic Safety said she's seen assessments before as successive governments failed to properly address the issue but this time is hopeful a centralized effort can get the job done in 10 years.

"If you want to fix them all in 10 years, which is what we would like the government to do ... have an idea from Day 1 of the magnitude of the problem, so you can set a 10-year pace," Monk said, adding the current pace would complete the upgrading by 2060.

"We see no reason the funding shouldn't be rolled forward -- some of it to 2005. Another angle we are pressing is we think there should be federal participation in this.

"We don't see this as an education issue -- we think education and the physical safety of children are both basic human rights and shouldn't be competing for the same strapped funding."