

Schools' earthquake readiness to be tested
Up to 800 more buildings to be assessed for potential safety flaws

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More than \$2 million will be spent in seismic assessments of as many as 800 B.C. public schools in high-risk earthquake zones, B.C. Education Minister Tom Christensen said Friday.

Many of the schools are in the Lower Mainland, on Vancouver Island and in the north.

"The results will be compiled province-wide and will allow the Ministry of Education to ensure that the schools with the highest seismic risk are upgraded as quickly as possible," said Christensen.

Assessments on schools in 39 districts are expected to be completed by October. The cost and time frame of school upgrades will only be determined after assessments are carried out.

Tracy Monk, a parent and spokeswoman for Families for School Seismic Safety, said she hopes professional involvement in the assessments will speed school upgrades.

"The current pace in Vancouver is to complete the work in 60 years, which I think is unacceptable."

She wants the project completed in 10 years.

"Honestly, it's been one government after another that has failed to address this problem," she said Friday. "Of course the fear if they don't do it in time is that something happens, and children's safety is at risk."

Monk said the cost of upgrading schools is estimated to be anywhere between \$500 million and \$1.5 billion dollars.

The government will spend another \$185,000 to train engineers to carry out assessments and coordinate research on seismic upgrades, Christensen said.

Seismic assessments of schools were last carried out in 1991. When asked why a new set of assessments are necessary, Christensen said that science has changed, rendering assessment tools used 10 to 15 years ago irrelevant.

When it comes to earthquake engineering, the science hasn't changed that much, said Perry Adebar, a professor of structural engineering at the University of B.C., who noted that what is different now are assumptions made in the field.

He said that because the subject is more art than pure science, there often isn't a perfect solution.

"A lot of the time, the solution comes from making the best judgment of the day," he said.

The main thing that will change with the new assessment is the way more moderate schools are ranked, said Leon Bell, who helped develop the new assessment strategy.

"What you'll find is any of the types of assessments done today will still identify the same thing with regards to high- and low-risk schools. What will change will be the more moderate [risk] schools," he said.

Areas deemed at highest risk are the Lower Mainland, the coast, Vancouver Island and the Queen Charlotte Islands.

A detailed report of the assessments will be prepared by the end of the year, after which the government will put together a long-term seismic upgrade plan.