

Dec 2, 2003

To: Adrienne Montani, Chris Kelly and all members of Committee 2
From: Families for School Seismic Safety

I am writing to you on behalf of Families for School Seismic Safety. First we want to thank the board and VSB staff for being so supportive of the advocacy efforts we are making to get new federal and provincial money to bring our schools up to acceptable seismic life safety standards.

As you are aware, the Surrey School Board condemned 2 school buildings at White Rock Elementary because they posed a very high risk to the children and staff in them in the event of even a moderate earthquake. As you are also aware, many of our buildings have also been categorized as high risk and may pose a similar threat to our children. There are likely hundreds of vulnerable school buildings in the province considered by the engineering community to be at risk.

APEG (Association of Professional Engineers and Geoscientists) has just submitted a proposal to government which states that "This proposed project has been formulated in response to an urgent need to address the unacceptable life safety risk that BC students and staff currently face in the event of a moderate or strong earthquake inflicting heavy damage on vulnerable school buildings." The words "urgency" and "unacceptable life safety risk" are the most compelling to us in this statement.

There are several ways to manage risk, one is to condemn buildings and put the children into portables if the level of risk is felt to be unacceptable. This is a risk-reduction measure that reflects the concern of the building manager /owner for the occupants - the children and staff. Another strategy is to rapidly fix the buildings. In Surrey, they decided to demolish the building, in other cases, a retrofit may make more sense.

The Surrey school closure illustrates how important it is that our school boards, and our Provincial government, take direct responsibility for their buildings when they pose a threat to the life safety of children and staff. In Vancouver, the urgency of the need to take corrective action on a large number of buildings was first clearly stated in 1990! We are astonished to be standing here in 2003, still pointing to the now out-of-date document, which clearly stated that the level of risk was unacceptable. We realize that 13 years worth of governments and boards have been trying. We are also aware that the pace has been glacial. Our government has to do more and it has to do it now. The clock is ticking.

Government holds the purse strings. Boards are entrusted with managing the buildings. Our federal and provincial governments must make a financial commitment to act on the clearly stated risk; our school boards must not quietly accept anything less. The life safety of children is NOT an educational issue. The funding for our children's education should not be competing within the same budget as the funding required to preserve their life safety. It is absurd to that point of insanity that any of us should accept such a choice.

We have been greatly encouraged over the past few months by all the support you have shown us – in view of recent developments in White Rock, we wonder if our Board has had any thoughts of stepping up pressure within the channels available to you to ensure that a solution, such as that proposed by the independent professional body of engineers, goes forward, and that new funding is put into place rapidly to address this problem.

While we are trying to connect with parents in other jurisdictions, we think it would be wonderful if our trustees could reach out to trustees in other affected jurisdictions so that all boards can speak with one voice on this issue. We also wonder if staff would be willing to contact staff in other jurisdictions – perhaps superintendent-to-superintendent, staff-to-staff, trustee-to- trustee, parent-to-parent we can all link arms across the province on this one issue about which there is unprecedented consensus. Perhaps there are public statements which some of you feel that you can make. With upcoming elections, the time for mobilization of all forces is now. New money from sources like the federal government could only be good for education as a whole.

We welcome any and all help you have to offer us and look forward to your active participation in our campaign to bring all schools in the province up to acceptable seismic life safety standards. Through a fluke of architectural history, schools happen to be built of some of the worst possible materials for a zone of seismic risk. The most vulnerable members of our society happen to be spending their days in some of our most vulnerable buildings. Now that we all understand the risk clearly, we all need to stand up together at the same time and have our voices heard. The situation is unacceptable. Work like this is what the public purse is for. What building could be more important than a school? Who could be more important than our children?

Please advise us in the coming weeks of any action you plan to take and let us know if we can be of any assistance in your efforts. Help us to keep our children safe – we are counting on you all

Sincerely,

Dr. Tracy Monk
Families for School Seismic Safety