

April 7, 2007

Dear Premier Campbell

Parents applauded your 2004 commitment to seeing all BC schools brought up to acceptable seismic life safety standards by 2019. We appreciated the leadership you showed in undertaking a provincial assessment to define the magnitude of the problem.

We are now into the third year of a 15 year commitment and there does not appear to be a clear plan. Your government has indicated in the budget that it is working with districts to develop a long term plan.

It is also becoming increasingly clear that what is needed is an integrated approach that focuses on creating better educational facilities in every sense – including that they be structurally sound. We hope to that the goal and the vision which drives the process in every district will be a holistic one in the service of better educational buildings in every sense of the word.

Therefore FSSS asks that the long term plan include:

- Clear construction timelines for each school
- Transparent annual public reporting at all levels, on progress of the school seismic upgrades and replacements
- Completion of all upgrades by 2019
- An integrated approach to improving educational infrastructure, to ensure that at the completion of the project, the students and teachers of BC can work and learn in the best possible educational environments that are also structurally sound.

It is also unclear if the government has allocated the staff required to create and implement an integrated long term plan. The 15 year commitment seems hollow if the mechanisms to achieve it have not been put in place.

We recognize that rising construction costs may mean the original \$1.5 billion will be inadequate to complete the upgrades. It is our opinion that cost can not be a barrier to ensuring our schools are made safe for our children, as soon as possible.

We remind the government that Seattle will be finished seismically upgrading and improving all of its schools in 2010

We also reiterate our position that school seismic safety be regarded as an infrastructure issue that does not compete for education funding. The 2 basic human rights of children to education and physical safety should not compete for the same funds. Children deserve their share of infrastructure funds.

With regards to government's plans to upgrade the seismically high risk legislature - while we applaud all efforts at hazard mitigation and support the preservation of heritage buildings, we also note that there are 311 school buildings full of thousands of children which are also high risk buildings. Many of these school buildings are also heritage structures. We hope that plans to upgrade the legislature will not contribute in any way to slowing of the schools project.

FSSS has previously obtained information from a freedom of information request which revealed that BC Building Corp carried out a seismic assessment of its provincially administered building inventory in 1997. Six out of 235 buildings were found to be at high risk. 2 have since been sold.

The government's seismic risk assessment of BC schools found that 311 out of 864 school buildings assessed are at high risk of sustaining severe damage to structural elements in the event of a moderate to strong earthquake.

We encourage the provincial government to work with the federal government to include schools on the critical infrastructure list as they are in other countries, and to provide seismic upgrade funding under the National Disaster Mitigation Program.

This year the United Nations has launched a global initiative to make schools the primary focus of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction:

“Governments must act now to reduce the devastating impact of disasters on their citizens, especially their children. Strengthening school buildings and educating students about how to prepare for disasters will save lives.”

— ***UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, October 2006***

Perhaps the most powerful statement on the importance of addressing this issue was made by the OECD experts group in 2004

“The motivation for school seismic safety is much broader than the universal human instinct to protect and love children. The education of children is essential to maintaining free societies . . . most nations make education compulsory. A state requirement for compulsory education, while allowing the continued use of seismically unsafe buildings, is an unjustifiable practice. School seismic safety initiatives are based on the premise that the very future of society is dependent upon the safety of the children of the world.”

Finally, as noted by John R. Filson, scientist emeritus of the United States Geological Survey.

“There is a notion that when faced with the "amoral mechanics" of the earth, we can only recognize the ephemeral nature of our presence on it. The continuing tragedy is that in the face of natural hazards, there is little attention given by the public and governments to plans and policies to reduce the effects of these threats before they occur. Amoral phenomena produce immoral episodes of grief and loss. Natural hazards are inevitable; natural disasters are not. “

Premier Campbell parents are looking to you to show leadership in putting the mechanisms and resources in place to make your strong commitment of 2004 a reality.

Sincerely,
Families for School Seismic Safety