

Superintendent Report to the Board of School Trustees

Final Report regarding the proposed closure of
Ridgeway Annex (June 2011) and consolidation with Ridgeway School
April 28, 2009

Introduction

On Wednesday, December 17, 2008 the Ministry of Education announced \$70 million in funding for the seismic renovations to Ridgeway Elementary, Queen Mary Elementary and the partial replacement of Carson Graham Secondary. Ridgeway Elementary and Queen Mary Elementary will both undergo exterior restoration and extensive interior reconstruction. The Province will contribute \$32.4 million and the North Vancouver Board of Education will contribute nearly \$6.6 million to cover the additional costs of heritage restoration at Ridgeway and Queen Mary Schools. Sections of Carson Graham having "high" seismic risk will be replaced by a seismically-sound building at a cost of \$38 million.

A possible replacement project for Ridgeway School was approved in 2004. Significant research, feasibility studies and long-term planning has gone into this project. After extensive consultation with community representatives and the City of North Vancouver, an innovative approach to provide the additional funding required for Ridgeway to extend the project beyond seismic upgrades and secure the heritage values of the building was developed.

The Ministry's approval of the Ridgeway project provides for the completed heritage restoration school to accommodate 3 Kindergarten classes, a capacity of 350 for Grades 1 through 7, and identifies space for *Neighbourhoods of Learning* to allow for the operations of preschool and after school programs within the new school. The Ministry of Education has extended the opportunity for the School District to further increase the capacity of the heritage restoration project from 350 students in Grades 1 through 7 to 425 students, thereby enabling the accommodation of the combined populations of Ridgeway School and Ridgeway Annex within the new heritage restoration school. The Ministry would increase the approved budget of \$20.4 million dollars by \$750,000 to enable the construction of the larger school. In order to secure the option of the larger school, the North Vancouver School District would need to proceed with a closure by-law for Ridgeway Annex.

School District Challenges

Declining enrolment, increasing surplus capacity, aging facilities, and financial challenges are significant issues that have been faced by the Board of Education for the past seven to ten years. The Board has committed to extensive consultation and communication processes to address these issues and concerns. The School District has consistently engaged the community: heightening awareness of the impending challenges, formulating and implementing plans to effectively respond to them, and contributing to the development of a compelling *Vision* for the future.

- The Board of Education strives to preserve and enhance the quality of instructional services and educational opportunities for students within public education in North Vancouver, while maintaining the viability of schools within all areas of the community.
- The Board developed its *Vision* for the future and established a *Sustaining Schools Working Committee* to help sustain the operation of schools within the School District as an alternative to the consideration of the closure of schools.
- The Vision process engaged the community in consultation and resulted in the identification of key areas to enhance the quality of instructional services and educational opportunities for students.

Declining Enrolment

Since 2002, when enrolment peaked at greater than 18,500 students, the North Vancouver School District has experienced a total enrolment decline of more than 3,000 students. A further projected decline of 750 to 1000 students in the next three years will bring the total decline in student enrolment to more than 3,750 students, representing a 20% decline in total enrolment over the past 10 years.

- Declining enrolment will continue to be a challenge facing the School District for the next three to five years, primarily as a consequence of the declining birth rate
- The total number of students in North Vancouver (and in the Metro area) will continue to decline
- Students have become a 'diminishing resource' to support the sustainability of schools
- The lack of affordable housing in North Vancouver (on a comparative basis to other metro areas) makes it increasingly difficult for families to settle in our community.

In addressing challenges of declining enrolment, the Board of Education has actively embraced program initiatives to help maintain the student population including: the introduction and expansion of program opportunities for students in the areas of early learning, International Baccalaureate, French Immersion, careers, sports, visual arts, digital media and high performance programs. Program studies are also proceeding through the *Sustaining Schools Working Committee* in the areas of Montessori, Mandarin, Music, Fine Arts, Outdoor Education and Sports.

In addition, the Board of Education has actively grown and expanded the International Education program by more than 500 students over the past six years (from 150 to 650 students), attracting both secondary and elementary students from more than twenty nations. The influx of International Students has helped to 'buffer' the enrolment decline that continues to be experienced across the School District.

The Board of Education has also invested in enhanced communication to ensure that the quality of the experiences and program opportunities available to students in the North Vancouver School District are effectively communicated, promoted and marketed. A strategic communication plan is now in its early stages of implementation to build upon the strong foundation and reputation of the school district as a very high performing school system and to continue to improve the 'welcoming' experience for our students and our families.

- The *Towards the Future for Schools* community consultation process of 2008 identified key themes for the sustained operations of schools within the North Vancouver School District and planning for the future. These themes included: enhancing program offerings; supporting early learning; preschool and before and after school care; expanding community use and partnerships; coordinating community planning; and building new schools.
- The findings of the *Towards the Future for Schools* process were presented at the 6th Annual Community Forum in 2008, and communicated through a Community Forum report and through a series of *Towards the future for Schools* community meetings held in 2009.
- The school district continues to work with the City and District of North Vancouver to address affordable housing for young families and to coordinate construction of new schools to incorporate community amenities to address community needs (health, social, recreation).
- The immediate communities, municipalities and the Recreation Commission have been engaged in discussions related to the planning of the construction of new schools.

Surplus Capacity

As a consequence of continued declining enrolment, there is an increase in surplus capacity within existing School District facilities. The amount of surplus capacity is expected to grow over the longer term. The current surplus capacity of 2500 student spaces is expected to increase to approximately 3500 spaces within the next three years.

- Further declines in enrolment will result in even greater surplus capacity
- Stretching instructional resources to address facility operating expenses detracts from the instructional services and program offerings
- School closures and the consolidation of schools and/or programs through the shared use of facilities helps reduce surplus capacity and facility operating costs, while preserving financial resources for instructional services and program delivery purposes.

The rental and lease of surplus classrooms and full schools has enabled the Board of Education to increase its short-term revenue generating capacity. However, short-term revenue received in this manner must also be balanced against longer-term capital costs related to maintenance and upgrades for the continued operation of these facilities.

Aging Facilities

The facilities in North Vancouver School District have an average age of nearly 50 years. As the majority of schools were constructed during the period of 1955 to 1965 many are nearing, or are past, the end of their functional life. Costs associated with the continued operation and maintenance of aging facilities is requiring an increasing proportion of the school district's operating budget.

Many of the facilities built in the 1950s and 1960s require extensive upgrades related to seismic condition, accessibility issues, safety concerns, asbestos removal and energy efficiency. Additional upgrades are also necessary to support the effective delivery of instruction to meet the needs of students. While the school district has made very good progress in upgrading existing facilities, the additional costs associated with the requirements of these aging facilities places a significant strain on the funding provided by the Ministry of Education.

- Between 1998 and 2008 the School District completed more than \$100 million in capital projects – renovations, additions and new replacement schools.
- Annual Facilities grant funding (currently at \$3.1 million) has remained relatively constant over the past ten years, while capital costs for upgrades have significantly escalated
- The School District has identified more than \$202 million in capital requirements in the 2008/09 five-year Capital Plan including replacement schools with a combined value of greater than \$100 million and seismic upgrades with a combined value of greater than \$100 million.
- The *Towards the Future for Schools* process identified the theme of Building New Schools as an integral component in addressing the demands for the future.
 - *The consolidation and construction of new facilities is preferred to renovating existing facilities; new buildings will be an asset to the school district; enabling increased joint use, reduced operating costs, implementation of energy efficiencies & 'green' building measures, foster a welcoming environment, and enhancing pride in our schools and in our community*
- New schools valued at greater than \$120 million have been, and will be built, at Lynn Valley Elementary, Westview Elementary, Sutherland Secondary, Highlands Elementary (2009), Ridgeway Elementary (2011), Carson Graham Secondary (2012), and Queen Mary Elementary (2013).

Financial Challenges

Previously supported by local taxation, the North Vancouver School District was able to develop an educational delivery model of small schools in each community or neighbourhood. This coincided with the rapid expansion of North Vancouver during the early 1960s as housing developments flourished. While small schools are attractive from an educational and community perspective, the current funding allocation system based primarily upon student enrollment places the North Vancouver School District and its'

community at a disadvantage. The small school neighbourhood model that was formerly a cornerstone of the community is no longer sustainable. The Board of Education has consistently advocated for the Ministry of Education to provide for the true costs of public education through the funding allocation system.

The School District's operating budget is directly tied to the number of students enrolled. As a result of declining enrolment and the diminishing capacity to generate additional revenue during the current global economic 'downturn', the Board is presently facing a budget shortfall (estimated at \$3 million) as it develops the Operating Budget for 2009/2010.

- Funding challenges will continue to arise as a result of declining enrolment and the funding allocation practices of the Ministry of Education that have not kept pace with inflation, or increased costs related to salaries and benefits
- Increasing reliance on revenue generation through the continued expansion of the International Program, the introduction of fees, and parent fund-raising places the School District in a position of vulnerability

The Board has consistently demonstrated strong fiscal management in addressing the demands arising from reduced operating grants, unfunded liabilities, and policy changes introduced by the Ministry of Education. The Board has increased its revenue generating capacity through: an expansive International Education program; the sale of curriculum resources and services; expanding the use of School District facilities; the rental and lease of surplus classrooms and schools; system-wide closures; and the introduction of cost savings measures such as the implementation of energy efficiency in all buildings.

Although the Board of Education has achieved reasonable success through these actions and other measures to protect the quality of instructional services and educational opportunities provided to students throughout the School District, the Board has determined that it has been necessary to close and consolidate schools to direct as many funds as possible to the classrooms and to students.

The School District has experienced the closure and consolidation of four elementary schools since June 2004 and has relocated programs and services to reduce surplus capacity through the shared use of existing facilities. Lonsdale, Maplewood, Monteray and Westover schools have all been closed, generating annual revenues of \$600,000, while achieving more than \$5.86 million in operational savings over the past five years.

Prevailing conditions for the future

The prevailing conditions of declining enrolment, increased surplus capacity, aging facilities and financial challenges are expected to persist into the foreseeable future. These issues have been highlighted through the *Towards the Future for Schools* consultative process conducted over the past two consecutive school years. The possible closure and consolidation of schools has been consistently communicated to help increase awareness within the broader context of the entire school district.

The consideration of school closures and consolidations has been advanced with the intent of supporting the school district's Vision for the future, including the provision of welcoming, safe and sustainable facilities that enhance the learning and teaching environment.

The 6th *Annual Community Forum Towards the Future for Schools* report identifies support for the construction of new schools in all areas of the School District and the need to proceed at the earliest opportunity to direct operational savings to the classroom:

- the consolidation and construction of new facilities is much preferred to the renovation of existing facilities; new buildings will be an asset to the school district, enable increased joint use, the implementation of energy efficiency measures, and will increase pride in schools and the community

- some expressed concern that money was being wasted with the continued operation of small schools and that the process of school closures should get started; operational savings should be directed to the classroom level.

The School District intends to preserve and enhance the quality of instructional services and educational opportunities for students within public education in North Vancouver, while maintaining the viability of schools within all areas of the community.

Consultation Process

Prior to engaging the community in the formal process for the consideration of the closure of Ridgeway Annex and the consolidation with Ridgeway School, the school district has conducted numerous public consultation meetings where the possibility of school closures and consolidations has been discussed in relation to the capital planning process and the *Vision* for the school district.

The comprehensive consultative process of the *Towards the Future for Schools* that culminated in the 6th Annual Community Forum on October 16, 2008 engaged the broader community in specific discussions related to "Building New Schools to Achieve the 2020 Vision". These meetings also addressed the potential for the closure and consolidation of schools as well as other challenges being faced by the North Vancouver School District.

In advancing the capital planning process, the Board of Education provided its approval on December 9, 2008 for the Capital Project Agreements for Ridgeway Elementary, Queen Mary Elementary and Carson Graham Secondary. The capital projects approved for both Ridgeway Elementary and Carson Graham Secondary made provision for larger schools with increased capacity upon the closure of Ridgeway Annex and Balmoral Secondary, respectively.

Upon the Ministry of Education's approval of the capital projects for Ridgeway, Queen Mary and Carson Graham on December 17, 2008, the Board of Education arranged community consultation meetings on February 5, 2009 to discuss the implications of these projects and the potential consideration for closure of Ridgeway Annex and Balmoral Secondary.

A public consultation meeting was held at Ridgeway Elementary on February 5, 2009 to discuss the capital project at Ridgeway including; the history of the capital project over the past five years, the option to build a larger Ridgeway School upon the closure of Ridgeway Annex, and the process of transition to facilitate construction of the heritage restoration of Ridgeway school. Input opportunities were provided to meeting participants. Summaries of the meetings and Key Questions and initial thoughts were collated and posted to the School District's website.

The consultation process for the consideration of the closure of Ridgeway Annex and consolidation with Ridgeway School has been conducted in accordance with the provisions of Policy 610: Closure of Schools (Permanent). This process provided members of the school district and the Ridgeway Annex community with specific opportunities for input for the Board's consideration.

Following the motion at the Public Board Meeting of February 24, 2009 to formally commence the consultation process related to the possible closure of Ridgeway Annex and the possible consolidation with Ridgeway School, a series of Public Meetings have been held.

- March 25, 2009 Public Meeting #1 at Ridgeway Annex School (Proposed Closure)
- April 2, 2009 Public Meeting #2 at Windsor Secondary (Towards the Future for Schools)
- April 6, 2009 Public Meeting #3 at Argyle Secondary (Towards the Future for Schools)
- April 8, 2009 Public Meeting #4 at Carson Secondary (Towards the Future for Schools).

These meetings were advertised through community newspapers, the School District's website and through school newsletters and notices. Meeting Minutes, presentation materials outlining the rationale for the

proposed closure, and Questions and Answers from the Public Meetings were recorded and reported on the School District's website.

Assistant Superintendent Bryn Roberts met with the Ridgeway Annex Response Coordinating Team on a number of occasions and with the designated liaisons. In addition, numerous public meetings were conducted related to planning for the Heritage restoration of Ridgeway Elementary. More recently, a Steering Committee was established and meetings have been held. Minutes from these meetings have also been posted to the school district's website.

The School Response Team coordinated the gathering of information that assisted in the consultation process, including alternative proposals, compiled the responses, and presented their findings on behalf of the schools and their community to the Board of Education at the Public Board Meeting of April 14, 2009.

Ridgeway Annex Response Team Report

The Response Team Report was presented by the Ridgeway Annex Response Team to the Board of Education at its public meeting of April 14, 2009. The report identifies the strong educational support that has been possible for children through the operation of this small community school. While acknowledging the benefits achieved through the continued operation of Ridgeway Annex, there is also the appreciation that the ability to provide such a setting within the school district has been a 'luxury'. While not approving of the proposed closure of Ridgeway Annex in 2011, the report indicates an acceptance of the decision to close Ridgeway Annex in 2011, or on the completion date of Ridgeway (Main) School. This is supported from the perspective that the Board of Education must address challenging financial circumstances.

Response Team Concerns

In regards to the concern for the accommodation of students, the larger Ridgeway School, possible through the closure of the Annex, will enable the accommodation of the student population from both schools upon the completion of the capital project.

Concerns related to class size, sharing of resources, supervision of students, and the need to build a strong sense of a community within the larger Ridgeway are all acknowledged. These concerns are expected to be effectively addressed at the new Ridgeway School in the future.

Concerns were expressed related to the future use of the vacated Annex, indicating an interest in maintaining the building and grounds for use within the community, particularly in support of after school care, pre-school and day care. These suggested uses of the Annex are consistent with those identified through the *Towards the Future for Schools* process and are consistent with the practices of the Board of Education. The building and the grounds would be maintained for community use, for potential rentals, or leases for services for children and families, and to address any future demands.

PAC requests and concerns have also been communicated regarding the mural on the east side of the building, resources purchased by the PAC, the sandbox, and the concrete tables and benches on the grounds of Ridgeway Annex. Resources purchased through the PAC would be carried forward to the main school. Consultation will take place between the PAC and the Ridgeway Steering Committee regarding these requests and concerns.

Input provided through the Towards the Future for Schools process

The community input received through the *Towards the Future for Schools* meetings conducted across the school district indicated strong support for the consolidation of Ridgeway Annex with Ridgeway. This view is consistent with the perspective provided through the *Towards the Future for Schools* process

- *"support was indicated for the consolidation of Ridgeway and Ridgeway Annex through the construction of a new school; there was interest for the new school having child care space."*

Input provided through the February 5 Capital Projects Meeting

The input provided at the February 5th Capital Projects Meeting indicated support for the consolidation of Ridgeway Annex and Ridgeway through the construction of a larger school at Ridgeway.

- *Meeting participants indicated their support for the consolidation of Ridgeway Annex with Ridgeway, noting that Ridgeway should be built as large as possible to accommodate the Annex and the Kids Club as provided in the Project Agreement. There was agreement expressed with the intent to move forward with the larger school of 425 students and that it would be better to combine the Annex and the main school.*

Input provided through the Ridgeway Steering Committee

The Ridgeway Steering Committee has had the opportunity to review the drawings prepared by the architectural team and has observed the benefits associated with building a larger school with 3 kindergarten classes and a capacity of 425 for Grades 1 through 7, rather than a school with 3 kindergarten classes and a capacity of 350 for Grades 1 through 7. The larger school provides for improved circulation, relationship of spaces, support for community use, and additional special education space.

These observations are consistent with the views recorded from the February 5th Capital Projects meeting.

- A school of 3 kindergarten classes and 425 would provide increased opportunities for students and increased flexibility in the design and function, especially for community use
- Annual operating savings would be achieved for the long term.

Conclusion

The potential consolidation of Ridgeway Annex and Ridgeway with the closure of Ridgeway Annex has been carefully considered and thoughtfully examined. The consultation process has been conducted in accordance with Board Policy and has concluded in a constructive and respectful manner. The Ridgeway Annex Response Coordinating Team has provided perspectives for consideration by the Board of Education and for the North Vancouver School District.

The benefits associated with the construction of a larger school at Ridgeway to accommodate the combined student populations of Ridgeway Annex and Ridgeway are significant. The students of Ridgeway will be provided with a safe, new facility that also enables the preservation of the heritage of our community. The North Vancouver School District will benefit generally by reducing operational costs to help preserve much needed resources for the instructional services and program opportunities provided to students across the School District.

- **The recommendation of the Superintendent of Schools to the Board of Education is to proceed with the closure of Ridgeway Annex, effective June 2011, and proceed with the consolidation of Ridgeway Annex with Ridgeway through the completion of Ridgeway School at a capacity of 3 Kindergarten classes and 425 students for Grades 1 through 7.**