

## **What's wrong with the Seismic Mitigation program? How can we fix it?**

### **Parents Advisory Council of the General Gordon Elementary School, Vancouver**

Ingrid Sulston (President), Z Smith & Craig Lane (Seismic Committee)

There is an ambitious \$1.5B province-wide seismic mitigation program with the goal of protecting our kids. Who could object? Yet the Parent Advisory Committees of several schools have voiced concern; General Gordon, Kitsilano High, Trafalgar, Lord Kitchener—with Gordon's PAC voting unanimously to oppose the school as proposed for them, and a petition opposing the current plan gathering more than 350 signatures.

This well-intentioned program is having unintended consequences:

- Promoting 'replacement' schools that don't really replace what we already have,
- Diminishing the quality of the learning environment,
- Eliminating support spaces for music, theatre, or covered outdoor play areas,
- Threatening before and after-school care programs, making care unavailable to some,
- Negating the schools' contribution to civic heritage and community,

The good news is, we can fix the problems by fixing the program. A better program would work like this:

- Starting with the schools at greatest risk, the Feasibility Study team selected by the VSB would work with administration, teacher, parent and community reps to assess the full capacities of the existing school. How much space is rented out to after-school care? Is the program under capacity? Is there a waiting list? Are there covered play areas? Is there an auditorium? How does the existing building perform in terms of energy and water use, daylight and fresh air for the kids? What is the role of the school in the community?
  - Any proposed school option would provide the full capacities of the current facility. If the current school provides space for afterschool care or has a music room, the new one would too.
  - Each option would be configured to minimize disruption during construction and after completion; where there is sufficient space, the renovation option should use enough temporary classrooms that classes don't have to live in the middle of a construction zone.
  - The renovation option should upgrade the major systems of the building as required. By prohibiting 'seismic' money from being spent on upgrades to other building systems, the program sets up an unintended incentive for demolition among facilities staff.
  - 'Replacement' and Renovation/Upgrade options should be evaluated for environmental impact based on actual energy use of the current school, predicted energy use after renovation, and compare with actual energy use of recently constructed new schools.
  - All options should meet minimum environmental goals: Adequate daylight to every student's desk throughout the school day, non-toxic materials throughout, fresh air and room temperature under teacher control, energy use at least 20% better than the average.
  - Estimate the carbon footprint of proposed construction weighed against retention of the existing.
- Once options have been explored, and before committing to a particular path, public meetings would be held to which the community would be invited via direct mailing to all residents in the school's catchment. Additionally all relevant documents would be online for public review.

Changing the process isn't about changing whether we renovate schools or build new ones. It's about ensuring that, when the seismic mitigation process is complete, we have ended up with schools that are safe, that parents will send their kids to, and that the community values.

Our definition of what constitutes an 'adequate' school must be raised to match the values of the citizens of British Columbia in the 1920's, when the great swath of Vancouver's grand schools were built. We are far richer than they were. It's our turn to build upon their legacy and leave a new generation of schools—some new, some restored—that will stand and serve our kids and our communities for a hundred years.