

August 23, 2021

Select Standing Committee on Finance
and Government Services
c/o Parliamentary Committees Office
Room 224, Parliament Buildings
Victoria, B.C. V8V 1X4

Dear Committee Members,

Thank you for giving us the opportunity to participate in the Budget 2022 consultation and share our priorities for the upcoming provincial budget with you. As we have done in previous years, this briefing is presented to the Select Standing Committee jointly by the Richmond Board of Education, the Richmond District Parents Association, the Richmond Teachers Association, CUPE Local 716, the Richmond Association of School Administrators and Richmond Management and Professional Staff. We are proud of our collective commitment in Richmond to cooperate, collaborate and advocate with all of our stakeholders in ensuring a safe, accepting and engaging community that promotes student success and inspires a passion for lifelong learning.

Our joint presentation advocates not only for the needs of our learners in Richmond but also for the K-12 public education system in British Columbia. Our recommendations are focused on two key messages: provincial funding to support COVID recovery in schools, and continued investment in seismically safe schools and major capital projects.

Key Messages

1. Provincial funding to support COVID recovery in schools

Our District made tremendous efforts during the 2020/2021 school year to minimize the spread of COVID-19, while maintaining educational programs for our students. The pandemic has had a significant negative impact on our District's financial position. The District is facing a \$7.2 million budget shortfall in 2021/2022, primarily due to reduced revenues as a result of the pandemic and has had to make significant cuts to staffing across all employee groups in order to balance the budget. Several sources of revenue, including international education, rental revenues and investment income, have been negatively impacted and will need time to recover.

We acknowledge and appreciate the pandemic-related provincial and federal funds received in 2020/2021 and the flexibility afforded school districts to allocate funds where needed. Richmond School District received over \$1.4 million in Provincial Safe Return to School Funds, and over \$7.8 million in Federal Safe Return to Class Funds in 2020/2021. These funds were spent on a number of areas including the Transitional Learning Program (the largest proportionally in the province), enhanced cleaning staffing, personal protective equipment, supplies and equipment, technology and learning resources and equipment, as well as employee health and wellness support.

With the availability of the vaccine, society is entering the recovery phase and the safety of students and staff remains our number one priority. School operations in fall 2021 will require everyone in the education system to continue to be nimble in contributing to the success of our students.

The District requires continued provincial support that will allow us to provide a healthy learning environment for our students and staff, and to safely recover from the pandemic:

- The new K-9 Distributed Learning program established for 2021/2022 for students who want to continue remote learning will likely require additional staffing.
- Changes to Health and Safety guidelines from the Ministry of Health/BCCDC are expected to be announced before the end of August 2021. Enhanced cleaning requirements, including daytime custodial staff to disinfect high touch areas, are currently included as a budget adjustment. This cost was funded from the COVID relief funds in 2020/2021 on a one-time basis. As we transition out of the pandemic and move to a full return of students in September, there will continue to be a need for additional daytime custodial staffing to support schools in welcoming students back. Parents and staff need to feel confident that our schools are clean and safe.
- Funding to support PPE including masks and hand sanitizer supply as well as other health and safety supplies is needed.
- Mental health support for students and staff will continue to be required.
- 44% of elementary classrooms in our district currently do not have mechanical ventilation systems. Capital funding will be required for system upgrades.

2. Continued investment in seismically safe schools and major capital projects

In 2004, the Ministry of Education launched the School Seismic Mitigation Program (SMP) in an effort to identify schools that may have structural risks associated with a seismic event. In Richmond, 37 schools were identified with at least one “high risk” building section needing to be addressed under the SMP. Richmond was identified as a geographic area with unstable soil conditions and risks of liquefaction if there was a large seismic event.

In May 2018, the Ministry of Education and Richmond Board of Education established the Richmond Project Team (RPT) and Executive Project Board (EPB) through a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with a mandate to accelerate the delivery of school seismic mitigation projects in the District. The goal of the RPT is to maximize the number of seismic event-resistant seats in the District as quickly as possible, and to complete all seismic upgrade projects by 2030. The commitment from the Ministry through the MOU was to support and fund identified high risk upgrade projects identified in the District's Long Range Facilities Plan and 5 Year Capital Plan.

Establishment of the Project Office through the MOU has been successful, where synergies and strong working relationships have been developed between Ministry Capital Planning staff and the RPT. A total of \$129 million has been approved by the Ministry for the SMP projects in the District, representing 11 out of 35 schools with a high seismic risk rating.

However, since 2019, there have been no new SMP projects announced for the Richmond School District. None of the 24 remaining projects were supported and announced in the 2020 and 2021 Capital Response Letters.

In addition to the SMP projects, the District also identified the following major capital projects and submitted to the Ministry in the Capital Plan for support: four school additions over the next 10 years providing 434 seats in the City Centre and Hamilton Planning Areas; and one new school west of the City Centre Planning Area providing 316 additional seats by 2027. Although included in the past three Capital Plan submissions, none of these projects have been supported by the Ministry.

The District is concerned with not receiving any new major capital projects in the past two years. It is our understanding that the Provincial Government supports and continues to prioritize the safety of our students and staff through the Seismic Mitigation Program as identified in the Premier's mandate letter to the Minister of Education.

Delays to support and funding for the seismic upgrading of schools contained within our capital plan will result in:

- Continued increased levels of risk for students and staff in a number of Richmond schools.
- The annual cost inflation rate will make projects far more expensive to complete the longer they are deferred.
- The opportunity window of utilizing the RPT with its current highly productive, knowledgeable and experienced staff to complete projects being jeopardized due to the lack of projects, potentially leading to loss of staff.
- Requirements included within the scope of the MOU cannot be met without the ongoing commitment of the Ministry of Education to regularly fund projects.
- The positive momentum and success of the RPT in collaboration with Ministry of Education capital planning staff cannot be maintained and sustained. The RPT is seen by Ministry Capital Management staff as a model of how capital projects can be efficiently and effectively managed to ensure on time, on budget projects, thus maximizing return on investment.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we would like to thank the Select Standing Committee for the opportunity to present our joint briefing. We appreciate the committee hearing our views and hope that our key messages will be given consideration as part of the 2022 provincial budget. Trustees, staff, stakeholders and parents in Richmond are committed to ensuring that we continue to have a strong public education system and that the Richmond School District is the best place to learn and lead.

Sincerely,



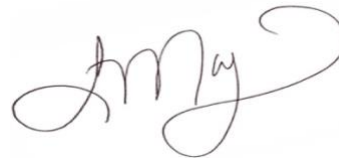
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