

May 12, 2022

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 the opportunity to participate in the Budget 2023 consultation process and share our priorities for the upcoming provincial budget. 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 three key priorities: sustainable operating grants to support K-12 education, continued investment in seismically safe schools and major capital projects, and enhanced facility life cycle funding to address deferred maintenance.

Key Priorities:

1. Sustainable Operating Grants to Support K-12 Education

The Board of Education appreciates the provincial support for K-12 education. However, the Ministry's operating grants are neither adequate nor sustainable to support school districts in maintaining appropriate service levels in the classrooms and meet our students' needs.

For the upcoming 2022/2023 school year, Richmond School District is facing a \$3.9 million structural budget shortfall, and has been forced to consider significant reductions to staffing across the District. This is following a \$7.2 million budget shortfall in 2021/2022, which was addressed by operating budget reductions and use of reserves.

The budget shortfalls are caused by a combination of chronic underfunding and lasting impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Ministry of Education and Child Care is the main funding source for the District. It is disappointing that there are no increases to the per-student grant rates in the 2022/2023 funding structure, which will result in many unfunded cost pressures including staff salary increments,

employee benefit increases, and inflationary costs. The unfunded inflationary costs and staffing increments are estimated to be over \$1.0 million for the District.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant negative impact on the District's financial position due to lower international tuition revenue and rental revenue. International Education revenues support enhanced staffing and programming that benefit all students in the District. It will likely take several years for the program to fully recovery to the pre-pandemic level. Further, funding has not been provided to cover additional COVID-19 related costs. The District will face a number of cost pressures such as enhanced ventilation and filters, and enhanced hand hygiene.

The Board of Education recognizes that classrooms are becoming increasingly complex especially given the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Staff are required to provide additional support to students for a wide range of learning, behavioral, physical and mental health needs. Transportation for students with complex needs also requires increased support from the District's operating budget. The District allocates far more resources to support students with additional needs than the special education funding received.

The recent Employment Standards Act change that provides five (5) days of paid illness leave for casual employees is welcome news. However, this change has introduced a new and unfunded cost pressure that could result in a maximum cost exposure of \$0.8 million to the District, if all casual staff take the allowable maximum five day paid illness leaves.

The Board of Education recommends that the Ministry of Education and Child Care provide additional funding to school districts by increasing the operating grant rates to keep pace with annual inflation. By working together with our communities, we have identified the needs to support students and the solutions required. Sustainable funding is essential in our ability to meet our students' needs as well as to continue to embed indigenous reconciliation into teaching and learning.

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 originally 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 Richmond Executive Project Board (REPB) 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 annual Five-Year Capital Plan.

Establishment of the RPT through the MOU has been extremely successful, where synergies and strong working relationships have been developed between Ministry Capital Planning staff and the RPT. Over \$162 million has been supported or approved by the Ministry for the SMP projects in the District, representing 13 out of 35 schools currently with a high seismic risk rating.

While the District was pleased with receiving support for two new SMP projects in the 2022/2023 Capital Plan after two years with no new projects, there is a great concern in our community that the goal of seismically upgrading all potentially vulnerable schools in Richmond by the 2030 target will not be reached. It remains 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 and reiterated by the Minister at the recent event at Maple Lane Elementary.

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 four Capital Plan submissions, none of these projects have been supported by the Ministry.

We are hopeful that consideration will be given in Budget 2023 to seismic upgrading projects and major capital projects in our community.

3. Adequate Facility Life Cycle Funding to Address Deferred Maintenance

The Board of Education understands the importance of maintaining functional, efficient, safe and healthy school facilities. We appreciate the Ministry's support in the facility maintenance and renewal program by providing Annual Facility Grant (AFG), School Enhancement Program (SEP) and Carbon Neutral Capital Program (CNCP) funding.

However, the current funding level is neither adequate nor sustainable. The total estimated annual cost of deferred maintenance for the District is \$11-14 Million to address vital electrical, facility, site and mechanical upgrades, roof replacement and functional improvement. This total cost is well above the current AFG of \$4.2 million and SEP and CNCP of \$1.3 million.

The level of the annual facility renewal funding has had very little change, and has not kept pace with inflation and continued aging of infrastructure over the past 20 years. The Richmond School District has 16 schools that are over 50 years old and 30 schools over 30 years old. The most recent figures from the Provincial Capital Asset Management System (CAMS) indicate that the estimated cost to remedy facilities renewal and deferred maintenance for the District exceeds \$386 Million. At the current funding level it would take 69.5 years to bring our facilities back to a "good" condition.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to light that there is lack of targeted government funding to permanently address ventilation issues in older schools. The Board recently approved use of its local capital reserves of up to \$12 million to address the lack of classroom mechanical ventilation in 11 schools. Ideally the ventilation issue in older schools should be provincially funded under a special facilities renewal program.

The Board of Education recommends that the Government provide adequate facility life cycle funding to support the District in providing safe and healthy school facilities and excellent learning environment for the students. We recommend that the AFG, SEP and CNCP funding be increased each year to include an inflation adjustment and that the Government fund the facilities renewal program at 2-2.5% of building replacement value to address increasing deferred maintenance.

Conclusion

We would like to thank the Select Standing Committee for the opportunity to present our key priorities to enhance the K-12 education system in our community. We appreciate the Committee hearing our views and hope that our key priorities will be given consideration as part of the 2023 provincial budget. Trustees, staff, partner groups 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,

Sandra Nixon, Chairperson
On Behalf of the Board of Education

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Richmond Teachers' Association

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cc: Trustees
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Secretary Treasurer
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