

## Springwood School Trustee Meeting

March 3, 2010

Good evening everyone and welcome to Springwood Elementary School, home of the Springwood Stingers. Thankyou to the School Board for inviting us into this night of consultation. We have been eagerly anticipating our moment in the queue and look forward to a full expression of our concerns, ideas and solutions.

My name is Jennifer and I have a daughter in Kindergarten at Springwood. I am part of a Concerned Family and Friends of Springwood group which has been working hard to organize a presentation for tonight.

So, here we go...

1. As we can see by the newspaper article display on the back wall tonight called "Then and Now: Same Story", we are going through a similar financial crisis as we experienced back in 2002 when schools were forced to close.

It is seemingly generous and openhearted to say, as the District Sustainability report states, "In recent years, the school district has been balancing the annual operating budget by using surpluses generated in prior periods".

In the same breath the report also states, "It became evident some time ago that, as a result of continued declining enrolment, the school district was developing a significant structural deficit." So you've obviously had plenty of lead time to develop a financial plan keeping us from crisis again...8 years in fact. Plenty of time.

Great, you used budget surpluses to stop the bleeding, to band aid the symptoms. Right, and what was used to cure the problem, to treat the root of the sickness?

You said it yourself on page 19 of the District Sustainability Report, “There is no doubt that enrolment decline is at the root of the financial challenge the district is now working through.” Granted, there were certain unforeseen factors contributing to the situation we are in but if you are able to project our declining enrolment for us so clearly between now and 2014, surely you could have done the same back in 2002. You could have projected the enrolment of our district and the situation we would be faced with today.

My question for you is, since you’ve had 8 years to learn from history and to do everything in your power to prevent schools from closing again, what have you done specifically since 2002’s closure crisis to prevent the closure of schools again?

What financially responsible steps have you taken during the last 8 years to ensure that we didn’t have to face more closures of both rural and smaller schools?

- 2) Heather Park Middle school is a beautiful school. New, bright, well thought out, perfectly planned as a middle school.

Unfortunately for us, it is not well planned or outfitted as an Elementary school. That is not to say that it couldn’t be though.

With proper planning and equipment such as fencing, playgrounds enough for 600 plus students, adding more appropriately sized toilets, water fountains, urinals, sinks, etc., removal of the lockers for safety, installation of lowered sinks and toilets for kindergarten classrooms, renovations to second floor stair case railings, removal of current science lab counters/equipment, renovations to current science labs, home economics room, wood working/industrial room, expansion of bus lanes and parking lots, but to name a few, this school could become a welcoming, safe and appropriate K-7 environment.

Superintendent Pepper responded to a question from Nukko Lake concerned parents on what the costs of renovating Heather Park would be. His answer, and I quote : “Between \$10 000 and \$40 000. Depending on Board of Education decision making.”

Hmmm, interesting. Considering that it cost the Springwood PAC a total of about \$ 50,000 to pay for our playgrounds alone. Even more interesting is that I can't seem to get a building contractor to even look at renovating my own kitchen for under \$10,000 and yet Superintendent Pepper believes that we can renovate an entire school, one of the largest in our district, for the same cost. Either I'm talking to the wrong trades' people or some corners are going to be cut.

My first question for you tonight is: For the stated estimated cost of \$10,000 to \$40,000, what specific renovations and changes do you for see occurring to Heather Park School?

My second question is, will you provide a written guarantee to me tonight that many of the changes I listed previously will be made ready for September 2010 so that my 6 year old grade 1 daughter will be comfortable, safe, and confident as possible in her new surroundings?

### 3) Mega Schools

To the best of my projections, the population of the proposed Mega-Elementary school at the current Heather Park building will have a population of about 650 students. Is this correct? If not, what will the population be ballpark? (Wait for a response)

So let's use a model, for the sake of some of our more visual learners here tonight.

Let's imagine for a moment that this egg represents a child, what the heck. Let's say this is your child. I'll put her in my pocket for now, to keep her safe. Eggs are fragile, as are our children at times.

Now, we have a great big school, a Mega-school, there is lots of room in here for everyone. Now we add 81 students from Nukko Lake, and 137 students from Springwood, and 189 grade 6's and 7's in our area, and finally we add the 170 English students from Austin Road Elementary.

As you can see, just because we have space for everyone doesn't mean that some of them won't slip through the cracks. Some will fall, some will be left behind, and some of them will not be supported in ways that our smaller schools are able to. So now I'll take your child out of safe keeping and send her off to his/her new school. This is unacceptable.

If, on March 30<sup>th</sup>, you vote to accept recommendation #15 as proposed and move us into the New Elementary school at Heather Park, out of 1001 Elementary Schools in BC, the new Hart Mega-school will have the honour of being the 29<sup>th</sup> largest elementary school in the province of British Columbia. In the Province!

I've spent many evenings during the past few weeks researching Mega-schools, scouring the educational journals and online databases at UNBC, searching Google Scholar articles, digging through volumes at our public libraries.

I'm sure that in all this research I've done, it is presumably far, far less than the District Sustainability committee did as they worked to formulate their list of recommendations. And yet, after all this research, I am unable to find one, single, solitary piece of evidence that shows me that my children will be better served in a Mega-Elementary school, than they will at a Springwood. Nothing.

Here are my resources. What I have found is this:

- TheodoreSizer, a major figure in school reform who argues that "less is more", that schools should not strive to offer everything under the sun but instead focus their resources on what is most important.

- Craig Howley and John Eckman who, in their book “Sustainable Small Schools”, argue that there is little relationship at all between the number of courses offered and overall student achievement. Why? Extra programs aren’t advanced courses in core subjects, they are remedial extracurricular courses. In simple terms it is the difference between being presented with a smorgasbord of food versus simply eating a well balanced meal.
- In her review of 103 documents entitled “School Size, School Climate, and Student Performance”, Kathleen Cotton found small schools to be superior or equal to large schools in all areas.
  - o Social Behaviour: Stockard and Mayberry quote, “Behaviour problems are so much greater in larger schools that any possible virtue of larger size is cancelled out by the difficulties of maintaining an orderly learning environment”.
  - o Extracurricular participation: James Kearney, I quote, “Small schools allow greater student participation in extracurricular activities.”
  - o Belongingness: Stockard and Mayberry, “Students in small schools...have a greater “sense of belonging” to the group than students in larger schools”.

We, the Concerned Family and Friends of Springwood Group, believe that the supposed superiorities of your proposed Mega-Elementary school are illusions. What The District Sustainability Report states on page 21 is that, “When smaller schools are amalgamated into larger ones, students have access to improved levels of educational service”. Improved levels of educational service. Wonderful.

But what the report fails to report is the decreased levels of:

- Student Achievement
- Healthy Social behaviour
- Levels of extracurricular participation

- Interpersonal relations with other students and school staff, that us and our children have to look forward to.

I'm hoping, for my children's sake, you can prove me wrong which is why I'm asking you the following question: which studies, research, and evidence did you use to substantiate your recommendation that this Mega-school will be better for our children? Where do I find access to this research you've used? (Wait for a response)

While Mega-Elementary Schools may be the trend in urban areas like Vancouver, they are unwelcome in Prince George. There is a time and place for children to join a group of 600 plus, when they are older and therefore more ready and capable. A 5 year old, who has grown up in a rural area and has gone to a school with 140 of his or her neighbours, is ill equipped to navigate, let alone succeed in your proposed Mega-school.

You asked for solutions so here is our solution for you. Are you ready?

Utilize as many of the suggestions in the "More for Less" document as you can to realize budgetary savings in administration. Give us back our Grade 6s and 7s. Keep all the Hart and Rural elementary schools open. Close one school, Heather Park Middle school. Sell the Central Administration Building on Ferry Avenue. Move the entire Central Administration up to this fine new vacant middle school building in the Hart.

And finally...Learn from your mistakes so that 5 years from now we aren't defending our school from closure for a 3<sup>rd</sup> time!