

SCHOOL DISTRICT NO. 57 (PRINCE GEORGE)

PROPOSED SCHOOL CLOSURES 2010

Frequently Asked Questions

1. Why our school?

The decision to recommend your school for closure was not made lightly, nor was it made casually. Exhaustive analysis of past, present and projected enrolment indicated, for the most part, a steady decline in numbers, which inevitably generates fewer resources, which inevitably means reduced opportunities for your children. The question then became “Do we keep this school open because it has traditionally served a particular neighbourhood, or do we close it to provide greater numbers of students and, therefore, greater resources and opportunities in another setting?” In the case of schools identified for closure, the Board accepted the recommendation of the committee and may decide to close your school.

2. How was the decision made to recommend our school for closure? Who made the decision to include our school on the list of closures?

The District Sustainability Committee (DSC) consulted widely with partner and stakeholder groups as well as with school administrators. The committee studied all aspects of school operations, from budgets, to educational cost per pupil, to building conditions and projected costs of upkeep, maintenance and renovations, to enrolment projections over the next five years, to available space in adjacent schools to geographic factors. Difficult decisions were made and recommendations were made to the Board of Education by the DSC.

3. How do we make a case to the Board to keep our school from closing?

You may make a presentation at the consultation meeting that will be held in your school, or you may submit a written submission to the Board at any time during the 60-day consultation period. (The schedule of meetings is posted on the district’s website www.sd57.bc.ca)

4. What would happen to my kids?

You would be informed of your new home catchment. Students living within that catchment would then be added to the enrolment list of the new school.

5. What if I don't want my kids going to the new catchment school?

As happens every year, the district's student transfer process will be open for parents to apply to enroll their children in another school. It is important to understand, however, that students would only be accepted at the preferred school if there is room for them.

Each spring, schools develop a school organization plan for the following school year. The process involves: 1) counting all the expected students in each grade or course, 2) "building" classes, which must meet mandated class size limits, and 3) planning for how many staff members the school will need. Sometimes, there will be room for a few more students in some classes after all catchment students have been placed. This determines whether or not a school has room to accept any out-of-catchment students.

Once a school accepts an out-of-catchment student, it becomes the student's home school. The student will not be asked to leave if a new student comes to the school from inside the catchment and wants to register. Note, however, that if the student wants to return to their home catchment, he or she will have to use the transfer process again and may or may not be successful. For further information, see Policy 5119 (School Catchment Areas and Student Transfers), available on the district website www.sd57.bc.ca.

In a normal year, parents are notified by April 15th about the status of their application. This year, due to the closure and amalgamation process, this will be delayed. Please watch for information about student transfers, which will be posted on the school district's website, advertised in the newspaper and sent home in school newsletters.

6. Would there be bussing to the new school?

The rule of thumb is that if students were bussed to school in 2009-2010, it is likely they will continue to be bussed in 2010-2011. In the case of some closures, there may be minor adjustments to bus runs for the sake of student safety, but all major changes, including policy changes or exemptions, would be made only at the direction of the Board.

Similarly, if your students were not bussed this school year, they are unlikely to be bussed next year. There are still walk limits in place (4.0 km for Grades 4-12 and 3.2 km for K-3), although there are exceptions on a situational basis.

Finally, district policy clearly states that we do not bus students attending choice schools or programs (e.g. French Immersion, Montessori, Aboriginal Choice School). Any variations from this policy would have to be authorized by a motion of the Board.

7. Would there be crossing guards on major thoroughfares?

The Board may, at its discretion, authorize the placement of a crossing guard at strategic locations. As a rule, this would happen only on high traffic thoroughfares with four or more lanes and at uncontrolled intersections.

8. Why are so many schools being recommended for closure?

To put it very simply, there are two main factors: steadily declining enrolment and funding levels that do not meet the needs of the district. For further information, see the District Sustainability Committee Report, which is available on the district's website www.sd57.bc.ca.

9. What would happen to equipment and supplies funded by the PAC?

Again, such equipment and supplies would typically follow the students where necessary and where they are needed. If the receiving school has no need for some or all of the equipment and supplies, then they become part of the district's inventory and would be subject to distribution on the basis of demonstrated need. Again, equipment and supplies bought and paid for by PACs become the property of the school district, though every courtesy should be extended to PAC members in keeping them informed about how, where and when items will be dispersed.

10. Would our new adventure playground be maintained?

Yes. The property still belongs to the district and the district is still responsible for the safety of equipment on its property. The district will do everything possible to ensure that the asset is available for use by children.

11. Where do I get reliable information?

Go to your principal first. He or she will either be able to answer your question or direct you to someone who can. There will also be information posted regularly on the district's website at www.sd57.bc.ca

12. What happens to school pictures, trophies and other artifacts?

Some items will move with the students to the new school. Items of historical interest would normally be catalogued and archived by the Retired Teachers' Association. Other items are likely to be stored and/or archived by the district.

13. Why reconfigure schools and programs that are working?

Schools and programs may indeed be working well now, but declining enrolments and diminishing resources threaten the viability and quality of these programs in the future. By closing and amalgamating schools, we will create bigger schools that will generate more resources and provide students with more options and more specialized service than would be possible in a smaller school with ever-declining enrolment.

14. How will district reconfiguration result in an improved system?

The intent is to achieve the kinds of economies of scale that result in larger schools with a full variety of support staff and a wide range of options for students. In times of economic uncertainty and declining enrolment, it is vital to amalgamate schools to ensure not only that schools survive, but that they flourish.

15. The Ministry of Education says they have increased funding, so why are we in such dire financial straits?

Overall, the ministry's statement is accurate. However, when it is measured against the circumstances of a particular district, a different outlook and outcome is obvious. As indicated in the District Sustainability Committee's report, the prime driver in funding school districts is the number of students enrolled. More students means more funding, and of course fewer students means less funding. School District No. 57 is in the unenviable position of experiencing the most significant decline in its history. The ministry does provide subsidies to ease the impact of declining enrolment. However, should a district qualify for those subsidies, any new program or initiative introduced by the ministry must be funded

from the subsidy. For example, the district receives \$1.4 million in funding protection. These dollars are an integral part of the district's revenue and support existing programs. The introduction of full-day Kindergarten for September 2010 will cost \$1.2 million. Since the district has received the subsidy, the expectation is that the new program be funded from the subsidy. Therefore, cuts will have to be made elsewhere in order to implement this program.

Other reasons for the shortfall facing the district include Medical Services Plan premium increases, Teachers' Pension Plan increases, contracted increases to employee benefits and other inflationary factors, and the new need to purchase carbon offset credits because the district is unable to significantly reduce the district's carbon emissions. The district also suffered a financial setback when the ministry announced it would not be providing the Annual Facility Grant to school districts this year.

16. Can't the district keep the cuts farther away from the classroom so that we don't have to face school closures?

School district budget shortfalls have been a reality in British Columbia since the early 1980s, and while there have been years that budgets have recovered and have been sufficient to provide the types of services we all agree need to be provided, more often we have found ourselves having to reduce programs and staffing to meet the budget. School districts long ago trimmed away any fat that once existed, so that there is very little extra left from which to recover the funds required to balance the budget.