

School Closure Seminar

held at the BCTF building, Vancouver, BC, May 29, 2008

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Purposes of the seminar:

Many communities have faced the closure of schools, with 150 closed since 2002, more closing this year, and others facing closure in the future unless provincial funding policies change. Often “reconfiguring” of schools has accompanied closures.

The seminar brought together teachers, parents and other community members who have been involved in challenging the closures and working to maintain their school in their community. It provided a space for participants to share stories, strategies and successes as well as losses. It also built connections among people from a range of school districts, with a focus on future directions, networking, and building a sense of hope that it is possible to influence the nature of our communities through focused action and ultimately influencing politicians who have been elected and those interested in being elected.

I. Values

Many of the closures are being made in the name of “efficiency.” Economic values are being given a primary place, ignoring the values of community, social connections and environment that should also be factors in deciding about the future of schools.

A belief in the central role that a school can play in the social health of a community and sense of belonging of the young is a shared value of those who have been engaged in the struggles to keep a school open in their community.

II. Factors in creating the pressure to close schools

1. Provincial funding policies were changed by the BC Liberal government, taking away the base amount for a school regardless of size. This change in policy, along with underfunding of education, has created a climate for boards of education to look to cutting costs by closing schools and consolidating into larger schools as a matter of economy of scale. These policies ignore other social and environmental costs that should be factored into sound public policy.
2. The government has cited declining enrolment as a reason for closing schools and has used declines as a smokescreen for funding that has not kept up with the costs of maintaining services.

On a province-wide basis, the declines in enrolment are a temporary phenomenon, with enrolments starting to climb again before the primary school students of today finish their secondary education. A future-directed policy would ensure that public land and facilities are not liquidated by short-sighted action.

Declines in number of students have been greatest in interior and northern communities that have been based on resource industries. The lack of government action has been one factor

contributing to the economic decline of these communities followed by population decline. The loss of a school is a significant additional blow to a community already hit by economic and demographic decline.

3. The government has put pressure on boards to close schools and sell property if they need to build a new school because of population shifts in the district. The minister has denied this, but the ministry policy of facilities explicitly states this.
4. The government has demanded 110% of capacity in secondary schools in a district before it will permit the building of a new school in a new population area. This has led to districts “reconfiguring” schools in order to produce the full schools in the district as a whole that would allow for the building of a new school.
5. Some school sites are in locations that private businesses want to develop. Most school sites would be attractive as investments because of the amount of land that generally goes with a school campus. Some schools are in sites that would bring very high returns on investment if developers could get the land. They, of course, also have high value as public space preserved for public use rather than for private profit.
6. Declines in enrolment at a particular school can be a self-fulfilling prophecy. When a district identifies a school that may be closed in the future, families will often choose to send their children to another school where they expect that they will be able to maintain their friendships and connections.
7. Some district administrators seem to have used the climate of school closures to solidify power, influencing the boards to ignore community interests and public good.
8. Enrolments in some districts are being lost to private schools. Underfunding of the public schools has led some parents who could afford it to send their children to private schools. Some closed public schools have been taken over by private schools.

III. Many strategies have been used to fight school closures

Some strategies have been successful in saving individual schools; sometimes those same strategies have not been successful. A variety of local circumstances are factors, such as board members more prepared to listen to the community than others; different degrees of general funding problems in the district; the role that district administrators play; the level of organizational experience and success of the group working to keep a school open.

While these strategies may succeed or not in keeping a particular school open, the overall problem will remain of more and more schools facing closure unless the provincial policies creating pressure for closure are changed. Working together across districts in the political process will be required to make these changes in policy.

These are some of the strategies that have been used by groups with participants at the school closure seminar:

1. Petition. Large number of parents sign a petition and then attend a school board meeting en masse. Rally at the school board office when there is a meeting.
2. Organize the community. Identify groups within the community, reach out to them, provide information in multiple languages when it is a diverse community. Have a structure that has responsibilities for reaching out to all aspects of the community. Put out leaflets in the community, knock on doors and talk to people.

3. Organize to get a moratorium and time for the community to develop a plan for utilization of the school.
4. Build solidarity across communities. Some boards have created situations where they pit one school community against another, promising new facilities to one only if another is closed.
5. Provide information to the community about the social costs of closing schools. (Example: Mazzi, 2008; see citation under Resources, below.)
6. Provide information to the community that shows the lack of truth in the minister's constant claim that funding has never been higher. Show how the funding formula does not really provide equality.
7. Build an identity for the school ("branding") that helps the public understand its importance.
8. Create positive events. Community fair, not just rallies.
9. Bring some joy to the work. A fund-raising concert in one community is drawing on local entertainers with no speeches.
10. Put on a counter-workshop for trustees to the one the BCSTA held on how to close schools.
11. Take legal action. The board must have a policy in place and must follow the policy with procedural fairness. The group in Comox created a society to be able to initiate a legal action.
12. Share district policies that provide the best public input on proposed closures.
13. Get district PAC to take a position.
14. Network across districts to get the message against school closures coming from multiple sources.
15. Provide the research that has been carried out that shows the value of small schools, particularly in supporting students at risk and those who are marginalized. (See Resources, below, for examples.)
16. Organize for school board elections. Bring a group together to develop a policy platform. Support those who agree to the platform. Support those elected on the platform to carry out the commitments they have made.
17. Work with the media to get out your message. Talk to reporters. Provide good material that can be used by the paper. Provide quality photos. Get on talk shows.
18. Encourage board to submit a "needs" budget that reflects the real needs, not just the amount determined by the province.
19. Use Freedom of Information to get information.
20. Make a complaint to the Ombudsman about unfair processes.
21. Hold your own public meeting if the board will not hold one.
22. Get city or regional district to adopt zoning that will not allow for private uses of the land that schools are on that are slated to close.
23. Identify if there are breeches of the district Aboriginal Education Agreement if there is one in the district.
24. Provide information to the community about the link between closures and privatization.

25. Press the ministry to change the facilities “functional capacities” policies and to follow the “Area Standards” policies that already exist.
26. Identify alternative uses of space for pre-school and adult programs that maintain the facilities for the school.
27. Keep a record of votes of trustees to hold them accountable at election time.
28. Take the issues of closures to Labour Councils and other community organizations to gain support.
29. Use community TV to get issues covered.
30. Hold a funeral for schools closed, using it to make a commitment to the next generation of children.
31. Develop a web site or blog for the campaign.
32. Bring parents, teacher locals and support staff union together on the issues.

IV. Ideas for follow-up from the school closure seminar

- Publish a report from the meeting
- Provide information on good media releases and media contact information
- Publish an advocacy tip sheet
- Information on finding good school board candidates, supporting them, and holding them accountable
- Provide information on judicial review requirements
- Provide some examples of good letters to the editor
- Provide examples of Freedom of Information requests
- Provide fact sheets of the “Did you know?” type
- Myth-busting material to use with the community
- Information about developing community e-mail lists for ongoing contact
- Create a Facebook page and a blog for opposing school closures
- Information about alternative policies that recognize the importance of the school in the community
- Provide information to districts that did not have anyone at the seminar
- Create an e-mail list of participants in the seminar.

V. Resources (distributed at the seminar)

- Leaflet on the social and environmental impact of school closures:

Mazzi, E. (2008). *Facilities planning and traffic consequences*. Presentation to the Metro Vancouver Land Use & Transportation Committee on June 6, 2008 (originally scheduled for May 2, 2008), agenda item 3.1. Retrieved June 10, 2008 from [http://www.gvrd.bc.ca/board/comagendas/LandUse/June/Land Use and Transportati on-June 6 2008-Agenda.pdf](http://www.gvrd.bc.ca/board/comagendas/LandUse/June/Land_Use_and_Transportati on-June_6_2008-Agenda.pdf)

- Report from a lawyer on requirements for procedural fairness:

Mogerman, R. (2003, September 1). "Fairness in school closure decisions." *The Free Library*. (2003). Retrieved June 4, 2008 from [http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Fairness in school closure decisions.-a0109741397](http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Fairness_in_school_closure_decisions.-a0109741397).

- Research on the positive role of small schools:

Schmidt, M., Murray, C., & Nguyen, H. (2007). "Cohesive communities, improved outcomes: A case for small schools." *Education Canada*, Vol. 47 (4), 59–62. Retrieved June 4, 2008 from http://weblogs.elearning.ubc.ca/newproposals/small_school_2007.pdf

Nguyen, H., Schmidt, M., & Murray, C. (2007). *Does school size matter? A social capital perspective: A review of educational policy literature*. Vancouver, BC: Simon Fraser University. Retrieved June 4, 2008 from http://www.saveourschool.ca/images/Does_School_Size_Matter.pdf.