

## B.C. reverses view on school closures [CA-BC] <sup>[1]</sup>

The Vancouver Sun

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**Source:** The Vancouver Sun

**Format:** Article

**Publication Date:** 25 Jun 2008

### AVAILABILITY

See text below.

### EXCERPTS

Space may be needed for expanded kindergarten, Education Ministry says.

The B.C. Education Ministry has abruptly changed its message on school closures and is now urging school boards to think long and hard before shutting more schools.

For years, the ministry has been pressing boards to reduce capacity due to declining enrolments, and trustees responded by closing more than 150 schools around the province. Now, however, the ministry is telling boards they may well need extra space if a government proposal for expanded kindergarten goes ahead.

Richmond school district secretary-treasurer Ken Morris said he and his colleagues heard the new message late last month from deputy minister James Gorman. "We gulped," he said, thinking of the many schools that have been closed since the Liberals came to power in 2001 and changed the funding formula so it no longer encouraged boards to maintain excess space.

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Education Minister Shirley Bond was in China on Tuesday and unavailable for an interview, but a ministry spokesman confirmed that boards are being told to "think ahead" to the possibility there will be many more kindergarten children in future years.

Vancouver trustee Ken Denike said he has heard the ministry might go so far as to place a moratorium on further closures this fall until it decides whether to make kindergarten available to all five-year-olds -- possibly by September 2009 -- and extend it to three- and four-year-olds in later years.

The ministry floated the idea of expanded kindergarten in its 2008 throne speech and recently established an Early Childhood Learning Agency to study the issue and make a report by year-end. The agency is seeking public comment.

The B.C. School Trustees' Association says it expressed several concerns about the proposals to the agency this week. It wants assurances that any expansion of kindergarten will be fully funded and it is also concerned about finding enough space and sufficient numbers of teachers, president Connie Denesiuk said in an interview.

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Denesiuk hadn't heard about a moratorium on closures, but said the ministry is telling boards to think about the possibility they will have many more young students in coming years. "It's prudent planning."

Richmond is one of the districts that could find themselves strapped for space. It closed five elementary schools in recent years as part of the province-wide drive to reduce capacity. Now, it faces a possible demand for 700 additional kindergarten spaces if the government introduces full-day kindergarten for all five-year-olds.

Currently, the government provides full-day kindergarten only for children who are learning English as a second language, are aboriginal or have certain special needs. For others, only half-day kindergarten is free.

Expanded early childhood education is part of the government's drive to make B.C. the best educated, more literate jurisdiction on the continent by 2015.

Irene Lanzinger, president of the B.C. Teachers' Federation, said she agrees boards shouldn't be closing schools, but said the space should be used for high-quality universal daycare, not kindergarten.

- reprinted from the Vancouver Sun

**Region:** British Columbia <sup>[2]</sup>

**Tags:** kindergarten <sup>[3]</sup>

spaces <sup>[4]</sup>

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