

# Vancouver School District Preferred School Size Working Group Meeting #3

October 8, 2020

## Meeting Summary

### Facilitators

Dorli Duffy  
Susan Rhodes

### In attendance:

Nancy Bourque – VEPVPA  
John Dawson, VSB Director of Educational Planning and Student Information  
Megan Davies, VEPVPA  
Aaron Davis, VSB Director of Instruction – School Services  
Nick Despotakis, VASSA  
Rosie Finch, VSB Director of HR  
Angie Haverman, VASSA  
Amanda Hillis, DPAC  
Dameun Kim, VSB Educational Planning  
Anne Lee, VSB Educational Planning and Student Information  
Sara McGarry, VSTA  
Anne Miller, VESTA  
Skye Richards, DPAC  
Michael Rossi, VSB District Principal – Educational Planning  
Bernie Soong, VASSA  
John Silver, VSTA  
Shehzad Somji, VSB Assistant Secretary-Treasurer  
Chris Stanger, VSB Director of Instruction  
Chris Wong, VSB District Principal – Education Planning

### Regrets:

Carmen Batista, VSB Associate Superintendent – Employee Services  
Treena Goolieff, VSTA  
Ricky Huang, VDSC  
Terry Stanway, VSTA

## 1.0 Objectives

The Vancouver School Board Preferred School Size Working Group held their third meeting virtually via Zoom on October 8, 2020. The meeting objectives were to:

- Review context, terms of reference and timeline for Preferred School Size Working Group
- Review progress to-date

- Provide an update on progress and new information since March 9
- Review and discuss information regarding the Financial Considerations in relation to school size
- Identify key information from this area of consideration to be included in guidelines on preferred school sizes
- Confirm dates for focus groups
- Confirm next steps
- Clarify next steps including additional information needs, homework and subsequent meetings

This document provides a brief summary of discussions held during the meeting. A copy of the October 8, 2020 PowerPoint presentation is available on the dedicated PSSWG link at [Preferred School Size Working Group](#).

Following an overview of the context, purpose, timeline and work-to-date of the Working Group, John Dawson provided an update on new information since February 10.

It was noted that while the implications of COVID on facilities design and operation is important, this continues to be a very dynamic situation. The PSSWG report will acknowledge this but will not include COVID implications due to a lack of evidence-based information related to COVID and school size at this time.

**Question 1.**

The January 2021 presentation of the PSSWG report to the VSB Facilities Planning Committee will occur at the same meeting where staff present the draft 2020 Long Range Facilities Plan (LRFP) so it will be too late to inform the draft.

**Answer 1.**

On September 28th the Board approved a timeline for the 2020 LRFP update process. As communicated at the September 23 Facilities Planning Committee (FPC), staff and the Board are aware that there are some overlapping workflows during the 2020 LRFP update process. During the October 9 PSSWG meeting, staff re-iterated that Long Range Planning is a process rather than a singular event defined by the release of an LRFP. Staff also indicated that more information will be forthcoming at the October 21st FPC regarding alignment of planning processes.

**Question 2.**

Will we have an opportunity to review our PSSWG guiding principles and potentially elaborate on bullet 3: “Effectively use school District resources and facilities in alignment with long-term financial and sustainability goals”?

**Answer 2.**

This guiding principle is part of the VSB Strategic Plan. When the strategic plan is updated there will be an opportunity to provide input on its goals and objectives. In examining educational, organizational and financial considerations impacted by school size, the work of the PSSWG is elaborating on how the District might more effectively use resources and facilities in the future. For more information on the VSB Environmental Sustainability Plan, please see <https://www.vsb.bc.ca/District/Sustainability/Pages/default.aspx>.

## 2.0 Financial Considerations

John Dawson provided an overview and PowerPoint presentation of financial considerations in relation to school size.

A question and answer session followed the presentation:

**Question 1.**

Are only operating funding sources included or also capital (AFG, seismic, capital plan approvals, etc.)?

**Answer 1.**

Important to note that the information presented today relates to operating costs of running schools as opposed to capital costs for building schools.

**Question 2.**

Does enrolment only include funded students?

**Answer 2.**

This average costing per student data only includes headcount enrolment domestic resident students that are funded. International fee-paying student enrolment is not included in the analysis.

**Question 3.**

Do we think it will be important in the future to look at how capacity is calculated? Can we look at comparing costs against utilization? What are the needs for space per student for best learning and how does that impact the fiscal considerations? Does educational space design come into our conversation with preferred school size so that managing students within a physical space is considered? Many school designs are more boxlike, but has there been any research about designs that work better? Would exploring these things allow for larger schools for dual or high school models, where the intimacy of smaller schools and the diversity in offerings can be optimized for learners? Why has it been determined that 100% capacity targets are what district schools are aiming for. Is this actually in opposition to the interests identified in education?

**Answer 3.**

The VSB does not have a district capacity utilization target. The VSB has developed design principles that guide site school and site design for new and replacement schools. One element of the design principles is to design space that promotes collaborative learning communities that are smaller than the entire school population.

At the November 16 PSSWG meeting, we will discuss the implications of school size and the application of VSB design principles in relation to the Seismic Mitigation Program\.

**Question 4.**

How does age of school factor into this?

**Answer 4.**

The average age of VSB schools is 74 years. More than half of VSB schools are more than 70 years old. While older facilities are less efficient to operate and may have significant deferred maintenance costs, the primary driver operating cost is staff related expenses – salaries and benefits. The lack of efficient organizational options in smaller schools has a large impact on the average cost per student.

**Question 5.**

The \$8 million could fund additional costs could potentially pay for one or two new builds each year though. Could this money be used for that part of the VSB budget (the added cost over the upgrades)?

**Answer 5.**

The \$8M referenced in this question is the approximate additional operating expenditure of the VSB due to the age of our facilities in relation to surrounding metro districts. In general, operating expenses and revenue including budget surpluses remain in the operating budget. So the \$8M would most likely be directed towards enhancing services and programs for students. New schools are funded from a capital budget.

**Comment 6.**

Would be nice to see student satisfaction/success with the same school size ranges as used in costings.

**Answer 6.**

The annual student survey data can be compared to the group sizing to examine student experience feedback. Unfortunately, that data collections process was interrupted by the pandemic last spring. The survey typically is administered in February to April. Staff has done preliminary work using information available from the Middle Years Indicator (MDI) which is available through a longstanding partnership between the VSB and the Human Early Learning Project at UBC. Very preliminary investigation suggests that a correlation between school size and desirable SEL outcomes does not exist. Staff will continue to investigate this avenue and will bring back any further information that they can provide to the next meeting.

**Action:** Anne Lee and John Dawson will examine the MDI data for any further analysis which can reasonably be applied to this data set.

**Question 7.**

What is the cost for alternative schools?

**Answer 7.**

Cost per student of Alternate Programs was not determined as part of this work. Many Alternate programs are partially funded through the Ministry of Children and Family Development. An example of the different funding model are alternate programs that operate in non-VSB facilities. There are about 370 secondary students (out of a total enrolment of about 19,000) that attend an Alternate program through the Vancouver Alternate Secondary School.

**Question 8.**

Are choice programs included in this calculation?

**Answer 8.**

Yes, choice program enrolment is included in the total school enrolment used to determine the average cost per student.

**Question 9.**

Do parents participate in these surveys?

**Answer 9.**

Parents don't participate in EDI and MDI surveys. Parent participation in the Student Learning Survey is welcomed. Parents are provided links to access to the Student Learning Survey. The SLS is a fairly new Ministry initiative that replaces the Student Satisfaction Survey. This year, the District focused on raising student participation rates.

**Question 10.**

Could we look at vulnerable population school satisfaction/success with school size range?

**Answer 10.**

Every school has vulnerable students. In some schools and areas there are a higher proportion of vulnerable students often living in communities with higher community need. Isolating the variable of school size from all of the other variables and influences on the learning experiences and outcomes for vulnerable students would be difficult and perhaps methodologically suspect. VSB staff is not qualified to undertake this kind of research.

Smaller schools are receiving a relatively higher proportion of District resources than medium and larger sized schools that also have vulnerable students. The focus of this session of the PSSWG was on the way resources are allocated in relation to school size.

## 3.0 Elementary and Secondary Sub-Group Discussions

The Working Group engaged in Elementary and Secondary Sub-Group discussions to address the following questions:

- Anything missing?
- What does this mean for sizing? Implications?
- When a school was TOO small or TOO big, how small/big was it (numbers of students)?

### 3.1 Elementary Sub-Group Findings

#### Feedback on financial data results (cost per student in relation to school size)

##### *Expected larger schools to be less expensive*

- Expected larger schools to get cheaper
  - Interesting to see that CPS levels out at about 350
- Shocked by numbers
  - Assumed that larger schools would be less expensive

##### *Medium size schools are more cost-effective*

- Medium size school are more cost-effective
- Medium size schools are as cost effective as larger schools

##### *Medium size schools give the opportunity for balance between financial and community goals*

- Opportunity for balance – in terms of the community we want to create
  - We can get that sense of community in a medium size school
  - Harder to build community in larger schools
- I value a balance of financial and community goals
- Not as much of a cost difference between medium and larger schools
  - It is possible to build community and a sense of belonging for students, family and staff
- Glad that it doesn't get cheaper with large schools
  - Want to ensure walkability to schools

##### *Other*

- Older buildings cost more to run
- Numbers make sense

#### Implications for TOO small

##### *Smaller sites may experience difficulty raising funds or covering some costs*

- Smaller sites experience difficulty raising funds
- In a very small annex, the cost of a performance can be prohibitive without the ability to join a main school to make it work
  - In a medium size school, we have the ability to offer more services
    - e.g., cross country running for Grade 2-7
  - Can have a strong sense of community with 390 students (participant experience) and also offer an array of programs and services

### *Other factors may influence costs in smaller schools*

- Factors that influence cost in smaller schools
  - The average cost per class is the same (class size and teaching)
    - Increased costs at smaller schools may include engineers, administrators, etc.
- Many smaller classes are part of enhanced services program
  - Therefore CPS could be higher for smaller schools
  - Student vulnerability and community need factors in
- Smaller schools have more hidden costs
  - Fewer options with smaller schools because of CPS

### *Other*

- Was it fair to look at Annexes on their own?
  - Data sticks out like a sore thumb
  - Compare cost of Annex K vs. cost of Elementary K

### **Other (non-financial) considerations in relation to school size**

#### *School space (area)*

- School space (area) matters too
  - Smaller schools may be more efficient but may not have the space needed for all activities
- Need both the right amount of space and the number of people to support needs
  - Sense of community and knowing names

#### *Equity*

- Importance of considering equity
  - Need to bring an equity point of view
  - How do we meet the needs of Indigenous students?
  - Equity vs. access – neighborhood schools and student opportunities to walk to school.
  - Keeping in mind our most vulnerable students

#### *School size in relation to delivery of programs and services*

- Program delivery can occur in different sized schools
- E.g., Can also have a “school within a school” model
  - The question is how to deliver the program?
  - Program delivery is not necessarily dependent on the size of the school
- Mini schools and choice programs
  - We do apply an equity lens
    - Meeting the need of students
  - Can we meet those ends through other means?
    - It's not just about money
  - Programming – what can we offer at small sites? And what are they missing?
    - E.g., access to Youth and family workers
- Small schools can be challenged in terms of delivering a variety of programs and services
- Appreciate the need to best support student learning and programming while managing resources effectively

### **Other comments re: implications of TOO small**

- Services in small schools

- Few people trying to do all things
- Economies of scale
- Challenge in larger school
  - Can teachers and student access space when a school is so large/ full?
    - E.g., space for students to stretch and play

### What is TOO small or TOO big?

- Data is more helpful in determining the lower end of ideal school sizes than it is for the upper end
- This data suggests that fewer than 300 students is less cost-effective than greater than 300
- There seems to be a sweet spot at around 300-350 students for the lower end of school size

## 3.2 Secondary Sub-Group Findings

For the low end of enrollment, the data shows a strong relationship between size of school and cost per student (i.e. the costs are higher); however, the data does not show a relationship as the number of students exceeds 1400

Concerns that the focus on cost per student does not include consideration of the costs of driving kids to schools, or kids taking buses for a long distance

It became evident that the group was discussing two items:

1. Cost per student as it relates to enrollment (i.e. operating costs related to running a school) – focus of this meeting
2. Distribution of schools across the Vancouver geography – i.e. if the cost per school drove the decision to reduce the number of schools and this resulted in fewer schools (not the focus of this meeting, but the concern that was raised about how this part of the guidelines could be used)

Reasons for concerns re: #2 above:

- a. Students would have to travel either by car or bus to school - Impact on environment
  - b. Loss of community school concept
  - c. Loss of ensuring schools are part of the hub of a community
- The data shows that schools smaller than 800 cost approximately \$1200 more per student
    - This money could be used to enhance student learning and services (e.g. with a school of 500 students this would equate to \$750,000 in savings to be redistributed)
  - Would be positive to see more options for variable education opportunities for kids (e.g. hubs in schools); the efficiencies may allow for this type of approach, or other enhancements to education
  - Important to consider the cost per student along with other variables, not in isolation

### What is Too Small or Too Big?

The group determined that the data demonstrated that schools less than 1100 are not as efficient as those larger than 1100.

This aligns with the last meeting discussion on schools organization and student services where the discussion highlighted that schools between 1000-1250 were too small

The data does not speak to a “too big” number – though discussions from the last meeting about school organization and student services did result in comments about what is “too big”.

## 4.0 Report Back and Large Group Discussion

### Elementary Report Back

- Several participants were surprised by the data showing that while smaller schools (below 300) are more expensive, larger schools (above 400-500) did not have lower costs per students and were not necessarily less expensive.
- Participants appreciated that medium size schools were cost-effective at a size that also meets goals including creating a sense of community and offering a diversity programs and services to meet student needs.
- Data is more helpful in determining the lower end of ideal school sizes than it is for the upper end
- Data suggests that fewer than 300 students is less cost-effective than greater than 300
- There seems to be a sweet spot at around 300-350 students for the lower end of school size

### Secondary Report Back

- Too small – bottoms out at 1100
  - Can't provide robustness, diversity and quality of programming, etc. below 1100 students
- This data does not give us a maximum end
  - There is an upper end from discussions re: school organization and student services
- The sweet spot is that point where student experience and enrichment is excellent and where funds are used efficiently to provide maximum benefit
- Also important to consider geographic distribution of schools
- Desire for alignment with city planning

## 5.0 Focus Groups – scheduling and identifying participants

Focus groups with partner groups will be conducted between November 17 and 27, 2020 to support stakeholder engagement regarding preliminary findings. Participants were invited to identify 2 possible dates for a 1.5 hour facilitated focus group via Zoom. Stakeholder representatives agreed to communicate candidate dates and the names of 5-10 potential participants from their membership to Anne Lee at [alee@vsb.bc.ca](mailto:alee@vsb.bc.ca) by October 23.

DPAC indicated that Thursday, Nov 19<sup>th</sup> would be a candidate date.

## 6.0 Summary of Next Steps and Homework

- Meeting summary and PowerPoint presentation from October 8, 2020 Meeting #3 to be posted on the Working Group link: [Preferred School Size Working Group](#).
- **Working Group** to review and circulate meeting notes within their organizations



- **Partner group representatives** to send Anne Lee 2 possible dates for a 1.5-hour focus group via Zoom, along with the names of 5-10 potential participants (by October 23)
- **Working Group** to send questions regarding the Seismic Mitigation Program (SMP) to Anne Lee at [alee@vsb.bc.ca](mailto:alee@vsb.bc.ca)
- **Next Meeting** – November 16, 2020, 3:45 – 6:15 PM via Zoom
- Working Group members are reminded that you have been asked to serve as representatives of your schools, group or organization. Please strive to be inclusive of the array of perspectives within your constituency when circulating information and participating in working group discussions.

Please contact Dorli Duffy at [dorli@dorliduffy.ca](mailto:dorli@dorliduffy.ca) if you have any questions or requests regarding this meeting summary.