

A public school system going private; A choice of venue leads to decreasing enrolment east of Main Street  
Vancouver Sun  
Tue Nov 9 2010  
Section: Westcoast News  
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Second of a series.

In the Vancouver school board's October report, Schools Considered for Possible Closure, the fact that the vast majority of underutilized schools are east of Main Street is never mentioned.

The only representation of this phenomenon is in the report's map, Elementary Utilization Capacities, which shows a stark and alarming disparity.

Of the west side's 35 schools and annexes, 19 are operating at greater than 100 per cent of capacity. Nine are operating at greater than 90 per cent of capacity. None are operating at less than 70 per cent. On the west side, it's all good.

On the east side, it's a radically different picture. Only six schools are operating at more than 100 per cent of capacity, and two of those six are small that have less than 50 per cent of the student population they did a decade ago.

Not surprisingly, all five of the schools the VSB nominated for closure in its report are on the east side.

This east-west disparity in school utilization is the elephant in the room, yet the VSB report ignores it. Reasons given for the decline in student enrolment are never geographic-specific in the report, but are attributed primarily to the changing "demographic profile of residents" and "fewer children living in our communities."

This is, in fact, not the case. While there are proportionately fewer elementary-schoolage children in Vancouver, BC Stats figures from a January 2010 report show that the number of school-age children in Vancouver has increased over the last 15 years.

In 2009, there were 45,766 children between the ages of five and 13 in the Vancouver school board's district, up from 42,583 in 1994. The majority of those children are on the east side. number are in private and faith-based schools, or in home-schooling. In the 2006-2007 school year, statistics showed almost 20 per cent of school-aged children in Vancouver were not enrolled in the VSB system. That percentage appears to be growing. It is estimated that for this year, the number of Vancouver schoolage children not in the public school system could be as high as 25 per cent.

But the growth of private schools does not fully explain the east-west disparity. On the contrary, one would expect the growth of the private school system to have a greater impact on the wealthier west side, where parents could more easily afford to send their children to private schools.

So what does explain the disparity?

No one is quite sure, though there are theories. And much of it is conjecture and anecdotal.

But one theory suggests the biggest reason for the disparity is the lack of school boundaries, which were legislated out of existence in 2002.

The VSB report touches upon it, but again, without being geographic-specific.

"Schools in the past were planned and built to accommodate students from the immediate neighbourhood. ... There was very little cross-boundary enrolment. ... Changes to Section 74 of the School Act now permit students to enrol in the school of their choice. As families exercise choice, what were once firm boundaries are now considerably blurred. As a result of student choice and declining enrolment, we now have underenrolment in some elementary schools and capacity pressures in others."

Parents may want to have the right to send their children to whatever schools they wish, but as the VSB report admits, it has an effect on those schools left behind.

"As student enrolment decreases, it becomes more challenging to provide the full range of services required to run an effective educational program for students. In order to meet class size/composition legislation and to maximize student-teacher ratios, schools with low enrolment are organized into multi-grade classes. In small schools with few students, providing support beyond the classroom teacher is challenging.

"It is also difficult for teachers in smaller schools to provide the full range of curricular and extracurricular programming parents and students have come to expect. A school with low enrolment has fewer teachers available to share these activities."

So, if you are an east-side parent and your perception, for whatever reason, is that west-side schools have better teachers, or provide environments more conducive to excellence, or are less encumbered by ESL classes, or are safer, or offer more in the way of French immersion and Montessori classes, you will do what you can to get your child enrolled in one.

The problem is, if that is indeed what is happening, it will only have a cascading effect on east-side schools. The fewer students going to an east-side school, the harder it is for that school to provide the services a parent expects. The more that perception grows, the more a parent will look to alternatives.

And if that is indeed what is happening, you have a city divided, and a school system where one half of the educational system is emerging as a de facto private-school alternative to a public school system being left behind.

More Thursday.

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