

School board could have alternative to closing Duchess Park Secondary

Declining enrollment has turned out to be a blessing in disguise for B.C. public schools.

Even though enrollment provincially decreased by 6,600 students over last year, the operating funding provided by the provincial education ministry to school districts remained stable at \$3.79 billion.

That means an "extra" \$24.6 million - or \$43 per student - will be shared by the province's 60 school districts over and above the base per-student funding.

In School District 57's case, that means an extra \$684,000 toward its operating expenses this year.

The announcement comes as good news as the district struggles for the third year in a row to meet massive budget shortfalls, said school board chair Bill Christie.

The board was also told this week that moving the administration offices from downtown to the old Telus building will save around \$500,000 a year in operational costs. The \$2.4 million for the purchase and renovations comes out of the district's capital

budget.

The savings could throw an interesting wrinkle into Tuesday's special school board meeting, called in order to vote on whether to consider closing Duchess Park Secondary School.

The savings from moving to the new building combined with the extra per-student funding add up to just under \$1.2 million toward what was a projected \$5.5 million shortfall this year - more than would be saved by any one of the school closure options considered this year.

John McInnis and Lakewood junior high schools are already being considered for closure as a cost saving measure. Their closures would result in estimated savings of just over \$1 million.

If Duchess Park is considered for closure instead, the district would be looking at just over \$725,000 in annual operating savings.

Trustee John Rustad requested the special meeting in order to put Duchess Park on the chopping block as an alterna-

tive option to closing John McInnis and Lakewood junior high schools.

The move proved controversial and resulted in hours of discussion last Tuesday night. Trustees had already discussed whether to consider closing Duchess and rejected the idea, but Rustad said new figures showed it should be at least discussed.

Trustees also debated whether the district should have a discussion about its long-term "vision" for secondary education before deciding to close schools.

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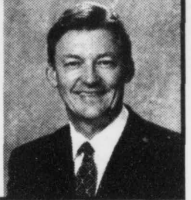
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The Benefits Program has two parts: a palliative care drug plan and a medical supplies and equipment plan.

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