

MINUTES

**MERRITT CENTRAL AND COLLETTVILLE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT MEETING  
NICOLA-SIMILKAMEEN SCHOOL DISTRICT (NO.58)**

**MERRITT CENTRAL ELEMENTARY, GYM  
TUESDAY, JANUARY 6, 2026, 6:00PM**

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*Success for ALL Learners Today and Tomorrow*

Present:	Chairperson	G. Swan
	Vice-Chair	L. Ward
	Trustees	J. Jepsen J. Kent-Laidlaw E. Hoisington J. Chenoweth D. Rainer
	Superintendent	C. Lawrance
	Assistant Superintendent	M. Sheldon
	Secretary Treasurer	M. Friesen
	District Principal of Indigenous Education	A. McIvor
	Director of Instruction – Inclusive Education & Early Learning	A. Moulard
	Executive Assistant	S. Chenoweth
	Executive Assistant	K. Buckland
	Director of Human Resources	B. McLean

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**Questions from the Public**

**Ewa Olguin** – I was under the impression from all comments that I was hearing in the newspaper that the school was closing because there were lots of mold and it was not healthy. I said to myself, “I wait a minute, I thought that the school got 6 million for renovations.” Okay, in 2025-2026, we have 1,800 students. In 2024-2025 we have 1,848 students. 2023-2024, 2380 students. 2022-2023, I have 2285. That’s high. 2021-2022, there were 2277 students. This year and last year, yes, I agree we are lower. And the whole idea last year when I was reading the paper from last meeting, I’m sorry I missed it as I was sick, was to save money, our goal is to save \$460,000. And I was thinking, how can we save money and not affect the wellbeing of the children? We were already punished last year using the bus system. Half of the kids were not able to get to school. How many people work in the school district office? Teachers have a union, CUPE secretaries have a union, the school district office is not a union. It’s like a private

company that runs all of us and makes decisions for us, and the school trustees decide if they agree with them, or not. I wish in a perfect world that our school trustees' spouses and family members couldn't work at the School District office. It's conflict of interest. My Question is, instead of closing a school, can we have 2 District staff laid off and that will save us \$400,000?

**Superintendent Lawrance's response** – When you are looking at those numbers , the first set of numbers that you are looking at is SCIDES. SCIDES and the brick and mortar schools are completely different. Secretary Treasurer, Mark Friesen, went back and pulled the projections from what is called a 1701. The 1701 form is a student data collection form used by schools in British Columbia to report student enrollment and funding eligibility. It is essential for calculating **Full Time Equivalent (FTE)** students, which determines funding levels for public schools. Enrollment at SCIDES varies from year to year. Over the past 2 years, we have seen a substantial increase in enrollment. The problem with SCIDES is that it is not a guaranteed school year after year. It was previously on a three-year contract. Our original contract was supposed to end this year in June 2026, but it was extended by the ministry by only one year. For years, SCIDES has been generating resources that have helped support the rest of the District.

In your answer to central office questions, I have already made cuts. I have eliminated three positions already. There is a certain amount of work that must be done. We have the same expectations as Surrey and Vancouver and a lot less staff to be able to do that. If there are not enough students in our schools, there will be layoffs. I would love to have come in the good times, when we could continue to hire more staff and have extra funds, but where our enrollment is at the moment, we can't continue. When we look it over a 20-year period, it's almost 565 students that we have lost, which is almost 6 million dollars in funding. We didn't feel the impact of it for a number of years, because there were very healthy reserves that we used to continue to support staffing. We are no longer in that position to continue.

**Patty Beers (Grandparent of a student in Central)** – You are in the process of selling 2 surplus properties in Brookmere. What is the projected revenue from the sale of these two properties?

**Secretary Treasure Mark Friesen's response** - We don't know exactly, but they're not very lucrative properties, so a few hundred thousand at best. \$200,000 - \$400,000 at best. So that would get us by for one year. There are also conditions that we have to put it into our capital, so that would maybe help pay for part of deferred maintenance. It doesn't go to help with operations.

**Superintendent Lawrance's response** – As part of the process we had those properties appraised. There are two parcels there. One has an existing building there. One went down and one went up. They were previously assessed in 2021. Before we are able to sell it, we will have to have it reassessed. One of them was appraised for just under \$200,000. It's one with the old Brookmere school on it. To be honest, whoever is to buy it is looking at a substantial cost to have it demolished to build something new. Interest has been mixed for these properties. If we were able to sell these properties, we could use it for capital upgrades, but we won't be able to use it for instructional dollars.

**Dana Egan (City counselor/Parent)** – During the meeting that I attended, I thought that there was a vote to defer the school closure for at least another year?

**Chair Gordan Swan's response** – Your Mayor asked us if that was a possibility, but no decision has been made. The decision is by the Board. It is one of those options that we have given to you where if we were

to defer for a year, then we will have to decrease staff. If we were to go that route we would keep all facilities, but we would reduce the number of staff in the district, which is the counselors, which we actually have more not less, our education assistants, which would be next year. Either way we would need to come up with those dollars for operating in the District.

**Sara Sandusky (CVE Parent)** – I keep hearing a lot about comparisons about Surrey, which I don't think is fair, because yourselves have compared to a similar sized district in this document here. And if you look at SD 53, for example, one of the largest ones here, they don't have an assistant superintendent, and they are even a larger district than us. My question is if the District was to going to dual track system, how would French Immersion be maintained (Ex: Library books, cultural events, Language consistency, etc.)

**Superintendent Lawrance's response** – With the dual track system in schools, all students have resources that are available for learning and seeing both English and French in the hallways and classrooms is beneficial. The other piece with French Immersion is the experience of cultural events, where both have English and French activities. Depending on the enrollment of French Immersion, it would be possible to have a separate section of the school. The cultural piece is that we would continue to have the Quebec trip, those things would all continue. We could do a group Christmas concert or a two-part concert. One being English, the other French. We will have to go through those details. We wouldn't be the only District to have a dual track school. Collettsville was dual track in the past.

**Hilary Willis – (CVE Parent)** – Why do Collettsville students have to move? Why can't they stay at Collettsville school?

**Superintendent Lawrance's response** – We had that as one of our scenarios [in the fall]. It comes down to numbers. When we look at the numbers of capacity of Collettsville School, there is not another school that we can move as a physical whole to make it dual track. With just French Immersion numbers, there is capacity at both Central and Diamondvale to make them a Dual Track school. Moving the students from Central to three different schools is the least popular option from the fall consultation meetings.

**Betty Ann McDonnell (Metis Leader & Central Parent)** – I did not hear anyone say that we are going to pick up the entire team and move them together. I want to be reassured by the School Board Office that they are going to pick up the entire team from Central School and move them all together.

**Chair Gordan Swan's response** – One of the options that was presented was to move all of Central to Collettsville, everyone together. We will move the teachers and the students collectively. The Board has not made their decision, that is why we're looking at all the potential options.

**Tina Etchart – (CVE Parent & DPAC)** – We have asked the Board to be included in many conversations regarding the budget discussions and have never been invited. We do not have confidence in your budget. What are your reserves? We were told that we have would have to close a school because we were only sitting at 1.5% of our reserve. There are nine employees in the school board office who spend \$106,000 on their expenses. Their own personal expenses are just \$20,000. We'd like to know what those are. So, my question is, are we closing a school because we don't have the money or to give us extra services? Because it can't be both. Where are our reserves sitting because operational and staff are two different things. If you're telling me that you can't find \$100,000 with your \$14 million budget, then I would like to come to your office and go through your books, and I'll find it for you.

**Secretary Treasure Mark Friesen's response** – We aren't looking for \$100,000 we are looking for a least a half a million dollars. Where does that leave us? Our reserves have gone down to about 1%. We would need to build that back up to between 2-4%.

**Chair Gordan Swan's response** – We have been supporting school programming for the past 10 years. We've been using our surplus from about 6 million down to where we are now. As our results have been declining, we've been continuing our services. If you look at counselling, we have more counsellors in our District than we require in our contract. We have more counsellors because our students have more needs. So, if we do nothing then those are two of the positions that will lose to balance it out.

**Secretary Treasure Mark Friesen's response** – To answer your other question, are we trying to save money to save position or the put money back in the reserve? The answer is that we are trying to save money to save positions. The Board should actually push the District further and say, actually we need a million dollars in cuts to save those positions and bring our reserves back up to 2-4%. Our first scenario is to do nothing. And the do-nothing scenario is that we will be running a \$400,000 deficit. That would mean that we would be dangerously close to running out of our reserve.

**Chair Gordan Swan's response** – Last year in Princeton, instead of replacing a Principal, it led the District to maintain 9 other positions throughout the District.

**Aaron Sumexheltza** – To spread the services amongst the students in the District, what would that look like? What would staff retention of teachers and other staff look like, and what information would the Board use to make your decisions?

**Chair Gordan Swan's response** – We're still gathering information for everyone. We have the options that we have put forward today. We are also looking at the government's increase or decrease in funding on a per capita basis. And we have projection on where we think they are going. We know in the last two years that they have declined at a faster rate. We're funded by bums in seats, so if our enrollment drops by another 50 kids, next year that's another \$550,000. I'm hoping that the Mayor is correct, and we will have more jobs that will bring more students to the District. As of right now, our projections are going down a little faster than predicted. Last year we lost 49 students, and I believe 51 the year before, so that was over a million dollars within just a 2-year period. I know that when I first moved to Merritt, Collettsville was a dual track school, so we have done it before.

**Hailey Agar (CVE Parent)** – From what I am hearing is that you gave yourself a pretty hefty raise and that the trustees approve of it. Let me know if I'm wrong. We are starting with not a lot of trust right up there. I don't think that you guys have kids' best interests at heart. You're talking about asking teachers to have bigger classes and split classes up to 4 classes in 1 class, split classes are hard enough as it is. Are you all prepared for this blow up in your face, or are you just going to run away and hide at another School District?

**Chair Gordan Swan's response** – You had mentioned one of counsellor positions, if you had an extra dollar where would you put it? Would put it in to maintain all of the schools or saving positions? One of the options is that if we don't look at closing a building, then we will have to look at reducing staffing .

**Dana Egan (City counselor/grandparent)** – Running the School District, running a city running a business, it's all like running a business. And I think everything you need to do; I just went and looked that you have, I believe 16 employees at your District office. I think you must go and look within and determine exactly what the workload is, and if there is some extra weight that you can lose and maybe take on a few more responsibilities. You've got to look at yourselves first before you start deciding what we're going to do with the schools, because we have a lot of community members here, and a lot of community support. I know that we're talking about counsellors, and teachers' jobs, and everybody's jobs. We don't want to lose those. Make sure that they are doing their due diligence and not wasting those taxpayer dollars.

**Shelley Cressey-Hassel** – If all of the kids from Central move to Collettsville, there are no sidewalks. Does the city have a plan to put sidewalks around Collettsville if Central was to close? Please think about the safety of the children.

**Chair Swan's Response** – The city is responsible for sidewalks.

**Wasanthi Wainwright** – I am concerned about Dual track. I would like Collettsville to stay as its own school. Why Can't Central move to the CMS building?

**Superintendent Lawrance's response** – The problem with CMS is that it has been renovated to house our alternate programs, CLC and SCIDES, as well as our Tech staff and because that school was designed as a middle school it would cost more to make it as an elementary school. It also doesn't have the same number of classrooms as an elementary school. We would also have to find another place for our alternate programs to move. We also rent out portions of the building as well.

**Deanna Boon (Parent Central)** – I want to know about the raises that you have given to yourselves. I would like to know how that works and address it. And is there a policy that the expenses can't be accessed to the public.

**Chair Gordan Swan's response** – I will touch on the Superintendent's raise, that was approved by the Board as a group. As part of the contract, we would look at in after the first year. We had it a lower rate, it was then moved up. It was about a 9% raise. Part of the raise was moving up the grid plus an increment, which was the cost of living. Every teacher moves on a grid every year as well. We have a grid according to years of service and performance evaluation. It happened the same with Principals, not just teachers. It starts with the degree that they have plus years of service on that grid in addition to what the general wage is.

**Superintendent Lawrance's response** – For expenses, it's one of the issues that we are talking with the Province about because there are mandatory meetings that we're required to do to as central office staff and as Trustees. We don't choose where the conferences are held. There are travel cost to get there. The Ministry has heard us, and one of the mandatory meetings that we typically meet in person three times a year for the Superintendent, Secretary Treasurer and Chair have been reduced to one in person and the other two are virtual. A couple of questions ago, you'd had asked me if I was going to turn and run. The answer is no. I've been asked by my own staff and teachers that if I had known, would I still have come? My answer is Yes. No Superintendent wants to cut a million and a half dollars in their first year and a school closure in their second year. That said, when you stated, "Look at what you're doing in your office,"

I've already cut 3 positions since I've been here and that work doesn't go away. So when you say take on more work, I already work a significant amount of hours as does everyone else in our office. But there is a limit to that. Just like there is a limit for teachers having too many students in their class. And when we asked our Board what matters most, it's people. Our auditor said that even if our numbers were to stay the same, we still would have to find an additional \$250,000 just due to inflationary costs. There is no easy answer here. We originally started with a two and a half million-dollar deficit, and I already started the cuts last year and I was able to save 15 positions. I'm cognizant of my expense account. There are certain meetings that I must go to. I don't take international PD. I spend an incredible amount of time in our schools, probably more than other Superintendents. We don't have a lot of staff [at Board Office].

**Deanna Boon (Parent Central)** – You totally dodged the question about us looking at your expenses. Is there a policy or not?

**Secretary Treasure Mark Friesen's response** – There is not a policy.

**Elliot Anderson** – I think the dual track system is a great program. I attended Collettsville as a student when it was dual track. Has the Board looked at what the impact could look like if parents were to home school?

**Chair Gordan Swan's response** – If you were to put your child into SCIDES then the dollars we retain in the District or if you were to homeschool then that would be \$11,000 less that we would have. That would be the same if students left to go to their band schools.

**Betty Ann McDonnell** – Do the dollars from the Educational Assistants not come from diagnoses that the children come to the school with? Would SCIDES be able to go back to Kengard school? Why not sell CMS? Would you potentially lease out Central?

**Superintendent Lawrance's response** – For the children with designations, the dollars stay with that child. There are certain ratios for non-enrolling teaching. So, for counsellors, it's actually high. It's like one to every 693 students, you get 1 counsellor. For student support teachers (SST) we have different ratios for them as well. The process of selling a building is a different consultation process that we will have to work through. First, we would need to declare it as surplus. We would have to offer it to the Ministry to see if they need it as a space and if they turn it down, then there's a different consultation process that we would have to work with in order to sell the property. We would look at renting out the school if there is a closure. It takes around 3-4 years to get approval from the Ministry to be able to sell it, and we don't have that amount of time [before the end of the school year]. Why we haven't sold CMS now is because it's housing two of our programs, it's paying for itself. As for Kengard, Scw'exmx Child and Family Services is renting it out. Mark is in the process of doing inventory of our surplus properties because we recognize that it may be a way to help some of our capital costs. If we were to sell a building, then we could only put it back into capital.

**Linda Warner** – I'm here as a concerned citizen. I understand this is a tough decision for you guys to make, but I think you need to disrupt the least number of kids. Is Ask-Wellness on the table for the replacement of Central [refers to renting out space]?

**Superintendent Lawrance's response** – No, they haven't approached us.

**Amy Mierau** – How are you going to support the families who are barely making to the school. If you're going to close Central, will the district put more dollars into the bussing budget for field trips?

**Chair Gordan Swan's response** – Those are all the things that we are looking at. We have heard the students saying that if you were to move us, move us as a group. Don't split us into 2 or 3 different schools.

**Lena Coutu (Parent at Nicola Canford)** – How were the students consulted during this process?

**Superintendent Lawrance's response** – Jane Kempston, who is a retired Assistant Superintendent for the District, had the idea of talking to groups of students during the first round of consultations after meeting with Coldwater Rightsholders, students were at our consultation meeting. She asked what they liked about their school, what do you like learning and what is most important about their school. She never talked about the school closure. She talked to students from grade 2-7.

**Linda Warner (Central Parent)** – To disrupt the least number of kids, has anybody talked about moving Diamond Vale to Collettsville?

**Superintendent Lawrance's response** – The percentage is based on the capacity of the building. There is not enough space at Collettsville.

**Denielle Audet** – In 2025, the school board spent hundreds of thousands of dollars updating two classrooms at the high school. Where did that money come from? There are two more on the table for next year as well at the high school. Is that going to be funded by the school board? How are you deciding what is essential spending?

**Chair Gordan Swan's response** – You are talking about the two science classrooms at MSS? Those updates came out of the capital budget.

**Secretary Treasure Mark Friesen's response** – Those are separate funding costs from the Ministry.

**Chair Gordan Swan's response** – In the past, we would have had to save up for 4-5 years to replace MSS' roof. We have a project approved by the Ministry on a separate budget. We have a facilities committee to take a look at projects and the Board will decide what is more important. It does not come out of the Operating budget, it will come out of the grant that is approved by the Ministry.

**Ronda Davis** – What are the safety measures that will be put in place at Diamond Vale school? Are we for the kids, or are we for the money?

**Superintendent Lawrance's response** – In terms of safety, we don't control where the homeless shelter is. The Mayor and the town counsellors really tried to advocate for the town on the location of the shelter. It is an unfair characterization to say that Diamond Vale isn't a safe school. Our principal that works there is incredibly dedicated to creating a safe space for the students. It's a victim of reputation, much like how Central was years ago. We go and check the fields of every school every morning, because unfortunately there is a massive drug problem across the entire country. It is not limited to Merritt.

**Tina Echart** – Why did you wait for 2024-2025 to make this decision to potentially close a school? You had the opportunity to do it during the floods. We want explanations. We reject any of the options, and

we're going to find a way to hold the board accountable going forward. We want to know what you're doing.

**Chair Gordan Swan's response** – We approached the government during the flood to combine the funding that we were going to get for the repairs for a new building. The government turned us down. They looked at the cost of a new building verses the repairs of Central and Diamond Vale, which was lower.

**Asia Elliot (Central Parent)** – Why haven't we considered moving the students from Bench that are in the portables?

**Superintendent Lawrance's response** – We looked at Bench initially as a possible closure, but the problem is that is the only school at that side of Merritt and would raise bussing costs. Also, Bench is at the top of our capital plan for a modernization and has been for a few years.