

MINUTES

**MSS/CLC/DIAMOND VALE/BENCH & NICOLA-CANFORD COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT MEETING
NICOLA-SIMILKAMEEN SCHOOL DISTRICT (NO.58)**

**MERRITT SECONDARY SCHOOL, MULTI-PURPOSE ROOM
MONDAY, JANUARY 19, 2026, 6:00PM**

Success for ALL Learners Today and Tomorrow

Present:	Chairperson	G. Swan
	Vice-Chair	L. Ward
	Trustees	J. Jepsen 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
	Manager of IT	E. Park

Questions from the Public

Wendy Charney (Merritt City Councillor) – Have you looked outside of the box, instead of just these affected schools, have you looked at principals in general? If a principal could become a teacher, is the principal's wage red lined? Because it used to be. If it's still redlined, how much of a savings would there be? When can't you have one principal for two or three schools at a stretch? You used to have part-time principals at the smaller schools; they were in the classrooms and in the office. So, in a crunch like this, you could have one principal going from Colletville to Central or Colletville to Diamond Vale, and if the numbers are low, you could have a principal for all three schools. Why do you not have just one principal for SCIDES and CLC? Why do we need a principal for both of those facilities?

Superintendent Lawrance's response – Dave Anderson, who is our principal at CLC, and he's also the principal at MSS. The reason that we've kept that relationship is before student move over to an alternate program, we actually have a District based team meeting that needs to happen. It just makes more sense for it to actually be our high school principal

that does both roles. In the past, principals used to be part-time principals. I think this changed during COVID, and they are all 1.0FTE principles now. The other piece that changed is that we really have struggled in the last few years with not having enough TTOCs (Teachers Teaching On Call), so part of the move to making them full-time administrators is they're often classes covering. Luckily, that has levelled of this year, and we don't have as many failures to fill as we would call them. I haven't been involved in conversations with administrators being in more than one school outside of the alternate program.

Chair Swan's response – I remember when we had some principals that were 0.65 or 0.80 FTE based on the student population. If we assigned a principal to part-time classroom and part-time principal, we found that would be problematic when we had issues happening within the school, because then secretary would have to go and find where the principal is, and pull them out of their classroom.

Wendy Charney (Merritt City Councillor) – You're talking about a principal that would be 0.60 FTE and they would have District meetings to attend to, so the principal was out of the building for different things, and they would have a teacher in charge who would then take over the role of the principal. Who is the principal at SCIDES?

Superintendent Lawrance's response – Dan Duncan, is the full-time principal. The enrolment has actually gone up at SCIDES over the years and SCIDES is a different environment than the brick and mortar schools. They are not a face-to-face school, which would require a different skill set to be a principal. If the enrolment was to decline, it might look differently in the future, but right now it's a full-time position.

Wendy Charney (Merritt City Councillor) – For cost savings, could you make SCIDES a head teacher versus a principal? Because usually a principal is there for the discipline and administration of different things. Do you think you would ever investigate that situation?

Superintendent Lawrance's response – Because of supervision of staff, it needs to be an administrative officer, a head teacher is not the same role, and there is an evaluation component with a principal role. To be honest, we're not sure whether SCIDES will continue after 2027. Right now, the Ministry has changed as we typically used to get a three-year contract and they've moved to a year contract. We're hoping for our sake that SCIDES continues, because it is one area where we're seeing an increase in enrolment. I'm not sure whether that trend will continue, as there is just over 100 of the students at SCIDES are fulltime equivalents. The majority are considered non-school of record students, typically enrolled in two to eight courses while being officially registered at a brick and mortar school elsewhere.

Kyla Dres (CVE Parent) – I'm a little bit concerned about our French Immersion program. My question is based around the definition about viable. What would be considered viable to continue running the French Immersion program and have you polled families to see if they would plan to continue putting their child in French Immersion if these changed were made, including kindergarten enrolment that is coming up? There is a required percentage of French instruction that must be maintained across the grade levels. My concern is that, with the possibility of triple or even quadruple grade combined classrooms, how do you plan to ensure that the mandated level of French language teaching is sustained so students can successfully progress through the program and graduate with a true dual dogwood.

Chair Swan's response – The District does a count every September 30th. It's called a 1701. The government pays the District based on the number of students we have in seats. There is also a slight geographic factor to consider. At the moment, some parents have raised concerns because Collettsville already has a triple grade- split, which is a direct result of current enrolment numbers. When student numbers decline, we must look at the collective agreement—specifically class size and composition guidelines—to determine what those class configurations can be. If we have smaller classes at Collettsville, that means some other school could be losing out because we still have to come within the number of seats

that the government is paying for. It is one of our struggles and we are hoping people will stay in the program. If we move the French Immersion program, we move the entire program together. Another concern regarding the program's long term viability is the need for parents to keep their children enrolled at the secondary level. Last year, we had only one Grade 9 student in French Immersion, and it becomes very difficult to sustain the program at the secondary level when there is such a significant -drop off- between Grades 8 and 9.

Superintendent Lawrance's response – In terms of viability, the program simply needs to generate enough enrolment to cover its own costs. This means the numbers can be relatively low and the program can still continue. However, if there were a significant decline in French Immersion enrolment, class size legislation and the funding we receive from the government could result in the need for a triple grade split. To clarify, in the first scenario—if no changes are made, there would be reductions affecting teachers. In the second scenario, if French Immersion remains relatively stable at around 107 students, the program remains viable for a significant number of years. We're hearing there may be another increase in Kindergarten enrolment, similar to this year—last year we had 6 students, and this year we have 15. Mr. Sambrook's dedication and commitment to French Immersion have had a very positive impact on the school and its sense of community. Many families feel that if the program were to move, his leadership has been a key factor in holding the program together and helping to revitalize it. The piece about surveying the parents is that the Board has to make the decision first. Once the decision is made, we will be polling out French Immersion parents, and we will need to poll our other schools as well because we have a number of students that are out of catchment. There are lot of pieces that we need parental input once the decision is made such as: What are your future plans? Are you going to stay at the school that you're at? Are you going back to your neighborhood school?

Bethany Ryan (Bench Parent) – My question is in regard to scenario 2, which is Central closing and the French Immersion Program moving to Diamond Vale. The deferred maintenance fees are concerning to me because the rental income will help offset the \$2.3 million of capital upgrades that are needed. I'm wondering about the demand for a rental property that size in Merritt, and if the property is unable to be rented or rented consistently or the income isn't coming in, will the District be on the hook for all these repairs down the road anyways?

Superintendent Lawrance's response – Probably the only agency that would be big enough would be Scw'exmx Child & Family Services. Right now, they're split across four buildings, is my understanding. They are currently renting Kengard from us. Other than that group, we would probably have to divide the school up and rent different portions of it. We wouldn't just let it sit empty. Part of the reason for some of the deferred maintenance is that we can defer it longer if we don't have students or staff in that building. If we weren't able to rent it then the Board would have to decide whether they would want to declare it surplus. It's an entirely different process to sell a building than it is to rent it out. There are legal processes around that. Another potential interested party could be our local First Nations, who may want the building or portions of it. Many current rentals in Merritt already come from Indigenous organizations. While nothing is guaranteed, this is an option we would certainly explore.

Chair Swan's response – The other question that we have been getting is, why don't you just sell the building and put that money into staffing? And the answer is because we can't. If we sell Central, those dollars do into a capital fund, so we have **Operating Fund** and **Capital Fund**. We cannot take dollars from the capital fund and use them to offset operating costs. If we're able to lease the building, we could use the revenue we're obtained from the lease to supplement out operating funds. Also, a portion of the sale of the building would go back to the Ministry of Education. If funds were placed into the Capital Fund and we pursued a project at Bench, such as expanding the gym or adding classroom space to eliminate portables, the Ministry's first question would be how much of the capital from the sale of Central we were using to support those renovations.

Wendy Charney (Merritt City Councillor) – If no schools were to close and you left them as they are, school populations are around 120 in some of the smaller schools, in theory could you look at sharing a janitor, a secretary and a librarian between two schools? I am also wondering what the Board is doing to promote the French program.

Chair Swan's response – The French program runs right through to grade 12. Our enrolment across the District is down. We're down close to 600 students. French and non-Francophone across the District. Unless we have more families move into the community and bringing kids age zero to grade 3 in the community to build up our enrolment. We are now running kindergarten classes of 15 students, which is challenging for us as a District. Looking ahead, another concern is that if, five years from now, we continue bringing in only one-third of the students we graduate, we will face significant enrolment driven pressures as those cohorts move through the system.

Wendy Charney (Merritt City Councillor) – It's unlikely that many parents will choose French Immersion if they feel the program isn't fully supported at the secondary level. We need to strengthen the program so families see a clear, continuous pathway. French Immersion has the potential to be a strong, vibrant program—it once was, and a dual track model worked well in the past, with cultural activities benefiting both the French and English streams. There is real value in rebuilding and promoting the program so that it can once again thrive.

Chair Swan's response – We do meet the Ministry's requirements right now for the French program. If we didn't, then we wouldn't be allowed to have graduate students with a dual credit and one of the reasons we're looking at dual track is because we're had students who are now adults with children of their own, saying it was a successful program. We also have a principal who has helped stabilize the school, which is an important factor. In addition, we must follow our contractual obligations with teachers, and those requirements also guide the decisions we make.

Superintendent Lawrance's response – Another important factor in promoting the program is the work being done by Nicole McKay-Smith, our French Coordinator. Last year, she visited Strong-Start programs across our elementary schools and spoke directly with families about the value of French Immersion, which helped support kindergarten enrolment. She has also been developing an alumni series highlighting former French Immersion students and how they continue to use French in their careers. We're not unique in seeing attrition at the secondary level. This is a nationwide trend in French Immersion. Enrolment typically starts strong in the early grades and gradually declines over time. In high school, some students leave because of postsecondary plans, especially since French Immersion requires an additional French course in their timetable, which can make it harder to fit in certain math and science pathways. We also know that high school programs often rise or fall based on peer groups; when some students leave, their friends often follow. Increasing retention in the later grades is essential, because the more students we have, the more course sections we can offer. We have continued the program to ensure students still have the opportunity to graduate with a dual diploma, but last year only three of the original 22 students who began in French Immersion kindergarten completed the program with that credential. Maintaining a healthy French Immersion program will require a collective effort from all of us moving forward. Going back to your librarian question, the only school that has a full-time librarian is MSS, and it is because her numbers dictate it. Everywhere else, it is the percentage from the contract, so it is one for every 475 students, and we actually have one librarian that is going between two schools. As for the secretaries. Central has the longest hours of all elementary schools. All other elementary school secretaries work less hours but aren't part-time. Regarding our custodial staff, they utilize a standardized formula to determine the time allocated for various tasks. Additionally, last year we closed several classrooms as a cost-saving measure for custodial services. Although it didn't involve physically shutting down a building, it resulted in savings of about \$20,000. We closed classrooms at both Diamond Vale Elementary and Princeton Secondary School.

Chair Swan's response – One more to mention on Custodians is that last year during our budget consultation we reduced all the custodial positions from 12 months to 10 months of the year.

Kyla Dres (CVE Parent) – My question is about District staff expenses and the need for greater transparency around how those costs are managed. If we are making cuts and decisions that directly impact schools and students, we should also

examine expenditures at all levels. Parents would benefit from understanding who approves these expenses, what that process looks like, and how those costs are being monitored. There are approximately \$20,000 in expenses for some District staff. Having clearer information about figures like these would help reassure parents that the District is looking at all areas, not just school-level reductions, to ensure that the numbers must balance; the impact on students is kept as minimal as possible.

Superintendent Lawrance's response – Part of what we do is we travel a lot, given that we're a rural District. One of our directives from our Board is they want to see us in schools. That said, we're cognizant of reducing expenses, as we move forward. When I first came, I thought we were in a bit of a different financial picture than what we were. We get called to a lot of meetings by the Ministry in the province, and we've asked them that they not all be in person. Sometimes they have that virtual option, but most times they don't. It often has to do with the nature of what's being discussed in confidentiality. Not only is there an expense to go, but there's the expense not being physically in the District during those days. The Ministry has listened, we typically did three superintendent meetings a year down to one in person and to being virtual, so that'll reduce costs there. We are also car-pooling as much as we can, as well as using District vehicles as the cost is less than paying mileage. We have had almost a complete turnover in my office, so some of the expenses from last year would also be moving allowances because you typically get that when you come into a new position. The bulk of my expenses, last year, I had a moving allowance, conferences, hotels travel and typically the meals that go with it.

Tina Etchart (DPAC) – So, since we have no money, you double your expenses, right? They were \$20,000 last year; they're \$35,000 this year. Are you able to give us the receipts?

Superintendent Lawrance's response – One thing is the SOFI report (Statement of Financial Information) from last year wasn't mine. They were Stephen McNiven's. This year's (2024-2025) are mine.

Tina Etchart (DPAC) – So \$35,000 in expenses, let's say to help you move, but it's only going to cost \$1,700 in boxes and tape and \$2,400 to move some furniture for the entire District, but one person's is costing over \$30,000.

Superintendent Lawrance's response – I've been clear that it was a moving allowance, conferences, hotels and travel expenses (mileage).

Tina Etchart (DPAC) – Parents expect to see transparency around teachers and principals expenses, as well as school budgets. Each school operates with a relatively small amount—around \$20,000—and if schools are consolidated, that budget does not increase. A principal could be responsible for an additional hundred students while still working within the same limited \$20,000 budget.

Secretary Treasurer Friesen's response – No, we try and set the school budgets on a per student basis. If a school is going to get 100 more students, their school budget is going to increase.

Tina Etchart (DPAC) – Speaking about salaries, you gave yourself a 14% increase.

Secretary Treasurer Friesen's response – Sorry, nobody gives themselves a raise.

Tina Etchart (DPAC) – Oh, sorry, the Board, you guys, decided to give a 14% increase because a bang up job is being done and we needed to hire a retired Assistant Superintendent, Superintendent and the current Superintendent, all at the same time because you weren't able to complete your school closure process without bring back retired staff that we additionally have to pay their salaries. You thought you did such a great job, that you deserve a raise and the Board agreed. I'm just wondering the logistics of how the Board decided. There is another expense that we found out, Douglas Boyd, the project manager, went from \$19,000 to \$ 50,000 in expenses.

Chair Swan's response – Those funds were provided by the government specifically for the Riverside project. The \$10 million allocation was designated to convert Riverside in Princeton into a daycare centre. He served as the project manager, and it is not uncommon to have a dedicated project manager for a project valued at approximately \$10.2 million. I will also point out that every year our books are looked at by an auditing firm. They give a clean bill of health and say that the books accurately reflect the cost in the District.

Tina Etchart (DPAC) – Yes, anybody can submit receipts and balance coming and going, and a ledger of an account. We're talking about who qualifies the money that's being spent. How is that qualified? Who's negotiating the contracts with all the vendors? You went from \$14 million last year to \$21 million this year. You don't separate your projects.

Chair Swan's response – We separate operations from capital. Capital projects go through a tendering process. Everything that is over \$5,000, which is out Board policy, as Chair of the Finance Committee, I see everything for approval that is over \$5,000.

Tina Etchart (DPAC) – We'd like to set some time with the Board or at the Board Office for parents to come and see these documents and these expenses.

Secretary Treasurer Friesen's response – I'm open to scheduling a meeting with you so we can have a more productive discussion. Since you're holding a document, I assume it's our SOFI report. You say that our vendors went from \$14 million to \$21 million, what could be in there is the big expense for Riverside as Chair Swan just mentioned, \$10 million of additional expenses this year to get that building up and running for childcare. That could easily attribute to a spike in our vendor usage.

Tina Etchart (DPAC) – Another thing regarding the public consultation or the budget process, is that there were a lot of parents from DPAC who were asking to have input on that. We were not welcome at the meetings because you knew our position. You're spending \$1.5 million on transportation where we get allocated \$180,000. We have been asking for years to start having a pay per use fee for the busing. Let's look at some alternative measures to be able to reimburse the parents if the Ministry isn't going to give it to us, then we will have to start billing the parents. The District seems to not have a problem to bill the parents and families in any other capacity, but getting the kids to school, that seems to be the issue. And Gordon, you told me that it's an all or nothing. If we can't recover the whole cost, we don't want to go over partial cost.

Chair Swan's response – You have asked us in the past to basically charge our Indigenous students a fee.

Tina Etchart (DPAC) – I don't know who they are and it doesn't matter to me.

Chair Swan's response – If you look at the buses at Central, you probably have a pretty good idea. The Board has said it's not going to change its current policy; it is not going to charge our rural kids to attend school in town. That's where the Board sits on the policy right now. Every year we look at those numbers, and I can tell you that our bands pay for the classroom portion of those students who are on reserve. We also have the BC Tripartite Education Agreement, which in that have a component for transportation. It's in law, it's legislated, but as a Board, we have said that we are not going to be charging those rural students to come into town.

Tina Etchart (DPAC) – So again, you refuse to have any cost recovery conversation, even though you have been asked by the parents to do so.

Chair Swan's response – We actually think, when the government took that away as a core service was incorrect. That was Minister Bond several years ago, when she said that busing is not a core service, we believe that is for our rural students in order to get an education. We would like to see DPAC and other parent groups, pressure the government to say that they should be funding bussing.

Superintendent Lawrance's response – The real issue is a lack of government funding. There's a reason why the chose not to call it a core service, because transportation, it's still covered in Alberta and Saskatchewan by the government. Every Board that runs a transportation system is in deficit because of costs and what you get from the government don't align. The only time they've turned a profit was during COVID when the buses didn't move, but you still got the funding for it. It's a challenge that's unique to rural Districts, because in most of the urban centres, they have a transit system. It's one of the things the Board is actually working on with the town of Princeton is they're trying to get a transit grant that they would have to have an internal bus system. I actually reached out to the Superintendent of SD 67 because they were moving towards a fee model for their busing. The question I asked them was, is this going to make up your transportation deficit? He said no. It would basically be a drop in the bucket, is what they were going to bring in, but they were going through some different things. They had a lot of nominal capacity on their buses, and they've offered those spots as courtesy riders to others. He couldn't tell me whether it was going to make a profit, other than it wouldn't be enough to set off the deficit, because they hadn't started it last year when I had reached out to him, because I asked him what his collection rates are, because I have worked for Districts and other provinces where there were fees. Oftentimes, you're not getting those fees from the student. Financial hardship is a real thing in our community. To say that the Board hasn't looked at it, they have. We've looked at Districts that do charge for it. We also reached out to Kelowna. It doesn't cover the cost of it. I think they were charging \$450 at the time. The seat is about \$1,200, a year.

Tina Etchart (DPAC) – Even a partial recovery would be something. And even if it was a drop in the bucket, it's enough to keep the kids in town in their school, right? That's all we're looking at. You had no problem to cut all the busing locally in town, no problem there at all. But not for out-of-town kids. So it just, our parents aware that, for example, if you change your catchment, the schools that don't seem that they're going to be affected, they might be kicked out of their school because you're going to have to make room for a now a new catchment, a person who lives in that catchment. So, I think to address the community in a realistic way to explain to them how it does affect everybody would be appreciated. And if there was a plan in place, we see you don't have a plan, but we feel very concerned that you're going to cost more money to the district rather than keeping it the way it is, you're going to end up costing more money to solve other problems that a rise because there isn't a thorough plan in place.

Chair Swan's response – Every out of catchment student has a form that their parents must sign, confirming that the placement is for one year and may change if space becomes limited. Over the past several years, our enrolment has dropped by roughly 600 students, which has allowed us the flexibility to accommodate students across schools without strict concern for catchment boundaries.

Tina Etchart (DPAC) – Have you reached out to any of those parents who could potentially be misplaced?

Superintendent Lawrance's response – Each year, we have students attending schools outside their designated catchment areas. At this time, we have been able to accommodate these placements due to available nominal capacity across most schools. The exception is Bench, where capacity is currently limited. This information is included on the annual out of catchment form signed by parents and has also been reflected in our presentation materials.

When reviewing potential impacts should a school close, we noted that transfers to Bench and Collettsville would be closed, as neither school would have space to accept additional students. Diamondvale still has available capacity, and Nicola-Canford has a significant amount. The ability to grandfather existing students will depend, in part, on French Immersion enrolment and the final determination of where that program will be located. Once those decisions are made, we will be able to advise families whether their children can be grandfathered or will need to return to their neighborhood school.

We have also addressed this question with parents at schools not under consideration for closure, as they have asked how out of catchment placements may be affected. These discussions have taken place during our meetings, and the

information has been included in our Q&A materials. A second Q&A document is currently being prepared to provide further clarification.

Tina Etchart (DPAC) – Would the Board be able to make a decision to pause this right now for one more year, so that we can make the decisions of March 2027 rather than 2026?

Chair Swan's response – It will be up to the Board when they get to their March meeting on what option they take or if they take another option. Once the Board makes a decision, that will drive the Superintendent in terms of what has to happen for September. If the Superintendent was to start to make those decisions, that would be inappropriate. Once the Board makes its decision, that will drive the other conversations. We know from our experience during the floods that we are able to develop and implement plans within a matter of weeks. At that time, we created nine campuses for three schools, and Central likely moved three times throughout the year. This type of work is not new to us. However, the first step must come from the governance side—school trustees must decide before any operational planning can proceed. The Board can decide to do nothing. There's a cost to doing nothing, because we don't have the surplus funds that we've had for the last 10 years; we've been using the surplus funds to support programs. This year, we lost 49 students, last year it was 51. That is \$1.2 million that we had two years ago, that we don't have now.

Tina Etchart (DPAC) – We didn't get an announcement last time about what our surplus is at right now, or are we in a deficit? I think you told me 1%.

Secretary Treasurer Friesen's response – At the February Board meeting we'll be presenting our amended budget, which will take into account the funding that we've gotten this year and any last staffing decisions that we needed to make, and then I'll be able to present a projected year end surplus. At the end of last year, if you look, we were at about 1%, which is below the policy that we're trying to get to of 2% to 4%.

Wendy Charney (Merritt City Councillor) – For the Principal that is going to be relocated, will their salary be redlined?

Superintendent Lawrance's response – If you don't know that red lined means or red circled means, their salary stays the same no matter which position they move to. It's not how our contracts are written anymore. I'd have to look at the individual contract, but I think it's a six-month severance for the admin allowance and then they would earn the teacher's salary.

Wendy Charney (Merritt City Councillor) – Okay, so that have to be taken into consideration. So, then you close school A, teachers and students go to school. Wouldn't that principal then get an increase in wages because they have more students and more teachers.

Superintendent Lawrance's response – It doesn't work that way in BC. There is a range that they get as principal and right now, we're not able to make any salary increases.

Wendy Charney (Merritt City Councillor) – In the past, the District operated with one Secretary-Treasurer and one Superintendent, and they ran the District. It is important to also examine staffing at the organizational level. We must ensure that our internal operations are as efficient and streamlined as possible. It is not sustainable to place the burden solely on schools, teachers, principals, parents, and students. A thorough review of personnel at the Board Office is both reasonable and necessary to identify potential areas for savings and to ensure that all departments are contributing to overall fiscal responsibility.

Chair Swan's response – We did last budget; we did remove people at the District office. It's something we'll continue to look at, but we did remove people there. We also reduced our maintenance by one position. We had a position of a District Vice-Principal that was removed.

Superintendent Lawrence's response – We started with the cuts in our office because you have to go first from the top. But there's a certain limit of how many people you can go down. What I would say is in a lot of districts, when the grant money runs out, those positions don't often disappear. They continue and it typically comes out of the classroom to continue to fund it. We don't have that luxury, nor can we afford it, and when we're asking everyone else to take the cut, there was no one that was spared last year. So, when I talk about, we found all the nickels and dimes and quarters, we've cut it as much as we can. There's nowhere else for us to go other than staffing. And the reality is, our numbers are continuing to go down for projections, you know, I'm sure other entities in our community often hear the same things, you know, at the city, people would say that they are overstaffed. We don't have an overly large central office. What's a little bit different in every school district, and this is across the country, we have different titles for different jobs that often do the same thing. So that why they may have less Assistant Superintendents, they may have more District Principals or Directors or those sorts of positions. But there's a certain amount of work that needs to be done, and the amount of reporting that we do now is very different than what used to happen in the past.

Adam Etchart (Merritt City Councillor) – In one scenario, you had suggested moving Central to Collettsville and Collettsville to Diamond Vale. If you do that and you leave the building, are you going to be responsible for doing some capital improvements at a large cost to be able to lease it, or would you work this kind of upgrades into a lease agreement? My concern is that we have the flood, most buildings that are insured commercially have some clauses, like equipment upgrades. I'm wondering if anything was negotiated with a heating system, if it was quite old and you have a proper boiler and commercial policy, why that wasn't replaced. Why wasn't this fought through the insurance to get that paid and upgraded.

Chair Swan's response – When we had the flood, initially, the Ministry said, we are going to loan you \$21 million that had to be paid back and at that time was out of a \$28 million operating fund. There was not way we were going to be able to take out a \$21 million dollar loan and a \$28 million operating fund. I had a talk with the Minister and let her know that if we didn't solve it privately, Jackie Tagart who was our MLA, would bring it up in the house. We need a grant because we're self-insured. We did get the grant. Every invoice for that, I had to approve, then those invoices went to a separate body in the Ministry of Education, and they looked at each of those invoices before they approved it. We had talked to them about with the amount of money that we were going to be putting into those buildings, and they said to us, the grant, those dollars, insurance dollars, if you like, has government self-insurance, is only to get you back to where you were, where we were, was a building that in parts of it were 90 years old, other parts were built in the '60s. So that's where we were on those dollars. Every one of those had to be approved by government in order for that. I was signing off on stuff for a very restoration company, \$7 million funds that on faith, the government was going to back that because we had to keep those payments going. We also talked to government and said, rather than put that money into the two buildings that have been damaged, how about we build a new Central combine both schools together on that property, raise it up, about three to four metres to get above the crown of the road there, and build a new school. They looked at that and said, no, we're not going to do that because a new building is approx. \$34 million. This money is to get you back to where you were before. I approved several repair expenses for Central last year, including approximately \$68,000 for specialized parts, as many components had not been manufactured since 1968 and had to be custom made to restore the system. These realities affected multiple aspects of the building. We replaced everything from four feet down and used nearly 1,000 sheets of plywood to rebuild the floors. However, the wiring behind the walls was not replaced, and the boiler was not eligible for replacement because it did not sustain the same level of flood damage as other areas.

We also faced challenges regarding the restoration of the Board Office, which had flooded to the same extent as the schools. After significant discussion with the Ministry, we did receive funding; however, the Ministry made it clear that the funding was intended only to return facilities to their pre-flood condition. We proposed an alternative—constructing a new Central building, raised several meters and combining both schools on the site. The Ministry considered the option

for several weeks but ultimately declined, noting that a new school would cost roughly \$34 million and that declining enrolment in our District, combined with growing enrolment pressures elsewhere in the province, meant the project would not be supported.

Adam Etchart (Merritt City Councillor) – My biggest concern is that if you do vacate Central available for a leasing opportunity, will there be a large cost of the school district that we're not planning for, that you'll end up in the same position?

Superintendent Lawrence's response – There's two kinds of leases that you can negotiate. One is a higher monthly value that factors in the maintenance that's going to need to be done over the long term or a smaller monthly payment with the understanding that the tenants are responsible for the maintenance. Operating a school with students and staff there, it's a different amount of maintenance and priority that it would have. It's a little bit different when it's a tenant in there. Typically, they're going to have fewer people in the building. Some of those systems may last longer because there's less people to use them. That is something that we're looking at because it's a long process to sell the property, but in the long term this would be the best option, because we know that there is deferred maintenance. We're a long way from that, so we would try the lease, just leaving it sitting empty isn't a viable option. We need to be bringing in revenue of some sort.

Chair Swan's response – We have to balance our budget each year. I know the mayor had talked about the potential of 150 students coming with jobs. We would love to see happen. The data that we're looking at, the economic data, that the province was looking at says they're now seeing 150 students moving here in the next year, the next 18 months. So that's another piece we have to look at. We hope our projections will hold. We know in the last two years, we were declining faster than the projections of ministry had, that's \$1.3 million dollars that we don't have today.

Kyla Dres (CVE Parent) – I have a question about the start and stop times of school. I think a lot of people have built their lives around the expectations of what time their children need to start and stop school.

Chair Swan's response – One conversation that has come up is with Diamondvale, especially if we have Collettsville move to Diamond Vale and knowing that we have some rural kids on the bus, does that become a 9-3 school instead of a 8:30-2:30. Yes, we are looking at that.

Kyla Dres (CVE Parent) – Can you speak a little bit more about the Bench modernization/remodel, what are you actually planning and how necessary is that if we are looking at making all of these cuts, I understand in a perfect world, you'd like to do all these things, but do we have to?

Chair Swan's response – We completed an electrical upgrade at the school this past summer, so that component has now been addressed. However, the building itself has not undergone any significant modernization. The reason the school currently shows at 104% capacity is because the Ministry does not count portables as part of the official capacity calculation. We also recognize that this area of town continues to be a growth area for the District. Despite that, there has been very little capital work done at the school. In my 30 years as a trustee, there has not been a major project completed aside from improvements to the main entrance. The electrical upgrade this year was necessary, as the system could no longer support basic operational needs—plugging devices into two separate outlets would overload the system. This upgrade was essential simply to keep the building compliant.

There are additional upgrades the school requires, and these have been submitted to the Ministry as capital requests. These types of projects do not come from our operating budget. For example, the two science rooms completed down the hall this year were funded through Ministry capital dollars. When we submit projects for this school, the Ministry has repeatedly declined them, noting that the District has sufficient capacity to relocate students to other schools. At the same time, the reality remains that this is the only school on that side of town, and it is operating at 104% of its recognized capacity.

Kyla Dres (CVE Parent) – After this round would there be any more consultations.

Superintendent Lawrance's response – Additional information will continue to be posted on our District website. Meeting summaries will be published once they are prepared, and a second Q&A document is currently in development. We typically complete the full consultation process before finalizing Q&A materials to ensure all questions raised throughout the meetings are captured.

We also have a dedicated email address for the public to submit comments or questions. If there is something you feel the Board should consider, please share your thoughts—emails are forwarded to all trustees for review. Our February Board meeting will provide another formal opportunity for the public to bring items forward during the Public Question Period.

Trustees will also be attending upcoming PAC meetings, which serve as an additional venue for parents to provide input—for example, sharing which options their PAC prefers if choices need to be narrowed. I make every effort to respond to emails within 24–48 hours. If you send a message to the school closure address, you will receive a reply.