

May 4, 2021

Honourable Jennifer Whiteside  
Minister of Education  
Room 306 Parliament Buildings  
Victoria, BC V8V 1X4

Re: Proposed Changes to the Juniper Ridge and Marion Schilling Elementary School Catchment Areas

Dear Minister Whiteside,

As a resident of the Juniper Ridge community in Kamloops, BC, I am writing to express my deep concerns and opposition to the proposed changes in catchment area for Juniper Ridge Elementary School. As you may know, Juniper Ridge is a geographically unique neighbourhood within Kamloops and currently all children in the neighbourhood are within the catchment area for our beloved community school, Juniper Ridge Elementary School (JRES). This letter outlines my firm opposition and concerns with the proposed changes to the JRES and Marion Schilling Elementary School catchment changes.

1. The proposed catchment changes would impose a huge divide in our close-knit neighbourhood and remove access to a local community school for many children.
2. This change would have major impacts on our children's well-being, social development, health, and connection to our community. Particularly following an unprecedented global pandemic where friendships forged at school are the only peer exposure and connection they so desperately rely on.
3. The marginal effect of spreading overcrowding to more schools by reopening Ralph Bell is overshadowed by the impacts and complete absence of benefits to affected families in Juniper Ridge. Our children would make up the majority of those impacted and would be paying too high a price if School District 73 (SD73) approved the proposed change in catchment.
4. Juniper Ridge is a connected community with many interdependencies and networks that provide a secure and safe neighbourhood for our children to thrive. The proposed changes would compromise many of these established networks, a primary one being access to daycare and before and after school care.
5. Many parents have real safety concerns about our younger children attending school in the proposed location of Ralph Bell. This is an area with significantly higher crime levels, open drug use and elevated use by transient people along the Trans-Canada Highway corridor.
6. There are more effective and more respectful options to address the overcrowding challenges that recognize the importance of our children's wellbeing, the value of attending community schools and the precious interdependencies and relationships within our communities.

## The Value of Community Schools

As this proposal stands, children in the affected area of Juniper West from kindergarten to grade 7 would be diverted to Ralph Bell Elementary school. They would be transported out of their neighbourhood every day removing them from their neighbourhood school, friends, and the teachers they know and love. You will hear from many of the residents in Juniper Ridge that one of the main reasons we chose to live and raise our families here was because it is a vibrant, child-friendly community with a great community school that we want our children to attend. This is for many reasons, including having a school that our community can rally around and co-raise our children with, sharing a community with the families our children go to school with, having school accessible to our children via walking and biking and having the ability to plan for daycare and after-school care that aligns with attending JRES. It has been shown that walking or biking to and from school has both mental and physical health benefits. This includes higher academic performance, reduced stress, elevated happiness, fostering independent decision making and fostering bonds with peers in addition to physical benefits<sup>1</sup>. In addition, there is a wide body of research on the importance of sound community planning which can promote healthy habits for our children (e.g., active travel) and reduces the likelihood of developing chronic conditions<sup>2</sup>. Active travel, including walking and biking, is promoted by short distances and the presence of safe corridors to and from school<sup>2</sup>. We love our community school; it is a central tenet to why many of us are in this community and why Juniper Ridge is a desirable place to live and raise our families.

## Our Children's Well Being

I am extremely concerned about the mental health effects of separating young friendships and dividing a community, particularly as we recover from one of the most difficult and stressful times in many of our lives. The pandemic has brought about uncertainty, loneliness and stress for both adults and children<sup>3</sup>. Our community school has provided one of the few, if not the only, places of consistent social interaction, normalcy, and routine for our children since the pandemic began. The benefits of these social interactions include a sense of belonging, familiarity, consistency, and security. If the catchment changes proceed, close friendships will be severed, many ties that bind our community will be weakened and our children will no longer attend school with many of their community peers. The value of our children's connection to JRES has never been more important and we will rely heavily on this as a community as we all recover from the pandemic.

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<sup>1</sup> For example: <https://www.utoronto.ca/news/why-walking-school-better-driving-your-kids?fbclid=IwAR0Lij8xbryZ4X2hqzIRNm1Bqtg5SOiqTNYgiKGpi7lppXjiwYSlninkynA>

<sup>2</sup> Active Living Children and Youth: What is the Canadian evidence saying? Authored by Healthy Canada by Design CLASP: <https://www.cip-icu.ca/%2FFiles%2FResources%2FFACTSHEETS-ChildrenYouth-FINALenglish.aspx&usg=AOvVaw1i0w9UZ1GC-SKImMJ44mNz>

<sup>3</sup> Children's Mental Health Ontario: <https://cmho.org/how-the-pandemic-impacts-childrens-mental-health/>

### Absence of Benefits to Affected Juniper Ridge Families and Children – Only Major Costs

In this proposed plan, Ralph Bell will open in 2022 with an enrollment already over capacity (116%), which will be 3% more than the projected enrollment at Juniper Ridge (113%) and 36% more than the projected enrollment at Marion Schilling (80% of total capacity), according to the enrollment projections provided by SD73. So not only would our children lose their community school, but they would also need to commute to a new school in a different neighbourhood by bus at young ages and be attending the most crowded facility, which is projected to worsen with each subsequent year. This proposed change would serve no benefit to our children. There are better ways to address this issue until Juniper Ridge gets a much-needed second community school on the west side.

### A Functioning Community – Impacts to Childcare

The availability of childcare in the Kamloops area is extremely limited. The Community Childcare Planning (CCP) report released in June 2020 by the City of Kamloops provided startling statistics on daycare availability in Kamloops<sup>4</sup>. There were 12,025 children under the age of 12 in Kamloops and only 3,314 licensed and registered daycare spaces. The biggest gap noted was for children ages 0-3 and 5-12 years old. Unfortunately, Kamloops families are all too familiar with the dire reality these numbers represent.

There are currently three childcare facilities operating at the Ralph Bell location: Kamloops Kidz Early Learning Centre, Children's Place Childcare Centre, and Kiddies Korner Daycare. These three facilities provide approximately 264 spaces (204 under 5 spaces and 60 before and after school spaces)<sup>5</sup>. This accounts for almost 8% of total licensed childcare spaces in Kamloops. Proceeding with the proposed change in catchment would displace these existing facilities and remove essential capacity and access to childcare that is crucial to families from many neighborhoods. Some of these spaces are used by Juniper Ridge families and include before and after school care for students attending JRES. The closure or relocation of Kamloops Kidz, Children's Place Childcare Centre and Kiddies Korner at Ralph Bell would worsen an existing crisis for many Kamloops families requiring childcare. As of April 20, 2021, at least one of the facilities at Ralph Bell confirmed that a relocation or accommodation plan has not been discussed with them. This is a major issue and solutions for families appear to be entirely absent from the proposed changes.

Childcare spaces in Juniper Ridge are even more limited with three licensed facilities, two of which are home based. Not surprisingly all three of these facilities have long waitlists. The CCP report notes that families prefer care close to home, work and school but unfortunately 22 out of 24 neighbourhoods in Kamloops do not have enough licensed and registered care. The proposed change in catchment also

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<sup>4</sup> Community Childcare Planning (CCP) report: <http://tinyurl.com/ybktbkqb>

<sup>5</sup> Personal communication with the Childcare Resource and Referral Centre through the John Tod Centre

means Juniper West families may no longer have access to their current childcare providers in Juniper Ridge who pick-up and drop-off school-aged children at JRES. They may continue to provide care for younger children, but this would separate siblings in care and would require families to either go to two locations to pick up their children or search for extremely limited childcare spaces elsewhere.

### Safety Concerns

I also have concerns about the safety of our youngest children attending a commuter school at a property adjacent to some low-budget motels. There are ample examples of situations involving crime, drugs, guns, and a transient population that we are not comfortable having our children largely unsupervised around<sup>6</sup>. I understand that Ralph Bell currently houses three daycares, but in a daycare setting children are under constant supervision at a much higher teacher to student ratio than an elementary school can provide. Young school children are also outside before and after school, during recess and lunch without the same level of dedicated supervision.

This proposed change in catchment is a band-aid solution that will not solve the capacity challenges facing our schools, but it will create major problems such as fracturing communities, compromising our children's quality of life and exacerbating an existing crisis in childcare availability. In a recent article published in *Kamloops This Week* on April 19, 2021, Meghan Wade, the Board of Education's Vice-Chair, called this "a capital crisis" many years in the making and "if we do open [Ralph Bell], all we're doing is sharing the pain." Why are we asking the youngest, most vulnerable members of our community to share the pain? We need to seek solutions that minimize impacts, ones that give our children as much stability and community as possible.

In light of the above-mentioned reasons, I believe SD73 should work with our communities to pursue acceptable solutions.

### Solutions to Consider

1. Increase capacity for portables at Juniper Ridge Elementary.
  - a. Create a new teacher parking lot (e.g. in the southwest corner of the property with a one-way entrance off Nechako and an exit onto Qu'Appelle). Use the current parking lot as space to add more portables when needed after 2022 and then convert to

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<sup>6</sup>For example:

Apr 14, 2021: <https://cfjctoday.com/2021/04/14/rcmp-come-across-stolen-vehicle-sawed-off-shotgun-at-valleyview-motel/>

Dec 30, 2020: <https://www.kamloopsthisweek.com/news/large-police-presence-in-valleyview-1.24261455>

Apr 19, 2020: [https://www.kamloopsbcnow.com/watercooler/news/news/Kamloops/Valleyview\\_motel\\_standoff\\_leads\\_to\\_1\\_arrest/](https://www.kamloopsbcnow.com/watercooler/news/news/Kamloops/Valleyview_motel_standoff_leads_to_1_arrest/)

Jan 28, 2020: <https://www.summerlandreview.com/news/kamloops-killer-who-claims-victim-stabbed-himself-has-appeal-dismissed/>

Mar 15, 2019: <https://vancouver.sun.com/news/local-news/kamloops-hit-with-unprecedented-level-of-gang-violence>

Jan 23, 2019: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/2-men-killed-in-separate-shootings-at-kamloops-hotels-1.4989736>

Sep 14, 2018: <https://www.saobserver.net/news/kamloops-rcmp-cuff-four-in-motel-room-after-alleged-assault-firearms-seized/>

Nov 4, 2017: <https://infotel.ca/newsitem/breaking-kamloops-police-surround-valleyview-hotel/it47419>

Jun 5, 2013: <https://www.merritherald.com/charges-laid-in-kamloops-shooting/013>

blacktop play space when a new elementary school on the west side of Juniper Ridge is built.

2. Make Ralph Bell a temporary middle school for grades 6 and 7.
  - a. This would allow all children from across the neighbourhoods to remain together with their established peer groups and eliminate the need to transport very young children to Ralph Bell.
  - b. This would eliminate the need for children in Juniper West to change schools a second time if a second community school is constructed in Juniper Ridge. It is incredibly unfair and disruptive to split friendships once much less a second time.
  - c. A middle school may be a temporary solution but would also alleviate some of the capacity challenges at JRES and Marion Schilling and keep existing friendships intact.
  - d. Assuming not all classrooms in Ralph Bell would be required for grade 6 and 7 students this could also allow much needed childcare facilities to continue operating in their current location. This would be a secure source of revenue for SD73 and avoid the potential loss of all 264 daycare spaces in the area.
3. Recognize established relationships and interdependencies of the current Juniper Ridge Community by diverting new areas of development (e.g. developments underway on upper Coldwater Drive and west of Qu'Appelle Blvd) to Ralph Bell. Residents in these areas would be notified of the catchment changes, which would allow them to make an informed decision before purchasing a newly built home.
4. Perform an audit of addresses of students registered at the school to find out how many no longer live in Juniper Ridge. There are families who have used friends' or relatives' addresses to register their children at JRES and others who have moved away since registering but continue to attend JRES. While we understand and empathize with the negative impacts that sending students out of the catchment would have, it could alleviate some of the capacity pressure.
5. Work with the Juniper Ridge Neighbourhood Association and JRES to encourage more active transportation (e.g., walking and biking) to our community school to help alleviate traffic issues. A national study revealed that schools with "Individualized School Travel Plans" with targeted interventions including things like safety training, improved signage, and special events like walk-to-school days, helped increased active transportation in communities<sup>7</sup>. While this point does not alleviate over-capacity issues it would help address potential traffic issues near JRES.

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<sup>7</sup> Active Living Children and Youth: What is the Canadian evidence saying? Authored by Healthy Canada by Design CLASP: <https://www.cip-icu.ca/%2FFiles%2FResources%2FFACTSHEETS-ChildrenYouth-FINALenglish.aspx&usg=AOvVaw1i0w9UZ1GC-SKImMJ44mNz>

For the reasons outlined in this letter, please sincerely consider my firm opposition to the proposed catchment changes for Juniper Ridge and Marion Schilling Elementary School. I urge School District 73 to work with the impacted communities to implement solutions that are more beneficial to the health and safety of our neighbourhood and the children and families within it.

Sincerely,



Amy Bagg

Cc:

Dr. Terry Sullivan, Superintendent of Schools – SD73, [superintendent@sd73.bc.ca](mailto:superintendent@sd73.bc.ca) (via Email)

Trish Smillie, Assistant Superintendent – SD73, [tsmillie@sd73.bc.ca](mailto:tsmillie@sd73.bc.ca) (via Email)

Rhonda Kershaw, Chair of the Board – SD73, [rkershaw@exc.sd73.bc.ca](mailto:rkershaw@exc.sd73.bc.ca) (via Email)

Mayor Ken Christian, City of Kamloops, [mayor@kamloops.ca](mailto:mayor@kamloops.ca) (via Email)

Honourable Todd Stone, MLA Kamloops-South Thompson, [todd.stone@bcliberals.com](mailto:todd.stone@bcliberals.com) (via Email)