

May 7, 2021

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

Re: Proposed changes to the Juniper Ridge and Marion Shilling 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. A strong focus of my letter will be discussing how difficult this transition will be for special needs families if the proposal is approved.

We moved to Juniper West six years ago (we were the 5th house built on Emerald Drive) knowing the school was excellent, safe, and in a wonderful neighbourhood. We have three amazing children, two of whom currently attend Juniper Ridge Elementary, including our six year old son who has special needs (Autism Spectrum Disorder and Global Developmental Delay). I am sure you can understand how difficult this transition will be for our daughter, who has attended Juniper Ridge Elementary for the past three years, and for our autistic son who struggles significantly with transitions and new environments. One very important question I asked three times during the consultation meeting was simply ignored! so I am hoping after reading this letter the district can provide more reassurance to myself, and other families who have children with special needs who will be affected by this catchment change .

What can you say to reassure families who have children with special needs attending Juniper Ridge Elementary that will have to transition so unexpectedly to a new school? As a parent of a child with special needs we have worked closely with staff, and an Inclusive Education team at Juniper Ridge Elementary to create programs and make connections that are imperative to our sons social, emotional, and academic growth. Have you considered how difficult this transition will be for children with special needs? Our son started kindergarten part-time doing half-days at Juniper Ridge Elementary September, 2020 alongside therapy at the Kamloops Autism Program. Our son just started attending full-days in April, due to his difficulties with transitions, social/emotional regulation, and safety concerns. He has worked so hard to get where he is and we are so proud! The collaboration between us, the Kamloops Autism Program, the staff at Juniper Ridge Elementary, and the Inclusive Education team has been extensive to get him to this point of attending full-days. We had strong hopes that with gradual entry, repeating kindergarten in September 2021 it would help make his transition to Grade one easier. Can you imagine the stress and anxiety my son and daughter will now

experience starting at a completely new school starting September 2022? The Special Education Policy Manual-Province of British Columbia states “The transition process for a student with special educational needs requires especially careful planning to ensure that the elements of the Individualized Education Plan and the support services required to carry it out are not disrupted or lost in the process” Can you guarantee support services and resources won’t be disrupted? It also states “transition planning should begin two to three years before school leaving” refer to appendix 34 of policy.

I am extremely concerned about our son taking the bus for transportation to and from school. As mentioned previously our son has extreme delays, has little safety awareness, has a tendency to wander and elope (bolt), therefore he requires 1:1 support during recess, lunch, drop-off and pick-up. The Special Education Manual states “ students with special needs who require supervision should not be left unattended at transportation drop-off or pick-up points “ it also states “ for students with special health or behavioural concerns, districts should consider assigning support staff to accompany and supervise these children on the bus...” refer to appendix 36 of policy. If you speak with the Inclusive Education Team affiliated with Juniper Ridge Elementary they will strongly agree these supports will be required for our son. Providing these supports would require additional funding, wouldn't it make more sense to keep special needs children enrolled in a neighbourhood school? And if not can you guarantee these support will be provided during transportation?

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 time in many of our lives. The value of our children's connections to Juniper Ridge Elementary has never been more important and we will rely heavily on this as a community as we recover from the pandemic. Our family has been a part of this community for 6 years and my children have made meaningful friendships with many children who live on the East side of Juniper. I want to mention how the Special Education Policy Manual states “ students with special needs are at risk of being uninvolved in decision making, uninvolved in their community life, under-employed, and unemployed...” refer to appendix 34 of policy, and now our son is potentially being forced out of his neighbourhood school where he has built valuable relationships within the community and school.

Many families including ourselves have worked closely with the Juniper Ridge PAC to participate in/contribute to school fundraisers. Families have paid thousands of dollars out of their own pockets to support fundraisers, which in turn has funded educational enrichment programs(e.g come read with me), equipment and resources. I myself have donated special education materials throughout the year to support our son. What happens to the equipment and resources Juniper West families have worked hard to fundraise for? And will Ralph Bell have comparable resources? Some examples of items purchased by the Juniper Ridge PAC include- snow shoes, chrome books, bean bag chairs, outdoor games etc. A \$853,000 budget doesn't seem sufficient enough to get the school up to par with other schools, many parents feel we are being “down-graded”.

I also have concerns about the safety of our young children attending a commuter school at a property adjacent to some low-budget motels. There are ample examples of situations and news articles involving crime, drugs, guns, and a transient population that we are not comfortable having our children largely unsupervised around. Concerned parents have walked the school grounds and their pictures are quite disturbing, dirty mattresses thrown up against the fence, drug wrappers thrown all over the school yard, entry points in the fence. Children should not have to be exposed to this. What additional safety measure will be put in place to keep our young children safe?

I also want to mention, is it fair that families purchasing up in the new development of Trail Side will get to attend Juniper Ridge Elementary, but families who have children attending Juniper Ridge Elementary for up to 7 years will be forced out of their neighbourhood school? I believe there are more effective and more respectful options to address the overcrowding challenges that recognize the importance of our children's well being, such as an option of a middle school.

If this catchment proposal is approved, would the district consider making exemptions for children with special needs and their siblings? After reading "School Boundaries and Student Transportation Transfer Request Policy" I understand strong considerations are made for a catchment student who attended the school in the previous year; and students with medical needs, including social and emotional; and family groupings. What concerns me is that requests are to be submitted by March 1st, which may not provide enough time for transition planning to new school, whether it be to Ralph Bell or a school of choice. The Special Education Policy Manual states " IEP transition planning should begin at least one year before school entry". I truly hope SD73 will consider grandfathering in students with special needs and their siblings, so they can remain at Juniper Ridge Elementary.

Please consider my firm opposition to the proposed catchment changes for Juniper Ridge and Marion Shillings Elementary School. I urge School District 73 to work with the impacted community members to implement solutions that are more beneficial to the health and safety of our neighbourhood and the children and families in it. And please consider all the struggles the special needs community will endure if this catchment proposal is approved.

Sincerely,

Jasmine Filipe  
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