

April 29, 2021

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Board of Education of School District No. 73 (Kamloops-Thompson)
1383 9th Ave, Kamloops, BC
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Re: Catchment Boundaries Consultations 2021

To Board of Education,

Our school-aged children are facing possibly the most serious mental health crisis in decades. In an unprecedented cross-sectional collaboration between four leading teams in child mental health research (Department of Psychiatry: University of Toronto, University of Calgary, University of Western Ontario, and Hospital for Sick Children; Department of Pediatrics: University of Toronto; Department of Psychology: Queens University) it was found that more than 70% of school-aged children (six to 18 years old) have suffered deterioration of mental health (i.e. depression, anxiety, irritability, attention span, hyperactivity, and obsessions/compulsions) as a result of COVID-19 (Cost, et al., 2021). Acknowledging this crisis the **BC Ministry of Education** stated, “Supporting the safety and health of students, families and staff is a top priority during a pandemic event. In addition to taking measures to protect our physical health, we also need to attend to our social and emotional well-being. During this time especially, students need to know that they are valued and that they are still part of a school community. Students’ sense of well-being may continue to shift as the pandemic evolves. Schools and school districts should keep in mind that students who were not considered vulnerable prior to the COVID-19 outbreak may now be experiencing mental health challenges” (BC Ministry of Education, 2020). This is clearly a time to ensure the social-emotional health of our children, a sentiment supported by our own **BC Ministry of Education**.

Ample research demonstrates that the stress of changing school environments is linked to increased risk of subsequent mental health issues (Singh et al., 2014; Webb, Pedersen & Mok, 2016; Hagan, MacMillan & Wheaton, 1996; Gasper, DeLuca & Estacion, 2010). The inevitable breaking of social ties can create psychosocial stress (Hagan, MacMillan & Wheaton, 1996) and increase the risk of antisocial behavior, friendship problems, and bully victimization (Gasper, DeLuca & Estacion, 2010). Therefore, it is of no surprise that the Ministry of Education further suggest that even continuity with the student’s current teacher to benefit student’s learning, success, and social and emotional well-being (BC Ministry of Education, 2020). It is somewhat surprising then that, against peer-reviewed research and recommendations from our own Ministry of Education, School District 73 (SD73) is proposing to cut off an appendage (roughly 1/7th) of the Juniper Ridge community to attend school isolated from the

community that has provided stability during this time and friends they have spent years developing strong relationships with.

SD73 has refrained from making public any concrete numbers regarding how this proposal will alleviate over-crowding at each impacted school. From the numbers our community has gathered it seems that these affected Juniper Ridge residents may move from one over-capacitated school (Juniper Ridge Elementary) to another (Ralph Bell). Perhaps such catchment changes have occurred with relative success in the past, but this particular decision, at this particular point in time, will undoubtedly have immeasurable negative impacts on our children. The Juniper Ridge students are also at a much larger disadvantage than students residing in Rose Hill and Sun Rivers, as students in the latter communities will continue to learn and play with their neighbourhood friends, albeit in a different facility. However, the Juniper residents are not only expected to learn in a completely unfamiliar environment, but also to do so without the moral support of most of their neighbourhood friends. At a time when the Ministry of Education has emphasized, “Routines can help create a sense of predictability and security. Maintain normal, predictable routines as much as possible” (BC Ministry of Education, 2020), this proposal by SD73 seems unfathomable.

Knowing the *independent* increased mental health risks stemming from COVID-19, changing schools, and separation of children from classes with their friends, is it of no concern to SD 73 what the collaborative repercussions of all of these factors may have on our children? Although the emphasis of this letter has clearly focused on the mental well-being of our children there is ample evidence linking mental health to learning outcomes. Therefore, mental health consideration should be forefront and center to the Board of Education, as this will clearly influence the ability of our children to develop their individual potential and to acquire the knowledge, skills and abilities needed to contribute to a healthy society and a prosperous and sustainable economy.

For this reason, it is strongly recommended, to either:

- a.) abandon any plans to relocate a fraction of the Juniper Ridge Elementary aged children to Ralph Bell, or
- b.) Relocate all of Juniper Ridge Elementary children for particular grades (i.e. make Ralph Bell a grade 6-7 school only, or whatever grades would be appropriate given number of students in the catchment area)

This is not the time to isolate our children.

Sincerely,

Raimy Olthuis

Raimy Olthuis

References

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