

September 28, 2016

Dear Ms. Elwood and the Richmond Board of Trustees:

We read with great interest and emotion the Superintendent's Report to the Board and the recommendation to close McKay Elementary that was contained therein. While we acknowledge the incredible effort and consideration that went into arriving at this conclusion, we would like to address what we believe to be some significant shortcomings and provide some alternative solutions.

The report states that closing McKay school and consolidating the catchment with Grauer will keep McKay students within the 15 minute walkshed. While this may be true in theory, in practice it is not.

Last Thursday morning we joined our intermediate students for a walk from McKay to Grauer. It was a warm, sunny morning. Students were energetic and excited to be out of the classroom. We walked at a brisk pace with no stops. We arrived at Grauer in 20 minutes. Granted, this only exceeded the report's ideal by 5 minutes, but it was longer nonetheless. And, among us were grade 7 students. We were not accompanied by preschool age siblings who could never be expected to maintain our pace. We were not juggling hand-holding and backpacks and umbrellas while trying to keep children safe at two major intersection crossings. We were not parents carrying tired toddlers in one arm while trying to steer wayward strollers with the other, on a dark, cold, wet morning, with commuter traffic speeding past us on busy Blundell Rd.

Our primary classes did not even *attempt* the walk. That afternoon we got an email from a grade 2 teacher who wrote: "I love the idea of the walk - we are trying to figure out if that is even possible for our class. We have a couple of kids who just wouldn't be able to make it. But I guess that's the whole point now, isn't it?"

The report goes on to state that the move of McKay students to Grauer will keep the McKay cohort together and bring the Grauer population to 318 students. This may be the plan on paper, but it will not be the reality that transpires. The bottom line is that parents do not want to send their kids to Grauer, and many simply won't. In fact, parents are so strongly opposed that over the past week we have heard statements such as "I would rather pay money and send my kids to private school than have them go to Grauer", and, "If we are forced to go to Grauer we will move".

The Board may retort that choosing to attend another school will not be a viable alternative, and to this end we note the recent announcement that school transfer applications have been put on hold. We feel that this is great! If the Board feels so strongly about not allowing cross boundary transfers then this in itself will resolve McKay's capacity shortcoming. Enforcing cross boundary policies would potentially return to our community 99 students who are within the McKay catchment but currently attend other schools. This would raise our enrollment to almost 250 students, and make us a thriving, near capacity school.

This could be further enhanced by allowing McKay to welcome students from nearby Blair school, which is already over-capacity at 172% and has students learning in portables. More than 50 students presently at Blair are out of catchment. Redrawing the school boundaries to include overflow from Blair would allow the District to realize multiple benefits:

- McKay would become a thriving, maximum capacity school without the need to close
- The enrollment pressures of nearby Blair would be alleviated
- Children would no longer be relegated to portables
- The 15 minute walkshed for both McKay and Blair students would be truly maintained.

There are alternatives. McKay school does NOT have to be closed.

Why are McKay families so opposed to moving to Grauer? In a word...safety. McKay is truly a gem of a school. It is tucked away in the quiet Laurelwood neighborhood, with its building and school yard surrounded by homes on all four sides. The only adjacent roads are a residential cul-de-sac on the west and quiet Ledway Rd. on the east. The cars driving through the neighborhood are either going to a residence or they are coming to the school. The neighborhood does not offer any commuter short-cuts, and there are no retail stores to draw commercial traffic.

Contrast this with Grauer, whose parking lot, main entrance and principle playground are all immediately adjacent to one of our busiest streets. Further, the safety of the Grauer neighborhood has also been called into question, as police are routinely called to a large, residential complex that borders the Grauer playing field.

Building safety is the most pressing example where notable discrepancies between McKay and Grauer come to light. McKay school is newer, has undergone more recent renovations, is on a single level, and has a wing that requires no seismic upgrading. Grauer, on the other hand, is on a provincially recognized list as one of the worst, most unsafe schools in BC. Its classification as an H1 building means that it is “at the highest risk of collapse...it is the most vulnerable structure; at highest risk of widespread damage or structural failure, not repairable after event”. It is irresponsible to ask parents to move their children to a school that is described in this way. If the building itself is not repairable after an earthquake, what does that say about the fate of the children who may be in it when the earthquake hits? It does not even make sense to *keep* children in such an environment, let alone send more.

We have heard talk of plans to substantially renovate, or even replace Grauer. Joining the McKay and Grauer communities will increase the occupancy and, in turn, hopefully Grauer will receive funding to build a new school. The key word here is ‘hopefully’. To our knowledge no funding has been guaranteed. If you close McKay and the funding does not come through then this will be a double loss for our community. We think that risk is unacceptable, especially given all the uncertainty about ministry funding that has come to light in recent weeks.

Even if the funding was already in place, our children's safety is important NOW...not 3 or 5 or 10 years down the road when such an undertaking would realistically be complete. Where will our kids be while the new school is being built? Sitting in the H1 rated building to which you sent them.

It is neither responsible nor safe to relocate our students to a school in a poorer state of repair and in a more vulnerable location. At the very least, keep McKay school open to protect our children's safety through the years of transition. We have much to offer the Grauer community, and we are the safer place to play and learn.

So this begs the question: Why is McKay the school that is slated to be closed? The factor that has not yet been mentioned is land value. McKay is located in a growing and desirable neighborhood indeed. This is exactly what makes it so safe – so unique – and so worth protecting. Despite the booming real estate market, we hope that the Board will not place a higher value on a piece of land than they do on our children, or the 145 children who walk through our school doors every morning, or the 250+ children who we are still fully committed to welcoming into our McKay community next September.

But now, we would like to consider the situation from a different perspective entirely. Instead of focusing on individual schools, each with its own merits and shortcomings, let us look at the district as a whole.

In March of this year a list of 16 schools being considered for possible closure was released. The rationale for closing schools was the belief that the School Board needed to meet provincial government standards in order to receive seismic upgrading. To quote Ms. Tablotney, the School Board Chair: "To receive provincial funding a school must be at 95% capacity...If we were not having to meet the 95% rate maybe we would not be where we are".

With this understanding clearly articulated, students, parents, teachers, schools and the board itself embarked on months of meetings, planning, data-gathering and presentations – all at considerable financial and emotional cost. September 19th marked the culmination of these efforts, when Ms. Elwood, Superintendent of Schools, released her recommendation that Woodward, Dixon and McKay schools be closed. In that report the 95% utilization efficiency was again cited as a benchmark for Ministry funding. Two days later, on September 21st, the Minister of Education Mike Bernier stated that "the 95% figure was never a firm rule, but a target for school districts to work toward". He went on to say "I look at Richmond...who feel they need to have utilization rates of 95% before doing seismic upgrades. I want to clarify that is absolutely false".

The cloud of a provincially mandated capacity, which has overshadowed all of the recent meetings and protests, and on which the long-range facilities planning process was predicated, has now been lifted. In light of the Minister's announcement, and the lack of clarity around the *true* requirements for seismic upgrading, we challenge the need to close schools at this time.

To Ms. Elwood: for all of the reasons stated above, we respectfully request that you reconsider your recommendation to close McKay school, and indeed reconsider your recommendation to close *any* schools at this time.

To the Board of Trustees: on October 17th, when you are asked to cast your final vote, we urge you to vote 'no' to closing McKay school. But more importantly, we implore you to vote 'no' to closing ANY Richmond school. As trustees who are elected by us, to represent us, you have both the authority and the obligation to save Richmond schools.

At McKay we may not have the loudest voices, but we are just as strong in our commitment to protecting our children's education and keeping schools open. At the ballot box, our votes carry just as much weight, and we will NOT vote for a Board that closes schools.

Respectfully yours,

Mrs. Donna Hand (*mother to Joey, grade 4 and Leo, grade 2; McKay PAC Co-Chair*)

Dr. Jennifer Shabbits (*mother to Hannah, grade 5; Leah, grade 3; and Lukah, who is looking forward to starting kindergarten at McKay school in September 2017; McKay PAC Secretary*)