

March 5, 2019

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Via email only

Re: Hudson EFI Proposal - Feedback from Strathcona Elementary PAC

Dear Vancouver School Board Trustees,

This letter responds to a notice dated January 23, 2019, from Adrian Keough, VSB Director of Instruction, Educational Programs. Mr. Keough's letter to the "Hudson and Strathcona School Communities" stated that the Vancouver School District is considering "consolidating" the Early French Immersion (EFI) Program at Hudson Elementary with the EFI program at Strathcona Elementary, to address space and enrollment challenges at Hudson Elementary ("the Proposal").

The Proposal could mean adding approximately 150 students to the existing Strathcona school population of approximately 470, for a total of 620 students, making Strathcona Elementary one of the largest schools in the Vancouver School District. Strathcona Elementary is a socioeconomically and racially diverse school with many strengths and many identified needs and challenges.

The Strathcona PAC met on January 30, 2019 to discuss the Proposal and does not support any of the options. Proposing to increase the student population so drastically requires serious consideration, which has not yet been given to the Proposal. **We believe adding an extra EFI cohort will further marginalize our population of low-income inner-city kids and should not be added until the needs of the most vulnerable children of our community have been met and the equity issues at the school have been addressed.** Parents at our PAC meeting identified the following concerns with the Proposal:

- Strathcona PAC has identified serious equity issues at the school that would be exacerbated by this proposal. The French program tends to have students from families with more resources, and significantly less racial diversity than the English program. The French and English programs are treated differently, and the students have different opportunities. As such, the

Strathcona PAC has identified that Strathcona must concretely address the existing equity issues and is concerned that adding 154 EFI spaces will exacerbate the already tenuous equity issues. There is concern that an increase in EFI spaces will increase the inequity and divide between English and French programs. Although we understand the review of EFI last year recommended 2 French Ks per immersion school, Strathcona is not well suited for this expansion that prioritizes the need for a district choice program over the needs of the residents of our neighborhood.

- Despite Strathcona school and community facing the burdens of the potential move, there is no apparent benefit to the community from absorbing the additional EFI spots, including no assurance of space for ongoing English spots for kids who live in catchment, nor community priority for enrolment in new EFI spots as there are no catchments for EFI.
- Internal culture at Strathcona is complex and is shaped by students and staff who largely possess lived experience of the Strathcona and Downtown Eastside neighbourhoods. Adding 154 EFI students who may not have that knowledge and sensitivity will drastically impact the culture. The Strathcona community is intentionally welcoming and inclusive and would embrace students from any walk of life or part of the city. However, our community is also unique and the culture of the school that embraces it must be considered. Any changes to our school must put the interests of the marginalized children of our neighborhood first.
- The EFI spots will be granted to anyone from the city and likely not benefit our neighbourhood children both those with higher and lower income. Additionally, the voices of parents and children from low-income will be further marginalized in this school with an extra EFI stream, and children will further feel the class divisions especially as the English and French streams are very segregated. Kids become aware of this divide and likely this will increase stigma and shame in accessing programs geared for those in need, e.g. the breakfast program. We do not see how any scenario of adding EFI will benefit the most vulnerable but we do see multiple ways in which it could decrease the services they receive and further marginalize and stigmatize students.
- The Proposal does not consider the impacts of increased student population to school grounds and the physical/emotional safety implications to students of adding 154 students, nor does it take into account that this influx will especially disadvantage low-income students. The draft Long Range Facilities Plan states that the school is currently operating at 101% of its capacity.
- The PAC is concerned that non-enrolling spaces currently used for music, First Nations support rooms, story room (literacy and art) and family support room will be converted to classrooms. This will further disadvantage First Nations and low-income students who may not have access to counselling outside of school or enrichment programs like music, art and enhanced literacy. We feel that the VSB should be having important conversations to make sure that these rooms

are included in classroom counts, to not give the impression that what goes on inside is somehow less important than the classrooms for each grade, and to ensure that they are not able to be lost as the VSB searches for available spaces.

- An increase of 154 students will drastically impact the physical space of the school and the student experience, and an understanding of how this will be addressed by VSB is a necessary factor for parents. Strathcona, despite recent and welcome upgrades with the seismic renovation, lacks sufficient physical space already for the key activities of an elementary school. Adding 154 students will overcrowd the cafeteria even further, where lunch is already hosted lunch in two shifts and the gym and the auditorium are both currently fully booked the whole day. Increasing our enrollment will not allow for all children to have sufficient physical activity time. This will particularly disadvantage low-income children who do not have equal access to after-school sports or activities.
- The schoolgrounds and the playground equipment are already insufficient for the existing student population and will be grossly inadequate for a school another full third bigger. The auditorium will also be overcrowded, again leading to a division of students. School wide events with parents in attendance, which are already typically divided into two cohorts, will be seeing an increase of at least 300-400 people. The school is not designed to accommodate these numbers. We are concerned that this will lead to a further division between French and English streams by separating assemblies and events.
- It is not clear from the Proposal how the merger of the programs could physically or logistically be accommodated at Strathcona. The “available space” in Building E at Strathcona Elementary is not seismically upgraded and has a seismic risk rating of High 3(H 3). It is not currently used for classroom space and according to the draft Long Range Facilities Plan is not considered available. It is unacceptable for our school to have gone through seismic upgrading only to move back into buildings deemed unsafe during an earthquake.
- The “available space” in Building E is currently used for Strathcona’s Out of School care program (OSC), which is operated by the Strathcona Community Centre. If the full 154 EFI spaces are added to Strathcona, this will directly impact the OSC program. Not only will there be no space to expand the OSC program to meet a drastically increased population, the OSC program will immediately need to shut down 60 spots that children currently have. The waiting list for OSC is already at its 200-child maximum. The crisis in access to child care in Vancouver is well-known, and this would be a devastating change for Strathcona families whose work and lives depend upon stable and safe access to child care. Ideally this program wouldn’t need to operate in an H3 building.
- Strathcona’s population currently includes a significant number of students with special needs. Students with special needs have specific human rights that must be accommodated. When there is a significant student population change that alters availability of resources and spaces,

access to those accommodations can be diminished. The PAC is not aware of any consideration of special needs students and the impact that the Proposal could have on them. Such a study must take place, and a clear plan made, before parents and the board can make an informed decision regarding the Proposal.

- Strathcona currently has Tier 1 status, and our population greatly needs the additional supports that this accords. The PAC requests safeguards for Strathcona's Tier 1 status, as this proposal may significantly shift student demographics while simultaneously worsening staff ratios for students in need of Tier 1-funded resources. It is not apparent that the Proposal considers the possibility of impacts in this regard. We have been reassured that our school will not lose the Tier 1 status. Nonetheless, needed resources will be further stretched thin with more students at the school, further marginalizing children who need those enhanced services the most.
- Strathcona school and neighbourhood do not have physical infrastructure capacity to handle the additional traffic from 154 extra students and their families.
- Hudson school is getting upgraded space while Strathcona school is getting over-crowded. Strathcona's seismic upgrade is considered complete, and we consider it extremely unlikely that seismically unsafe H3 space returned to active use would receive seismic attention in the foreseeable future.

Further Concerns

In addition to the initial concerns identified by parents at the January 30th meeting, we are concerned that the current consultation process is inadequate, and there is incomplete information provided to parents. There is no description in Mr. Keough's letter of January 23rd of what consultation with parents means and what kind of threshold must be met for there to be adequate consultation.

Inadequate notice was provided for the current consultation process with the Strathcona and Hudson communities. The Strathcona community received the letter from Mr. Keough on January 23 with the Proposal, and engagement happens over March, with a decision being made in April. The March to April consultation period with the Strathcona community is inadequate and is not meaningful if it does not provide a true give and take of information, concerns and responses. The process has simply not provided enough time for the VSB or the Strathcona community to fully analyze all factors necessary to make a decision and to act in the best interests of students and families.

Engagement will be via two open-houses with parents and a survey. This is insufficient to connect fully with the Strathcona community. Families may be away or unavailable at that time, and not all families at Strathcona will use on-line submission forms.

Inadequate notice was provided to the Strathcona community to watch live or attend the VSB staff present the Proposal to the Facilities Planning Committee – Mr. Keough's letter was sent on January 23 with notice of the presentation, which was also on January 23. Although it was available on-line

afterward, the Strathcona community did not have the opportunity to participate in any way.

We are concerned by the prospect of these serious issues being deferred to a 1-year implementation plan, rather than examined and accommodated fully within the Proposal and prior to its acceptance or rejection. Strathcona is home to a large population of already-marginalized students, whose lack of opportunity relative to the district at large is not by design, but by de-prioritization. Attempting to resolve these problems later, without dedicated planning and resources, will worsen their situation.

We are aware that Victoria School Board recently unanimously passed a motion from Trustee Ryan Painter calling for Victor School, a public school in Victoria for students with special needs, to be removed from the catchment review process that is currently taking place, which proposed to turn Victor School into a mainstream elementary school because it can physically hold more students than it currently does. Mr. Painter recently stated, “We can’t just look at this as a numbers game. We have to look at the stories that exist behind these numbers. These are the most vulnerable students in our district, we need to consider them especially as important distinct unique members of our broader school community.” We hope that the Vancouver School Board will share this perspective and not treat the Proposal as a numbers game.

We urge you to pause the timeline for the Proposal until a thorough planning process can take place so that parents can make informed decisions about supporting the Proposal or seeking a different path forward. One path we suggest is a seismic upgrading of buildings D and E, an engagement with experts and parents to address already existing equity issues at our school, and a path forward that ensures all in-catchment students can attend Strathcona English if they choose.

We understand that the VSB staff have stated their intent to address details once a decision is made; however, we strongly urge that you undertake planning first, bringing to the parent and teacher communities and VSB trustees all the details possible to make an informed decision.

Parents are extremely busy, and at Strathcona many parents face their own barriers to participating in public processes. The information that has been provided about the Proposal so far has been minimal. While we appreciate that Henry Hudson is at capacity, we ask that the Vancouver School Board ensure it is taking enough time to meet the needs of students at Strathcona as well.

The familial nature of our school culture, our opportunities to do group learning and have shared experiences will be no longer. The cultural balance at our school is tenuous. We are so committed to making sure our racialized and historically marginalized families are not further alienated from the heart of their community. In an era of reconciliation with First Nations communities, we find this to be a regressive proposal. We think it absolutely imperative to maintain the delicate balance at our school and not to overwhelm the school with a population who inadvertently undermine the hard work teachers and staff are doing to ensure the learning and social/emotional needs of our vulnerable kids are met. Some English teachers and staff have already stated that should this move go forward they will leave and get work elsewhere. We believe this is because this proposal undermines the hard work they do every day for some of the city’s kids who stand the most to lose from this proposal.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. We look forward to continuing the conversation.

Sincerely,

Lord Strathcona Elementary School Parents Advisory Council Board
c/o pac_str@vsb.bc.ca

CC: Parents of Lord Strathcona Elementary School
Parents of Henry Hudson Elementary School
Honourable Rob Fleming, Minister of Education
Honourable Melanie Mark, Minister of Advanced Education and MLA, Vancouver-Mount Pleasant
Jenny Kwan, M.P., Vancouver East
Jason Eng, Principal of Lord Strathcona Elementary School
Richard Zerbe, VSB Director of Instruction
Jennifer Cook, VSB Manager of Food Services
Sarah Rutherford, VSB Manager of Enhanced Services
Veronica Light, Childcare Coordinator at Strathcona Community Centre Association
Mayor Kennedy Stewart, City of Vancouver and Vancouver City Council