

To the Trustees of the Vancouver School Board;

I am writing to you at the juncture of planning for my daughter to enter high school in September 2023. This is a time when all families may start to get nervous in anticipation of a major life transition, and for us the feeling is amplified by the fact of my daughter C's intellectual disability and the approach this district takes to placing students with needs like hers.

When C was entering kindergarten in the Vancouver school district in 2015, I was able to do some research about the neighbourhood schools that were possible entry points for her. I visited the schools, and in some cases spoke with parents of children in those schools. I was able to make an educated decision about the school that we would apply to based on the research I did, and as a result C had an excellent experience of inclusion in our community annex from kindergarten to grade four. It was gratifying to leave the annex knowing that C had started her education with feelings of acceptance, belonging and community.

We transitioned into the larger elementary school in our neighbourhood for grades 5 to 7. Many of the experiences that made school feel good to C were not available in those first many months of COVID precautions, which was hard for everyone. It took time to feel a sense of belonging in the new school, for her and for me, but we have gone on to have some very positive inclusive experiences even amidst the challenges. Most importantly, we have made connections to more students and parents in the neighbourhood we live in, and C is known by more of her neighbours and community members.

We happen to live across the street from our neighbourhood high school and have lived here for thirteen years, since just before C was born. Through those years I have always imagined that she would attend this school that we can see from our living room window. I have watched the students coming and going, recognizing more and more of them through the years as former schoolmates of C's. C and I have greeted these familiar faces in the after-school din of returning home while they all depart high school in a steady stream past our house. I have imagined that it would be comforting to know that there were familiar faces who would greet her kindly and with familiarity when the time came for her to be enrolled in high school.

So imagine my surprise when I finally turned my mind to this major life transition of sending C to high school and discovered the reality of the transition for students with intellectual disabilities. The reality, for those unfamiliar, is this:

- 1) Neighbourhood high schools are not offered as the 'first choice' for students with intellectual disabilities.
- 2) Instead, 'programs' (e.g. Life Skills, Learning Assistance/Life Skills) for students with intellectual disabilities are the norm in the Vancouver school district.
- 3) The 'programs' are distributed amidst most of the high schools in the district, though there are some high schools without any 'programs'.
- 4) The process for 'choosing' a high school for my child with an intellectual disability involves very little choice at all.
- 5) The process starts with the school team recommending a particular 'program', which they then apply to on our behalf.
- 6) If the district team agrees with the school team on the best 'program' for my child, then they choose the school that has the best version of that 'program' to fit my child's strengths and stretches and offer me what they have decided is best for her. In many cases this team has never met the student they are placing, though in some cases they observe the student to help make this recommendation.
- 7) Once the district team has decided on their best offer for my child, I am given a letter that states this limited time offer.
- 8) I will be able to visit the 'program' that has been offered to us, and meet the teacher of that program, and then I must make a decision.
- 9) If I choose not to take the program that is offered to me, my daughter can then attend her neighbourhood school (if there is space), but I will be taking my chances as far as what supports will be offered to ensure her successful inclusion. Especially given a lack of infrastructure and lack of systemic culture supporting this choice.
- 10) The 'program' that is offered to us will most likely not be in our neighbourhood school (in our case right across the street), which means we must either drive her or accept the bus transportation that is offered to us.

I hope I don't have to point out to you how different and inequitable this process is compared to that of any family of a student who doesn't have an intellectual disability. How different it is even from our process of choosing an elementary school for my daughter when she was about to enter kindergarten. There is no informed choice available to us as parents in this process. We are not able to look at all the options available, including the neighbourhood high school, investigate those options and make our own choice based on our extensive knowledge of what our children need to be successful in the school environment. Instead we must depend on the district to make the choice for us, based on paperwork and the expectations and available support of the different programs offered throughout the district. We are asked to disregard our hoped-for plan (in our case attending the school across the street from us) in favour of what the district thinks is best.

C has three former schoolmates with varying levels of intellectual disability who have moved on to high school. In one case, the student is bussed to a program at Killarney Secondary. In another, the student is bussed to a program at Kitsilano Secondary. Yet another ended up in a program at Tupper Secondary, and that family chooses to drive the student to school rather than have her be on the bus for an hour, but she does take the bus home. These are students who live blocks from one another in my East Vancouver neighbourhood, and who live a short distance from our neighbourhood high school. Meanwhile, a family I have spoken to who has a student who lives a block from Tupper is bussed to the high school across the street from me to attend the Life Skills program there, because that is what was deemed the best fit by the district.

Besides the expense and hassle of transporting students daily by bus, this transport of students unnecessarily from one neighbourhood to another has the following major implications:

1. The majority of the non-disabled peers that know my daughter from the past eight years of schooling will go to our neighbourhood school, and perhaps wonder what happened to all the students with intellectual disabilities that they learned alongside through elementary school, who are now out of sight at different high schools in segregated 'programs'.
2. The disabled peers that my daughter has connected with for the past eight years are more than likely going to end up in different 'programs' than her, friendships that are now likely lost.
3. Because these 'programs' are organized by students' common 'strengths and stretches', any given program at any given school is not inclusive to all disabled students. They are not set up in a way where my daughter can learn from disabled peers who have the stretches and strengths she doesn't have. She will not have the advantage of learning among a broad cross section of her peers, disabled or non-disabled.

It is urgent and imperative that this system, which currently works against disabled students' rights to a supported education of their choosing, is transformed. **Let's prioritize enrolling ALL students in their neighbourhood schools, if that is the family's choice, and supporting students appropriately wherever they are.** There are multiple further steps to be taken to improve high school inclusion and education for students with intellectual disabilities (for further information, please see Shelley Moore's [work](#), including her recently published [doctoral dissertation](#)), but I am asking for this one important step to be undertaken as soon as possible, as no further steps will be possible without it.

Finally I want to assure you that though this letter is signed with only my name, I advocate on behalf of countless parents, of both disabled and non-disabled students, who know that we can and must do better by disabled students in this district. I advocate for the parents of non-disabled students who want their kids to have diverse high school classrooms, parents of disabled elementary-aged students who expect to have the choice of continuing to attend neighbourhood schools when they get to high school, and all the families who were not given a choice of where their children would go to high school but didn't have the energy or capacity to fight for something better. When I [tweeted my story](#) in December 2022, the comments I received included 'heartbreaking', 'file a human rights complaint' and 'is this even legal?'. There is an inherent understanding that the approach to placement of students with intellectual disabilities in the Vancouver School district is unjust and inequitable. I implore you to take the steps necessary to implement a change now. It is past time.

Sincerely,
Meaghan McLeod