January 20, 2016

Seattle City Council
Mayor Ed Murray

RE: SPS Building Capacity Challenges Relative to Before and After Childcare

Dear Seattle City Council members,

Thank you for your letter and concern regarding the building capacity challenges of the Seattle Public Schools (SPS) related to before and after school childcare providers. Director Betty Patu, President of the Seattle School Board, has asked me to respond to City Council concerns. We share your concern about supporting our students and completely agree that support systems which extend beyond the school day are very important to our families. We are currently working with several partners, including the Department of Early Learning and the childcare providers themselves, to find spaces within our buildings that will not be needed for classroom use. Our ultimate responsibility to the students and families of the Seattle Public Schools is to have classrooms ready by the time our students arrive on the first day of school.

History

Seattle Public Schools is running out of classroom space due to increased enrollment and state reductions in class size (which take more classrooms). The districts' enrollment peaked at 100,000 in the 1970s, but declined to just fewer than 40,000 in the 1990s. During that time of declining enrollments, Seattle reached out to providers and encouraged them to utilize our facilities (often at free or reduced cost) to better serve our students. We are extremely grateful for these partners that provide services which benefit our students, our families and our schools.

In the last decade, Seattle Schools' enrollment has risen dramatically – we now enroll over 52,000 students – up 7,000 students in the past 7 years. In addition, the state legislature has provided more than 100 new teachers for lower class size and all day K. This represents a need for dozens of new schools. Thanks to generous community support for school levies, SPS has worked feverishly to cope with the growth.

Challenge

Each year the district goes through intense planning and problem solving to solve the growing space crunch. We have added more than 200 portables, taken over faculty rooms, conference rooms, libraries, and computer labs. We have placed music and art on the stage and on carts. We have subdivided larger classrooms into two smaller classrooms and converted covered play areas. We have built additions and rebuilt older schools with a much larger footprint. At each stage we hear concerns about smaller play grounds, loss of previous spaces and overcrowded lunch rooms.

One year ago, as the City announced the placement of ten of 14 of the new preschool programs in SPS, the board asked staff to look at space needs and determine a priority system for consideration of available spaces. At that time, the school board established K-5 as our primary need, pre-school second and before and after care third – with the understanding that before and after care can often be included in spaces that are not dedicated to daily classroom use.

Notification

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In many cases, as you note, solutions take time, which is why SPS sent a letter to all 40 child care providers in October of 2015—eleven (11) months in advance of the start of the 2016-17 school year--alerting them to the fact that there would most likely be impacts for the next school year and that if they were to be impacted, they would get that notification as quickly as possible. Of the 40 providers, 19 have been notified they may need to make alternative plans for the upcoming school year. This preliminary notification is not final. We will verify our enrollment estimates in the next few weeks; that may well narrow the list from 19 to fewer. We will then revise our enrollment estimates throughout the spring based on open enrollment and do so again after school opens in the fall. While our projections are historically very accurate (about 99%), we cannot predict our exact classroom needs with 100% predictability in advance. We closely monitor space needs in our 98 buildings to provide a quality K-12 education, and are committed to give our partners as much lead time as possible so that all possibilities may be explored—hence the notification.

Solutions

We are hopeful that we will be able to find multiuse space within our buildings that will work for our before and after care providers. This would allow for the programs to operate and would not lead to elimination of a very beneficial service for our families. We anticipate the need for 66 new classrooms for next year – a potential of 19 may come from before and after care. The others come from adding portables, taking over alternate spaces such as faculty rooms and doing on-site remodeling (turning one classroom into two).

How the City of Seattle Can Help

- Portable Placement – Under the City's site utilization standards, schools can use only 35% of the available lot size for structures. This is a residential standard and much lower than business standards. Changing the city standards for schools could allow us to purchase and place more portables (and possibly impact fewer before and after care providers).
- Community Centers – The City may have spaces adjacent to some schools that could be used by before and after care providers.
- Permitting – One of the major reasons we need to take action now is the need to meet the City's permitting timelines. Remodeling and portable placement require City permitting and we have to start now if we are to have classrooms available in the fall.
- Classroom Space -- Many of our providers provide services in the gym or by sharing a classroom that is used for instruction during the school day. We are not moving any before or after care locations for preschool, and we are not moving any before/ after care locations unless we absolutely have to – based on enrollment numbers for K-5 students.

We are hopeful the City and others can act to assist with reviews and licensures, so any providers who need to be moved to alternative spaces can move as quickly as possible.

We deeply appreciate all the assistance being offered. This action by the school board does not constitute an end to communication and collaboration, but rather allows us the sufficient lead time to our valued partners to potentially explore options while allowing the district time to get permits for work to be done, applications to be filled out, and calendar in any appeals or departures for lot coverage which are required under city codes.

We look forward to working with you and others to address the growth challenges facing our schools.

Best regards,

Dr. Larry Nyland

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