

March 13, 2023

Dear: Honorable Minister McLean



**RE: Ensuring there is an elementary school Downtown**

I am writing to express my deep disappointment with the government's stated decision to relocate Downtown's only elementary school (Ecole Whitehorse Elementary School "EWES"), and to urge the government to commit to ensuring that there is an elementary school Downtown.

Regarding the former: I am a Downtown resident, and parent of two children who currently attend EWES. We decided to build our home Downtown based on walkability. For many reasons (health, environment, time), it was – and is – important to us to try to minimize the amount of driving we do. We – along with many other stakeholders, including the EWES School Council and the City of Whitehorse – were completely blindsided by your announcement in June 2022 that you had decided to relocate EWES to Takhini. It is regrettable that this decision would be made with absolutely no consultation whatsoever with any of the affected stakeholders. Doubly regrettable is the fact that this decision leaves the Downtown without an elementary school. Schools are an important part of what helps comprise and support a healthy, thriving, diverse community. The removal of our only elementary school will undoubtedly have profound implications on the future demographics of our neighborhood. Our own kids will likely be in high school by time EWES is moved to Takhini, if that is indeed what happens. But I very much want to live in a neighbourhood where children, old people, single people and families are all represented. Someone recently said that if you remove its schools, the community loses its heart. That really rung true for me.

The government's response, to date, to concerns expressed by people including our MLA, Downtown residents who have met with you, and others who have written you is very disappointing. Your government has identified a number of reasons for which EWES was selected for relocation. In your letter to a Valleyview resident dated November 30, 2022 the decision to relocate EWES was justified in part on the fact that "less than 10% of downtown residents attend EWES". It's my understanding that the Department of Education does not collect, and thus does not know, how many of the EWES students live Downtown. In any event, 10% accords with the percentage of the Canadian population, generally, which is of elementary school age. If it is being suggested that if less than 10% of a neighbourhood attends the school closest to them, then that school should be shut down, that would be a very surprising position to take. The Yukon Bureau of Statistics First Quarter 2022 Population Report and the City's plans for accommodating growth in the new Official Community Plan ("OCP") indicate that Downtown is the third largest neighborhood in Whitehorse at 3071 residents. The City OCP plans to accommodate 50% of the growth in the urban core, increasing Downtown population to 4606 people, and thus making it Whitehorse's second largest neighborhood. The Downtown population justifies a school. It may be that it should not

be a French immersion school. However, the size of the Downtown population clearly indicates that the neighborhood merits, and should have, an elementary school.

Another frequently cited reason or justification for why EWES must be re-built in Takhini, instead of Downtown, is a lack of available land Downtown. I read with interest your government's recent press release seeking requests for proposals for development of 2.12 ha on Rogers and 5<sup>th</sup>. While that land is not currently zoned for education purposes, zoning designations can change. In any event, the land which EWES is currently on is zoned for educational purposes, and would be available to situate a new school in the event that EWES is torn down.

Your government's response to calls to ensure that there will be an elementary school Downtown is, essentially, that the government will be undertaking consultations to decide where any new schools will be built. I can put it no better than Ms. Tredger in her response to you in the legislature on November 2<sup>nd</sup>, when she said:

The minister is talking about an engagement to decide what happens next, but that is a bit of a slap in the face, because no engagement was needed to get rid of downtown's only elementary school. No engagement was needed with Takhini before dropping a second school into their neighbourhood.

So, why does this government suddenly need a formal engagement before they can listen to downtown residents?

Having a school Downtown is the right thing to do, for many reasons. A central element of neighbourhoods that reflect good urban planning is the presence of neighbourhood schools. This enables active transportation, facilitates community connections, and helps promote community involvement the school. The latter can enrich the education provided at the school.

Your riding has an elementary school. Can you imagine announcing that you were closing Elijah Smith Elementary School, and that all of the kids in the neighbourhood would be bussed Downtown, for instance? I cannot.

In closing: a motion will be introduced in the legislature this week calling upon members to ensure that there is an elementary school Downtown. I urge you to take this opportunity, and support this important motion.

Sincerely,

Brook Land-Murphy

c.c. Hon. Nils Clarke, Minister of HPW;  
Emily Tredger, MLA for Downtown Whitehorse