

December 10, 2020

Melissa Ford and Nate Salazar
President Salt Lake City School Board
440 East 100 South
Salt Lake City, Utah 84101

Larry Madden
Superintendent SLCSD
440 East 100 South
Salt Lake City, Utah 84101

Re: Community Request

Dear Ms. Ford, Mr. Salazar, and Mr. Madden:

We're all aware that 2020 has presented unprecedented challenges for our students, teachers, parents, schools and communities. Your collective leadership and science-driven decisions to hold all classes online have not only protected countless children, families, educators and staff, but now appears prescient given the current surge of COVID-19 infections.

At the same time, we are deeply concerned about the effects that exclusively online classes have on the social-emotional health of students and the impact on student achievement, which is worsening the achievement gap for students of color and those who are economically disadvantaged. However, today we write to you on another matter of equity that has been much more longstanding.

While our current focus is rightly on pandemic-related matters, we will eventually return to traditional conversations about growth, allocation of resources, and educational equity. As such, we write this letter as concerned parents, city residents, and community advocates for two reasons: (1) to ensure that our concerns have been documented at the outset of any future planning; and (2) to request that the Salt Lake City School Board and School District work with us and the community as a whole to begin an authentic, community-engaged process of building a new high school on the west side of Salt Lake City.

To be clear, we are seeking a process that we understand may take significant time and will necessarily include many considerations; however, over the coming months, we will continue to press for a process that is both: (a) informed by the needs of students and families throughout the district, particularly those on the west side of our city for the reasons outlined in this letter and supplemental information; and (b) undertaken with the deliberate objective of addressing educational inequities by creating new opportunities for our long-underserved westside community.

This request is motivated by a myriad of negative impacts that have resulted from forcing most westside students to attend high schools across the city. To give you an idea of the scope of this problem, Highland High School has 221 students and East High School has 1,164 students that live west of I-15. While that is only 11.5% of Highland's student body, this accounts for a majority of East's student body (56.8%).

Altogether, a total of 1,385 students must travel across an interstate and a whole city to attend a high school disconnected from their neighborhoods, their communities, and sometimes their peers.

Beyond transportation and convenience, these geographical disparities present greater inequities in terms of educational outcomes, extracurricular participation, parental involvement, and a sense of belonging. The supplemental information provides perspectives from former students, parents, educators and community members about the long-standing impact of not having a high school to serve the Glendale community and surrounding neighborhoods.

It's also worth noting that a new high school located on the west side of our city can also be an opportunity for the School District to develop a community school, which has shown gains in student performance and returns in social value to the community. Perhaps most importantly, this model has shown success in increasing student enrollment. Again, our request is for a process to discover what needs may be fulfilled but we also want to illustrate the importance of viewing that process as an investment that can benefit students and families across our city.

This request is the result of many conversations among parents, educators, students and former students within our community over many years. This letter was composed with contributions from the signatories and other community members. The signatories below are an initial list of supporters and we intend to begin sharing this request letter and gathering additional signatures from within our community. We mention this because we want to be open and transparent with our intentions and our direction.

We do not make this request lightly. We appreciate that the School District's immediate priority must be navigating through the current pandemic. At the same, we feel that COVID-19 has only underscored the disproportionate burdens and underlying inequities confronting our westside students and families. For years, our westside high school students and their parents have expressed their discontent with the distance and disconnection our current system creates. However, our history with the closing of South High School (see supplemental information) has shown us that our westside community has too easily been left out or ignored when planning decisions are made. So our request may be early for some, but it is long overdue for many of us.

We feel that this letter and the supplemental information reflect longstanding concerns within our community that we hope guides any future planning and budgetary decisions.

While you may feel free to contact any of the signatories individually, for the purpose of responding to this letter and all signatories together, please send correspondence through the following contact person, who represents a nonprofit community advocacy organization and has helped facilitate this letter among the signatories:

Richard Jaramillo
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Salt Lake City, UT 84110
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richard@uclr.org

Thank you for your consideration and we look forward to working together.

Sincerely,

PARENTS WITH STUDENTS ATTENDING SLC SCHOOL DISTRICT

Amy Jordan, Glendale parent
Sara Farah, Glendale parent
Billy Palmer, Glendale parent
Tina Tuifua, Glendale parent
Dr. Paul Kuttner, Glendale parent
Elsa Bermudez, Glendale parent
Erica Aguilar, Glendale parent

Ana Palma, Glendale parent
Inoke Hafoka, Glendale parent
Osman Osman, Glendale parent
Rosie Peralta, West Valley City parent
Laura Hernandez, Rose Park parent
Scott McLeod, Liberty Wells parent

FORMER STUDENTS OF SLC SCHOOL DISTRICT

Itzel Nava
Sharay Juarez
Yair Marin
Siosaia Langi

Rahermila Neupane
Maria Machorro
Diana Bustamante

COMMUNITY MEMBERS & ADVOCATES

Rep. Angela Romero
Haloti Liava'a
Dr. Leticia Alvarez Gutiérrez
Jarred Martinez
Turner C Bitton

Dr. Adrienne Cachelin
Jennifer Mayer-Glenn
Richard Jaramillo
Sol Katia Jimenez

CC: All current and incoming members of the Salt Lake City School Board

SUPPLEMENTAL INFORMATION

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Since June of 1988, when SLCSD closed South High School, our community has worked hard to productively engage in a school system that privileges students and families on the east side of Salt Lake City while forcing those on the city's west side to carry disproportionate burdens.

It's worth recalling that SLCSD's own consultants advised against closing South High, as the closure would disproportionately impact students who were already disadvantaged. Their recommendation at the time, which we are not advocating here, was to close Highland High School instead. This history warns us that recommendations seeking greater equity and accommodation for shifting demographics will likely be met with resistance from a privileged portion of our city. That backlash led to a complete reversal from the recommended path, the closure of South High, and a clear decision to prioritize east side students, families and neighborhoods at the expense of those on the west side.

More than thirty years later, many of the initial impacts of displacing South High's student body have not only remained, but have strongly reinforced systemic inequities.

CURRENT CONDITIONS

From the feeder schools in Glendale and surrounding westside neighborhoods, students largely attend schools across the city. At Highland High School, 221 students (11.5% of the student body), live west of I-15. At East High School, a striking 1,164 students live west of I-15—that's 56.8% and a majority of their student body.

Altogether, a total of 1,385 students must travel across an interstate and a whole city to attend a high school disconnected from their neighborhoods, their communities, and sometimes their peers.

To begin each school day, many westside students are forced to wake up earlier and travel farther than eastside students. On the west side, access to a car of their own is less common for students and transportation challenges are generally more common for parents, so students often must take hour-long, crowded bus rides to get to school.

These transportation issues, along with the additional distance from westside neighborhoods to eastside high schools, have created many entrenched inequities,

including reduced access to early morning classes and extracurricular activities, fewer opportunities for parental involvement, and reduced participation in student clubs and associations.

These issues of transportation and distance are more than just inconveniences; they reflect inequitable treatment of students and families based on geographic location, which, due to a history of segregation, aligns with ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic disparities.

The social-emotional impact is also deeply troubling as westside students experience disconnection from their neighborhoods during school and a separation from their classmates as their cohorts are split across different eastside high schools. Many westside students lack a sense of belonging when they have no option to attend a high school in their own neighborhood.

Educators and policy makers often “look at the inequalities of student outcomes and blame students without looking at the conditions, such as the curricular structures, processes and discourses that create unequal outcomes” (Yosso, 2002, p. 94). These are some of the reasons why culturally responsive instruction and curriculum are so important. Equally important, research has found that neighborhood schools provide students with a sense of pride and identity that have lasting outcomes that go beyond the four walls of a classroom.

These realities highlight a number of inequities in SLCSD and reflect a harmful power dynamic that has allowed for these conditions to persist for far too long.

STUDENT EXPERIENCES

Consistent with much of the research regarding integration strategies that involve students of color in predominantly white schools, students who began their education in the Glendale community before attending East High School report a range of difficulties and barriers. These include an uncomfortable and unsupportive learning environment, lower academic expectations, racial stereotyping, and expectations of behavioral problems.

In an ongoing collaborative research project, the University of Utah has been documenting student perspectives as they seek to understand the experiences of students who started school in Glendale and have graduated from East High School. Below are excerpts from the research project that powerfully express common, westside student experiences:

“In Glendale, it made me feel more comfortable because there's a lot of minorities. At East, [it's] completely different: it's segregated. Cliques [of] white kids would hang out where 'High School Musical' was filmed, the Latinos sat on the floor, and the Tongans had their own place, too. The cooler kids were at the top, and the only kids [of color] who sit with them played sports. When students were in sports, they hung out together, but they became 'white washed.' After the season, they went back to their cliques.”

“Just, like, when you're going up there, like, who do you become? Because now you are in a different area, with different people, and it's like trying to be, like—it's like when your mom takes you to the store and asks you not to touch anything, you know? It's like I'll go to all my classes, be a good student, so people aren't looking down on me because I'm from Glendale...”

“...when the teachers are always questioning you, you start thinking maybe I don't belong here, maybe I shouldn't challenge myself.”

Ultimately, we carry their concerns to you as expressed in the following:

“[East High School] was all the way out there. Being a kid, it's like: 'we can't have something close to our house?' We were still able to navigate that [situation]. Sometimes you're the only [student of color] in class, but it's okay because you look forward to after class. It came with expectations too, like: 'do you even deserve to be here?'”

These selected student experiences are not outliers; they reflect a common experience among students who endure conditions no school district should support, let alone reinforce as SLCSD has done despite some honest efforts by many working in the district.

PARENT EXPERIENCES

Many of the conditions faced by our westside students are also felt by our westside parents and caretakers. Below are some experiences provided by westside parents that have helped inform this letter and our request:

“I hate how early I have to wake my daughter up to get to the bus on time. She has to be up by 5:30 AM to be ready to catch the bus. In the winter it is so dark outside and I don't like leaving her alone to wait for the bus. High school students need more sleep than that.”

“Due to the distance of school, school activities may have to take a back seat because students may need to be home to fulfill other responsibilities. Having a school closer to our community may allow both to occur. Access and closeness of school could take away from travel time, money spent, and opportunities to be more active as a student, without having to sacrifice anything.”

“When our kids miss the bus we have limited options to get them to school. If no one is available to drive them they have to figure out how to use public transportation, walk an hour and a half to two hours uphill to get there, or just miss school. If they miss the bus after school and we can't pick them up, they have to wait until the next bus leaves late in the afternoon or take the long walk home.”

“Students whose families don't meet income qualifications for free and reduced lunch, but cannot afford the pay for school lunch, don't have the luxury to quickly run home and grab some food and come back to the school like many of the students who live close by. This leaves them to depend on their friends for food, or ask around for spare change to purchase school lunch or food at a nearby convenience store.”

“When our children are participating in multiple activities it can be difficult on the whole family. We are too busy driving to be able to provide a home cooked meal and have to rely on cheap fast food to feed our family on those nights.”

“The high school is too far from my home to be able to be actively involved in what is happening at the school. Transportation is a huge barrier for so many of our families on the west side.”

“The buses were so overcrowded when my daughter was going to East that students would have to fight to get a seat or they might end up having to sit in the aisle. My daughter would often choose to wait for the activity bus to come home or just decide to walk.”

As parents, we all want the best for our children and that is what makes the status quo so troubling: lacking a local high school for the Glendale and surrounding westside neighborhoods has deprived our westside children of the same opportunities afforded to eastside families.

EDUCATOR PERSPECTIVES

Educators also recognize the challenges that students and families confront while attending a high school far from their neighborhood. Educators that teach westside students in their elementary and middle schools often forge connections that extend beyond the classroom and into the community, where they see the impact of displacement. Many educators at East and Highland also see the negative effects of transporting students across the city. They see the impact in their classrooms, in extracurricular participation, and in the division of social groupings of students.

In community conversations about this letter's request, a former Glendale teacher expressed the following comment that we feel captures a common perspective among SLCS D educators:

"I knew many parents who cared deeply about their children's education at East and Highland High Schools. However, there were barriers to their participation, transportation being primary. I drove families to meet with teachers and administrators because they did not have access to transportation. Once they were in the building, it was not a welcoming place. There was no signage in languages other than English. It was cold and intimidating for the parents. Students also returned to visit us at schools in Glendale and shared that they had been experiencing racism at the school but that no one at the school would talk about it."

These are not isolated experiences and these perspectives are shared among many educators. It is our hope that a community-focused process of exploring a new high school will find ways to meaningfully include educator perspectives, as some fear retaliation for speaking up on behalf of their students and others feel that raised concerns are ignored.

Most importantly though, is student achievement. Students are more likely to succeed if they are educated in a space where they feel a sense of belonging and where culturally responsive curriculum and instruction are offered. It is the moral obligation of the education system to provide a free appropriate public education to all students and that promise has not been kept. And because of that, students are not achieving at the levels they could.

The academic literature supports this perspective. The research shows that student achievement is negatively impacted by students feeling less connected to schools as result of having low expectations from teachers (Berry, 2005; Diamond, 2006; Douglas et al., 2008; Nunn, 2011), counselors (Teranishi, 2002), and principals (Henfield et al., 2008). Research has found that students of color who are bused to schools outside their

neighborhoods also exhibit low self-esteem, experience racial anxiety, and often encounter hostile school climates (Chapman, 2013).

COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVES

Beyond students, parents and educators, having a high school in Glendale (or a surrounding west-side neighborhood) would be a truly empowering endeavor to address the broader, systemic inequities faced by the many communities of color and lower-income families residing on our city's west side.

Much of our nation's inequality is entrenched in our institutions and, outside of their home, schools represent one of the first institutions a child will encounter. We all want that introduction to be welcoming and nurturing so that the seeds of learning have fertile ground from which to grow.

However, when a middle school student transitions to high school in our school district, it not only creates individual challenges for the student and their family, it underscores the systemic barriers to their success. It uproots them from their neighborhoods and leaves them alienated in their classrooms. We are dispossessing these children of opportunities and community identity.

Our commitments to equity and inclusion must be more substantive than catchphrases and half-measures. We need bold and fundamental changes to rectify past decisions that have continued—and in many ways furthered—inequity in our school system.

CONCLUSION

For many years, we have wished and hoped that the School District would improve conditions and transform our high schools to places where all students, families and educators feel welcomed and like we belong. Things have improved, but simply not enough.

For the reasons outlined above, we request that the Salt Lake City School District begin developing an authentic, community-engaged process of building and creating a new high school on the west side of Salt Lake City. While we have outlined a desired albeit broadly-defined outcome of a new high school, the process of engaging, listening, and responding to the community and its long standing concerns are equally as important.