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Sent: Wednesday, January 22, 2025 11:25:55 AM

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Subject: Central Okanagan Schools - Enhancement Agreements - Outdoor Learning Spaces

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Dear Central Okanagan Schoolboard, CUPE Leadership, and District Leadership:

Firstly, I would like to give a heart felt thank you for your service to our community, you have made an important commitment to advocating for, and supporting public school education, both at the provincial level and in the day to day running of our schools. I have felt such a

sense of pride to see the number of childcare spaces that were built so quickly in our community. It has also been wonderful to see the number of school building and expansion projects that are underway or completed to support our growing community.

I am writing today to outline my concern with the challenges of having Enhancement Agreements brought forward by PACs continuing to be unfulfilled. While I recognize there are complexities within the current collective agreement with CUPE, I am confident that all parties can recognize the importance of these projects and the opportunities that the parent and broader community could provide through creative delivery methods that will reduce pressure on the Operations team and benefit the students and school communities with expediency.

I am writing today because I hope that through a creative approach and partnerships, we can forge a new direction in our community to realize even more successful school enhancement agreements. Parent Advisory Committees (PACs) across our district have always worked hard to create enrichment for our learners, including fundraising to build playgrounds and other school enhancement projects, such as outdoor classroom and nature-based play spaces. While there are several different types of Enhancement proposals that benefit our schools, I will focus on outdoor learning spaces in this letter, although I am confident that other project types would benefit from a new or revised model of approval and delivery.

Research continues to affirm the critical role of outdoor and nature-based play for school-aged children's development in various dimensions, including physical, cognitive, and social-emotional growth.

Studies reveal that nature play environments can enhance children's social interactions and foster emotional well-being. Open outdoor settings provide a sense of freedom, allowing children to express themselves in ways that may not be possible indoors. They also encourage cooperative play, where children build social skills by creating shared narratives, developing games, and overcoming challenges together. This freedom not only supports emotional expression but also helps children manage risks in a supportive environment, building resilience and self-confidence (Prins et al., 2022).

Engaging with natural elements in outdoor settings can deepen children's connection to nature, which is beneficial for environmental awareness and ecological understanding. Such experiences can increase focus, reduce stress, and boost overall mood, contributing to better learning outcomes when children return to classroom settings. Structured outdoor programs also offer rich opportunities to blend physical activity with educational content, enhancing learning through experiences that are often more memorable and impactful than classroom-only approaches (Oh, 2024; Prins et al., 2022).

Being immersed in natural settings positively impacts children's mental health by reducing stress and increasing feelings of happiness and calm. Studies indicate that children who spend time in outdoor environments show fewer symptoms of anxiety and hyperactivity. The unstructured quality of outdoor play also encourages imagination and environmental stewardship, as children may build a lasting connection to the natural world. These experiences are essential for emotional regulation and contribute to a balanced mental state (Fyfe-Johnson et al., 2021).

These are all benefits that align closely with the BC school curriculum and many school based learning plans.

While I can appreciate that our school district has been under immense pressure to build both childcare spaces and classroom spaces, along with maintaining existing aging infrastructure, it is with this in mind that I would encourage the Board of Trustees, CUPE and District staff in Management and Operations to consider some revisions to delivering projects initiated and funded by the school and PAC community. We have a responsibility to honour fundraising undertaken by school communities and fulfill project goals. These are volunteers and community-based fundraising dollars made in good faith with the expectation of enhancing learning, including outdoor and nature-based play experiences for our students. Money, in many schools, currently being unused. In addition, we are limiting opportunities for students to have meaningful play and learning experiences at their schools, which could be so critical to their physical and mental health and social-emotional growth.

For me personally, I have been a long-time parent volunteer in the district. My expertise is landscape architecture, and I know through years of education, research and practice that outdoor space is vital for healthy communities. In 2020, at one of my children's schools, we established a committee of parents, teachers, administration and our Indigenous liaison, to develop and design an outdoor learning and meeting space for the students and staff at Casorso Elementary. We proceeded to engage with the parent and student community through surveys, open houses and fundraising efforts. We solicited donations from local businesses. We applied for a national grant, which was unsuccessful primarily because we had not had the Enhancement Agreement yet approved. I was a parent volunteer at that school for 11 years and for four+ of those years we actively worked on this project, although my youngest child has now left the school. Of course, this comes with some personal frustration and feelings of disappointment, but I am more concerned that we are not working more diligently and collaborating to have outdoor play and learning spaces for all our students, particularly knowing that there are resources available in our community, both through volunteer efforts and community donations, unspent dollars that could be enhancing student experience.

I know that we are all doing many things to bring the best to our learners. This is an opportunity to further invest in our schools and community by using creative solutions and resources, particularly in our growing district where resources are stretched.

Thank you for your consideration, I would be happy to meet to discuss what creative partnerships could look like, having worked extensively with other community non-profit organizations in other capacities to enhance outdoor spaces.

Sincerely,

Cadre Simpson

Kelowna, BC

cc. Central Okanagan Parent Advisory Council (COPAC), Casorso PAC President, KLO PAC President

Attachment: PDF copy of letter