



District Parent Advisory Council No. 57 (Prince George)
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To the Board of Education - Prince George School District:

The District Parent Advisory Council welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on policy 5119. We enclose, with this package, this letter, survey results, a draft of an amended policy, and data regarding the number of non-catchment students.

One very important point - we do not believe you have enough time, at this point, to make any well considered changes to this policy in time for the February kindergarten registration. We ask that you take the time for review, revisions, and careful consideration, and look at making these changes for the 2015 registration process instead of rushing into them for 2014.

Our major points are as follows:

- Priorities for registration and transfers, methods of breaking ties, and core principles about registration and transfer should be moved back to Regulations.
- Catchments in British Columbia are permeable – students have the right to attend any public school as long as space is available. The board has the ability to make this more or less difficult for parents.
- Our data suggests that quite a number of students are attending non-catchment schools. There are a number of reasons for parents to choose a non-catchment school – please respect that choice.
- There are three possibilities for prioritizing registration of catchment children vs. siblings of non-catchment children – catchment first, non-catchment siblings first, or giving equal importance to new catchment registrations and keeping existing families together.
- Only 5% of our survey respondents supported the current and proposed method of kindergarten registration – registration, and then a separate transfer application later in the year. We suggest changes to the online registration to provide more clarity for both parents and school administration.
- The draft policy attempts to remove busing from students who attend a choice program at their catchment school. This negatively affects equity of access for choice programs, and should require a change to policy 3541 on Student Transportation to be implemented.

In more detail:

Too much has been stripped from the regulations of the policy

At the moment, what you have is a policy on catchment, and not a policy on registration or transfers. The regulations are the section of the policy that requires public input to change, and reflects the core values of the school board. The board needs to give direction to administration – to be reflected in administrative procedures – on matters such as registration priority, methods of breaking ties, and transfers. You will see in our draft that a few selected areas have been moved back into Regulations, where they were originally.

Catchment and Siblings

“The province [of BC] has enacted legislation, now incorporated into the School Act, that makes school catchments and district boundaries permeable to students; they have the right to attend any public school as long as space is available.” “The Act says that priority may be given to students currently enrolled in a school and to their siblings so that once a student has transferred, he or she may be given equal status as other students residing in the catchment of the receiving school. That provision obviates the need for a student who transferred previously to reapply to his or her receiving school each year. It also allows priority to be given to siblings to attend the same school.” - *School Choice Under Open Enrollment*, 2004, Daniel J. Brown

In other words, although a board may make catchments more or less difficult to go through, all catchments are permeable. If there are issues with availability of space, priority is given to children in the catchment, and a board may also give priority to siblings of these non-catchment children.

The board must be the body that makes the decision on how decisions are made for priority for entry into schools and programs, where space is an issue. This must be an area that requires public input when changed. What are the board’s core values for the importance of catchment and siblings, when not enough space is available in a school?

The district does not appear to have current data on how many students are actually attending non-catchment schools. However, we have some numbers from 2009 as to the regular track program students at Austin Road, Spruceland, and College Heights Elementary. In those schools, some 6 out of 10 regular track students were from the catchment, and 4 out of 10 were non-catchment.

This is not a trivial number of students. Families have students attend a non-catchment school for a wide variety of valid reasons. Please respect this parental choice.

We asked on our survey: “If there is only one space available for a new student, and a choice must be made between registering a catchment child, and the sibling of a non-catchment child already enrolled in the school, who should get that one space?” The catchment child was chosen by 53% of respondents, the sibling of the non-catchment child was chosen by 41%, and 6% chose other. While a majority, this is not an overwhelming one. There are good arguments to be made for both catchment and siblings.

This leaves the board with three possibilities, for your consideration:

- Catchment comes before non-catchment siblings (catchment first)
- Non-catchment siblings come before catchment (families first)
- Group siblings of non-catchment children and catchment children into the same priority group (equal importance to catchment and keeping families together)

Kindergarten Registration Method

We asked on our survey: “Currently, in order to register in a regular program at a non-catchment school, a student must first register at their catchment school, and at a later date, send in a separate transfer application. What do you believe the process should be?” Only 5% chose the current and proposed method – “Register with catchment school, then send separate transfer application later”. 41% chose “register directly with the school they wish to attend”, and 49% chose “register with catchment school, and submit transfer request at the same time”.

This would be very simple to implement with online registration – ask the parent what the child’s catchment school is, state that they would have priority for registration there, and then ask which school they would like the child to apply for.

It is unclear what the benefit is to the district in having inaccurate information as to school intentions during the registration process. It certainly does not benefit parents to require this additional step.

Transportation and choice programs

The revised policy adds a small phrase to an existing statement: “The parents or guardians of a non-catchment area child *or a child registered in a choice program* shall assume full responsibility for the transportation of the child to and from school and any related extra supervision requirements...”

This would affect Montessori students living in the PGSS catchment, French immersion students living in the Duchess Park catchment, French immersion students living in the Heather Park catchment, Northern Learning Centre students living in the Kelly Road catchment, and other potential choice programs, such as French immersion at Morfee.

Is this provision meant to exclude people who do not have an alternate means of transportation from participating in choice programs that take place in their own catchment school? With a choice program at a catchment school, you have an opportunity to make a choice program accessible and equitable for all families living in that catchment.

If the board wishes to change regulation 4.1 of policy 3541 on Student Transportation – Home and School, then we would urge you to review the transportation policy, and not write new transportation policy in policy 5119.

We would welcome the opportunity to provide more information on any of these points.

Sincerely,

Sarah Holland
Chairperson

DISTRICT PARENT ADVISORY COUNCIL NO. 57 (PRINCE GEORGE)