

To Whom It Concerns,

When M's mother and I first enrolled him at South Park school, we were attracted to the school's philosophy of parent involvement and its community of support. M had not yet been diagnosed high-functioning autistic with ADHD. In the years since his diagnosis, M has struggled with school, and has had a difficult time connecting with other children in a meaningful way. He has been prone to highly disruptive outbursts, has lashed out violently at times, and has required a great deal of intervention over the years, often during transition times and when outside stimuli, particularly sound, have become overwhelming.

M's teachers and EA's deserve a tremendous amount of credit for working through these issues with him. However, M's mother and I being allowed or encouraged to come to the school and be with him has had a tremendously positive effect on him and his elementary school experience. We can calm and settle him in ways his teachers and EAs often cannot, preparing him to learn and engage with his peers.

Other benefits to his mother and I being allowed to witness and engage with M's elementary school experience include being able to encourage social connections, and being able to better understand the difficulty he is facing, both at school and more generally in life. There is nowhere that M faces more challenges, particularly social challenges, than at school. To be able to witness these challenges first-hand has been extraordinarily helpful in allowing us to better understand our child and the difficulties ASD can cause him.

The Family School model creates a community among parents, students, and staff that is unlike anything I've seen at any other school. It has meant so much to know that M has such a large group of people looking out for him every day, many of whom know him well and understand his needs and behaviours. It has also been possible to forge strong friendships within this community, and to help M make deep and meaningful connections with some of the other children. Having spent so much time in and around the school and his classroom, M's mother and I have been able to get to know not only the other parents, but also many of the other children in the school, which has made it much easier to assist M in forming these friendships. Socializing, making friends, and finding kids to play with during breaks are not things that have come easily or naturally to our boy.

There are other benefits to South Park that are less tangible, harder to articulate, and yet no less real or impactful. The Family School model fosters an atmosphere of kindness and acceptance, of tolerance and patience. The label "Family School" is appropriate, as one feels like a member of a large family at South Park. I see the effects of this every day with M. The other children treat him well, and accept him in a way that is truly heart-warming.

M is high-functioning ASD. Things could go either way for him. With enough of the right kind of support, I am convinced there is every chance of him finishing high school with solid grades, an active social life, and a great deal of independence. If this happens, we will owe a tremendous debt to South Park and the Family School model. The community of parents, children, and staff that exist there, our ability to be a part of his day-to-day learning, and the relationships we have enjoyed and been able to help foster for M will all have played a large part in making a relatively normal, healthy, and constructive elementary school experience possible for M.

Middle school won't be easy. High school may well be a nightmare, but I feel that South Park Family School has given M a solid foundation for learning. He enjoys school much of the time, loves to learn new things, and feels welcome and accepted despite his sometimes very strange, atypical behaviours. He loves his school and speaks fondly of his classmates. There are a lot of hard-won victories in what I've just said there. I do not think we would have been able to make so much progress at any other school, at least not in the same relatively short period of time.

M only has a year and a half left at South Park. A change in the philosophy or the very nature of the school may not, at this point, have too big of an impact on him specifically. It saddens me greatly, though, to think of families with similar challenges, children on the spectrum or faced with other challenges, not having South Park Family School as an option. Where would M be now if we hadn't had South Park Family School? I have thought about this a good deal, and I don't think he would be doing very well. I suspect that he would have struggled with school to the point of it becoming unsustainable. We likely would have had to put M into a special school where he would have drifted further from a typical, independent life. South Park Family School provides a third option between special, segregated schools, and "normal" schools.

As it stands, M is thriving at South Park. He has a long way to go before he could pass for neurotypical, and he still struggles with school in general, but he has several close friends, loves and excels at math, and resists going to school in the morning less and less as time goes by. We love South Park Family School. We love the community there. It has done a world of good for our boy and our family. It is not the right school for everyone, but it has been just the right school for us. If the parents of South Park Family School seem fanatical in their defence of the school, it is fueled by gratitude. South Park has done us a lot of good, and it will do a lot of good for many other families, given the chance.

South Park parent (names withheld for privacy)

Our Story

Since the announcement of the proposal to change South Park Family School from a school of choice to a catchment school I have been struggling to write this letter. For myself and many other parents at South Park Family School, the choice to attend is a deeply personal. It is a choice I feel so fortunate to have.

My eldest son's early years were not the easiest. At a routine public health check at 18 months the nurse recommended that he go for further assessments. The results were a sharp reality check for our family when it came back that he was severely speech delayed. It was determined that his speech delay was caused by his poor hearing. When he was older we could look at surgery but for now, in his formative early years, he would need to rely on us to fill in the gaps where his hearing failed.

At 2 1/2 we enrolled him in a parent participation preschool so I could be in class with him, be his ears when he needed them. The thing with hearing impairment is that the exclusion is often not noticeable unless you are looking for the signs. A child may appear uninterested, or withdrawn or unintelligent. Being in the class was fantastic but the parent participation portion was frustrating. Many parents only enrolled because it was close by They did not believe in the model and it was a struggle to get parents to volunteer. Myself and a handful of others often had to juggle the work meant to be shared by the entire parent base.

When it was time for my son to go to school we struggled. I grew up in the French Immersion Program and I always envisioned it being a program that I would **choose** for my children. I knew in my heart though enrolling in that program would be setting him up to fail. I worried too about being able to support him in the class. I had heard that depending on the teacher some met you at the door and you were never allowed in the classroom.

While the teacher managed 18 five year olds I wondered who would be there to be my son's ears? If he couldn't understand what was going on how long before he became disengaged? I would watch him in his preschool struggling to understand the teacher over the noise of the class and agonize over where he would fit in.

At the same time we were considering school options we were also faced with the knowledge that our living arrangements were going to change after the start of kindergarten. We are one of the many families in Victoria who are not homeowners. As I am sure you are aware the vacancy rate in Victoria is very low and as the saying goes "renters with children can't be choosers" I knew that we would have very little control over where we would live. If we chose to enroll our

son at the school across the street (which was at the time Vic West) Would our second child be able to get in if we moved out of catchment?

I don't know who first told me about South Park Family School. A school that magically seemed to have been created to meet all our needs. A school where I could be assured to be welcome in the classroom at any time. A school with no catchment. Where even after moved our second son would be assured a spot. I told my friends in other cities about this magic school, they all replied in the same manner "I wish that existed here."

Our son started kindergarten in 2015. I accompanied him into the classroom for the first bit of the day every morning. In that first year his hearing struggles persisted, socially he suffered a bit. It was hard for him to connect with other students. He didn't always quite understand them. A classroom is a noisy place and the other children didn't always have the awareness or the patience to repeat themselves but the parent volunteers did. In fact, in that first year I would say many of his closest relationships were formed with other parent volunteers. Like minded parents who saw the value in active parent participation in the classroom.

One experience from South Park I don't think I will ever forget is waiting outside the school on the first day of grade one. My son was looking around the school yard for familiar faces, "Mama, I see Ashley! Ashley is here!! am going to say hi!"

Ashley is a mom in her thirties.

I think this moment demonstrates perfectly the true value of South Park Family School's model. It isn't just parents baking cupcakes or helping out with art (though they do those things). It is parents making connections with children that help them remain engaged in the school and have a sense of place within the school community.

I now have two children in the school. I sit on the PAC as the VCPAC representative and act as the Classroom coordinator in my eldest sons class. I have gotten to know a diverse cross section of families during my time at South Park Family School and have met many other families whose stories mirror ours.

These proposed changes to South Park Family School matter so much to me because I know that right now there are families throughout the city with a pre-kindergarten child wondering where they can fit. They don't even know it yet but there is a little school in James Bay that is going to change their life.

Sincerely Amanda and Mehernosh Panthaki (Kayan and Jasper's parents)

How South Park is different from other schools

I am currently the custodian at South Park school, and have been going on 4 years now. I have also worked at nearly every school in the district, 50/52, and chose to work at South Park specifically because of its distinction from other schools.

South Park is in possession of a nearly 50 year tradition which has created and passed on an understanding of what this school is. Its specific values, emphasis, understanding of itself, current community and historical lineage all differ radically from other schools of which I have been a part. It values trust over regulation, and allows children to be trusted as members of our community. It values development of character over intellectual rigidity, which is a profound and even uncomfortable difference when viewed from other schools perspectives. We are a family school, and it is extremely tangible to our members that they are a part of our family. People choose to come here to be a part of this, and in coming here, they agree to receive the torch from the parents of the past, and keep it alive in order to pass it on.

There is a well-grounded understanding of our tradition here, and families agree to take part in this when they register. This is why a catchment program would not only change this, we see it as beginning a process to end the tradition, values, and understanding of the school. Parents would not be agreeing to our understanding of our school by taking part in it. Children would not be agreeing to accept the trust and hope placed in them by entering the 50 year tradition and allowing it to grow within them. Staff, in choosing this school, would not be implicitly accepting the values and practices which are emphasized here. As a school of choice, we allow all members to choose to join the tradition of South Park, to become a part of it, add to it, help it to grow, and keep it alive for the next generations.

The reality of this tradition may not change in the next year, or in the next five if the school were forced to change. But the tradition of educators and families that established it 50 years ago would become deracinated by not requiring people to choose it, and therefore would begin its process of decay. Within 20 years, when not a person who has been a part of the philosophy and tradition are present, entropy will have set in, and the school will have lost its guiding direction and reason to be.

The palpable values behind our school exist because it is a school of choice. It is an enclave within Victoria for families who wish to put extra effort into their community to have a place to do so. It has a tradition that has been established for this, and it took time for it to become as substantial as we feel it today. To undermine this for a temporal problem is not only ignorant, for it ignores the character and conscience of our school which only exists because we agree to keep it

alive, it discounts that this character has withstood temporal problems like population changes. The effect our small and humble school would have on current population changes, redistributing perhaps a class and a half worth of kids next year, is not worth the price of eroding a tradition which has been created to give children and families an upbringing with values they choose, after seeing that it served others so well before them.

It is my sincere hope that the values which we, the community of staff, families, and children choose to nourish, maintain, and cherish, will not be upset by a broad brush solution. Population changes will swing one way and the next throughout the centuries, but the values and understanding of a community can withstand time.

Steve Thompson
South Park School Custodian
School District 61