

June 12, 2023

Dear Committee Chair, Vice Chair, and Members of the Committee,

We appreciate the time and opportunity afforded us to share some information and clarify our process for the formal study of school closures and boundary adjustments in Alpine School District. We remind you of the comprehensive report provided to this committee by district officials last month which outlines the specific actions and timeline followed by the board and staff. Additionally, no request was made via email, text, letter, or telephone call for the superintendent or board members to attend the scheduled committee meeting last month. Consequently, a subpoena to this meeting was unnecessary given that an invitation to attend is sufficient.

Based on the discussion last month, we believe a few points of clarification may be helpful to this committee and the public. Following our clarification on these points, we welcome any questions from the committee members. However, due to pending litigation, we may be limited in the scope of our response.

First, the schools being considered for closure for the 2023-2024 school year have been studied in the past, both formally and informally. Valley View Elementary was formally studied in 2020-2021, and the Board decision was to hold. Sharon has been on a closure watch list for several years due to declining enrollment and facility concerns.

Second, a concern was raised that administrators were reassigned, and teachers were allowed to transfer before a final school closure decision by the Board. While most administrative assignments are typically done in the spring, other changes may occur during the summer and, on rare occasions during the school year. Teachers are given the opportunity to transfer schools each spring for the next school year. Knowing that the board was considering possible school closures, we thought it prudent to allow teachers of potentially affected schools the opportunity to transfer. We would remind this committee and the public that administrators and teachers are contracted with the district and assigned to a school or work location. Assignments may be changed at any time to meet the needs of the organization and/or the individual.

Third, the buildings being studied for closure have significant structural, operational, and seismic challenges. For reference, Valley View Elementary was completed in 1966 and is 57 years old, while Sharon Elementary was built in 1954, and is 69 years old. Over the years, improvements and updates have been made to both facilities; however, both are listed on FEMA's Unreinforced Masonry Report. Newer facilities are proximate to the schools being studied for closure, have the capacity, and are in better condition to support the learning needs and safety of our students, families, and communities.

Fourth, as outlined in the report shared with you last month, we began this formal process on December 8, 2022, with notification to all patrons that the district was studying school closures and boundary adjustments. In instances where statutory ambiguity arose, district staff and

Board carefully considered the language, context, and purpose of the law. Following six open houses, public comments received at two board meetings, hundreds of online feedback submissions, and a public hearing, the Board and staff chose to take a more conservative approach to the statutory timeline language. It is anticipated that the Board will make a final determination on June 30, 2023. Because it is easier to prepare and make temporary assignments than it is to not prepare and scramble at the last minute, steps have been taken in preparation for potential board action on the 30th. However, those actions are all reversible pending the final decision of the board.

Fifth, if the committee is considering changes in the statute, given our experience as a board and staff, may we suggest the following recommendations to provide greater clarity as boards undertake the emotionally challenging process of determining how to adjust boundaries, and consolidate and close schools as conditions in districts change. Clarify the purpose of the feedback process and the notification period. Our understanding is that the purpose of feedback is not to determine the necessity of closing a school, but rather to “provide an opportunity for public comment on the proposed school closure” (53G-4-402, 23(a)(ii)) to help inform boards so that wise decisions about the proposed closure and boundary changes can be made. Additionally, statutory language could require that formal boundary studies be conducted by specific timelines.

In conclusion, we are diligent in our responsibility and commitment to providing the best possible educational opportunities for our students, while being wise stewards of taxpayer dollars. As outlined in the statute referenced above, “A local school board shall do all other things necessary for the maintenance, prosperity, and success of the schools and the promotion of education.” (53G-4-402, 22)

Thank you for your time.