



November 24TH, 2016

**BY EMAIL:** [linda.larson.MLA@leg.bc.ca](mailto:linda.larson.MLA@leg.bc.ca)

Ms. Linda Larson  
MLA – Boundary-Similkameen  
Parliamentary Secretary for Rural Education  
Room 243, Parliament Buildings  
Victoria, BC  
V8V 1X4

**Re:** Important information regarding the Conseil scolaire francophone de la Colombie-Britannique (SD 93) that will impact the Province’s consultation and engagement process in developing the Rural Education Strategy

Request for a meeting to discuss SD 93’s participation in the development of the Rural Education Strategy

Dear Ms. Larson:

On behalf of the Conseil scolaire francophone de la Colombie-Britannique (“SD 93”), I want to thank you for your commitment and involvement in working to improve rural education across the province. As you may know, SD 93 is a unique school district in British Columbia with a provincial mandate to offer French first language education guaranteed by section 23 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Liberties* (“*Charter*”). As a school district offering minority language education in both rural and urban communities across the province, SD 93 faces a number of challenges not experienced by either rural or urban English-language school districts with a defined geographic service area. For that reason, I write further to letters sent by Georges Farkas, Assistant Deputy Minister of Education, on November 9 and 22, 2016, regarding the Province’s development of a Rural Education Strategy, in order to provide you and your team with important information about SD 93 that should, according to it, inform how its needs are taken into account during the Rural Education Strategy consultation and development process. I also invite you to meet with me and other representatives of SD 93, in your capacity as Parliamentary Secretary for Rural Education, to discuss, in greater detail than is set out in this letter, the development of the Rural Education Strategy and its impact on SD 93.

By way of a brief overview, it is important to note that SD 93 operates 37 French first language programs in homogeneous or heterogeneous schools across the province. SD 93 started operating in 1996, with a population of approximately 1900 students. In the 2016-2017 school

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**Conseil scolaire francophone de la Colombie-Britannique**

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year, SD 93 has reached an enrolment of over 5700 students across the province. SD 93 has been one of the fastest growing school districts in percentage since its creation in 1995, and the fastest growing school district in actual numbers between 2013 and 2015. SD 93's French first language programs located outside of urban regions (Greater Victoria, Lower Mainland, and Kelowna) include programs in Nanaimo, Campbell River, Comox, Port Alberni, Powell River, Sechelt, Penticton, Kamloops, Prince George, Terrace, Whistler, Pemberton, Squamish, Revelstoke, Fernie, Rossland and Nelson. Of SD 93's 37 French first language programs, 21 have fewer than 100 students enrolled. SD 93 also offers online French-first language education, known as École Virtuelle, in order to offer a larger range of educational programming to its students at the secondary level across the province.

The letters sent by Assistant Deputy Minister Farkas on November 9 and 22, 2016 describe the Province's engagement process in reviewing rural school funding and educational practices in rural communities across the province. The province's process, which has formally been launched as of November 22, 2016, includes consultation with and collecting feedback from key stakeholders including school districts (trustees, staff, administrators, teachers, etc.), K-12 sector associations (BCSTA, BCSSA, BCASBO, etc.), community organisations (local government, regional districts, etc.), and other interested stakeholders. The engagement process also provides school districts the opportunity to provide formal submissions by early January. SD 93 intends to fully participate in the process set out in the November 9 and 22, 2016 letters, and will provide formal submissions, as requested. However, at this early stage in the consultation and engagement process, and having reviewed the questions posed in the survey sent to school districts on November 22, 2016, it is important for SD 93 to communicate that it has a unique mandate and particular challenges, which differ from those of both rural and urban English-language school districts, and that the consultation and engagement process should take these particularities into account in order to develop a Rural Education Strategy that also addresses SD 93's needs.

In the past, SD 93's unique mandate and the challenges it experiences, as a school district offering minority language education in sparsely populated communities across the province, have gone unrecognized or have been misunderstood by the Province when crafting or developing provincial policies or strategies that affect SD 93. It is in this context that SD 93 would like to draw to your attention at least four concerns that, if not considered at this early stage in the consultation and engagement process, may – unintentionally – result in a Rural Education Strategy that disregards the needs of SD 93.

First, as part of the consultation and engagement process, the November 22, 2016 letter provides senior school district staff with access to a short online survey meant to identify issues around

funding, facilities, and educational programming. In reviewing the questions in the survey, it is clear that the survey is designed to assess the needs and challenges of rural English-language school districts and does not capture the nuances of SD 93's operational and capital funding problems, as they are quite different from those of most rural and urban English-language school districts. For instance, unlike English-language school districts, SD 93's schools are the primary instrument of linguistic and cultural transmission to the minority French-speaking population which is surrounded by an Anglo-dominant community. As such, operational and educational challenges associated with delivering French first language educational programs in rural communities that are not captured by the survey, but that affect SD 93 schools, include: difficulties associated with operating rented or shared facilities, the ability to participate in French-language cultural activities which is vital to the transmission of language and culture in a Anglo-dominant community, and the importance of early childhood educational programs to begin French-language transmission to students before they reach school age. As such, SD 93's rural schools have particular linguistic and cultural needs that are not applicable to rural English-language school districts. Furthermore, the survey questions appear to presume that a school district operates regionally and that general trends can be observed and effectively communicated through answers to the survey questions. However, SD 93 operates provincially. It's challenges in Fernie (where the SD 93 operates a French-first language program out of three rooms in a community centre with 18 students enrolled from K-5) are altogether different from its challenges in Nelson (where SD 93 operates a French-first language program with 83 students enrolled from K-8 in a homogeneous facility that is rented from SD 8 and located outside the Nelson City limits). As SD 93 operates provincially, it offers an online curriculum through école Virtuelle which presents operational and funding challenges that are not explicitly addressed through the survey questions. Moreover, the survey questions address the challenges of school closures, but not the challenges of opening new programs or schools in rural areas, which is one of SD 93's greatest challenge in rural areas, as is described in more detail below. SD 93 is concerned that the survey questions, related to general aspects and trends of rural education, will not adequately capture its unique experience and its particular mandate and role in rural communities.

Second, the November 9, 2016 letter explains that feedback and input into the development of the Rural Education Strategy will be sought from a variety of different stakeholder groups, including BCSTA, BCSSA, BCASBO, etc. Although these organizations are crucial to understanding the K-12 sector generally, they cannot give insight into challenges faced by SD 93's schools for a number reasons, including: SD 93 is only one of 60 school districts across the province; SD 93 is the only school district with such a distinctive mandate; and the K-12 organizations mentioned above, by definition, defend interests that are common to most school districts and are not designed to take into account the unique mandate and interests of SD 93. Although unfortunate, it is common that members of these organisations are not aware of SD 93's

purpose or existence in the communities they represent. As such, in addition to consulting more directly with SD 93 representatives, the Province should consult with French-speaking organizations from across the province that have knowledge about French first language education. One such example is the Fédération des parents francophones de la Colombie-Britannique.

Third, as a provincial school district, SD 93 has yet to begin operating French first language programming in many rural communities across the province. SD 93 operates varying levels of primary and secondary education in all areas of the province where the number of eligible students warrants a particular level of instruction. However, as SD 93 is still a nascent school district, there are many areas in the province where SD 93 is aware of the potential demand for French first language programming, but where it has been unable to begin operating a French first language program. SD 93's School District Facilities Plan, prepared for and submitted to the Ministry of Education in November 2015 as part of its capital planning requirements, identifies a number of rural communities where SD 93 could begin offering French first language programming, including Fort St. John, Quesnel, Williams Lake, Dawson Creek, and Salt Spring Island, to name a few. Unlike SD 93, very few rural English-language school districts, if any, are continually searching to establish starter schools by establishing starter schools in varying and multiple communities like SD 93. One of the greatest challenges facing SD 93 in this endeavour is securing space in rural communities where a starter French first language program can be opened. Also unlike SD 93, most rural English-language school districts are experiencing declining enrolment and do not face space challenges like those of SD 93. Whereas SD 93 is opening schools in both rural and urban communities across the province, almost every rural school district is closing or rationalizing schools.

Fourth, often SD 93's urban schools serve students that are sparsely populated and more comparable to the geographic dispersion of students attending English-language rural schools. This geographic dispersion is crucial to understanding SD 93's needs in terms of operational and transportation funding in areas of the province that are typically defined by the province as "urban", but where the province's "rural factor" should apply because of SD's geographic dispersion of students. For example, in Vancouver, SD 93 presently operates only two elementary schools (École élémentaire Rose-des-vents and École élémentaire Anne-Hébert), that serve all of Vancouver and parts of Burnaby and New Westminster. In comparison, the Vancouver Board of Education ("VBE"), which operates within the geographic limits of the City of Vancouver, operates about 90 elementary schools in the city. In this respect, SD 93's urban schools more closely resemble certain aspects of English-language rural school and should be considered as part of the province's review of the "rural" funding formula.

Therefore, SD 93 believes that a meeting, at this early stage of the engagement and consultation process, would greatly benefit the province's understanding of SD 93's mandate and challenges and would ensure that the consultation and engagement process takes into consideration the impact of the Rural Education Strategy on SD 93.

I thank you in advance for your attention to this matter. Should you or your team have any questions, please have your staff contact Mr. Sylvain Allison, SD 93 Secretary-Treasurer. I look forward to meeting with you in the near future.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M. Lapierre', is centered within a light gray rectangular box.

Marie-France Lapierre  
President

cc. Sylvain Allison, Secretary-Treasurer