



October 19, 2011

To the Seattle School Board,

Enclosed please find a position paper on the capacity issue from the Thornton Creek Parent Group. We fully support the letter you have received from our staff, which we understand Mr. DeBell requested specifically for the board, regarding academic issues around further expansion. We also understand the competing concerns regarding facilities and enrollment. In addition to adding our voice, we wish to address the full spectrum of issues that further expansion poses to our school, address the larger picture and the longer term, and inform new district staff of the recent facilities history in our neighborhood.

In a nutshell, Thornton Creek was designed as a small school. Everything in our program design **revolves** around this basic concept. To grow it is to kill it. We want to continue to be the successful program we have long been, providing a strong draw for families throughout North Seattle.

We hope you will take the time to read our argument and thoughtfully consider our position.

Sincerely,

The Thornton Creek Parent Group



## Thornton Creek Parent Group's Position on Program Expansion

### Summary

Staff and parents at Thornton Creek School oppose further expansion of our program. Neither our program nor our facility can accommodate more students than the 75 we've already absorbed over the last three years. The negative impacts of expansion are already numerous; further expansion, through the addition of portables or otherwise, would degrade our program and pose serious health and safety concerns for students. While we appreciate the district's critical need to solve its capacity issues and have been proud to do our part to help alleviate overcrowding in the Northeast cluster, we now find ourselves to be one of the most overcrowded schools in the cluster. Our program—a district success story—is at risk. Student health and safety is on the verge of being seriously compromised. Further expansion is neither desirable nor feasible.

If the district insists on adding more students to Thornton Creek, it must also make available sufficient resources to train new staff in our unique program and to address the acute shortcomings and health and safety risks in an outdated facility that is already inadequate for the numbers of students we serve. We would be happy to actively participate in helping the district come up with long-term solutions that can do a much better job of meeting the demands of our program and go further in helping with capacity challenges in the NE region.

### Thornton Creek: A Seattle schools success story

Thornton Creek is a designated alternative school that has for 37 years delivered excellent academic results along with an opportunity for extraordinary social-emotional development and citizenship skills. Our enrollment waitlist is evidence of the value families see in Thornton Creek's program design and the success of our students by the district's measures is testimony to the value of our program.

Based on its record of success, Thornton Creek was recently singled out by Dr. Enfield and the district as a flagship model for "innovation schools." Yet even as the district looks to Thornton Creek as a model innovation school, overcrowding and expansion are threatening our student's academic success and our program's integrity.

### Our position: Hold our expansion at the current level

At the crux of the issue facing Thornton Creek is the role that program size plays in our educational model. Our program is defined in large part by a genuine sense of connectedness among students and teachers and by the creation of a community where students and staff all know one another, interact frequently throughout the school building, and meet regularly as a single, cohesive school community. As our number of students grows, this defining aspect of our program is diminished and in danger of being eliminated. ***Although overcrowding poses a challenge for any school, at Thornton Creek personalization and community are part of the definition and explicit mission of the program.*** (See Additional Background at the end of this paper.)

We acknowledge the capacity challenges in the northeast. We appreciate that the district has limited options for responding to overcrowding. However, the growth we have *accepted over the past three years* to help ease pressures in the northeast has **already** affected the integrity of our program design and stressed our facility's limits. We are at the point of compromising our program integrity, academic effectiveness, and student health and safety. We already have 20% of our students housed in portables; if expansion continues, that number will jump to 37%.

***Neither our program nor our building can accommodate more than the extra 75 students we have already absorbed over the past three years without seriously threatening our program integrity and academic performance.***

**OVERCROWDING IS AS MUCH A PROGRAM ISSUE AT THORNTON CREEK AS THE NEED FOR ADDITIONAL SEATS IS AN ISSUE IN THE NORTHEAST CLUSTER.**

Further impacts on TC's program integrity and academic effectiveness must be considered as decisions are made to address overcrowding in the Northeast region. It is in the best interests of the district to maintain the integrity of our program so we can continue to attract as many families as we do now. Our parents and staff welcome an opportunity to discuss this issue with board members and district staff in an effort to find alternative solutions that don't put our program or our kids at risk.

**Already jammed: The negative impact of expansion so far**

The Thornton Creek program does not operate as a group of isolated classrooms gathered together at a school site. Rather our program emphasizes the creation of community, bringing us together often for shared learning activities, whole-community celebrations, assemblies, and performances. Our program design and instructional model require facilities that provide out-of-classroom, small group and whole-community meeting spaces. Our program requires that students interact among partnering classrooms, work independently and with parent volunteers in small groups outside of their classroom, practice conflict resolution skills with peers, access our modest library for expedition project research, and, when necessary, work with tutors or parent volunteers to support their skill development.

These are ***critical*** elements of our program design that have already been negatively impacted by our recent program growth and will be further impacted should more students and more portables be added to our campus. While staff members have worked hard to accommodate the growth we've experienced to date, the following points demonstrate some examples of the negative impacts we're already experiencing:

- ***The aspect of our program devoted to social-emotional needs is threatened.*** TC teachers get to know their students well and provide them with extensive social/emotional support. Semi-private space for addressing a social/emotional issue with an individual or group of students no longer exists.
- ***A core aspect of our program, integrated grade-band collaboration, has been weakened.*** Integrated grade-band collaboration is more complicated due to scheduling accommodations that must be made with the addition of more classes.
- ***Our library is completely out of space.*** Our library cannot add more systematic shelving for more books to support our expeditionary learning projects and high-interest student books because of a lack of shelving space.
- ***Intervention work is threatened.*** Adults doing intervention work have difficulty finding quiet hallway space or any space at all to work with individual or small groups of students who need extra instructional help, making this work less effective for students.
- ***Overcrowding is affecting the learning environment of all of our students.*** TC is educating greater numbers of students who have a difficult time focusing their attention in a group setting. Overcrowding in all of our out-of-classroom spaces affects their learning.
- ***Less time for our performing arts programs due to lack of space.*** Our performing arts programs cannot find space for rehearsals and performances
- ***Less partnering between our self-contained and general education students.*** Partnering between our self-contained and general education students is more difficult because of increasing demands on grade-band scheduling.
- ***Loss of PE, library, and art time.*** Our PCP scheduling for PE, library, and art time will continue to offer less and less of this valuable instruction time to our students.
- ***We are losing parent volunteer time due to lack of space.*** TC parents are deeply committed to volunteering their time and our program has flourished over the years because of parent volunteers. Now, teachers are having difficulty finding out-of-classroom space where parents can work with students in book study groups,

math and science projects, and more. As a result, some teachers have had to give up this effective use of parent volunteers because of a lack of space.

- ***Even the use of hall space for small groups is becoming difficult because of traffic and noise.*** Our teachers now use our narrow hallways for DRA, math assessments, and small group math and literacy work. This is becoming increasingly difficult because of increased student traffic in the hallways. A teacher or student who needs a quiet space to work cannot find that space in the school.

These are a few examples of impacts growth has had and will continue to have on our program. If a decision is made to place additional portables at TC, **the addition of 110 more students will have a negative impact on our academic outcomes and overall performance.**

### **The problem with portables**

Portables simply do not meet current SPS design criteria for elementary teaching/learning spaces. Portables hinder teaching and learning (particularly the kind we strive for at Thornton Creek) and present real health risks. The 2008 Washington State Auditor's Performance Audit Report noted that compared to permanent school buildings, portable classrooms had much greater long term maintenance and operation costs and "pose risks to health and safety" of students and teachers. The report recommended that no more than 10% of a school district's classrooms be in the form of portables.

Portables have poor air quality. They do not provide the essentials of water for science, art, and hygiene; storage for teacher/classroom materials; storage for student belongings and project materials; or display space for class work. The portable furnishings provided by SPS are inadequate and inappropriate for an elementary-level learning environment. What's more, portables provide no out-of-classroom hallway space for any small-group student learning because they do not connect to a building.

While portables may be a tempting solution to the need for more classroom space, they will not help alleviate the stress on our already maxed-out core facility—in fact, they'll exacerbate it. Our bathrooms, cafeteria, library, art studio, and gym are all already overcrowded.

Given the questions about the air-quality of portable classrooms, the lack of running water, and the pressures that portable classrooms put on core facilities, then it needs to be stipulated that portables should be a short-term solution, not the entire plan and not meant to stay in place until BEX4.

In 2004, the district proposed to expand both Pathfinder at Genesee Hill in West Seattle and AE2/Thornton Creek at Decatur into K-8 programs utilizing portables on each campus. Due to the excessive costs associated with infrastructure needs at our location (then known as AE2/Decatur) the district decided to expand only Pathfinder at Genesee Hill. During the last round of closures, the district decided to move Pathfinder to the Cooper building because of the lack of educational adequacy of the portables at Genesee Hill. ***The current plan for Thornton Creek would place more portables at the Decatur site than had been housed at Genesee Hill.***

### **If expansion happens anyway: What we'll need**

If the decision is made to place more portables at Thornton Creek to house classrooms, please recognize that the addition of 175-190 more students will severely stress the existing space that was built to serve a much smaller population. Unless critical support is provided by the district, our instructional model will continue to be weakened—having negative consequences for our successful program.

Thus far with the four portables that have been placed at TC, the District's BTA budget has been unable to address any of the facility and program needs listed below. In addition, the parent group has been forced to shoulder the costs of additional professional development for newly hired staff as well as basic portable furnishings and refurbishing. These

costs **cannot continue to be the sole responsibility of the TC parent group. These costs brought on by a central decision to expand the program cannot be cost-neutral to the district.** If expansion continues, the district must help the school by providing for the following, immediate program and facility budget challenges (before the portables arrive):

#### **Program support**

- **Funding professional development training for newly hired staff.** TC must be allocated funding for these program expansion-related costs. This will enable new staff to utilize the specialized curriculum that Thornton Creek staff uses in our program.

#### **Facility support**

- **Additional boys and girls bathroom facilities to accommodate the increased population.** Current restrooms were designed for a K-2 population of much smaller numbers and are already over-taxed and unsanitary.
- **Expanded art, PE, and library space.** Art, library, and PE are critical components of our program relating to the sense of community we build and the expeditionary learning at our core.
- **Additional lockers for 180 students (all 8 new/existing portables).** We already don't have enough lockers for the current school population. Students need a place to store their school supplies and personal belongings.
- **Additional space for the Kids' Time before- and after-school program.** Space for before- and after-school care is already insufficient, with long wait lists for our families.
- **More custodial time.** We need an increased allocation in custodial time as there will be more space to maintain over the coming years.

Also, the district must make a budget allocation for each portable for:

- portable classroom water
- new projection screens and teacher presentation equipment
- security shades
- teacher and student computers
- teacher presentation station carts
- new bulletin and dry erase boards for each portable
- reasonable furniture for student/teacher use, **not** unwanted surplus leftovers
- furniture for tabletop display of student art, science, and expedition work
- lockers or a shed roof addition for all portables for out-of-classroom storage of student belongings
- painting the interior and exterior of the portables
- shed roofs over ramps to protect students in rainy weather (See the BTA project at TC on our oldest portable.)

Additionally, if the decision is made to place even more portables at TC, any new portable needs to be delivered and set on its foundation during the winter. Occupancy work should be completed by the early summer with **occupancy permits by August 10/15 to allow teachers and parents classroom setup and prep time.**

#### **Long term solutions: Educational adequacy and service area planning**

While we strongly believe we can no longer play a role in the short term portable solution, we absolutely can participate in a long term solution that may help ease enrollment pressure in our region. To address overall north-end capacity issues, we strongly encourage the district to identify new elementary AND middle school locations. We do not believe waiting almost another decade for the construction planned in the next capital levy is a responsible approach. We are willing to work with the district to identify such space, which may include district-owned leased space (such as Cedar Park) or leasable space (such as at Magnuson Park). We are available to explore the options for a suitable, right-sized facility for Thornton Creek. Finally, we would participate in the creation of an additional alternative program, for which demand is evidenced by the waitlists at Thornton Creek, Salmon Bay, and TOPS.

### **About our geozone and student assignment**

We wish to address the district's idea of potentially resizing the geographic zones of option schools to help with capacity management and overcrowding. Thornton Creek was created by the SPS School Board as a **regional resource** for SPS families, not as an attendance area or neighborhood school. TC has served the families of north and northeast Seattle for many years. ***The geo zone should remain as it is currently drawn so that Thornton Creek remains a regional resource and does not gradually become a neighborhood school.***

We would like to make the point that option schools cannot be used as retention ponds for overflow from neighborhood schools. Furthermore, this approach obscures overcrowding problems; Thornton Creek is not listed as an over-capacity school because of the "Option" designation. All families who are part of an alternative school need to specifically select that program in order for the program to have 100% buy-in on the part of participating families. If the district assigns families to an alternative program who did not choose the program, then it becomes a neighborhood school by default and weakens the program itself. A weakened program would translate into empty portables.

If we grow beyond what our program and facility can handle, we will need all the support we can get to attempt to protect as many traces as possible of our program integrity. To that end we need the district's support to ensure that every family at Thornton Creek is in complete support of our program. This means that ***for 2012 open enrollment and beyond, Enrollment Services must expect/require parents to visit an option school prior to requesting enrollment.*** We suggest that parent be required to present an "I visited XXXX Option School" certificate as a step in the open enrollment process. Enrollment Services should no longer assign students to an open seat at an option school without receiving the notice of a prior visit to the school.

We respectfully ask the board and the district to protect this alternative program so we can continue to attract as many families as possible and remain a strong asset to Seattle Public Schools.

### **Additional Background**

#### **Accurate and consistent capacity and enrollment data for planning**

In order to effectively communicate the position that the Thornton Creek community has taken on program expansion, we need to establish a common understanding about how capacity is calculated at our building.

We agree that there can be only one capacity number for each building. However, we strongly recommend that the district use a multiplier for enrollment to be able to show more accurate utilization numbers with regard to special education. For example, Thornton Creek is listed in the latest district numbers as having 44 extra spaces. However, we have three classrooms that are fully allocated to a 4b special education program with a maximum of 8 students. Those 4(b) students should get a 3x multiplier for capacity purposes as each student is the equivalent of 3 in a gen ed class. If the capacity calculation is made this way, then it shows that TC is **over** by 4 spaces not under by 44.

Throughout this position paper we refer to capacity as determined by classroom utilization (using the 3x multiplier) as "effective school population" and for clarity in discussing such topics as percentage of students housed in portables, we refer to "actual student population," which is the physical number of kids in the building.

Also we noticed that the district projections clearly haven't been updated. In multiple cases for the NE, this year's enrollment is either over or close to the 2015 projections. In particular, at Thornton Creek, the 2015 projection is listed as 359 but the 2011 **actual** is **372**.

### Critical characteristics of an alternative school

The accepted definitions of Seattle alternative schools were outlined by the *Final Report of the Alternative Education Committee, An Advisory Committee to the Seattle School Board, June 30, 2005*, and Seattle School Board Policy C54.00 on Alternative Education, June 21, 2006. As that report and the subsequent board policy noted, there are certain key characteristics that are critical to the definition of an alternative school that are directly affected by current expansion plans:

- **"Informed Choice:** Choice is the fundamental 'best practice' of alternative education. Students, staff and the principal must be at an alternative school voluntarily because of the school's distinct mission, core values, and practices. Choosing an alternative school solely because it is the family's neighborhood school or for reasons other than the school's distinct mission, core values, and practices does not constitute choice in our meaning of the word.

Seattle Public Schools is dedicated to ensuring that all students are offered an opportunity to attend alternative schools, including those students who need bilingual or special education services. Students who need specialized services may attend alternative schools through a slightly different enrollment process, but it is still assumed that a student and his/her family are making an informed choice about attending the school.

The basic idea of school choice continues to surface in public education as one way to increase educational effectiveness by responding differentially to diverse student needs and interests, enhance students' interest in education and commitment to their schools, and contribute to the vitality and democratic structure of public education.

#### **Indicators:**

- Students and families are allowed to choose the school.
- Students and families understand, share and support the school's philosophy and values."

As mentioned above, if alternative programs such as Thornton Creek are used as tools to manage overflow in student population, then the district is violating one of the central tenants of the Alternative Education Policy.

- **Small schools:** One of "The 12 Key Elements of the Best Practices of Alternative Education" in the report as accepted by the Board is that "**alternative schools should be small by design to preserve personalized environments and to serve the mission of the school.**" One of the indicators is that "there is an emphasis on community-building activities to develop interconnectedness and interdependence." It is increasingly difficult to maintain the necessary level of community-building activities in a facility that doesn't have sufficient space for our entire school to gather together.

As the 2005 Alternative Education Committee Final Report noted, a recent report of the Center for Reinventing Public Education (Roza, M. et al., 2005) compared the cost per student for students in small schools with students in large schools. The results show that when educational services from central budgets are combined with educational spending, the cost per student in small high schools is not universally higher than the cost in large schools.

One of the recommendations to the Board in the 2005 report was that "school size should be linked to preserving personalized environments and to meeting the school's mission."

And the June 15, 2007 *Final Report from the Alternative Education Committee: A Community Advisory Committee to the Chief Academic Officer, Seattle School District* said, "A small school community is integral to and actualizes the philosophy, mission, core values and practices of an alternative school. The implementation and embodiment of the preceding eleven characteristics are dependent on small schools as defined in best practice for personalized schooling and alternative education." ***The indicator of this is that the "school***

**community is small by design.** Learning and the school environment are relationship-centered and personalized by design. "

- **Staff should be sufficiently trained in the particular alternative model:** The 2007 *Final Report from the Alternative Education Committee* said: "The mission and objectives of an alternative school go beyond simply academic achievement. An alternative school has a coherent focus, philosophy of education and core values about meeting the intellectual, social, emotional and developmental needs of each child.

#### **Information from the state auditor's report on Washington public schools regarding portables**

The Washington State Auditor's report concludes that portables have higher long-term costs and last only one third to one half as long as permanent school buildings. There are also other less visible costs such as:

1. **Portables place a hidden financial burden on school common areas** which are typically built only to service the existing classrooms in the permanent school. These include overcrowding of halls, libraries, offices, resource centers, computer labs, cafeterias, kitchens, gymnasiums, auditoriums, restrooms and student lockers.
2. **Portables are much more expensive to heat and cool** because they have a much higher exterior surface area to volume ratio. According to the Auditor's Report, page 21, ***"The most efficient portables cost about 2.5 times the national average to heat, cool, and light compared to permanent school buildings."***
3. **Portables are much noisier than regular classrooms** in part due to acoustical problems inherent in the room materials and design and in part due to excessive noise from the portable's heating and ventilation systems. Excessive noise in turn can significantly impair student learning.
4. **Portables also present significant health problems for children and teachers** including headaches, nausea, asthma attacks, chronic sinus infections, colds and other respiratory problems. The underlying cause of these problems is believed to be due to excessive out-gassing of formaldehyde and other aromatic hydrocarbons. (For example, see report of tests conducted by the California Environmental Protection Agency as well as a report by the Center for Environmental Health at the Massachusetts State Department of Health).