

Correspondence



RABBIT CREEK COMMUNITY COUNCIL (RCCC)
A Forum for Respectful Communication & Community Relations



1057 West Fireweed Lane, Suite 100 / Anchorage, AK 99503

November 18, 2024

Dear Anchorage School Board Members and Superintendent Bryantt –

The Rabbit Creek Community Council (RCCC) strongly supports keeping Bear Valley Elementary School open and voted to draft this letter of support at our November 14, 2024, meeting by a vote of 25 ayes, zero nays, and 2 abstained. This vital institution not only meets the district's stated priorities for school evaluations but also demonstrates exceptional academic achievement and value to our community. The community has a long-term need for Bear Valley school, given transportation constraints and future land use patterns. These and other factors justify keeping Bear Valley off the school closure list as detailed below.

Building Utilization

Bear Valley's utilization rate, inaccurately reported at 69%, excludes its growing preschool program, which increases the rate to over 70% this year and has the potential to exceed 80% next school year. Additionally, Bear Valley provides before/after school and summer programming, serving over 100 children, with rental revenue contributing approximately \$15,000 annually to the district. These programs would not be available to Bear Valley students forced to attend other schools, as programs at receiving schools are either at capacity with long waiting lists or do not exist. These losses in childcare from preschool through 6th grade would exacerbate a municipality-wide shortage in childcare options for working parents.

Despite district-wide enrollment declines, Bear Valley's enrollment has remained relatively stable, with losses in 2024 attributed to the transfer of the 6th grade to Goldenview Middle School.

Academic Excellence

Academic performance, ranked as a top community priority based on administration survey results, is glaringly absent from the closure rubric. Bear Valley has the highest academic achievement of any Anchorage School District (ASD) public school: 66% of Bear Valley students achieved high proficiency in 2023 and only 11% were non-proficient, compared to the ASD averages of 35% highly proficient and 35% non-proficient.

Bear Valley has strong teacher retention and a 0% suspension rate, aligning with state and district goals for educational excellence. Bear Valley has a fulltime specialist in PE and Music, no combined classes, and half-time art and health programs that are on a 2-week rotation reducing

their need to travel between schools in a single school day. Its diverse programs and extracurricular offerings such as Choir, Battle of the Books, Art Club, Spanish, Cross Country, Spelling Club, STEM Night and Science Fair, Multicultural Night, Filipino Dance Club, tennis club, school-based Girl Scout Troop #23082, additional music and additional sports clubs enrich student experiences. **Unlike the slated receiving schools (O'Malley, Rabbit Creek, and Huffman), Bear Valley is the only school that offers before school care.** Receiving schools only offer after school programs, all of which are full and have extensive waitlists, meaning they could not accommodate any Bear Valley students.

Incorrect Data and Impact

The district's utilization metrics fail to account for Bear Valley's actual and potential growth, including a waitlist of 43 students this year. Furthermore, ASD's reliance on birth rates as the sole predictor for future enrollment does not reflect the steady influx of young families drawn to Bear Valley's vibrant community and record of excellent academic achievement. In terms of future housing, the largest undeveloped residential tracts in the Anchorage Bowl are in the Bear Valley-Golden View Drive-Potter Valley area. Given the capacity for many new homes in this area, Bear Valley is the wrong school for permanent closure. Furthermore, the proposed redistribution of students would fill receiving schools to near-capacities of 96 to 98%, leaving little room for the infill housing development that the Municipality is promoting, in conjunction with the subdivisions currently being developed in our RCCC area.

Transportation

The district's assumption that transportation for displaced Bear Valley students can occur without significant impact is unrealistic. Bear Valley families already face delays during the winter months due to challenging conditions; longer commutes to more distant schools will only exacerbate these issues. The extended bus routes proposed by ASD would lead to earlier mornings, later evenings, increased fatigue, and less time for homework or family activities, all of which would negatively affect student learning and well-being. In winter, the extended bus routes will be dangerous: more students will be riding down the dangerous curves and steep grades on DeArmoun and Rabbit Creek roads. The extended routes will be highly susceptible to long delays because of the steepness and maintenance challenges of Hillside roads. During the 2023 school year the Hillside area experienced 32 days (18% of the school year) of significant snowfall (significance defined as greater than 2 inches of snow, NOAA Station USC00500281 <https://www.ncei.noaa.gov/cdo-web/>).

The ASD busing plan also ignores the costly transportation burdens to parents and taxpayers. Given that extended bus routes may take 45 minutes (counting bus stop waiting), many parents will drive their students to school. The receiving schools will have exacerbated parking and traffic problems that will be expensive to solve. In addition, increased traffic is bad for the entire community in numerous ways: safety, air quality, road maintenance, more asphalt for road lanes and parking lots, and lost productivity for students and parents. Municipal land use and transportation plans call for reducing vehicle miles traveled.

Opportunity to Expand School Uses Rather than Close Schools

While the ASD is in a budget shortfall, we understand that closure of Bear Valley and other schools across the Municipality will not significantly decrease that shortfall. Thus, we suggest ASD instead look for ways to increase utilization of all our schools. Specifically, ASD should work with the proponents of Project Anchorage to ensure their proposed projects include expanded school uses. Opportunities for these existing facilities to support a revitalized Community Schools program, preschool and before/after school childcare programs at more schools, and modernized and expanded uses of school swimming pools, among other uses, should receive higher priority, and would be less expensive than building new infrastructure. Such programs would also build community and neighborhood cohesiveness as well as economically help solve the tremendous childcare deficit that plagues our city. Some long-term rental revenue for ASD could also be realized.

In sum, Bear Valley is an essential asset to our community and is ASD's highest performing school. Closure would displace students, erode community trust, and undermine academic outcomes district-wide. We urge you to reconsider the recommendation of the administration and use Bear Valley as an example to help make all neighborhood schools thrive.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Ann Rappoport, Co-chair



John Riley, Co-chair