

Submission to:
Edmonton Catholic
Schools District

Edmonton

**Community Impact
Statement:
St. Basil School Closure**

January 17, 2022

COMMUNITY IMPACT STATEMENT: ST. BASIL SCHOOL CLOSURE

Background

On November 24, 2021, the Board of Trustees of the Edmonton Catholic School District (ECSD) voted to begin the process of closing St. Basil Elementary Junior High School at 11510-102 Street in the Spruce Avenue Neighbourhood. St. Basil is not a designated community school for the Spruce Avenue neighbourhood or any other neighbourhood. It is used as a specialized, city-wide program in Polish bilingual education and its students come from all over the City. The City of Edmonton (the "City") received a notice of the proposed closure and an invitation to submit a Community Impact Statement on November 24, 2021 by way of a letter from ECSD Board Chair Sandra Palazzo to Mayor Amareet Sohi.

This is the second Community Impact Statement the City of Edmonton has prepared for St. Basil Elementary Junior High School. On December 17, 2019 the Board of Trustees of ECSD voted to consider closing this school. Then, as now, St. Basil was not a designated school for the surrounding community. At the time, in addition to the Polish bilingual program, it also offered a second specialized, city-wide program: the Jean-Forest Leadership Academy for Grades 7, 8 and 9. The City submitted a Community Impact Statement on January 20, 2020 identifying two significant community impacts:

- The loss of community access to gymnasium bookings under the Joint Use Agreement - Facilities;
- The loss of St. Basil as a hub and gathering place for the Polish Community.

In 2020, the Board voted to relocate the Jean-Forest Leadership Academy to another District school but to keep the Polish bilingual program at St. Basil. That resulted in a drop in enrollment of approximately 25 per cent. Since then, enrollment in the Polish bilingual program has continued to decline to 210 students.

The most recent notice of closure, received November 24, 2021, states that the motion to consider closure will be subject to measures intended to address the two major impacts that the City identified in 2019. If the school is closed, ECSD will continue to offer the gymnasium for community access under the Joint Use Agreement and it will continue to rent space to the Polish cultural group.

Because the City submitted a Community Impact Statement for this school two years ago and because this closure addresses the City's two major concerns, this statement will provide a more concise brief overview of the issues.

The City of Edmonton understands that the proposed discontinuation of the Polish bilingual program and the need for the children to move to a new school are of paramount importance to the student-families of St. Basil. However, as stated in the previous [Community Impact Statement](#), the City of Edmonton respects the autonomy of ECSD to make decisions about what specialized programs it will and will not offer and refrains from comment on the impact of this closure on the educational experience. The purpose of this document is not to make a recommendation about whether to close this school or not — its purpose is to identify certain community impacts and their relevance to the City's strategic goals in the hope that this perspective will assist the Board of Trustees of Edmonton Catholic schools as they grapple with a very difficult decision.

CITY OF EDMONTON PLANS AND STRATEGIES

The following City strategies and policies are relevant to assessing the community impact of the possible closure of St. Basil school.

The City Plan

Edmonton City Council approved the City Plan in 2020. The City Plan combines a Municipal Development Plan and a Transportation Master Plan, and includes strategic direction in environmental planning, social planning and economic development. It sets strategic direction for the way Edmonton grows, its mobility systems, open spaces, employment and social networks, generally touching on most aspects of life in Edmonton.

The "Five Big City Moves" are an invitation for Edmontonians to work together to build a great city. Among those aspirational goals is a vision of Edmonton as a Community of Communities.

A Community of Communities: A Community Of Communities is about making big city life feel less anonymous and more personal. It's about welcoming new residents and developing housing, recreation, schools and employment in all of our districts that can be better accessed through all forms of transportation.

Embedded in this vision is the aspirational goal that Edmontonians will have the choice to live in a "15-minute District" where they can meet most of their daily needs without having to travel far.

If St. Basil is closed, families of current students will be offered the opportunity to enroll their children in a designated community school. These families will also have access to the full range of educational opportunities available to any student-family in Edmonton, including transferring to one of the other school districts or enrolling their children in another city-wide program (subject to eligibility). To the extent that St. Basil families choose their local school, this could in some cases help to contribute to The City Plan vision of a Community of Communities. However, it must also be noted that while St. Basil School is not the designated community school

for Spruce Avenue, the use of this building by students, families and staff brings vitality and interest to the neighbourhood and the closure of the school may be felt as a loss by some neighbours.

BREATHE and Open Spaces

BREATHE: Edmonton’s Green Network Strategy examines how open space in the city functions as an integrated network of public spaces that provide real, measurable value to Edmontonians. Open spaces contribute to human health and wellness, improve the urban environment, and provide places for people to come together. These contributions are the central themes of the Green Network Strategy and provide the organizing framework for assessing open space.

St. Basil school sits on a 1.99 hectare parcel of land that includes the school building and a portion of the surrounding neighbourhood park as shown on the map below.



In mature neighbourhoods like Spruce Avenue, school sites typically function as large open spaces for various groups and individuals. Although the future use of the site is undetermined, the open space surrounding the school building will continue to be available for community use.

Community Hubs

In the previous closure process which commenced in 2019, community members contacted City Councillors and City Administration directly with concerns about the school closure’s effect on the Polish community in the area. One of their concerns is that the Polish Bilingual Program at St. Basil is an important part of a long-standing and thriving Polish community hub. In the Community Hubs Framework, the City has defined community hubs as

“an accessible amenity encouraging social gatherings that strengthen citizens’ sense of place and connectedness and that appeals to, and brings together, diverse groups of community members”. Community hubs can help build social capital, reduce isolation and create vibrancy in neighbourhoods, making them accessible, inclusive and welcoming spaces and places for individuals, families and community groups.

ECSD is to be commended for its commitment to the community by allowing these uses to continue in St. Basil. However, we must also acknowledge the view (expressed in 2019) that the absence of the Polish bilingual program would, in itself, detract from the value of this area as a hub for the Polish community of Edmonton.

Future Uses of St. Basil School

Under the longstanding agreement known as Joint Use Agreement - Facilities, the City of Edmonton and Edmonton’s publicly funded school authorities share recreational space. Students have access to City fields, pools, rinks and other recreational facilities and in exchange, community groups can book school gyms for things like indoor soccer practice or community basketball leagues. In addition, ECSD often makes school space available for rent by a variety of other community groups. As stated in our previous Community Impact Statement, St. Basil is well used by community groups, particularly those connected with Edmonton’s Polish Community. In this closure, ECSD has publicly committed to allowing these uses to continue. This goes a long way to mitigate the impact of this school closure on the community and speaks to ECSD’s commitment to the principles of the Joint Use Agreement - Facilities.

If St. Basil is closed, ECSD intends to continue to use part of the building for administrative space and will make space available to community groups. ECSD has offered to extend these community uses, in good faith, as a way of mitigating the community impact of closure. However, the decision about how long to continue community use of St. Basil rests solely with ECSD, as would decisions to sell or repurpose the site.

CONCLUSION

The City of Edmonton appreciates ECSD’s decision to continue to allow St. Basil to be used for Joint Use and other community users as a way of mitigating community impacts of closure and thanks the Board of Trustees for their consideration of this Community Impact Statement.