

June 12, 2025\*

Dear Tacoma School Board,

I am unable to attend the board meeting tonight, so I am writing a letter to express my concerns about the cuts to Geiger Montessori Elementary, which my two children attend.

My son started there when he was 3, my daughter, 4. We are extremely fortunate to have two public Montessoris in Tacoma, two of just 500 in the country. It's the only pedagogical method my kids have ever known, and they have thrived in the environment, academically and socially.

I am well aware that our debt is significant and cuts are necessary. The entire district is entering a time of sacrifice; we are all losing essential educators in our buildings. This is a painful challenge we're facing, especially because we have never needed our paraeducators more. Many teachers have told me they've seen an uptick in behavioral issues in the classroom in the last decade, and paraeducators – in both the classrooms and the halls – allow classrooms across the district to function and serve their primary purpose of educating our children. I volunteer in both of my children's classrooms weekly, and see this in action every week.

ESPs are not just helpful at a Montessori school, though. They are truly essential. Montessori cannot function as an educational method without an assisting teacher in the classroom. If we lose half our ESPs, we will become a Montessori only in name, for I can't see how it will be possible for one teacher to teach three grades at once. In my son's class, his beloved ESP runs his math group. As a first grader who is advanced in math, he is able to do math with the second and third graders – something he would not be able to do in a traditional school. If we lose our ESP, we lose that math group – how will one teacher guide students through math in first, second, and third grade?

Given that this is a time of sacrifice, some might argue that it's a luxury to have a Montessori option at all. But so many Tacoma citizens have worked incredibly hard to build and grow these schools, and we owe it to them – not to mention our children – to keep alive what they've built with their passion and sweat equity.

Before Geiger was turned into a Montessori, it was suffering from low enrollment. Now, Geiger is a stand-out educational institution with one of the highest enrollments in the city. The student population at Geiger is diverse, with more than 40 percent from low-income families. Its strong academic performance is a testament to the school's effective strategies for supporting students with diverse backgrounds.

Furthermore, turning these schools into Montessoris not only revitalized the schools themselves, but also the neighborhoods in which they reside. Many have bought and rented homes in both areas in order to send their students to a Montessori school. These Montessori institutions have become truly integral to these neighborhoods. Once again, if we lose these ESPs, we will be Montessori only in name. And will we run the risk of losing our Montessori accreditation? I am concerned about this as well.

Geiger's steady enrollment is due, in part, to its reputation for being welcoming to students who struggle in more traditional educational settings. My son is one of those students, and I am thankful everyday that he has a classroom environment where he can learn to manage his challenges with support, and without shame. Volunteering in my children's classrooms, I have gotten to know students who transferred to Geiger from more traditional schools. At the beginning of their transitions, they were struggling, having violent meltdowns that posed danger to other students, trying to escape school, hiding and shutting down when overwhelmed. They are now thriving among their peers. One student shoved a stack of books onto my daughter's neck during a meltdown; now, at the end of the school year, they are good friends. This kind of growth in the classroom is only possible with the support of an ESP and the benefits of the Montessori method.

Geiger has a strong community. We are prepared to make sacrifices, and to fill in the gaps where we can. We already do. In my son's class, a parent volunteers every day of the week. I am fortunate enough to have the flexibility to be one of those parents. But most don't have this flexibility, and we cannot rely on parents alone to fill in where the district does not provide.

I will end with saying that we need more transparency in the budget plans. As a community, we should know how exactly we got into this level of debt that is going to be affecting our families so dramatically, and have full clarity on where spending will be allocated going forward. I've heard and read so many different explanations for why we got here; I think seeing the numbers would help us to understand the full story.

Thank you so much for your time.

Respectfully,

Simone Gorrindo

*\*Public comment submitted past deadline for June 12<sup>th</sup> meeting; requested to be included on June 26<sup>th</sup> meeting.*