March 28, 2014

Ed Murray, Mayor
City of Seattle
600 4th Ave, Seattle, WA
7th Floor
Seattle, WA 98104

Jose Banda, Superintendent
Office of the Superintendent
Seattle Public Schools
MS: 32-150
P.O. Box 34165
Seattle WA  98124-1165

Re:  Downtown School—Opportunity to Acquire Free Land and Building

Dear Mayor Murray and Superintendent Banda:

We write in support of a downtown school generally, but in particular to ensure you are aware of a rare opportunity to acquire, at no cost, a suitable building and land in the heart of Downtown Seattle. The federal government is disposing of the Federal Reserve building on the west side of 2nd Avenue between Spring and Madison streets. Under federal law, the government will convey the building and land for free to a public entity for public use, which includes an education use. This presents an exciting opportunity to address a significant educational need for Seattle’s burgeoning population of downtown children for nothing more than the price of cleanup and renovation.

The downtown population of school-aged children is booming and needs a school. In 2001, 110 children were born to downtown families west of I-5. By 2012 that figure had climbed to 265. The trend is expected to continue; the number of downtown households is projected to increase by 10 percent in the next five years. Downtown K-12 student enrollment in SPS grew from 482 students in 2007 to 598 today, a nearly 25 percent increase. Downtown
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enrollment is increasing faster than the district as a whole, surpassing even previous high growth estimates. The most recent estimate predicts that SPS’s downtown K-8 population will likely surpass 500 students by 2015. This is placing pressure on the capacity of surrounding schools, as demonstrated in the recent re-mapping exercise. Yet the Downtown neighborhood remains the largest and most populous neighborhood in Seattle without a public school.

This downtown population boom is no surprise; decades of City planning and zoning, combined with the efforts of developers, retailers, affordable housing providers, musicians, restaurateurs, employers, and residents, have made downtown a vibrant place to live and an attractive option for families. A downtown public school is the logical next step.

SPS is aware of the need for a downtown school, which is why it included $5M for planning in the most recent levy. The possibility of acquiring the Federal Reserve building at no cost warrants immediate review by the district and city. We strongly urge your joint exploration of this exciting opportunity.

The existing structure contains 90,000 square feet—enough to meet the SPS specification for more than 550 students. The site is ideally situated to take advantage of downtown educational opportunities, such as the Central Library (two blocks away), Soundbridge at Benaroya (only 2.5 blocks away), and the Seattle Art Museum (two blocks away). The existing structure has plenty of roof space (and plenty of capacity under the zoned height limits) to develop a rooftop playground, similar to the successful new space atop the Northwest School’s recent expansion on Capitol Hill. The site has good transportation access. Not only is it within walking distance of thousands of downtown homes, but it is well-served by public transit.

And if that weren’t enough, the building even looks like a school.

While the structure will require some cleanup and improvements to make it suitable for use as a school, the opportunity to acquire a parcel of land, already improved with an institutional building, would likely greatly reduce total project costs. This is an opportunity for SPS to get in front of a demographic trend and meet the growing demand for a public school downtown. We encourage you to explore the potential of the Federal Reserve building. The undersigned individuals and groups are very excited about the possibility of a downtown school, and we pledge to work with you to make this opportunity a reality.
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Sincerely,

Downtown Seattle Families  Downtown Seattle Association
Chinatown International District BIA  Downtown Seattle Residents Council
Downtown District Council  Pioneer Square Residents Council
Alliance for Pioneer Square  Belltown Moms

cc:  Seattle School Board
     Seattle City Council
     George Norcross, GSA