



ADVISORY NEIGHBORHOOD COMMISSION 3E

TENLEYTOWN AMERICAN UNIVERSITY PARK FRIENDSHIP HEIGHTS
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May 14, 2014

BY E-MAIL

Mayor Vincent Gray and
Members of the Council of
The District of Columbia
Wilson Building,
Washington, DC

Letter Resolution Regarding School Boundary Review

Dear Officials:

We write to express our serious concern with the Student Assignment and School Boundaries Review Process (“Boundary Review”) and all of the options thus far proposed during the process.¹ Specifically, we (1) oppose the lottery proposals, Options “A” and “C,” which go well beyond the stated purpose of the Boundary Review, and ask that the current Mayor take no action on the basis of the Boundary Review once completed (2) call for the development, on an urgent basis, of a comprehensive plan to fix DC’s matter-of-right schools; and (3) recommend that after this plan has been developed, the new Mayor and the Council reinitiate a boundary review process that is transparent, based on sound analysis and data, and in which parents have ample opportunity to participate.

The lottery proposals and recent statements by the Deputy Mayor for Education (DME) and others in connect with the Boundary Review suggest DC’s school leaders have lost the confidence they once evinced that DC can ensure quality matter-of-right schools for every child. We – and we believe the majority of city residents – have not abandoned that goal. DC can and must rededicate itself to ensuring good matter-of-right schools for every child. DC must likewise reasonably ensure that every school’s enrollment is appropriate.

WHEREAS

¹ See generally <http://1.usa.gov/1iYjzEr> (summarizing three options proposed by DME).

The Boundary Review Evinces Loss Of Confidence In Matter-Of-Right Neighborhood Schools, And Bad Policy Is The Result

An implicit sense that DCPS cannot create sound matter-of-right schools for all DC children infected the Boundary Review. The lottery proposals that comprise two thirds of the options DME presented would do no more than randomize access to schools of disparate quality. This contravenes DCPS' stated purpose

to ensure that every student attends a great school, and that every school meets high standards in all areas that affect student achievement.

Drawing lots for good and bad schools will not “ensure that every student attends a great school.” Rather, in many instances, it would merely push students from one bad school to another one farther away. It would add traffic to a city already overburdened with traffic. It would complicate the already-hard lives of many single parent and dual-working parent families. And it would destroy neighborhood-school relationships that help make many great schools great.

The notion that a sound neighborhood school should be available to all children is bedrock in DC. That many students in parts of the city attend non-neighborhood charter schools shows that we have not done enough to help all matter-of-right neighborhood schools be worthy of that goal, not that the goal is unreachable.

The lottery proposals are, thus, bad public policy. Worse, they are bad public policy sprung on a public that expected something else. We believe most parents in DC understood the Boundary Review to be just that – a review of (matter-of-right) school boundaries to ensure appropriate enrollment levels. Both the name and stated goals of the Boundary Review support such an understanding. Likewise, the Boundary Review emerged shortly after Council Member Mary Cheh introduced a bill seeking such a review to address overcrowding in matter-of-right schools. Finally, much of the process that led to the lottery options occurred behind closed doors, again blurring the actual nature of the Boundary Review until late in the process.

The Boundary Review's Work On Reviewing Boundaries Has Been Inadequate

In light of the mission creep that by all appearances has dominated the Boundary Review, the Boundary Review has failed at what should have been its essential purpose, providing reasonable assurance that neighborhood schools will not be over-enrolled and that families are redistricted on an appropriate basis.

Overcrowding has long been a concern for this ANC. Two ANC 3E members served on the School Improvement Team for the (initial) expansion of Janney Elementary School. In May 2009, a DC official told SIT members that DCPS expected *no* growth in Janney's in-bound enrollment, then about 480 in a school designed for many less. Accordingly, she stated, Janney would be built for 480 students.

Based on rough calculations about likely population growth and other trends, we calculated that Janney's enrollment could easily grow by 100 students. We thus asked then-Chancellor Rhee to revisit the no growth estimate and to detail how DCPS would respond to any growth, whether by expanding Janney further, redistricting, or both.²

We received no formal response. DC agreed, however, to build Janney to accommodate 525 students rather than 480. The enlarged school was oversubscribed on the day it opened. Its enrollment now exceeds 625.

Fortunately, money was found to expand Janney yet again, and in December 2013 we supported a proposal to expand Janney to a capacity of 675 students.

DC never provided demographic data and analysis to support projections for Janney's growth. Had the ANC and SIT merely accepted DC's initial pronouncement that Janney should be built for 480 students, *and* had not money been available to further expand Janney this year, the school likely would now be at nearly 150% of capacity, with no apparent end in sight.

DME has provisionally recommended transfer of about 20 students currently-enrolled in the public school system out of Janney's boundaries if it does not subject elementary schools to mandatory lotteries. As of May 6, 2014, paralleling the experience with the Janney modernization, DME has released no demographic analyses or underlying data to support this number of transferees. We question why DME would propose redistricting this number of families. Janney will be at or near capacity when its follow-on renovation is completed. The school's enrollment has grown rapidly in recent years *despite* negligible housing growth in the neighborhood. With several potential development projects, Tenleytown may yet add hundreds of housing units over the next few years. Moreover, DME proposes to initiate a 10% out-of-bounds set aside at a school that, with few exceptions³, has been closed to non-sibling out-of-bounds students for the last 2 years.

Families that DME would move out of their preferred school's boundaries view such a move as presenting profound consequences, so the process and data must be clear and compelling.

Common sense – and our experience trying to right-size Janney to date⁴ -- show that the Boundary Review's work setting boundaries has been inadequate. Given the stakes, parents deserve to feel confident that neither too many nor too few students will be moved from schools their children currently attend. Likewise, they deserve to feel confident that of the possible scenarios for redistricting

² See http://anc3e.org/docs/resolutions/2009/09-05-19_ANC3E_Letter_Resolution.pdf

³ Such exceptions include referrals of special needs students from DC's early intervention program.

⁴ Although ANC 3E members have not been directly involved in the modernization processes for Murch or Hearst Elementary Schools, some students of which also live within our boundaries, the general arguments herein apply with equal force to those schools.

for a given school, DME has selected the most reasonable one. The Boundary Review has not, and given DME's desire to issue a report in June, cannot provide such confidence.⁵

RESOLVED

In light of the foregoing, ANC 3E respectfully makes the following recommendations:

Let the Boundary Review Conclude, But Take No Action Based On It

For all the reasons above, the Mayor, the next Mayor, and the Council should not redraw school boundaries based on the Boundary Review alone.

Develop and Implement A Comprehensive Plan To Fix Our Matter-Of-Right Neighborhood Schools

As soon as the new Mayor takes office, the Mayor, in consultation with the Council, should begin to develop a "Marshall Plan" to ensure that all students have a high-quality matter-of-right school in their neighborhood. The Mayor and the Mayor's appointees should demonstrate the same urgency and high expectations for matter-of-right schools that seemingly obtained only a few years ago. The Mayor's Marshall Plan should build on the successes of past reforms, discard or improve aspects of those reforms which have not worked or worked as well as expected, and go as far beyond those reforms as is necessary to achieve the goal of great schools for all.

The Mayor and Council should consider appointing a blue ribbon panel to review DC schools' successes⁶ and failures to date, and to issue a set of recommendations for comprehensive reform that can inform the Marshall Plan. The task of repairing Washington, DC's schools is important enough that the Mayor should be able to attract any educational expert in the United States. Ideally, the Mayor would appoint the best minds from across the ideological spectrum to such a panel, with the only prerequisite that every panel member demonstrate a commitment to reaching across that spectrum to develop consensus recommendations.

Establish A Data-Driven, Transparent Redistricting Process

The new Mayor should begin the process of redistricting anew no sooner than the Mayor has finalized and begun to implement the education Marshall Plan we advocate above. No child should be transferred to a school that is manifestly worse than the school he or she currently attends. At the same time, many of our local schools are crowded and will become increasingly so. Although an educational reform plan should come first, the task of redistricting must therefore, like the task of fixing our schools, be attended to with urgency.

⁵ DME did not even propose boundary changes until April 2014, even though the Boundary Review began in October 2013. Likewise, DME has not presented alternative scenarios for redistricting for a given school assuming no lotteries are implemented.

⁶ Alice Deal Middle School and Wilson High School should be among such a commission's case studies of success. Students from within our ANC's jurisdiction have increasingly chosen to attend these schools based on perceptions of their rising quality. We believe that several factors, including leadership, programming, and modernization, drive these perceptions (perceptions that we think are correct), and that these factors, at least to a degree, should be replicable elsewhere.

As we have noted, redistricting is a vital, high-stakes endeavor. The renewed redistricting process must incorporate detailed demographic data and analysis, and this material should be shared with the public on an ongoing basis from day one. Parents should have ample opportunity to question and test assumptions and models. Likewise, parents should have ample opportunity to explore and discuss different scenarios for redistricting for a given school. We expect such a process should last at least six months.

* * *

ANC 3E adopted this letter resolution by a vote of 4-0-1 at a properly-noticed public meeting held on May 8, 2014. Commissioners Bender, Frumin, Quinn, Serebin, and Tinker were in attendance.

ANC 3E

By Jonathan Bender, Vice-Chair