

ARLINGTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS
Work Session on Middle School Boundaries
September 12, 2017

Item C-1-a

The Arlington School Board convened on Tuesday, September 12, 2017, at 7:04 PM at 1426 North Quincy Street, Arlington, Virginia.

Present were:

Barbara Kanninen, Chair
Reid Goldstein, Vice Chair
James Lander, Member
Tannia Talento, Member
Nancy Van Doren, Member
Melanie Elliott, Clerk of the Board

Also present were:

Dr. Patrick K. Murphy, Superintendent
John Chadwick, Assistant Superintendent, Facilities and Operations
Linda Erdos, Assistant Superintendent, School and Community Relations
Dr. Tara Natrass, Assistant Superintendent, Instruction
Lisa Stengle, Director, Planning and Evaluation
Dr. Sarah Johnson, Integrated Planning Person
Lionel White, Director, Facilities Planner
Tyrone Byrd, Director, Secondary Education
Zach Larnard, Planner
Meg Tuccillo, Planner

1. Opening Remarks and Objectives

Dr. Kanninen called the meeting to order and confirmed the purpose of the meeting was to plan for the upcoming middle school boundary process. She then briefly reviewed the agenda.

Ms. Stengle shared the objectives of the work session which were to gather feedback on the proposed methodology and other considerations to prepare for the middle school boundary engagement process, and to identify issues to include as part of the community engagement process. After reviewing how APS addresses enrollment growth, she confirmed plans for a middle school at the Stratford site and reviewed initiatives in the 2017-18 Action plan.

2. Why change middle school boundaries

Boundary changes are required by policy when new schools open, so this work session focused on boundary changes needed for the new middle school at Stratford. The changes will impact current 4th, 5th and 6th grade students and will balance enrollment across all middle schools. Ms. Stengle confirmed that starting the process now allows families to begin to prepare for the change. She then reviewed lessons learned from the recent high school boundary process, such as the importance of clearly communicating how policy will guide this process, and shared staff plans to ensure successful engagement throughout the process.

3. The proposed methodology

The proposed methodology is based on planning units that were developed in 2001. As a result of a recent review, it was decided that some larger planning units should be divided to provide more equity (some planning units with features that make them difficult to divide will be left intact). Ms. Stengle confirmed that the changes being made will not affect current attendance boundaries and will keep neighborhoods intact as much as possible.

Ms. Stengle then described the six considerations in policy that will be taken into account as recommendations for boundary changes are considered. These are stability, contiguity, alignment, proximity, efficiency and demographics. She also explained how these considerations are being interpreted for this process.

Stability means that students will be part of a boundary change only once at a given level. Staff confirmed that this consideration is focused on individual students, not households, and will ensure that students who will be moved in this boundary change have not been impacted by another middle school move. Responding to Board feedback, staff agreed to include information on past planning unit moves at all school levels in data that is shared with the community. Staff will also provide information on the number of large planning units that will not be divided.

The interpretation of contiguity to be used is that attendance zones are contiguous and contain the school to which students are assigned without making new attendance ‘islands.’

For alignment, staff will focus on keeping groups of students together as they move through school levels. For this process, the focus is on the transition from middle to high school, and alignment will be assessed once groups of planning units are combined in proposals. Ms. Stengle shared an illustrative map showing the implications of moving all students from one middle school to the same high school. The group recognized that there is no simple way to keep all students from one middle school together in high school and again it was noted that all considerations are interrelated and will need to be looked at together.

Proximity is defined primarily as walkability, and is focused on keeping students close to the schools they attend so they can walk or need only a short bus ride. Ms. Stengle shared another illustrative map outlining approximate walk zones for each of the middle schools. It was recognized that distance is not the only measure of walkability, but also must consider other barriers such as busy roads. The group recognized that walkability is determined by student age as well as distance.

Efficiency looks at minimizing future capital and operating costs and considers both transportation and facility utilization. An illustrative map was shared demonstrating possible boundaries based on efficiency. The Board recognized the two aspects of efficiency, and Ms. Van Doren encouraged exploring sustainable options such as transportation alternatives like public transit. The group discussed access to public transit and recognized it will be challenging to accommodate both students and commuters, and staff agreed to bring data on public transportation for the Board to consider in this process. Mr. Lander commented on the importance of focusing on instruction, and reminded all that option programs throughout the county will

affect enrollment. The group recognized that proximity and efficiency are closely related, and confirmed that capacity utilization also is part of efficiency so should also be considered.

Ms. Stengle next explained that the next consideration, diversity, is based on Free and Reduced Cost Lunch (F&RL) data. She noted that to preserve confidentiality, this data will only be shared publicly if it is relevant to 10 or more students in a planning unit. An illustrative map based on diversity was presented. Staff explained why F&RL data was chosen for diversity and Dr. Murphy reminded the group that while ethnicity can be considered, because of legal ramifications, decisions cannot be based on that factor alone. The Board further discussed whether and how diversity can be considered, and Mr. Lander stressed that the Board's focus should be on instruction, student safety, meeting the needs of each individual student. The group also recognized that diversity will be affected by participation in choice programs. It was agreed that using F&RL data as an indicator of diversity should remain as one of the considerations.

Board members recognized that, while all of the considerations will be part of the boundary process, no one consideration will determine the final decision. The group also recognized that some proposals that are brought forward could emphasize one consideration over another. Ms. Stengle confirmed that staff will bring a combination of considerations forward to allow the Board to weigh these options as they come to a decision. Dr. Kanninen noted that this process will also allow the Board to identify outliers that need to be addressed.

Ms. Stengle then explained that for each boundary proposal, staff will provide maps, suggested planning units, estimated enrollment by grade, estimated capacity utilization, transportation for grandfathered students, and how the proposal meets the six considerations. Some Board members asked for ancillary data on ethnicity, while others felt that this information is not helpful, as APS cannot predict the impact of choice programs on diversity at a school. Dr. Kanninen appreciated that this data must be considered within limitations, including recognizing the legal risks of looking at race or ethnicity. Mr. Lander reiterated that the Board's key focus should be on instruction, and Ms. Talento pointed out that in Arlington, F&RL does not appear to impact student performance, so using it is a socioeconomic rather than diversity consideration. Staff stated that preparing additional data on diversity will entail significant work, and the Board agreed to table this discussion.

4. Other issues to consider

Ms. Stengle presented additional issues to be considered for the engagement process, including when to move each grade to the new school. Data demonstrating how moving one, two or all three grades at once will affect enrollment and capacity across all middle schools was shared. Staff is suggesting moving grades 6 and 7, as that helps balance enrollment across the schools and avoids the social/emotional impact of 8th graders out of their middle school.

Responding to questions, staff recognized a need to consider siblings, particularly 8th graders who may want to move to the new school with younger siblings. Community input on this will be solicited, and Ms. Stengle noted that the Board will need to consider how to manage grandfathering. Also discussed was the challenge of ensuring enough students remain enrolled in each school to support a full range of middle school courses. Board members looked forward to community feedback about the impact of moving only 6th and 7th grade students, and also to

further consideration of sibling preference and its effect on students and schools. Mr. Chadwick briefly commented that moving only two grades will negatively impact transportation costs.

Ms. Stengle then suggested that program move considerations could be part of the middle school process, noting that both a Montessori and an immersion program are currently housed in middle schools. Responding to a question, staff confirmed that there are approximately 64 middle schoolers in Montessori. The group recognized the complexity of plans for the Montessori program with the impending move to the Patrick Henry facility and Ms. Stengle confirmed that this discussion will be brought back to the Board in the near future.

Ms. Stengle presented options and considerations for moving Immersion to a central location, and confirmed that enrollment does not currently support a second program. Mr. Lander asked about adding a second IB program, and Dr. Murphy stated that APS would have to plan forward to implement such an addition. Noting recent improvement in student achievement in the middle schools, Mr. Lander suggested that program evaluations of Montessori and Immersion would help inform a decision about a possible program move. Ms. Talento noted that the strategic planning committee will look at alignment, and she thought the Board should not solicit feedback until that work is done. Board members asked for a better understanding of a central location, and Mr. Byrd shared a staff discussion to clarify how this is viewed. Mr. Chadwick also spoke to the transportation perspective of a centrally located program, and Board members recognized challenges. Board members also recognized that Immersion involves only a small number of students, and discussed how to determine if a second Immersion program could be offered. Summarizing the conversation, Dr. Kanninen confirmed that while the Board does not seem to support pursuing a move of either program at this time, they would be open to additional discussion. Ms. Stengle confirmed that consideration of an Immersion move will be incorporated into the strategic plan process, and additional information will be provided to the Board.

In summary it was confirmed that the School Board will make the final decision on boundaries, and the group now has a common understanding of the six considerations in the boundary policy and how they will be interpreted. It was also agreed that discussion should be held with the community on which grades to move to the new school. Finally, there is not interest in looking at moving Montessori or Immersion at this time, but the Board is receptive to additional discussion after the Montessori planning group and the strategic planning committee complete their work and provide their recommendations or suggestions.

5. Next Steps

Dr. Johnson reviewed the timeline and next steps for community engagement and Board action on this process. Staff explained how data will be collected and shared, and confirmed they are working to provide translation services as needed as well as outreach to diverse communities.

Dr. Kanninen thanked all for their participation, and the meeting adjourned at 9:32 PM.

ATTEST:

Melanie Elliott, Clerk
Arlington School Board

Barbara Kanninen, Chair
Arlington School Board