

Ep. 14 Elementary Boundaries

FULL TRANSCRIPT (with timecode)

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M1: Hello and welcome to Episode 14 of the What's Up, APS podcast, I'm Frank Bellavia. And on today's episode we're going to talk about elementary boundaries and the process that we've just started.

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F4: I guess just everybody why I love my job. You love driving a bus. I really do. Well. I love riding your bus Mr. Dan. And also.

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M3: The whole body here crime issue. Arlington public schools is looking for bus drivers if you are interested go to AP us for more information. Arlington public schools one hire at a time.

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M4: Welcome back I'm Frank Bellavia.

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M1: As I mentioned before the break we are talking about elementary boundary initiatives that we have going and joining me today is Lisa Stengle The director of planning and evaluation. And Wendy Pilch the interim director of early childhood and elementary education. Welcome to the podcast. So we're going we're undergoing a new boundary process to shift elementary schools. Why are we looking at this. Let's just get right into it.

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F1: Well our elementary population continues to grow and in 2019 we're opening a new elementary school next to Jefferson Middle School that will be named Alice fleet. The current. Student population. Patrick Henry Elementary School is all moving into that building the space that is vacated by that will be used for the Montessori program that's moving out of drew and drew will now have space for a bigger neighborhood. We know that in South Arlington we have a lot of schools that are over capacity. So this is a chance to balance enrollment. At the same time we're also looking at the school that's going to be opening in September 20 21 and as we're looking at possibly making changes the school board has actually asked us to look at you know can we make some decisions now for everybody versus waiting until 2021.

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M1: Secluding This is in reality every elementary school boundary across the county is going to be looked at in one way or another every elementary school. In the past we looked at moving planning units to adjust boundary lines in Boundary decisions that we've had most recently with Discovery coming on line but this time we're doing things different in the kind of unique approach to to redrawing our boundaries. Can you explain what that process is this time around.

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F1: Yeah and let me give you a couple of points before I get into that. We recently did a high school process last year and I think one of the lessons learned there was limiting into sound planning units really

makes it difficult to use all the school boards considerations when we're making recommendations and so when we did the middle school boundary process last fall we looked at all cleaning as you know as we're looking across our schools. It made sense to look at everybody. So what we actually when we were looking at it this time we we thought as we're looking at where our schools are and where is where students live we know there are some areas where we don't have neighborhood schools in Arlington. As we look at the big map and in some of the conversations we had around options and transfer policy last year you know one of the concerns was you know what are we doing for these neighborhoods if you look at. That. Area around the courthouse and that area where he is there's a lot of kids who could walk that don't necessarily go to immersion schools so a lot of questions came up and we actually as we step back and looked at as we look at all of our schools and we think about Reed that's coming online we have a lot of schools that aren't necessarily where students live. We build them where we had land and if we just draw boundaries based on what we have today it may not be as efficient as it could get. So we actually decided and talking with the school board. Looked at if we open up our options schools begin to think about where things are located. Could we get some efficiencies and maybe reduce some of the transportation costs. Make sure that students are going to neighborhood schools that are in their neighborhoods and. They need keep more of our resources in the classroom where we have teachers you know use the money instead of using it for transportation use it for instruction.

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F3: As you rightly said it would decrease the amount of time students are on buses which gives them which makes parents happy and also has kids coming to school more ready to learn.

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M1: And we've noticed this two phase process and phase one is looking at it from taking the walk zones first insurgent. Why look at the Walk zones first.

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F1: So we think actually the walk zones will tell us where our neighborhood schools should be. We know that if we have a building and you know 75 percent do you know even more the population could actually walk to school that that actually might want to be a location where we could put our students. One of the things that we have right now is walk zones for our current boundaries. Current boundaries don't meet necessarily circle around the buildings that they're in. They kind of stretch shall we need to actually go back look at the Walk signs that make sense for the buildings regardless of the boundaries. You know actually removing the current elementary boundaries. The other piece of that is we know that our elementary policy our boundary for boundary policy for elementary schools goes out to a mile. But we also know when you get sort of to the edge that mile they're going to be some families that will drive and we don't want to at the same time putting lockdowns in place. Add to the congestion that the traffic. You know it's better to have a bus coming with 50 kids than 50 cars coming with 50 kids. So we want to look carefully with the key to make sure we know the walkable zones around each school and then we think we can look within those walk zones and look at our current students and what we are seeing in some of our projections to say. All right do we have enough students here to make this really a walkable neighborhood school or is this you know a place where we're really going to have a lot of kids and bars buses regardless of what we do and maybe that's something that we going to look at a little differently.

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M1: When you when you look at the Walk zones that you take into account major roads like Gleib Wilson George Mason things like that. Does that play into war zones.

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F2: Yeah. So there's some aid here. I live near Gleib. And you know if you're familiar with that neighborhood across from the school and Broders read out in front of it there's a crossing guard there. If you look at some of our other schools you know anyway yes is not too far from where I live. And here at Wilson Boulevard and. George meets George Mason and there's no crossing guard there. So right now they're walking so small. Now if we had a crossing guard that goes across Wilson Boulevard. How many kids would we have potentially had. So that's part of what we'll be looking at you know if we will we can expand those walk zones. Are there enough kids there you know kind of balance out having a crossing guard or is it again 23 crossing guards and it only adds 10 kids. You know so we'll be looking at those things when we dig into how many students live in the lockable zone.

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M1: The plan talks about passing a moving swopping neighborhood and options schools. What's the benefit of doing that. You touched on a couple of things about walkability. What are some of the benefits.

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F2: I think some of the benefits you know from the from the standpoint of how we're looking at it is you know as we're looking to draw boundaries on the western edge of the county on the open Reed Reed is going to be a highly walkable neighborhood school. We know right now without expanding the walk zone we can almost feel that school. As we look at right now where those kids go to school and 28 you know 2018 they're going to Tuckahoe they're going to McKinley they're going to Nottingham and they're not going to there. So those schools are not going to be filled as we draw boundaries for everybody. We're going to in some neighborhoods. We have schools clustered so close together they're pulling from the same groups of students. I think the fleet example is probably pretty interesting. Henry probably is going to have the same exact walkable boundaries as fleet. So you have a neighborhood school and they and the other school really is a great spot for an option because you're not taking away the neighborhood from the neighborhood. Unlike some neighborhoods right now where there you know they might sit across from an option school in those families can access those schools unless they get into the lottery.

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M1: So all our elementary schools to be part of the process.

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F1: So all of our elementary schools will be part of the boundary process in some way but this part about looking at siting and which ones would be neighborhood adoption schools there were a couple that are being left out of the process because of recent school board decisions. So Reed in charge to the building level planning committee is a neighborhood school fleet I think and they charged their planning committee and as design now is where the Henry neighborhood school is going to move to. Drew Model School went through revisioning process last year's esteems school and they will remain the neighborhood school and the Montessori program that's moving into Henry will be an option program that will sit there. So those four sites will be part of that first part of the process but we will be drawing boundaries for all of them next fall when we come back.

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M1: D It doesn't necessarily mean that programs that are successful are not based on actual location. So what does this mean for instructional programs in the schools.

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F3: Well the Department of teaching and learning is collaborating and working very closely with the Department of Planning and Evaluation as we look at some of the boundary changes we are in constant communication. When you look at research around highly effective learning environments you find most of the research points to environments where kids can work in whole group small group and individual and. Have some independent work time on their own. And all of these environments in any school we have the ability for students to learn in all of those different moods. In addition it's very important that the environment the tone for the entire beset by the teachers and administrators in that building and the Department of teaching and learning is working very hard to train teachers to work on classroom environment to create warm and welcoming classrooms where students are engaged and feel happy being in their class. We know that families become very attached to the teachers and administrators of buildings that they have been a part of. But we really at the Department teaching learning were more committed to ensuring high level of teaching in whichever classroom your student does attend.

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M1: And it doesn't matter if you go to an auction score or neighborhood school kids are going to get a great education no matter where they are and like you said it set the tone set by the principals and the staff at that building correct. And then where we're aiming for student centered classrooms and the teacher sets up that student centered environment by making students a part of the setting the tone for what the classroom.

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F3: Environment will look like. Having morning meetings having closing meetings each day and there isn't any aspect in any of these buildings we're talking about where that wouldn't be possible. So we will be working with all of the schools to help transition if students do move from one building to another will be working closely along the way to ensure their success. With that move and in addition there are many of us in the department teaching and learning that are working on some of the new building planning. And. I am part of the read beyond PC and helping make some decisions around instructional. Design in the new building and we'll do that with new buildings but will also help with transitioning some of our buildings that are not as new as Reed and as really to ensure that we are that everything is at the highest level as a P.S. expects and as our community members desire the pardon.

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M1: Phase 1 2 also said that you don't still be as many options schools and high schools as are currently just could possibly be shift grants. That's still the case.

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F1: Yeah yeah. We have today at the elementary level we have five options schools. We have two immersion schools. Q Learmont yes expeditionary learning is that Campbell and then Montessori which is moving into race so the numbers that will come out with will be the same number of options. And again my story is moving to the Henry building so that one is not really being considered in this process because it makes sense. But you know so we will be finding four sites for four options. I think the other piece that I would put out there is we'll bring you proposals to the school board. One will be what I'm thinking of is really the status quo which is you know keeping what we've got today and comparing it to OK you've removed options schools. Let's let's look at two options and that's where to compare the pros and cons of each. I mean there are going to be transition things that we have to consider with cost not just

of transportation but of the costs of moving and setting up. How many times is failing the families have to move to they have to move multiple times. I mean we wouldn't want to put a school through that. But. You're looking at all the considerations to make sure that it's a thoughtful decision and not just you know removing it because it makes sense in one way. You talked about Reed earlier in the neighborhood that it pulls from is it could it be a possibility that schools completely walkable. With the current walks which doesn't include south of Washington Boulevard which if you know the neighborhood is across the street you can see it from the school building. I think we know that today there's 500 and some odd kids who live in the war zone. You know the kids across the street are really in a war zone if they have a crossing guard or some sort of remediation across Washington Boulevard which is part of this first step that we'll be looking at a lot of sense. I think it could be a school. No no buses except for maybe our special needs students would be required. We have I think as we looked at it right now Randolph is also a totally walkable school for that neighborhood and there may be some other opportunities. Right now the boundaries don't allow. I don't think many will be filled in that same way. But I think there are some places where we have a lot of kids and we don't have it in school right now.

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M1: So phase one is walk a walk walks and study what's face to face to is we'll come back next fall.

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F2: So we're asking the school board to actually at the end of this school year to make a decision on the neighborhood option schools. Again we'll take the two proposals and they'll give us direction on which one to move forward with. Over the summer my team will then take and look at all of those kids who live outside the walk zone. That's really where we get a chance now. To look at the other considerations in the policy to look at alignment from. Elementary to middle to high school to look at other small groups of students going in different places to look at diversity and demographics to look at the other criteria that you're in there. Have they been impacted by previous boundary changes. So what we hope to do is come back in the fall with some proposals similar to what we did with boundaries for middle school this year. But minus the proximity piece which sort of was in every conversation last year we heard everybody talk about proximity by doing proximity. This fall or this spring and coming back in the fall we could say all these kids are going to be taking the bus regardless of where they go. You know. Now can we begin to look at those other considerations and really provide a balance of proposed balance of attendance.

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F1: I think for Reid. One of the challenges we're going to have is Reid's going to open in 2021. Some of those kids are newborns today. You know they're really young and they may not be here five years from now so we're going to be real careful around here I think there will be some zones between Reed and other schools where we will say we think this might be going to read but it might also be going denying him or it might also be going to sleep depending on which direction or McKinley. But we'll come back when we get closer to the time and we know we have better information on the kids that actually live in that neighborhood in SAG. We said you'd go to one of two places which schools should you go to. So it will be more rather than opening up the whole process will have sort of done a lot of legwork. Now that will come back if you know closer to 2021 and say this is where you'll go based on the numbers we have today.

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M2: But again we'll be outside of those walks.

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M1: You How will this impact the school environment. Changing of the boundaries. Well I see a huge benefit being less overcrowded schools when we know the number of students that.

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F3: Are actually going to be attending that school I can prepare for that number of students within a small range. It takes a lot of stress off of administrators and teachers. And I can see that as being a huge benefit they can really focus on the resources they need to make available for their students and enhance their own professional practice rather than worrying about overcrowded classes overcrowded hallways. And I see that being a real benefit.

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M1: It also goes into common spaces like media centers in the cafeteria and gyms.

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F3: If anybody has been to have lunch with their child in the cafeteria and elementary schools recently it it does if you feel the number of elementary kids right now in AP just by being in the lunch room so I can see large benefits to lowering just the number of kids going through the lunch line at a time number of kids in the lunch room so that they can actually have conversation rather than eat their lunch with a lot of noise. So a lot of social benefits as well. Entering school with fewer kids in the hallways more room for backpacks and lockers and for kids you really feel like they have a place within that building that is that is there.

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M1: We've kind of touched on throughout the conversation about timeframes for this one for phase one time for friends to so put together what is the time frame for this and what should parents expect moving forward.

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F1: So the time frame is we are already started to reach out to PTA and civic associations for phase 1 to really get our task groups together who are going to be looking at the Walk zones around each of the elementary schools. And what we've done is turn this into a task so that is not bringing everybody to the table we want the communities to work together they know their schools and where they sit better than we do. So they'll be helping us with that. That work around the walks and we'll continue through March and April after spring break. We will be coming back with the options. So what happens if we stay the same way we are with that where neighborhood schools are today versus what are we what's the scenario if we do a realignment of some of those and then the school board will act on that by the end of the school year. When we come back next fall with our boundary proposal process and there'll be community engagement at that point. And by Thanksgiving we want the school board to adopt the new boundaries because kindergarten information night falls and in 2019 these new boundaries will apply for all of other schools for parts of North Arlington and where we can make them apply earlier to relieve some of the crowding issues right now.

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M1: We'll implemented them and then we'll continue to make the other adjustments that we need to around read and for when that opens in 2021 and I'm assuming there's a number of ways coming up with that the community can really engage in it and provide their comments and feedback.

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F1: I think during this first phase really the participation through their eyes and their civic associations is key. Are setting up those task groups to actually work with their communities to work on the walkable zone around each school they can follow all of this information on engage. There will be a chance for them to provide input on the walk zones where these task groups from later on. On the two proposals that we're bringing forward again they can find all of the information on engage. We'll be documenting the maps there and all the tools and resources for these groups will be close to their proposals will be there over the summer by the time school starts next fall rollout the boundary of the revised boundary proposals and that's sort of our one stop for all of the information around any of our engagement processes.

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M1: And people have questions and concerns.

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F1: Now they can just send best way to send an email to the engage@apsva.us we get a team with staff who are looking at all of those and responding sometimes their instructional questions and so we send them to our partners over in teaching and learning sometimes they are going to facility stuff so our group makes sure they get responses to those in follow up.

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M1: Great. Well I want to thank you both for for taking time to to join us. I think we've touched on a lot of different topics coming up in the next couple of weeks we'll have some more ways to get out to the community. We're planning some Facebook lives we're planning a Twitter town hall coming up on this soon so stay tuned for all about that stuff will be communicated through your school talking on social media. Thank you very much for joining us. Thank you. Do you have any questions. Like we said email engage@apsva.us. If you have ideas for future topics for the podcast send an email to apsnews@apsva.us or tweet us @APSVirginia thanks very much for joining us. We'll talk to you next time.