

February 23, 2018

Dr. Patrick Murphy and Dr. Barbara Kanninen
Arlington Public Schools
1426 N. Quincy Street
Arlington, Virginia 22207

Re: Stratford School Commemoration Recommendations

Dear Dr. Murphy and Dr. Kanninen:

We write to share the recommendations of the Superintendent's Special Committee on Historic Interpretation at the former Stratford Junior High School ("Committee").

Summary

Our Committee supports the staff recommendations in the *Proposed Interpretive Framework and Concept Design Summary*, and respectfully recommends that the School Board and Superintendent commit to ongoing support and funding to further interpret these and other historic events with and for our students and community.

Recognizing that budgets are tight during this generational investment in school and county facilities, we recommend the initial investment prioritize (1) commemoration of the specific events of February 2, 1959 over the building's architectural history, and (2) large scale exterior interpretation elements over interior displays.

Beyond the immediate investment in the built environment at Stratford, we strongly recommend a sustained effort and future investment in interpretation inside the school and in tandem with other civil rights and other community history across Arlington. To this end, several committee members offered to support fundraising and programmatic collaboration if needed.

Background

In late 2016 Dr. Patrick Murphy formed the Superintendent's Special Committee on Historic Interpretation at the former Stratford Junior High School to discuss the most appropriate way to spend the \$250,000 set aside by the School Board to commemorate the historic events that took place at the site during the week of February 2, 1959, when Stratford became the first public school in the Commonwealth of Virginia to become racially integrated.

Following the May 17, 1954 Brown vs. Board of Education Supreme Court ruling that a separate but equal school system was unconstitutional, "Virginia Commonwealth officials had little intention of implementing any desegregation program pursuant to the Brown ruling...Governor Thomas B. Stanley stated that he 'would use every means at my command to continue segregated schools in Virginia.' In 1956, the Virginia General Assembly passed a referendum giving local school boards the authority to manage student placement, while reserving the right to close any Commonwealth school where integration occurred – establishing Virginia's policy of 'massive resistance' to school integration.

Arlington then approved a gradual and limited desegregation plan that would permit integration at only a few elementary and junior high schools and one senior high school over the course of three academic years, from 1956 to 1958. ... In response, the Virginia General Assembly voted in 1956 to strip the county of its right to an elected school board and replaced it with a more conservative county-appointed board. The first tentative steps towards an integrated Arlington school system were abruptly ended."

Arlington citizens, with support from the NAACP and other national leaders, continued to work toward fulfilling the Supreme Court's ruling. Stratford played a critical role in two tense, but peaceful moments, when integration was attempted, first unsuccessfully by three students (Edward Leslie Hamm, Jr., Joyce Marie Bailey, and George Tyrone Nelson) on September 5, 1957, and then successfully 15 months later when: "'On Monday morning, February 2, 1959, under the protection of approximately eighty-five Arlington police officers, Ronald Deskins, Michael Jones, Lance Newman, and Gloria Thompson entered and were admitted to Stratford Junior High School without incident, making Stratford the first public school in the Commonwealth of Virginia to desegregate .'"¹

Committee Engagement Process

Our committee included one of the four students who integrated Stratford, African-American community leaders with intimate knowledge of Arlington's school desegregation journey, and representatives from the Arlington County Historical Affairs and Landmark Review Board (HALRB), Arlington County Historic Preservation Program, APS Department of Teaching and Learning, APS Facilities and Operations, and Stratford Building Level Planning Committee (BLPC).

We deeply appreciate both the opportunity to serve in this way and your leadership and commitment in honoring the important civil rights events at Stratford. As County Board Chair Katie Cristol highlighted this month, we are invited to "translate Arlington's history, our community values" to modern times. "To tell the old story' of Arlington is to tell of the fight for inclusion: Defiance of Massive Resistance and integrating our schools; waves of immigrants and refugees shaping the County's culture and economy." As community historian Dr. Alfred Taylor reminds us, "We have to understand where we are coming from so that we can appreciate where we are going." Bringing the Stratford story to life will help us understand the Arlington, Virginia and the United States today and how we all shape our communities for the future.

The Committee met six times between January and November 2017, working closely with APS staff and consultants, including a specialty interpretive planning and design consultant. Together we engaged in a collaborative and iterative process of establishing priorities, reviewing inspirational images, and commenting on various proposed concepts prepared by APS design consultants. We heard the first-hand testimonials of the community members who integrated the school in 1959, leaders who nurtured the slow but steady desegregation across decades, and others who are deeply invested in sustaining both the story and the meaning for future students and community members. It was an inspiring and often breathtaking experience to revisit the

¹ [HALRB.Stratford-Local-Historic-District-Designation-Report.6.11.2015.pdf](#),

stories and their meaning for our past, current and future community. Throughout, we challenged, encouraged, frustrated and inspired each other as we sought to translate the essence of the history and its meaning into the built environment, art and programmatic elements.

Out of this process we identified two major priorities:

- **The primary focus should be on the week of integration and the four students** who successfully integrated Stratford on February 2, 1959. The unique architectural history, while interesting, is not the focus of the current effort.
- The Stratford Junior High School history and place should be **linked to other local and national civil rights events and places**, in a way that is both visible and tangible for community members and engaging, thought-provoking and relevant for students. For instance, a walking tour, common signage or site furnishings and materials could connect multiple sites along Lee Highway². Family and community sacrifices, overcoming injustice and bias, persistence, compromise, hope and collaboration are important parts of the story.

Recommendations

The Committee's work is reflected in the the *Proposed Interpretive Framework and Concept Design Summary* report, which describes interpretive elements throughout both the exterior site and the interior building. Each proposed element contributes to one or more of the Committee's goals:

- Recognize and honor the four then-7th grade students who successfully integrated Stratford Junior High School;
- Explore the specific events of February 2, 1959 within the local, regional, and national context in which they occurred, while considering the lasting meaning and impact of that event, and relevance for students and community members today;
- Reflect the enduring ideals that the desegregation movement embodied and celebrate the resulting multicultural character of the community today;
- Provide opportunities for future middle school students to reflect on the themes of inclusiveness and diversity through engagement with others, display of original artwork, and storytelling; and
- Document the evolution of the site and building over time, focusing on the character-defining features of the existing building which clearly illustrate a "progressive architecture for a progressive community".

Since the initial cost estimates to implement the entire framework would exceed the available funding set aside by the School Board, the Committee carefully **prioritized the exterior elements** of the hero's welcome gateways and historic path interpretive trail as most urgent.

Our criteria included:

- Meets the spirit of the committee charge (e.g., emphasize integration over architectural history);

² Nearby sites include Hall's Hill neighborhood and segregation fence, High View Park, Fire Station 8, Langston School/Langston-Brown Recreation Center, Calloway United Methodist Church, Lee Highway sit-in locations at #3515, #4700 and the intersection with Old Dominion

- Most visible and accessible to the greatest number of people (exterior and large scale); and
- Logically integrated into the concurrent construction project (e.g., phasing, materials, site disturbance, placemaking, wayfinding, lighting)

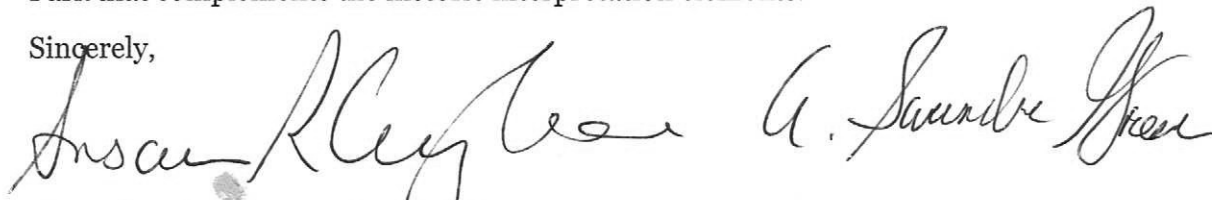
While we are unanimous in our prioritization of these first efforts, we recommend that APS and Arlington County Government **implement the entire framework over time**. This should include **pursuing grant funding** or other opportunities for additional funds from the National Trust for Historic Preservation and other sources to both interpret and maintain the site, for instance restoration of the historic glass block classroom window that are currently completely covered on the classroom interiors.

The remaining framework elements can be funded separately and added later. This future effort could explicitly support the new school community and culture development, while building connections to other local and national partners. As part of these continued investments, the Committee recommends that APS, in collaboration with Arlington County:

- Continue to **develop site-specific and district-wide curriculum** to support Arlington's role in the international story of racial integration, specifically around the events of February 2, 1959;
- **Host a commemorative 60-year anniversary event in 2019** – before or in conjunction with the reopening of Stratford as a neighborhood middle school; and
- **Install additional interpretive signage at the Vacation Lane** main entrance to commemorate the earlier, failed attempt at integration on September 5, 1957.

Finally, though not directly related to the Committee's charge, the Committee would support a School Board decision to **name the school Stratford Middle School** (or Stratford Junior High School), to maintain a clear connection to the school's former name at the time of integration. As part of this naming and the rebranding of the school, we recommend **additional wayfinding and signage** on campus, on surrounding streets and in Stratford Park that complements the historic interpretation elements.

Sincerely,



Susan Cunningham and Sandra Green

Co-chairs, Superintendent's Special Committee on Historic Interpretation at the former Stratford Junior High School

CC:

Committee Members: Drew Costley, Michael Jones, Joan Lawrence, Sharon Monde, Karen Nightingale, Craig Syphax, Frank Wilson

School Board Members: Reid Goldstein, Monique O'Grady, Tannia Talento, Nancy Van Doren;

Past Board Members: Emma Violand-Sanchez, James Lander, Abigail Raphael, Noah Simon

APS and County Staff: Rebecca Ballo, John Chadwick, Jeff Chambers, Ben Burgin, Theresa Flynn, Bill Herring, Cynthia Liccese-Torres