CCPTA comments and recommendations regarding APS' school boundary process

The establishment of school boundaries is a demanding process for everyone involved: staff, leadership, administrators, parents, and students. Arlington Public Schools (APS) has experienced boundary changes at every level of instruction in recent years and faces multiple more in the immediate years ahead. With each process, staff has attempted to address concerns from the previous round, to engage more community members, and to respond to community-stated priorities.

The County Council of PTAs (CCPTA) acknowledges and appreciates APS' efforts. We recognize the various demands on Board members and staff during contentious boundary discussions. We acknowledge that all participants and stakeholders share in the responsibility to maintain a respectful and collaborative process that ensures effective outcomes. Furthermore, we believe that School Board action to refine the boundary process framework is needed in order to ensure an efficient and decorous process.

Recent boundary processes have been divisive and have raised concerns about community members feeling overwhelmed and disillusioned. CCPTA has identified some key issues we believe should be addressed before another boundary discussion begins. We offer recommendations to improve the decision-making process and increase the transparency both APS and the community seek.

Key issues have been identified in the following categories:

1) Goals and Objectives;
2) Data;
3) Guiding Principles; and,
4) Community Engagement

1) Goals and Objectives:

Setting clear goals helps participants understand the objectives for a boundary process and the means for achieving them. Unclear goals can unintentionally create the impression that decision criteria are being shifted as the process progresses in order to reach a pre-determined outcome. Unclear and/or inconsistent objectives or goals throughout a given boundary process also contribute to contentiousness and outcomes that do not always seem to achieve the stated or perceived objective(s) – namely, balanced enrollment across schools.

For example, the most recent middle school boundary process in Fall 2017 was presented with the intention to balance enrollment across schools and relieve crowding. Yet, the outcome left one middle school significantly under-capacity and the remaining schools at or above capacity with continued enrollment growth expected.

The elementary school boundary process completed in Fall 2018 resulted in similar imbalances. Understood by the community to be intended to relieve crowding and to establish Drew Model Elementary School as a full K-5 neighborhood school, the final

decision instead resulted in the last-minute consideration of a substantial preschool program at a far-below-capacity Drew.

To ensure boundary decisions achieve the necessary and intended objectives, CCPTA recommends that specific goals be set and clearly stated at the outset and adhered to throughout the process. What are the purposes of the boundary changes? What objectives are to be achieved by the new boundaries? Proposed options should be evaluated against these set objectives to ensure the final decision achieves the intended goals and resolves the problems proposed to be fixed. Additionally, a formal review should be conducted following the first few years of implementation to determine whether the expectations and goals for the boundary change have been achieved or additional adjustments are needed. Given the pace of enrollment growth and the expectation for continued growth, it is important to have the flexibility to make adjustments as needed, rather than waiting five or more years for the next boundary review and revisions.

2) Data:

Recurring issues with data have impacted the decision-making process and contributed to the community's negative experiences and perceptions of the process. Problems around data have exacerbated friction in the community, undermined community trust in the process and in leadership, and weakened the credibility and effectiveness of decisions.

As one example, inaccurate data was used in establishing boundaries with the opening of Discovery ES and additions at Ashlawn ES and McKinley ES. The inaccuracy of data led to continued overcrowding with no relief at an expanded McKinley ES while neighboring schools enjoyed significant relief from overcrowding with room for more students. Despite repeated community questioning of the data, the process moved forward to a decision that did not balance enrollment and did not relieve crowding at each school as intended, creating distrust and division both within the broader community and between the community and APS.

Another example is the use of resident FRL% data in the Fall 2018 elementary school boundary process which obscured the true impacts of proposed boundaries and did not depict a clear picture of what could be expected in regard to enrollment or student demographics once the boundaries are implemented. Using a countywide average transfer rate rather than a proportionate transfer rate for individual schools known to have substantially higher opt-out rates magnified this problem.

CCPTA recommends that staff build upon the work already initiated with the community to ensure data accuracy and to select the most appropriate type(s) of data to be used, and formally integrate this effort into the boundary process. CCPTA also suggests that capable consultants be hired prior to initiating a boundary process, if necessary, to verify the integrity of data (and thereby the integrity of ensuing discussions and proposed solutions).

We recommend APS increase community-wide awareness of its recent collaboration with the community to review data for projections. The current work is not broadly known and could provide assurance to those residents being considered for new boundary designations about the strength and accuracy of the data being used. Staff should evaluate

the effectiveness of this collaboration, ways to improve the format or structure, and identify if/how it can best be incorporated into the overall boundary process framework – perhaps both pre-process and again prior to School Board action.

Potentially overlooked or unknown situations, trends, or characteristics unique to individual schools are more likely to be identified by the individual communities themselves. Therefore, staff and the community should collaboratively determine the most appropriate data type(s) to be used for effective decisions and confirm the appropriateness and accuracy of that data prior to the start of a boundary process. Principals of each school should continue to be consulted and involved throughout the process.

This effort before the boundary process begins should minimize data conflicts and questioning of the appropriateness of data during the process itself. Additionally, the community's ability to understand the data and the rationale for selecting the chosen data at the outset will make the process easier to follow and minimize confusion on the part of community members as to the basis of recommended boundary scenarios and decisions. Furthermore, it will foster collaboration, a sense of APS and the community "being in this together," and increase the public's sense of transparency in decision-making.

3) Guiding Principles

The current process uses six considerations that are defined in general terms and applied in an unclear manner. This is an open invitation to factionalism and encourages "cherry-picking" of individual considerations to suit a particular outcome. Lengthy, recurring debate about which considerations should have greater weight or priority perpetuates divisiveness in the community and inflames the contentiousness of discussions.

Individuals and individual groups should not be able to use selective principles to bolster advocacy positions for their specific self-interests. Similarly, the School Board and individual Board members should avoid requesting boundary scenarios that specify particular planning unit(s) be assigned to specific schools, as this can give the impression of favoritism, special interests, or a predetermined outcome. It would be more appropriate to request scenarios that result in greater achievement of specifically stated goals and/or better balance of the guiding considerations. Strong and effective decisions are made when they are solidly based on set criteria and aimed toward a unified goal or vision. Therefore, a more concrete set of principles for boundaries is necessary and would eliminate much of the arbitrary nature of the current process.

CCPTA recommends replacing the current six considerations with four well-defined "determining factors" of equal priority. Well-defined and distinct determining factors, along with a mandate to achieve the best overall balance of those factors, would serve to minimize the selective application of preferred principles. Proximity and Contiguity can be incorporated into "Transportation Efficiency." Efficiency can be better-defined as "Utilization," while Alignment and Stability can both be served under "Stability." Finally, "Demographics" can be better addressed as "Socioeconomic Diversity." (See Addendum C)

Striving to balance all of the principles in the final boundary decision would vastly improve the community's understanding of the priorities, the criteria to be incorporated, and the

vision APS is working toward from one process to the next. Community members have emphasized that they would be more accepting of the final outcome if they understood the rationale for it, even if they did not agree with it.

It is important and prudent to include all of the determining factors in any potential solution in order **to represent a full range of the community's values and needs**. Currently, participants feel choices between considerations have to be made because achieving one consideration limits or precludes the ability to achieve another consideration. By aiming for a balance of all factors, the impacts of competing principles (such as Contiguity and Demographics) and overlapping considerations (such as Stability and Alignment) are removed.

Targeting the best balance of all the factors also would establish specific expectations and provide a clear direction for discussions and possible solutions. Moreover, the community would be better able to understand the basis for proposed solutions and what the final decision strives to achieve. A mandate to balance all four factors in each boundary decision would <u>acknowledge and address APS' own stated values as well as the expressed priorities of the community-at-large, and would generate decisions that more effectively espouse those values</u>.

4) Community Engagement

A strong emphasis on *opportunities* to engage and *ways* to provide input may overshadow the solicitation of informed, constructive feedback and collaboration. People enter and exit a boundary process at different points, and there is a perception that those who participate and provide input from beginning to end effectively have a stronger voice.

Many community members have commented on their perceived futility of engaging, or the expectations and need to provide either repeated feedback or feedback at multiple points throughout the process. Excessive calls for input leads to frustration and "engagement-fatigue." People in the community want an opportunity to provide meaningful input, believe it will be duly considered, and receive a timely and rational decision. Too much reliance on community feedback throughout the process can leave the impression there is a lack of purpose or vision steering the process and negatively impacts the community's confidence in decisions. APS and the School Board need to provide more leadership by setting a specific direction for the process and parameters for effective decisions.

Because each process is different, the community does not know what to expect from one process to the next. This uncertainty negatively impacts the quantity and quality of community engagement. Implementing a consistent framework for the process would establish a foundation for broad community engagement from the beginning, as people will know what to expect and how much will be expected of them throughout the process.

CCPTA recommends adopting a consistent process framework and offering fewer opportunities for input throughout the process.   A sample process structure can be found in Addendum B of this report. As the number of times community feedback is requested decreases, it is imperative that APS continues to maximize <u>*ways*</u> to provide input, and to improve engagement with as many community groups as possible <u>during the initial phase</u>

<u>of the process</u>, particularly with those who tend to be under-represented in these conversations. More marginalized community groups are often not involved until later in the process after feedback from the broader community has been well-considered, making their participation appear to be less relevant and seem less incorporated into the outcome.

CCPTA recommends that staff focus on community-wide meetings and consider eliminating meetings with individual school PTAs or groups from a single community. Multiple community-wide meetings should be conducted with many of them held in or very near the schools and communities that tend to be under-represented in these processes. Open office hours and other means of providing input would remain available to any community member or group, and written comments or questions from groups could be submitted in writing or brought to community meetings.

This will enable staff to concentrate on aggregate comments, make fewer representations to individual groups, and avoid accusations of favoring particular parties. <u>Just as importantly, it would serve to reduce factionalism by bringing communities together where they can hear each others' concerns, fostering understanding and collaboration rather than self-serving advocacy and division.</u>

Concluding statement:

The current APS school boundary process does not optimally serve the system's needs today. As active members of the school community, CCPTA offers its experiences and observations from the last several boundary processes and suggestions for a more effective approach from the community's perspective.

As APS continues to grow and to open new facilities, we will need to adjust and establish new boundaries more frequently. Key changes to the process could lead to better decision-making and more efficient management of APS' financial and staff resources. The implementation of a set framework will provide consistent community and staff expectations from one process to the next; while defined, set criteria for boundary determinations will indicate a direction for each successive decision. Staff's work will be more efficient and effective, and community involvement less demanding and more meaningful. <u>In addition to leading to more effective boundary decisions, CCPTA believes these changes will help promote understanding and cooperation between communities, acceptance of decisions, and trust in leadership</u>.

Recommendation highlights:

1. School Board action to refine the boundary process framework is needed to ensure an efficient and decorous process.

2. Implement a consistent boundary process framework with fewer opportunities for input throughout the process to encourage greater community participation and more valuable feedback.

3. Clearly state objectives to be achieved and problems to be resolved at the outset of each process and adhere to those goals throughout the process, evaluating each proposed option against those objectives to ensure final boundary decisions achieve the stated goals and address the identified problems to be resolved.

4. Build upon existing collaborative work with the community to ensure data accuracy and to select the most appropriate types of data to be used in each process, formally integrating this effort into the boundary process framework. This can reassure communities about the strength and accuracy of data being used, minimize data conflicts and questions during the process, and make the process easier to follow and the rationale for recommended boundary scenarios easier to understand.

5. Replace the current six considerations in the APS Boundary Policy with four well-defined determining factors of equal priority in order to reduce factionalism, bring communities together, and foster understanding and collaboration.

6. Reflect a balance of all four factors in each proposed boundary scenario to ensure a final decision that espouses the stated values and priorities of the APS community. If necessary, the Board can mandate a balance of the considerations in the next boundary process prior to the finalization of a formal revision to the terms and definitions of the existing considerations in the current boundary policy.

7. Evaluate whether the final outcome has achieved the stated goals of the boundary adjustment once the new boundary has been in place and one or two years of enrollment data is available. Ensure a process is in place to make additional adjustments accordingly, if necessary.

Additional considerations:

- As staff and the Board strive to ensure a sufficient cohort of students being redistricted to a given school, they should be mindful of the # of _grade-level cohorts_ in a given planning unit, rather than the total # of students in a planning unit. While APS may deem "10" or "25" a sufficient cohort, for example, there may in reality be as few as one 5th grader in a single planning unit matriculating to a separate middle school for 6th grade. That scenario does not honor the spirit or intent of "Stability" and "Alignment" to ensure a comfortably-sized group of familiar peers as students are re-assigned to a different school or move up from one level of schooling to the next.

- Consider providing side-by-side demographic data to help define the parameters that can be reasonably expected from proposed options – i.e. providing both demographic data based on resident FRL% within a proposed attendance zone as well as an estimated enrolled FRL% based on the current transfer-out rates for each school.

- The Board should consider how the goals for possible relocation of option programs work in concert with the boundary process and that the two perhaps should not be separate discussions or initiatives. Community members have indicated that APS needs to state what their goals are for moving option schools and clearly state what problem(s) they are looking to solve. Those goals then should be taken into consideration in the creation of boundaries moving forward.

- Live-streamed community meetings should include minimal small group breakouts. People viewing from home receive little to no benefit from watching the short opening presentation by staff. Both viewers and those in attendance would benefit from hearing the questions and concerns of the various school communities or other groups. While it is imperative that all feel welcomed, included, and free to share their thoughts and questions, hearing what other members of the broader community have to say fosters fuller understanding of the information and the process, awareness and understanding of the multiple needs APS and the School Board need to consider, and greater collaboration between communities.

- A holistic perspective should be applied with every boundary process and decision. All school communities (and neighborhoods via civic associations) should be engaged prior to/at the outset of each boundary process and updated throughout regardless of whether they are expected to be directly affected by any boundary changes. This would help minimize communities being surprised by un-anticipated changes or unforeseen secondary impacts. Community members would be less likely to be caught off-guard if they were not initially expected to be affected but became directly impacted by proposed solutions at a later point in the process. In reality, everyone is impacted directly or indirectly by boundary changes. What happens in one geographic area of the County impacts schools and communities throughout the rest of the system, and alignment issues between levels of instruction can be inadvertently affected by a boundary change.

Addendum A: Issues and Recommendations

PROBLEM	EXAMPLE	RECOMMENDATIONS
Contentious and divisive Lack of clear objectives/goals to start Outcome does not always seem to achieve the initial stated objectives Lack of analysis to evaluate effectiveness of decision/achievement of objectives	Nature of some rhetoric both face-to-face and online Middle school boundary process was to "balance enrollment across schools" and "relieve crowding" yet outcome was one middle school significantly under-capacity with remaining schools at or above capacity with anticipated growth	Develop long-term vision and direction for decisions to strive toward Set specific goals and factors for basis of decisions rather than arbitrarily applied principles or considerations Establish means to evaluate whether the final outcome achieves the stated goals and to monitor effectiveness after implementation
Significant, recurring problems with data Inappropriate data Inconsistent data Inaccurate data Data does not seem to support decision	Use of resident FRL% obscures the true impact of proposed boundary Using resident FRL% for some things and enrolled FRL% for others does not enable true comparisons, obscures impact of proposed boundary, instills distrust in leadership, erodes credibility of decisions County average transfer rate v. a proportionate transfer rate (same impacts as above)	Determine appropriate data at outset Keep goals and data consistent throughout process Ensure the accuracy, validity, and appropriateness of data prior to the start

Addendum A: Issues and Recommendations

PROBLEM	EXAMPLE	RECOMMENDATIONS
Overlapping principles Principles at odds with each other Principles with uncertain purpose Arbitrary application of principles Lack of specified weight or role in process	Proximity and Contiguity Contiguity/Proximity and Demographics Contiguity Community members can select principles that best serve their self-interests. Board members can prioritize or dismiss individual principles according to personal preference or interest Consideration of individual principles is uncertain from one process to the next	Replace general "considerations" with distinct "determining factors" Mandate Board to choose among options that balance all factors Provide specific definitions of each determining factor and set target goals for each as appropriate (see Addendum C)
Quantity v. quality engagement/input "Engagement fatigue" – process requires being engaged from beginning to end Seems to favor those with the time and stamina to engage at every step and be heard multiple times and be loudest Communication with non-English speaking families	Bulk identical letters/emails from specific communities; Colored t-shirts Particularly in iterative processes, people seemingly not affected in phase one tune out and are unaware and/or unprepared later in the process if things change and they are directly impacted Under-represented groups' input tends to be solicited later in the process when their input might have a lesser impact	Fewer, more meaningful opportunities for input Minimize separation of groups; increase opportunities for communities to hear each other's questions and concerns; foster understanding & cooperation Engage under-represented communities and those not directly impacted at very beginning of the process

Addendum B: Sample Boundary Process

SAMPLE PROCESS

Step one:
Identify and state the specific purpose(s) for the process, objective(s) for new boundaries, and the appropriate data – vetted by the community – to be used to develop solutions.

Step two:
Use specific determining factors to develop options.

Step three:
Conduct a community input phase of a specified period of time deemed appropriate for the given process.

Step four:
Staff consults with School Board to consider community feedback and solicit Board member comments and general guidance.

Step five:
Staff incorporates appropriate feedback and devises a final recommendation or two options for Board consideration.

Step six:
Provide a short period of opportunity for the community, APS, and School Board to react to recommended boundary scenario(s), focusing on the identification of errors, oversights of special circumstances or situations, and any unintended impacts or policy infractions.

Step seven:
Make final adjustments to recommended boundary option(s) as appropriate per step six.

Step eight:
School Board takes action on decision/approval.

Step nine:
Evaluate whether the final outcome has achieved the stated goals of the boundary adjustment after the first one or two years of implementation.

Addendum C: Suggested Determining Factors

CURRENT GUIDING PRINCIPLES	RECOMMENDED DETERMINING FACTORS	WHY INCLUDE FACTOR
Proximity = keeping geographically closest students together at a neighborhood school to minimize bus rides and support walkability	**"(Transportation) efficiency"** – referring to _Proximity_ and _Contiguity_ and efficient use of APS bus routes and resources/County transportation options, including cycling and walking	Reality of limited resources, especially in face of continued growth; honors community's desire for nearby schools
Contiguity = precluding oddly-shaped geographic boundaries	**"Utilization"** – referring to _Efficiency_ and optimizing use of facilities (instructional use as well as % capacity usage)	Responsible stewardship of tax $ and resources; necessity in midst of seat shortage, growth, and limited resources/options for new facilities
Alignment = reinforcing contiguity and stability		
Stability = consistency, minimizing disruption	**"Stability"** – referring to _Alignment_ and _Stability_ ensuring a sufficiently large # of cohorts moving together when redistricted through a boundary change AND when transitioning to next level of education (ES to MS, MS to HS) - grade level cohort v. planning unit cohort	Recognizes importance of consistency and difficulty of transition and change by minimizing disruptions and social isolation
Efficiency = optimizing use of facilities; minimizing future capital and operating costs		
Demographics = promoting diversity	**"Socioeconomic diversity" "Equity"** or **"Inclusivity"** – referring to _Demographics_ and using FRL% data, defining a target goal to move toward with each decision	Reflects values of APS and Arlington County; incorporates values of community; acknowledges importance of diversity/diverse schools; supports and facilitates equitable opportunities

Addendum C: Suggested Determining Factors