

Arlington County Council



August 31, 2020

Dear Ms. Stengle and Ms. Mimberg,

Thank you for a very informative and engaging discussion last week. I have shared your comments and thoughts with the CCPTA Executive Board and we would like to follow up with you regarding some key points.

As you know, we face unique circumstances with the COVID-19 pandemic. Uncertainty and instability have become the norm because of how quickly things develop. We have appreciated the efforts by the Superintendent, School Board members, and APS staff to communicate clearly as information has evolved. Even so, families and staff are exhausted and burdened with plenty already this year. It is obvious to all of us that the 2020-21 school year will already be a year like no other in APS' history with a myriad of unique challenges, pressures, and uncertainties facing parents, students, and APS staff and teachers.

Therefore, we ask you to consider deferring the elementary school boundary process for a year. As we discussed, past boundary processes have been painful and divisive. The CCPTA has been working hard since March to promote a countywide focus among our PTAs, encouraging partnerships and collaborations to feed and supply vulnerable families, advocating as a more cohesive group, and managing a cross-county book distribution effort. We ask that APS support us in our efforts to avoid creating competition among our schools and families during this extremely challenging time.

Of particular concern is that we simply don't know what APS enrollment will look like after the pandemic. It's not clear how many students who are leaving APS this school year will return. We also understand that the decrease in enrollment numbers is uneven across the county. Drops in enrollment have been higher at schools where families have more economic choices about schooling their children and enrollment has increased at schools where families may be collecting together more densely because of economic difficulties. **The geographic enrollment landscape is likely to look very different in the fall of 2021, in ways we may not be able to predict. Please don't ask families to invest precious time and energy in this process now, only to have to ask them to do it again a year later.**

We understand that the current timeline is somewhat related to costs associated with allowing the new elementary school at the Reed site to be unused for an academic year (as all of our schools may be for the duration of this school year). **We ask that you also consider the potentially greater costs arising from making decisions based on faulty methodology or the staff resources needed to repeat the process the following year if we push this process**

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forward during a time of great upheaval. The relationship between APS and our families hangs in the balance during significant change. Is this year's planned boundary process how we want to spend our precious time and resources?

As we discussed, in the past it has often been difficult for families to understand the specific goals and parameters of community engagement efforts (for example, what elements are non-negotiable and why; what elements they can truly influence; whether the goal is simply to inform the community or use their suggestions to improve a plan or develop an alternate scenario; etc.). This has contributed to engagement fatigue and a sense of engagement theater when the outcomes of the boundary processes have had contradictory results to the stated intent at the outset. We're very concerned that these feelings would be exacerbated this fall: the necessary requirement of social distancing will make meaningful community engagement more difficult or impossible. **Families with more flexibility will be able to engage more readily than families who face additional challenges during this time, reinforcing the impression that some voices are heard more loudly than others.**

This year, families and staff are struggling given the circumstances of a pandemic and virtual learning. Please don't add to these already challenging burdens. Please prioritize student success and well-being by deferring this process until the future is less uncertain.

We value the opportunity to be collaborative partners and to help keep each other informed about community engagement and APS priorities. Thank you for considering our request.

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