

Jamestown Elementary PTA
3700 N. Delaware Street
Arlington, Virginia 22207

November 27, 2012

Dear School Board Members, Dr. Murphy, Ms. Tuccillo, Mr. Chadwick, and Mr. Pfeiffer:

The Jamestown Elementary School PTA recently conducted a survey of its community to understand its priorities and concerns with regards to the building of the new school on the Williamsburg campus. We received a significant response from the community with a total of 221 responses, 189 of whom completed the survey. 93.7% of these respondents were parents and the remainder staff. Among parents, respondents were representative of our school population in terms of both planning unit and grade of their children. Given the number and makeup of respondents, we believe the survey results are very strong representation of the views of our community, which consists of 436 families and 55 teachers.

We have attached a copy of the survey and a summary of survey results for your review. Based on feedback from this survey and discussions at PTA meetings, we recommend that Arlington Public Schools (APS) take the following action steps.

1. **Continue to take immediate action to reduce overcrowding.** The top concern in our survey, cited by 61.9% of respondents, was whether the plans would successfully eliminate overcrowding in the schools. We support APS' plans to build new facilities, rather than increase class size. We are aware that past efforts to address overcrowding have been blocked by community concerns about change. Our survey indicates some willingness to accept change at this time with only 38.1% citing concerns about changing schools and 31.2% citing concern about the new school being as good as the former school.
2. **Follow a process that actively engages and responds to community feedback.** The third most commonly cited concern in the survey, cited by 42.9% of respondents, was whether the School Board would listen to community feedback. While recent transportation issues have had a minimal impact on the Jamestown community, the poor communications and lack of community feedback in the process has stirred skepticism. We believe that the boundary process has begun in the right manner and would like to ensure it continue down that path. In particular, we think that data and options under consideration should be made available to the public and feedback should be solicited using approaches that capture feedback from the *majority*, such as surveys and requests to PTAs to draft letters in response to options under consideration. Past boundary changes have relied heavily, if not solely, on speakers at School Board meetings to solicit feedback. While speakers should be a part of the process, we think that relying on them too heavily gives undo weight to vocal minorities and could block difficult, but necessary decisions to address the key objective of alleviating overcrowding.

3. **Address community concerns related to the location on Williamsburg's campus.** While the location on the Williamsburg campus ranked as the fifth most commonly cited concern, it was cited by 34.4% of respondents and was a *very strong* concern for those who cited it, as evidenced by the large number of open-ended responses centered on this topic. The location was a particular concern for those planning units immediately surrounding Williamsburg. It was cited by 68.2% of respondents in planning unit 2209 and 56.6% of respondents in the planning units west of Old Dominion Dr. (2209 to 2212). Common sources of concern mentioned in open-ended responses include the following:

- Impact on traffic, which is already considered to be a problem at Williamsburg Middle School;
- Inefficiency associated with building new facilities in lieu of utilizing existing facilities, such as Madison Center, Reed, or ATS (which could be used as a neighborhood school if relocated);
- Impact on open space; and
- The location being close to the McLean border and not close enough to the center of overcrowding to address the problem.

In response to these concerns, we believe that APS needs to do a better job explaining its decision of where to build and to address concerns about traffic and open space in the building design. However, APS should not let the concerns about the location block construction given that the most commonly cited concern in the survey was alleviating overcrowding. In particular, the Madison Center should not be considered as an alternative, since it would require significantly more students in our school district to change schools than the Williamsburg location, and changing schools was cited as a concern by somewhat more respondents (38.1%) than the location (cited by 34.4%).

4. **Prioritize Proximity and Stability when selecting among boundary options.** Some boundary options will address certain boundary criteria better than others. As part of the boundary planning process, we would like APS to help the community visualize -- through the proposed online planning tool or otherwise -- how emphasis on each planning criteria translates to proposed boundary solutions. We believe that this will help the community understand how policy choices drive the boundaries for the new school. When considering boundary options in the next stage of this process, we ask that APS prioritize Proximity and Stability. The responses to our survey ranked Proximity as the most important boundary criteria with 46.6% of respondents citing this as their #1 criteria. Stability ranked second with 61.9% of respondents rating it their first or second most important criteria. Efficiency, Contiguity, and Demographics ranked #3, #4, and #5, respectively. At recent PTA meetings, parents have expressed particular concern about how APS will maintain Proximity and Stability if and when new capacity is brought online later without planning for its impact now. While parents seem to be willing to accept boundary changes at this time, we think that they are willing to accept *one* big set of changes and that they will become rigid if further boundary changes are considered in conjunction with new capacity down the road. We think that APS needs to create a more

holistic plan for long-term capacity boundary changes capacity in order to maintain Proximity and Stability for its students.

5. **Prioritize Traffic Flow, Open Space, Separation, and 21st Century in designing the facility.** Survey responses ranked Traffic Flow, Open Space, Separation, and 21st Century as the top four design priorities. Open Space was cited as a concern by 43.9% of respondents, making it the second most commonly cited concern. It was ranked as a top 5 design criteria by 73.0% of respondents, and a #1 design criteria by 11.6% of respondents. Based on this feedback, we think that APS should prioritize design concepts that utilize the unused land on the corner of Harrison and 36th Streets in a manner similar to the Hilltown concept, since this approach will have the least impact on open space.
6. **Grandfather 4th and 5th graders.** We understand that grandfathering will slow APS' ability to address overcrowding. The survey shows a wide range for preferences for this trade off. On average, respondents would like to see 2 years of grandfathering with 68.3% of respondents preferring 2 years or less of grandfathering.
7. **Continue plans for new school to be a neighborhood school.** 48.1% said that they would like the new school to be a neighborhood school with the most commonly cited reasons being that it keeps students closest to the school that they will attend (cited by 60.4% of those who prefer a neighborhood school), it provides the best solution to address overcrowding (cited by 54.9% of those who prefer a neighborhood school), and that it provides the best educational solution (cited by 40.7% of those who prefer a neighborhood school). The next most common choice was an upper elementary school, which was cited by 36.5% of respondents. Only 15.3% would like the new school to be a county-wide choice program.
8. **Offer option for FLES continuation.** Teachers and parents have raised concern about whether students that move from Jamestown (or Glebe) to the new school will be able to take Spanish after having been in a FLES school for a number of years. If the new school does not offer FLES, we ask APS to provide a way for students in the new school to complete the program if they have had 2 years or more of FLES. Possible solutions include grandfathering students who have had 2 years or more of FLES, making a cross-registration option available to former FLES students (ie, former Jamestown and Glebe students at Williamsburg could opt to be bused to Jamestown or Glebe for FLES), or offering an after-school FLES program at the new school on early release Wednesdays.

Thank you for your consideration of these recommendations. These recommendations have been drafted by the PTA Executive Board, our School Boundary Liaison, and our BLPC Liaisons and have been circulated to the PTA community for feedback. We welcome the opportunity to discuss the survey with you and to respond to any questions you may have.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jill Curran". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'J' and a long, sweeping underline.

Jill Curran
President
Jamestown PTA