

March 4, 2020

Ways and Means Committee Hearing

House Bill 1422 Public Schools - Redistricting - Community Advisory Committees for Student Assignment

Testimony from Sabrina Dodd (7425 Democracy Boulevard, Bethesda, MD)

I submit this testimony as a state resident, parent of 3 Montgomery County Public School ("MCPS") graduates, and a former member of the MCPS school boundary committee that provided the Superintendent with recommendations for the location of a new middle school to serve students in the Bethesda Chevy Chase Cluster in 2016.

Thank you for your focus on the process for determining the location of new public school buildings. I am concerned your proposal to add a community advisory committee, appointed by Montgomery County Council or the County Executive, would make an already difficult process even more contentious. In Montgomery County the public schools are under the leadership of a Superintendent, who reports to an elected Board of Education ("Board"). The Superintendent makes a boundary recommendation to the Board, based on alternatives developed by his staff and the ratings those alternatives receive from a Boundary Advisory Committee, composed of staff and members of the public. As with matters under the purview of the Superintendent of Schools, other than the MCPS budget, the "governing body of the County" has no involvement in the boundary process.

It is my understanding the bill is offered, in part, in response to complaints about processes districts currently use. In particular, vociferous concerns have been expressed about boundary changes that have resulted in students going to schools further from their homes. I appreciate this concern. However, schools are built where land is available. It does not necessarily follow the best use of a new school facility is to serve the students who live closest to it. Further, deciding school boundaries, with the intent of maximizing neighborhood schools, would exacerbate existing de facto segregation, given the history of housing segregation in Montgomery County.

Another concern often raised by parents is a lack of transparency. At this time, with the use of GIS software, planners can geocode student locations and demographics by address. Students can then be identified geographically according to specific characteristics, including grade level, current school assignment, FARMS status, English language learning or bilingual status, discipline, and participation in special programs. Student demographic information can be juxtaposed to new home construction data, future housing development locations, enrollment projections, and school capacities. GIS allows for decision makers and the public to see the demographic makeup of a student body based on different boundary options. Many parents are dissatisfied with the school boundary change process, notwithstanding the transparency afforded by GIS. Their dissatisfaction is a result of the belief a boundary change will adversely affect their children's education. The process is not a cause.

In Montgomery County, in virtually every instance, the process for deciding on school boundary changes has been inherently conscientious. It is the separate often inter-locking issues of race, class and equality, as well as the large demand for high-performing schools that drive the dissatisfaction of parents. Creating an Advisory Committee, appointed by the County governing body, will do nothing to quell that dissatisfaction or help the Superintendent and the Board of Education identify and ensure the underlying values, principles, and decision-making criteria that guide redistricting result in students getting the best education possible.

Thank you for considering these concerns.