

Safety concerns at SSIMS prompt two visits from county officials in one week

Parents, teachers decry overcrowding, lack of security cameras, outdated infrastructure



Exterior of Silver Spring International Middle School, which looks out over Purple Line construction on Wayne Avenue. Credit: Em Espey

Overcrowding at the 89-year-old Silver Spring International Middle School prompted two visits last week by officials from Montgomery County Public Schools and the county government. One county councilmember who viewed the campus called the environment "very, very troubling."

Staff members told the principal they "feel unsafe coming to work" and said students are being "negatively impacted." Community members point to violence, weapons scares, strangers traversing the 14-acre campus, which is next to a Metro station, and 1,250 students navigating a building with water damage, air quality problems, mold, asbestos, unfinished renovations and tricky modes of egress.

Community members are asking for more security cameras to be installed, a third security officer to be assigned and the building layout to be reexamined for possible changes in order to offset overcrowding and accessibility issues, particularly during emergencies.

The MCPS Safety and Security Office is due to release a campus security audit that will include making specific recommendations for improvement. A spokesperson for MCPS told Bethesda Beat in an email that although the details of the internal review cannot be shared for fear of compromising school safety, the district is considering "a number of improvements."

These improvements will include “changes to stairwell and hallway operations, reviewing connecting areas between the middle and elementary school and increasing security staff,” communications director Jessica Baxter wrote to Bethesda Beat.

The school board has received a “a lot of concerning emails” about the issues at SSIMS, according to remarks by school board member Brenda Wolff (Dist. 5) at an operating budget session on Tuesday.

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Board member Lynne Harris (At-Large) was once a student at SSIMS and attested to the campus’s “multiple ongoing safety issues” during the board meeting. She said the building structure has been “sliced and diced” since the 1930s, resulting in a campus that’s uniquely difficult for staff

to oversee and manage.

"I really think we need to be looking at the staffing allocation through that lens," she told the board.

On Tuesday, Montgomery County Public Schools conducted a walkthrough of the campus as part of their internal security and security audit, prompted by an email campaign from parents and testimony before the Board of Education.

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On Friday, a second walkthrough was facilitated by the school's Parent-Teacher-Student Association. County Councilmember Kate Stewart (D-Dist. 4), Board of Education member Grace Rivera-Oven (Dist. 1), MCPS Associate Superintendent Peter Moran, Montgomery County Education Association President Jennifer Martin, SSIMS Principal Karen

Bryant, PTSA members, teachers and parents were in attendance.

"We were there for over two hours," Stewart told Bethesda Beat. "I think this was a critical step. Conditions there are very, very troubling."

Stewart has been speaking with residents in the area for months about safety issues at SSIMS, she said, and her staff began planning Friday's meeting as soon as she took office.

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Bolstering security measures

According to MCPS staff guidelines, two security assistants are assigned to every school unless specific factors warrant a lower or higher allocation. School type, student enrollment and square footage are the three primary factors the district

uses to decide whether additional security personnel are needed.

Parents and teachers have been calling on MCPS to add an additional security officer to the school given the size of the student body and campus, as well as the volume of recent incidents there—including violence, truancy, and [trespassing concerns](#), as well as reports of weapons ranging from knives to [pellet guns](#) and [BB guns](#), according to multiple parents and school correspondence.

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The school is also located next to a bus stop and a park, and teachers say members of the public frequently traverse school grounds, mistaking them for public areas due to a lack of clear signage.

In early January, SSIMS staff sent a letter to Principal Bryant outlining a list of **pressing safety concerns**.

"A number of serious incidents have led staff members to feel unsafe coming to work, and the unstructured atmosphere in the hallways has negatively impacted student learning and wellbeing," the letter read.

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Purple Line construction is taking place along Wayne Avenue right outside the SSIMS campus. Credit: Em Espey

To further complicate matters, construction on the Purple Line is taking place right outside SSIMS' doors. Construction crews walk along Wayne Avenue daily, prompting staff to wonder how to identify someone who may pose a threat to the school, according to several educators.

Compromised accessibility

In part because of the building's age, issues with water damage, air quality, mold, asbestos and unfinished renovations persist, according to reports from teachers, students and parents.

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"Because of the age of the building, environmental concerns are a huge issue that needs to be remedied," said Carrie Ewachiw, parent of a SSIMS seventh grader. A number of incomplete renovations over the years has resulted in "kind of a Frankenstein of a building," she said.

A [2019 on-site review and assessment](#) of SSIMS' compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act identified 338 barriers to accessibility within the school

building, including issues with stairs, ramps, bathrooms, water fountains and exterior routes.

The assessment was completed by inspection and certification company [Bureau Veritas](#), founded in 1828. The resulting report was published by MCPS in October of 2019, just months before the COVID-19 pandemic hit the United States and caused schools to pivot to virtual learning. Since students' return to the classroom, multiple parents and educators report that the issues raised by the 2019 report persist.

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"This is not a modern school," said Tammy Brown, mother of a seventh-grade SSIMS student. "It's not a good set-up."

One stairwell in particular has raised concern among the

SSIMS community as far as safety, crowding and accessibility—stairwell 7. During a recent unplanned evacuation due to a malfunctioning alarm, it took students and staff 10 minutes to evacuate the building through the stairwell.

“In the event of a real emergency, I’m not confident they could safely evacuate,” Brown said. “It’s easy to see why it’s such a chokepoint.”

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The next step

Stewart called the Friday meeting a “critical step forward” in addressing the many safety concerns at SSIMS.

Baxter told Bethesda Beat in an email that as part of the improvements being made to address these concerns,

MCPS will soon be establishing “a safety committee made up of students, staff, parents to meet monthly to discuss actions and assessing of internal safety and operational upgrades.”

According to a [community letter](#) from Principal Bryant, MCPS will soon be releasing an audit of the SSIMS campus that will include specific action items focused on addressing safety and security concerns. She said she looks forward to receiving the audit and facilitating next steps.

“The principals, the teachers and the PTSA are doing a remarkable job under really terrible conditions,” she said.

“We need to make sure the environment they’re working in is safe for everyone.”