Shabina Ahmed
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Good evening - Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to speak tonight. My name is Shabina Ahmed, and I reside in Potomac with my husband Zain; we have three children, all of whom attend Wayside Elementary School. I have lived in Montgomery County for over 25 years and I am also an MCPS graduate (Watkins Mill HS). I chose to move back to the county after graduate school because I truly believe this is one of the best places to live in the country.

I became concerned when I heard of the Board’s resolution to consider redrawing our current school boundary lines. I have two major concerns:

1) There will be logistical issues in changing the boundary lines enough to promote the goal of socioeconomic diversity. It is clear, based on Montgomery County’s demographics and geography, in order to satisfy the goal of increasing SES diversity, children will have to commute a considerable distance from their neighborhood to their newly assigned schools.

2) Schools serve as the centers of our communities. Families become interwoven with one another as our children form lifelong friendships, with parents developing relationships with one another in this process. The phrase ‘it takes a village’ resonates within our communities. Who here has had to rely on a neighbor to make sure their child gets home safely from the bus stop, when running late from work? How many of us have had to rely on another parent to pick up our sick child from school? Or relied on a carpool system with other parents to make all of those weekly sports practices work with our busy schedules? Further, there is clear and consistent research that parental and community involvement in schools increase student achievement and success, regardless of the family’s income level or background. (Barton, 2003) (Jeynes, 2003)

Rezoning to satisfy a still undefined demographic goal, will tear our current school communities apart. This will have a negative impact on the affected children, their families and potentially even the schools themselves.

a. Children may have to leave behind friends they have known since kindergarten. The distance will also likely have an effect on out of school interactions with the friends they make at their new school.

b. Traveling further to a different school will make it difficult to participate in after school extra-curricular activities.

c. Accessibility to the school by families will diminish, making it harder for parents to connect with teachers and contribute as school volunteers and leaders.

Our Wayside community recently had the experience of having our school building relocate while the school was rebuilt. Our children’s bus commute increased from 10 minutes to over 40 minutes, though the holding school was only a few miles further than Wayside. During those two years, the participation in afterschool activities was non-existent, and the parental involvement with the school and each other diminished significantly.
Lastly, as I mentioned previously, I attended MCPS and I am graduate of Watkins Mill High School in Gaithersburg. I think this puts me in a unique position to understand the differences in achievement that exist between schools across the county.

I did well in school; I took Honors and AP classes, went on to graduate summa cum laude from UMD and then med school after that. There are likely many factors that went into my success, some of which a school board does not have the power to influence – such as family support for my education. However, there is one aspect to my experience at WMHS that the board needs to take a closer look into: intra-school inequities. WMHS is an extremely diverse school, however, if the demographics of the AP and honors classes were studied, it will become clear that those higher level courses do NOT represent the student population of the school. In a school where approximately 50% of the students are Hispanic, why was it that only one student in my Honors Calculus class was Hispanic? What is the demographic make-up of our magnet programs?

Before the Board decides to draw lines between neighborhoods, intra-school inequities need to be examined and worked on. Otherwise, it will just be more of the same – the school population as a whole may look good on paper, but the integrated classroom concept will not become a reality.

To summarize, I respectfully urge the board to reconsider zoning based on demographics and keep communities together. Instead, the board should redirect its efforts to explore opportunities to help improve schools like Watkins Mill, without having to pull apart the communities they serve.

1) Create opportunities for greater parental and community involvement in the school
2) Examine ways to increase diversity within the schools honors and AP level courses
3) Consider diversifying school staff and providing more cultural competency training
4) Set high expectations for all students- you may be surprised to learn that many students can rise to this challenge
5) Consider rezoning for over-crowding, with the input of the affected communities, and respecting the geographic locations of neighborhoods.

I thank you for your time and consideration. And thank you for being committed to the success of every student in our county.

References