My name is Jane Smith, and my husband and I moved to Germantown in 2001. Our 2 daughters are Seneca Valley High School graduates (2006 and 2012). Now, as empty nesters, we are creating a legacy in this community, and one of them should be a stellar high school experience for current and future SVHS students.

I was one of the first lead facilitators hand-picked and trained by the MCPS Study Circles program in 2003. Study Circles strives to close the academic achievement gap by facilitating courageous conversations about race and diversity, and by creating individual school action plans with students, parents, teachers and administrators. Many schools in our cluster ask for this program and it was a privilege to serve many of them as a lead facilitator in this capacity for nearly ten years.

When the poverty issue was raised, we agreed that is was outside of what we could control, as we struggled with possible solutions.

In 2003, 14% of the students at SVHS were on FARMS. Last year, 39% of them were on FARMS. Watching this take place was difficult on many levels as a parent, homeowner and community advocate. A key fallout is that de facto segregation continues to increase with this unfortunate reality.

I have spent many years as a community organizer and catalyst. One of my past clients is the VP of Diversity and Inclusion at Sodexo. My experience has taught me, and research proves these points:

Diversity promotes student growth and reflection. It fosters a sense of empathy and awareness. It brings about open-mindedness and new perspectives. It supports creativity and tolerance. It allows students to feel unique, yet part of a group. It prepares students for a global workplace.

Studies show that students work better in a diverse environment, enabling them to concentrate and push themselves further when there are people of other backgrounds working alongside them.

A recent NYTimes project on immigration reports that students feel safer in school and in life when they are educated in a diverse setting. Educators and administrative leaders can help students better understand that while everyone is different, everyone is the same and should be treated with respect.

Lessons learned from decades of research on integrated classrooms include:

1. White students’ test scores don’t drop when they go to schools with large numbers of black and Latino students.

2. Diverse classrooms teach some of the most important 21st century skills, which matter more than test scores. Some of the most important academic, social and emotional skills – curiosity, complex and flexible thinking, resilience, empathy,
gratitude – are not captured by standardized test scores but are keys to a successful and productive life. Academic advantages must include these skills which are captured mostly through qualitative assessments like presentations, group projects and student surveys.

3. Graduates of socioeconomically diverse schools are more effective in the workplace and global markets. Virginia Commonwealth University's Genevieve Siegel-Hawley argues that daily classroom interactions with students from different racial and economic backgrounds help students develop the ability to view and understand complex problems and events through multiple lenses. Research also shows that an integrated workforce helps companies design and sell products more effectively to a wide range of customers.

School is about preparing kids for life – not just the next school. Loyola University of New Orleans' Robert A. Garda Jr. found that choosing a school or a neighborhood is actually one of the most meaningful ways in which parents can act out their values and help reduce income and racial disparities.

We can do better. We must. The time is now. The window is closing.

It pleases us that the MCPS Superintendent dedicated significant resources and research to learn more about equity and diversity issues and impacts. To our delight, he has chosen the best possible boundary study recommendation, to honor and to serve our precious students and future workforce.

His option will make us stronger, wiser and more capable, as individuals and as a region. We are at a critical crossroads. Let’s turn a critical corner for SVHS, for our neighboring high schools, and for the greater good across MCPS and Montgomery County.

Thank you.