November 13 Boundary Study Testimony

Maria Fernanda McClure – Clarksburg Cluster resident

Thank you for the opportunity to address you regarding the Upcounty Boundary Study, initiated to relieve overutilization at Clarksburg and Northwest High Schools.

I approach you today with two requests. One is to ask for a side-by-side comparison of the current recommendation against Option 9. The recommendation creates conditions particular to our geographic area, which can’t be ignored. My other request is that you look beyond FARMS numbers alone. Please make a commitment to remove barriers and build infrastructure to address disparities that systematically disadvantage students with the greatest needs.

As a resident MD living in the LBES service area, I first became engaged in the Upcounty Boundary Study process when our elementary school was included in the first round of options proposed to provide relief to the overutilization at Clarksburg and Northwest High Schools. We learned four factors are considered when assessing boundaries, but this effort would focus only on three: Demographics, Geography and Utilization. We were also informed that the language related to the Demographic factor had been updated to include the phrase “especially strive” to create a diverse student body. We asked if that gave the Demographic factor greater weight and the response was "There is no weighting or priority for these four factors" (Boundary study FAQ http://gis.mcpsmd.org/boundarystudypdfs/SVHS_FAQ_Feb1.pdf)

Option 4, which included reassigning Little Bennett and Darnestown Elementary Schools to Seneca Valley, neatly addressed the Demographic factor by helping to balance FARMS figures, but it was a complete failure in terms of Geography and Utilization. That made me wonder why such an unbalanced proposal would be made.

Based on a comment made by Dr. Smith during the October 28 working meeting, I’m concerned the Superintendent’s focus shifted from the driving purpose of this study, which was reducing overutilization at Clarksburg and Northwest High Schools, to testing the new wording of the Demographic factor. This shift occurs at the expense of ensuring better utilization for a school with no immediate relief options in sight and creates more gridlock in an already crippled area of the county.

During that same meeting, Ms. Dixon discounted our concerns about traffic. She suggested distance was not an issue because activity buses will continue to be available as they are now. What Ms. Dixon may not know is that Clarksburg High School only has activity buses on Tuesdays and Thursdays. They depart at 4:30 before many activities are finished and it takes most students about an hour to make their way home.

With all due respect to the Board, you are experts when it comes to Education Policy, but your commuting experience is completely different than the reality we face along Route 355 and our ancillary roads all day, every day. Not one of you lives in Clarksburg. Not one of you works in Clarksburg. More importantly, not one of you has to learn in Clarksburg. For any of you to dismiss the gridlock we fight daily shows a deep disregard for the impact the current recommendation will have on our community. Having middle school buses literally crossing paths to move kids back and forth is absurd and places yet another unfair burden on our youth.
The current recommendation does nothing beyond shuffling students to achieve equality on paper. I'm all for taking advantage for windows of opportunity, but not when the problems we create are not balanced by achieving true equity for all students.

If the focus continues to remain solely on balancing FARMS numbers across schools without addressing the existing barriers to learning, we disrupt all of our students. This single focus does not align with your social equity inclusion policy. It runs counter to the recently adopted FAA policy and it utterly fails our most vulnerable population.

Clarksburg, Maryland is a beautifully diverse community in terms of race and ethnicity as well as socioeconomics. We invariably bring our personal experiences to the table but there is one area in which we do come together to transcend divisions resulting from our cultural differences. WE LOVE OUR CHILDREN. We universally want the best for them and we do not want to have to jump through hoops to give them the best educational opportunities available. As you well know, these obstacles are even greater for minorities, for families living in poverty and for those struggling with the English language.

We cannot overwhelm Seneca Valley by increasing the FARMS rate just so students can take advantage of the Health and Wellness Center scheduled to open there in January of 2021, but we need to do something. We need to do more county wide to ensure academic, social and emotional support is available at all schools.

According to an MCPS commissioned resource study, Black and Brown students, particularly those from low-income families, spend more time with novice teachers than their peers. They need access to effective and diverse teachers and these teachers must be supported to succeed.

In MCPS, lower-income elementary and middle schools are much more likely to have novice principals. All students, particularly Black and Brown students must attend schools led by effective and diverse leaders committed to providing equitable access to opportunities and resources. These leaders must be supported to succeed.

In MCPS, Black and Brown students are less likely to take the most advanced math classes. All students, particularly Black and Brown students, must be engaged and supported to master rigorous coursework if we hope to ensure college and career success.

Unlike other areas in Montgomery County, our neighborhoods are socioeconomically integrated by design. By requiring access to different levels of affordable housing in all new construction developments, the County is working to level the playing field for residents. It is up to you to level the playing field for our students by looking beyond just FARMS numbers. You must ensure that every student, every teacher and every leader receives support as well as the tools critical to achieving their personal and academic potential. If you need the Clarksburg community to press the County Council for more funding for these services, let us know how we can work with you to make that happen.