Good Evening,

I am here tonight representing the Clarksburg Cluster. Along with several community advocates, we have spent the past several months gathering feedback from each school in the cluster as well as implementing student outreach through a focus group and survey. This Boundary Study has brought out very strong emotions, but most of all, it has brought so many members of the community together to advocate for the greater good. You see, all students in the Clarksburg Cluster ARE OUR KIDS, even if their address isn't Clarksburg. We are passionate, because we care about ensuring the best education experience for all of OUR KIDS. It's a challenging time when you have to make choices about which families should be reassigned from the cluster and we want to be sure that wherever they land, they will prosper. Students are anxious about being separated from their friends. We need to be able to tell them that their friends are landing in the right place.

As you saw from the Boundary survey results, Clarksburg residents felt very strongly about the geography factor. Nearly 50% of Clarksburg High School students identified it as the most important factor to them. Unless you live in or have to commute through Clarksburg, you may not realize the magnitude of the traffic problem we have. There is continued development without the infrastructure to support it. Not only do our residents rely on the few main roads we have, but people travelling from areas north such as West Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Frederick County add to the congestion. What's the most popular bailout exit on most days? Exit 18, right in Clarksburg. Our community has tried to advocate for m83, widening of 270 and other road projects, to no avail. This is why the geography factor generated such a powerful reaction, putting the Board of Education, who is responsible for the school policy, in a difficult position.

The reassignment of students who will have to travel with the traffic each day presents a lot of barriers to them and their families. With the superintendent’s recommendation, those high school students will no longer benefit from the change in bell times as their 5-20 minutes commutes will at least double to 10-40 minutes on average. No one wants to double their time on a school bus. The commute time for the communities who travel north, against traffic, isn’t as big of an issue as it is for the communities travelling with rush hour traffic.

All affected communities expressed concern about their ability to engage in school activities if it is not the most geographically convenient location. Surveyed students most often cited transportation issues as a reason for not being able to participate in after school activities. Not all schools are created equal in this respect and the feedback we have received suggests that activity bus services may not be as robust as needed to ensure equal opportunities for all. Some activities don’t start right after school and the busses aren’t running late enough to get students
home. It has also been reported by students and parents that Ride-on bus stops are not accessible to all families, partially because there is no stop near their house.

Included in the Superintendent's recommendation is the more rural area, Boyds. The roads in this area are very windy, and some have no streetlights. This is a recipe for a disaster for teen drivers who need to travel much further than the typical student being reassigned does. The Boyds community should be considered separately.

The original intent of the Boundary Study was to provide relief to the overcrowding of Clarksburg High School while filling seats that the newly renovated Seneca Valley High School. Many of the students in Clarksburg High School have spent their entire school experiences in overcrowded schools. The Superintendent's Recommendation puts Clarksburg High School very close to its current enrollment in just 6 years. To quote the Superintendent, Dr. Smith, "If not now, then when?" While Clarksburg continues to grow, there is no relief in sight! Please find a way to better address the utilization factor. There were TEN other options that better addressed the issue of overutilization. The safety of OUR KIDS is depending on your action to solve this.

Clarksburg High School currently has the most portables in the entire county. A parent described the students in portables as "doomed" if there were ever an active shooter situation. The PTA and the administration have asked for additional security cameras to better be able to monitor students entering and exiting the building from the portables, yet there has been no action. Although we hear that Damascus and Poolesville may provide future relief, there is no mention of a boundary study in either of recently announced CIPs for those schools. "If not now, then when?"

When Clarksburg students shared their experiences with attending overcrowded schools, they told us they often bump into other students as they try to navigate to their next class, particularly in areas where two hallways meet. The crowded hallways result in bad attitudes and inflame physical conflicts as they transition. Some reported feeling anxiety due to hallway conflicts as they have to push and shove their way to their classes. One student compared it to, "270, during rush hour." Students reported that overcrowding forces them to take longer routes to avoid the jams making them even later to class. We can probably all relate to that as well as we opt to take back roads over 270 during rush hour, even when we know it will make us late, it's better than 270. So while the parents fight traffic to get to work, the students are fighting traffic to get to class. Overpopulation also impacts access to activities and services. Students expressed that clubs are often full before they are able to sign up because so many students are competing for the limited spots. Lunch lines are long and the cafeteria is crowded requiring students to sit on the floor in hallways or find a teacher willing to open their rooms to them. Teachers need breaks too! We can do better.

That brings me to the third factor of the Boundary Study: demographics. Clarksburg is already an incredibly diverse community. Our demographics are fairly balanced across all races. Socioeconomic diversity exists within the community as well, due to the more updated housing laws which we embrace. We recognize these laws may not have been in place with our nearby
neighbors, many of which are part of our cluster. It seems to be the priority in the Superintendent’s recommendation, to reduce the disparity of FARMs rates across the schools in the Boundary Study. There is much to be gained by students who attend schools with a strong sense of diversity.

Throughout the past few months, we learned a lot about the differing resources in the schools. Schools like Watkins Mill High School, which has a Wellness Center, appears to have a more successful FARMs population than that of Clarksburg Highschool, according to the Equity Accountability Model data. The Wellness Center that will be at Seneca Valley High School is a tremendous resource to the school communities, but currently, they are only open to the students who attend the school, and in some cases their siblings. We heard Dr. Smith talk about his plan to make the Wellness Centers regional and extend their hours to support more students, but that is still a plan at this point, and it’s concerning that some of our most vulnerable students may not have access to the physical and mental health services that will be offered. After digging deeper we realize there is much more to the story than just the Wellness Center.

Schools with high FARMs rates have other resources that support our most vulnerable students in accessing the rigorous curriculum that MCPS schools offer. Schools with high FARMs rates have great after school programs like Excel Beyond the Bell, which is proven to increase attendance rates. Highly impacted schools have full time, bilingual PPWs, PCCs, ESOL counsellors, and more. The combination of resources helps our most vulnerable students succeed despite the adversity they face each day. There are two solutions here: one is to send the more highly impacted populations to the schools with the resources, or bring the resources to the students who need them the most. In the Superintendent’s plan, the schools who will be most heavily impacted demographically by the reassignment are Rocky Hill and Neelsville Middle Schools. In the end, we have to advocate for our students to get access to what they need that range from basic needs to academic needs, that is of utmost importance.

No matter the decision made by the Board of Education, we will continue to advocate to ensure OUR KIDS “bloom where they are planted.” I have been working closely with the Seneca Valley Cluster Coordinator and we are both committed to ensuring a smooth transition for all families involved in the reassignment.

Thank you for this opportunity.