Dear BOE

The revised goal of this study was to address the overcrowding mainly at CHS, while also looking at the middle school utilization. We believe the Superintendent’s recommendation does not achieve effective relief at CHS with a 400 students overcapacity 5 years from now, with either no potential relief OR one more boundary study to create more turmoil in the area. Also, it uses an incorrect basis for the boundary study by trying to normalize FARMS rate for middle schools but notably does not include all of the middle schools in the study. Inconsistent responses for this approach have been provided by MCPS. Numerous studies have clearly shown that poverty is a significant factor in causing the achievement gap. However, changing the FARMS rate which is merely an indicator of poverty, does not generate a solution to the challenges caused due to poverty. For eg: If you have a foot fracture and in pain and your doctor just provides you pain relief instead of providing a cast for the fracture, you would reject his solution outright and may even question his medical credentials. The focus on decreasing or “normalizing” FARMS rate is inherently just that, without addressing the need to have the focussed resources or access within the schools that have a high FARMS rate, to address poverty induced achievement gaps.

A 2018 Stanford study that looked at 45 million students across the nation over time, showed that FARMS rate/school poverty is not correlated to student achievement. Our own MCPS Office of accountability study in 2018 also showed that there is no correlation between MCPS school poverty rate (FARMS rate) and student achievement. NWEA an education equity organization also showed high FARMS negatively biases the improvements done year over year and masks the reduction in gap achieved in high poverty schools. All these findings do not negate that poverty is a major factor in the achievement gap, but they do clearly show that changing school poverty rate/FARMS rate is not the right solution. Instead the studies show that additional resources such as more experienced teachers, ensuring higher attendance along with additional support such as health services and extended hours for students who need the help, are more aligned with addressing and narrowing the student achievement gap. The Kirwan commission which is quite comprehensive in its analysis of the achievement gap also does not advocate that changing FARMS rate will be a solution. Their guidance is to incentivize highly experienced teachers to remain or be assigned at high poverty schools, providing health services and other community support in the schools, and to decrease barriers to these resources.

The current recommendation’s disregards Option 12 because it has the greatest disparity in the FARMS rate and needs to be “normalized” for enabling achievement gains, but this statement is not aligned with the available data from recent studies. It is in direct contrast to the data that clearly shows that simply decreasing FARMS rate is an incorrect method to address student achievement. Option 12 provides geographic proximity to all the schools in the area. Distance is a barrier to consistent attendance, which disproportionately affects students in poverty. Option 12 addresses the issues of congestion at CHS the best, while still maintaining walkers in all the school clusters. Most importantly, Option 12 is aligned with the above mentioned studies that high poverty schools need to have lesser barriers to access opportunities and resources to effectively address the achievement gap. Option 12 removes barriers and provides direct and non-competitive access to the CTE and IB programs at SVHS to a larger number of students in transient or persistent poverty. It also allows for the larger cohort of Daly and Fox Chapel ES through Neelsville Middle school IB program and to transition into SVHS IB program. Option 12 provides on site access to a health center instead of creating a barrier to reach from a
different school/area. All of this has the potential to actually address the achievement gap issues caused due to poverty, rather than just mask the symptoms of poverty.

Rather than supporting a superficial numbers game that fails to address the very issues that the recommendation claims to address, we strongly request you to look at Option 12 with an open mind, in light of the recent and updated research in this field that are nuanced enough to differentiate the various causes, indicators and solutions for addressing the achievement gap within MCPS.

References:

