Good evening Superintendent Smith and Members of the Board of Education.

My name is Zoe Tishaev, and I am the SGA President of Clarksburg High School. We will hear a lot of repeated perspectives tonight, so I want to take the time to refocus our attention on the core issue this boundary study aims to address: overcrowding.

Every student at Clarksburg feels the tensions caused by the overutilization. I feel it every morning as I’m late to stat class, as I have to run from portables 5 - 13 on one side of the school, to portables 1 - 4 on the other. That is a chasm that cannot physically be crossed in the 5 minutes allotted to students for transition time.

Thus, I am confounded by the results of the boundary public survey, where Clarksburg community members overwhelmingly identified that geography was the most important factor for the consideration of new boundaries. These survey results conflict with reality, leading me to believe that there is a serious dissonance between the concerns of the parents and the everyday frustrations of the students.

There is a deeper, underlying problem in the Clarksburg community. One that the community doesn’t discuss frequently enough, and that is the divide of our two school systems -- one for the rich, and one for the rest of us. Though the divide is much more acute in the uber-rich areas of Potomac and Bethesda, it persists in every part of our county, Clarksburg being no exception.

Let us examine Clarksburg’s current three feeders: Hallie Wells, Rocky Hill, and Neelsville. It’s not hard to see which of these schools is unlike the other.

Neelsville is structurally deficient and has a FARMs rate of an astonishing 67% (as compared to <25% of the other two schools). The disparity between Rocky Hill and Neelsville’s FARMs rates is 44%. For two schools just five minutes away, that is a staggering figure. It doesn’t have to be this way. Superintendent Smith’s Recommendation lowers the FARMs disparity between Rocky Hill and Neelsville to just 16%. It is important to note that, even with this blow to the disparity, Neelsville remains above a 50% FARMs rate. The boundary change is not the solution, but it is a major step toward finding one.

A contention we will hear tonight is that sending students away from their geographical area, even just by an extra 5 minute bus ride, disrupts a sense of “community.” I contend this notion. “Community” is not just the neighborhood you live in. It’s the people you see in the halls, in your classroom, at the pep rallies. Community is not a series of homes in a certain pattern, starting at one road and ending at another. Community is a feeling, a sense of belonging, an identity that is created by the people who partake in it. Clarksburg High has a catchment area of incredible diversity from Clarksburg, to Boyds, to Germantown, to Laytonsville, to Gaithersburg. And we are stronger because of it.
Members of the Board of Education, I trust you all to make the decision that is right for our MCPS community. I know you will. However, whichever option you end up choosing, I have one ask: please do not reassign current freshmen. My job as SGA President is to create a sense of community, to make all students feel welcome at Clarksburg High. This past June, we held a pep rally dedicated to the class of 2023 to dissolve the identities of Neelsville Knights, Rocky Hill Wildcats, and Hallie Wells Mustangs. We dismantled the divides between the middle schools to carefully foster a feeling of Clarksburg identity. And it worked. The result: for the first time in my four years at being at Clarksburg, the freshmen out-cheered the sophomores. It is difficult to articulate the significance of that moment for me. These students are Coyotes. They have bonds and connections here, at my school. Redraw the boundaries. Redraw them boldly. But please, don’t take our freshies away.