

Members of the Montgomery County Board of Education  
Carver Educational Services Center  
850 Hungerford Drive, Room 123  
Rockville, MD 20850

**Re: Sept. 24, 2018 Board Meeting Agenda Item 10.1: Board of Education Policy FAA – Long-range Educational Facilities Planning**

Dear President Durso, Vice-President Evans and Members of the Board:

I write in strong support of the Policy Management Committee's proposed language to revise Policy FAA, in particular the following language:

*a) Demographic characteristics of student population,*

*Analyses of options take into account the impact of various options on the overall populations of affected schools. Options should especially strive to create a diverse student body in each of the affected schools in alignment with Board Policy ACD, Quality Integrated Education. Demographic data showing the impact of various options include the following: racial/ethnic composition of the student population, the socioeconomic composition of the student population, the level of English language learners, and other reliable demographic indicators and participation in specific educational programs. [Lines 447- 464 – emphasis added]*

My thinking on what matters about where students go to school has changed. For many years I have been active in PTA and MCCPTA, and through that involvement have worked with fellow PTAers to try and crack the nut of parent engagement. We all know that parent/guardian engagement is a strong predictor of student achievement – for that reason I have long viewed anything that makes it harder for a parent to be a presence in their child's school and feel empowered to advocate for their child as an obstacle to remove, and often geography appeared to be one such obstacle. Many suggest that to achieve a diverse balance of students in our schools will require moving many students to schools outside of traditional Cluster boundaries, which often (not always) means a school assignment further from home. The inference is that greater distance will make it more difficult to achieve oh-so-important family engagement, and this forms the basis of many arguments I have heard against placing special emphasis on achieving student body diversity in FAA policy decisions.

The research and the students have changed my mind. I firmly believe in data-driven solutions, and that every decision this school system makes should rest on a foundation of evidence-based best practices. The data is clear. Montgomery County's neighborhoods and schools are re-segregating. The result is that we have high poverty schools with large concentrations of students of color, and low-poverty schools with large concentrations of white students. The data also clearly shows that student performance in high poverty schools lags substantially behind student performance in low poverty schools - -across all demographic groups and datapoints.

Our MCPS students have shown us that they are powerful, thoughtful advocates. Any decision made about who goes to what school will be a bad one if it is made without the student voice at the table. I am firmly convinced that the adults in the room don't know as much as we think we do about what's happening in our schools, what needs to change, and how to make change happen. The student perspective is essential to every conversation about schools, students and student outcomes. Students across the country, and here in Montgomery County are speaking out passionately in favor of true diversity in our schools

All means all. We are not serving ALL of our students equally well. But national trends and education research point the way for us to do better. The emerging evidence is clear. Truly diverse schools provide an environment in which all students have the best chance of success. Segregated schools, schools with imbalances in the race, culture and socioeconomic diversity of students, do not create an environment in which all students have the best chance of success. This is a social justice issue that many school systems and communities are tackling head on. MCPS doesn't have to reinvent the wheel to find strategies that work to create truly diverse schools that would do much better for our students. Montgomery County talks the talk, but now it's time to seriously walk the walk.

If students love their schools, the parents will come. If student outcomes improve, parents will come. It is time for Montgomery County to work proactively to create true diversity in our schools.

Thank you,  
Lynne Harris