

Arlington County Council



**CCPTA Recommendations Regarding Boundary Change
and Option School Move Policies and Processes
March 2021**

In April 2019, the CCPTA provided APS and the School Board our [comments and recommendations](#) regarding its school boundary change process. We appreciate that APS has adopted some of those recommendations in its subsequent work (for example, conducting a rigorous, community-informed review of planning unit data well in advance of its work to draw new boundaries). As we said in 2019 and still believe, the establishment of school boundaries is a demanding process for everyone involved: staff, leadership, administrators, parents, and students. We recognize that with each process, staff has attempted to address concerns from previous boundary change initiatives, to engage more community members, and to respond to community-stated priorities.

In the spirit of continuous improvement and collaboration, we offer the following set of recommendations. Some of these are carried forward from April 2019, as indicated below, and others reflect new concerns informed by recent experience. The recommendations are intended to foster more realistic and authentic community engagement, to advance diversity and equity, and to ensure that instructional needs are paramount in option school moves and boundary change processes.

- 1. Clear Goals** (carried forward from April 2019): Clearly state the objectives to be achieved and problems to be resolved at the outset of each process and adhere to those goals throughout the process as much as possible, evaluating each proposed option against those objectives to ensure final boundary and school move decisions achieve the stated goals and address the identified problems to be resolved. That said, we understand that the goals may change due to extenuating circumstances or in response to community feedback; when this happens, we propose that APS clearly indicates when and why goals have been revised, on the Engage site and elsewhere. We note that during the option school move process of 2019-20, the goals of the process changed over time without timely and transparent explanation, and this created some confusion and frustration.
- 2. Four Determining Factors** (carried forward from April 2019): Replace the current six considerations in the APS Boundary Policy with four well-defined determining factors of

equal priority in order to reduce factionalism, bring communities together, and foster understanding and collaboration. These four factors could be structured as:

- **Transportation Efficiency:** This encompasses the current Proximity and Contiguity policy considerations and should include efficient use of APS bus routes, County transportation options, cycling and walking.
- **Utilization:** This refers to the current Efficiency policy consideration with the goal of optimizing use of facilities (instructional use as well as % capacity usage.) When calculating capacity, APS should consider indoor common areas (hallways, cafeteria, gymnasium, etc.) as well as outdoor play space for elementary students. It should also require APS staff to employ clear and consistent criteria when determining whether school sites can accommodate relocatables and for how long; we note that some sites have been identified as unsuitable for relocatables and yet they exist there, greatly minimizing the outdoor space available for recess and P.E. classes.
- **Stability:** This encompasses the current Alignment and Stability policy considerations with the goal of ensuring a sufficiently large number of cohorts moving together when redistricted through a boundary change AND when transitioning to the next level of education (ES to MS, MS to HS). It should require careful analysis of the size of *grade-level cohorts* in a given planning unit, rather than the total number of students in a planning unit. While APS may deem “10” or “25” a sufficient cohort, for example, there may in reality be as few as one 5th grader in a single planning unit matriculating to a separate middle school for 6th grade. That scenario does not honor the spirit or intent of “Stability” and “Alignment” to ensure a comfortably-sized group of familiar peers as students are re-assigned to a different school or move up from one level of schooling to the next.
- **Diversity and Equity:** This refers to the current Demographics policy consideration. More detailed information on the Diversity and Equity factor is provided below.

APS should reflect a *balance of all four factors* in each proposed boundary scenario to ensure a final decision that espouses the stated values and priorities of the APS community. Well-defined and distinct determining factors, along with a mandate to achieve the best overall balance of those factors and clearly communicate the necessary trade offs between factors, would serve to minimize the selective application of preferred principles. If necessary, the Board can mandate a balance of the considerations in the next boundary process prior to the finalization of a formal revision to the terms and definitions of the existing considerations in the current boundary policy.

3. **Evaluation** (carried forward from April 2019): Evaluate whether the final outcome has achieved the stated goals of the boundary adjustment once the new boundary has been in place and one or two years of enrollment data is available. Ensure a process is in place to make additional adjustments accordingly, if necessary. Share this evaluation information with the community.

4. Option School Moves: We must have a policy governing option school moves. The School Board and APS leadership have stated that these moves are not considered boundary changes and are not governed by Policy B-2.1, leaving the families, students and staff at these schools without a clear sense of how such decisions are made and what influence they have. A policy governing option school moves should require APS staff to:

- set forth clear goals for moving option programs, prioritizing alignment with the instructional vision for option programs as set forth by the Department of Teaching and Learning;
- provide data supporting its recommendations;
- provide an analysis of how the proposed option program move would impact utilization/capacity for currently enrolled students and staff (we note, for example, that the move of Key Immersion to the ATS site will force this program to operate at 157% of the site's permanent capacity, which is unacceptable for any option or neighborhood school);
- provide an analysis of how the proposed option program move would impact the ability of specific student populations to move with the program, including but not limited to the ability of low-income parents to reach the site via public transportation; and,
- offer opportunities for community engagement that are consistent with engagement opportunities for boundary changes.

5. Instructional Impact: Any future processes related to boundary changes and school moves must be aligned to and led by the APS instructional vision . In this way, we can ensure that the PreK-12 instructional models and programs we have selected in order to provide multiple pathways to student success are housed in appropriate facilities and that there is coherence in each pathway across elementary, middle, and high school levels. Staff should provide a rationale for proposed boundary changes and school moves that demonstrates this alignment to the instructional framework.

6. Grandfathering: We ask that APS address the possibility of grandfathering students as part of its initial public presentation of any boundary change scenarios. If grandfathering isn't possible, APS should provide data so that the community can understand why (e.g., the incremental additional cost of busing it would require, net projected change in capacity, etc.)

7. Vulnerable Student Populations: Any future processes related to boundary changes and school moves should prioritize the needs of our most vulnerable student populations instead of addressing their needs after changes have been made. Planning should *begin* by ensuring that programs for income-eligible PreK children and students with disabilities are located in close proximity to the students who need them and are accessible via public transit so that families can participate in their child's education and in the school community. There must be as much care taken to provide stability for *these* students as there is for other students in

Arlington, who currently have the assurance that they will not be moved multiple times during their educational experience.

8. Diversity and Equity: We urge APS and the School Board to engage individuals and community groups in a thoughtful and robust discussion about how demographics and equity should factor into school move and boundary decisions.¹ Such a discussion could explore and answer the following considerations:

- A. Is our goal a more uniform FARMs rate across all schools? If so, are we clear why this should be the goal? When we think about how this would be achieved, have we thought through any unintended negative consequences (e.g., diluting the impact of partnerships and programs that some schools have set up to support the unique needs of diverse families they serve)?
- B. Should we prioritize the assignment of PUs so that income-eligible students are assigned to their closest walkable school?
- C. How can we factor in income-eligible parents' access to public transportation to reach their students' schools?
- D. How can ensure that schools and PUs with higher FARMs rates are not disproportionately over capacity?
- E. How are we weighing transportation-related impacts for low-income students and families (e.g., how many are bused and for how long, as compared to more affluent students)?
- F. How are we assessing stability-related impacts for low-income students and families (e.g., how many are being reassigned to a new school, compared to their more affluent peers? And how will this affect their ability to matriculate to the same middle school or high school as their more affluent peers?)?
- G. How are we gauging engagement-related impacts for students and families (i.e., to what extent will low-income families and students be able to participate in the school community, via supports like access to public transportation, Extended Day capacity, or language translation)?

It will be important to center the voices and experiences of traditionally disadvantaged groups in this discussion so that people in positions of power and privilege are not making assumptions about what these groups need. If translation services are needed, they should be arranged by APS.

In any future boundary and school move process, the community should see and weigh in on alternative boundary and school move scenarios that provide analysis of how each scenario addresses the structural inequities that shape our current system.² This analysis

¹ See the National PTA's "Addressing Systemic or Institutional Racism" Position Statement which includes the following: "National PTA and its constituent associations will hold courageous conversations with our membership and communities to understand the impact of institutional racism and how it affects the well-being of children of color."
<https://www.pta.org/home/advocacy/ptas-positions/Individual-Position-Statements/position-statement---addressing-systemic-or-institutional-racism>

² See the Virginia PTA's "Advancing Diversity and Equity" Position Statement which includes the following: "It is important to acknowledge and advance work with community partners to address structural inequities that are rooted

might take the form of a related brief that provides not just the FARMs rate of each school in the proposed scenario, as is currently done, but also narrative that describes how each scenario performs on the diversity and equity considerations prioritized by the community (all or a subset of A-G above, or others that are raised in the course of the diversity and equity discussion).³

9. Involvement of Advisory Groups and an Iterative Process: APS staff should engage the Advisory Council on School Facilities and Capital Programs (FAC) in all boundary change processes. APS staff should provide the full FAC membership with the opportunity to inform the data to be used in boundary processes as well as confidential consultation on actual, draft boundary change scenarios *before* they are presented for public review and comment. Additionally, APS should collaborate with the community on the *design* of its community engagement efforts (e.g., goals and parameters, tactics, wording of survey questions, timeline, etc.) so that they are clearly framed, realistic, and anticipate community needs and concerns.⁴ The CCPTA would be pleased to collaborate with APS staff in this capacity. For example, it would be helpful to set expectations up front about whether APS is reaching out to:

- Explain to the public something that's going to happen (what, why, when, how)
- Fact-check assumptions and data
- Seek help spotting potential issues, opportunities and blind spots that may not be immediately apparent
- Listen to community feedback if there's a value judgment to be made, when there are tradeoffs between competing alternatives and there's not an straightforward, quantitative way to judge which would be better or worse
- Debrief on past initiatives or decisions in the name of continuous improvement.

We urge APS to evolve its school move and boundary change processes so they incorporate iterative cycles of planning, prototyping, feedback, and revision. APS could take a page from the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching's [cycles of inquiry](#) protocols and from best practices in [design thinking](#) to re-engineer its school move and boundary processes to focus on rapid prototyping with community engagement built into each round. This would be an improvement over the current "one-and-done" surveys and community meetings that facilitate engagement with initial proposals, but not revisions. As a consequence of the current process, only those individuals and groups with the time,

in our nation's social, political, economic, and educational structures."

https://vapta.org/images/Advocacy/Equity_and_Diversity_Position_2020-06-18.pdf

³See the National PTA's "Addressing Systemic or Institutional Racism" Position Statement which includes the following: "National PTA and its constituent associations must educate themselves and their communities on the disparities among students of color compared to their white peers...This knowledge is essential to understand the impact of institutional racism on school performance."

<https://www.pta.org/home/advocacy/ptas-positions/Individual-Position-Statements/position-statement---addressing-systemic-or-institutional-racism>

⁴See the National PTA's "Shared Responsibility in Educational Decision Making" Position Statement which includes the following: "We believe that, because parents, teachers, students, and the general public are affected by school policy, it is appropriate that they participate in its determination."

<https://www.pta.org/home/advocacy/ptas-positions/Individual-Position-Statements/Position-StatementShared-Responsibility-in-Educational-Decision-Making>

expertise, and organizing capacity to remain engaged through School Board work sessions, office hours, and public hearings are heard in the final phases of work.

A new process for school moves and boundary changes might look like this:

1. APS confirms the goals for the move/boundary process in collaboration with the School Board and advisory groups like FAC, ACTL, CCPTA, ACTC, ASEAC, the Superintendent's Advisory Committee on Equity and Excellence, and the Superintendent's Advisory Committee on Immigrant and Refugee Student Concerns.
2. APS identifies the data it needs to inform the process, collects the data, and vets it with community representatives (as was done in Spring 2020 with Planning Unit data).
3. APS develops its initial scenario(s) in collaboration with FAC. In doing so, it is guided by the policy(ies) governing school moves and boundary changes.
4. APS develops its community engagement plan in collaboration with CCPTA.
5. APS shares its initial scenario(s) with the advisory groups initially consulted on goals (#1 above) and with the broader community. Through a combination of engagement strategies, the scenario(s) are analyzed based on a) how well they address the specific goals of the current process (#1 above) and b) how well they balance the four factors enshrined in policy (see "Four Determining Factors" above). These engagement strategies would likely include many of APS's current tactics like online surveys and community meetings.
6. APS uses feedback gathered through community engagement to improve its initial scenario(s), in consultation with FAC.
7. Revised scenarios are shared with the community for a second cycle of engagement and analysis, which should mirror the engagement opportunities in the first cycle (#5, above). School Board work session(s) should be integrated as is feasible and appropriate.
8. A third round of prototyping and feedback can be conducted if necessary (community survey data, for example, should yield incrementally more favorable results with each cycle of prototyping; if that's not the case, another cycle may be warranted). In all cases, though, we should avoid a situation where APS presents to the School Board a final recommendation that has not been vetted in a cycle of community engagement that includes intentional outreach to less affluent communities and families of color.
9. The School Board holds a final public hearing and votes on the proposed school moves or boundary changes.
10. After 1-2 years of data is available, APS should evaluate whether stated goals of the process were achieved and share this information with the community.

**Voted on and approved by the CCPTA Executive Board and Member Delegates
March 15, 2021**