



Francis Scott Key ▪ Escuela Key Elementary School
Parent Teacher Association
2200 Wilson Blvd, Suite 102 - 337
Arlington, VA 22201

November 25, 2019

Lisa Stengle and Gladis Bourdouane
Department of Planning and Evaluation,
Arlington Public Schools
2110 Washington Boulevard Arlington, Virginia 22204

Dear Ms. Stengle and Ms. Bourdouane,

I am writing to you as the PTA President of Escuela Key, or Key School. Since APS' announcement of the two proposals to move various schools, our community has had many discussions about our concerns, our questions, our ideas, and our goals.

Our overarching goals are for our current students, families, and staff to be able to continue with Key, for future elementary families in Arlington who want dual-language immersion to be able to access it, and for a strengthened Immersion K-12 Pathway. We recognize that APS has a momentous challenge in making room for thousands more students in the next 10 years, and we recognize that many schools are going to have to share in the changes that will be required. We are not asking for Key to be exempt from sharing in that burden.

However, we are deeply troubled by the two current proposals and their potential impacts on our current families and staff, the future of Key's Immersion Program, and middle and high school Immersion Programs. We are asking that you delay the School Board vote scheduled for February 2020, complete more analysis, allow our our community and our staff to dialogue with you, be willing to consider our ideas, and combine the school moves and boundary changes processes.

This is a big request, and I understand that your time is limited. In support of this request, and to summarize the feedback I have received from the Key School community, I have divided this letter into two sections: "Concerns" and "Requests."

Concerns:

- **Missing data**

- The presented data reflects the effects of proposed changes only for students who attend neighborhood schools. For example, according to APS information, the proposals will move

either 2,100 or 2,400 neighborhood students. But the fact that 1,232 or 1,633 option students will move is not included.¹

- It is unclear how many neighborhood students from McKinley or Carlin Springs will move, or whether they are included in the 2,100 and 2,400 counts of neighborhood students.
- Key School was a neighborhood school as recently as 2017. Two years is only two data points, not a trend line. There is insufficient information about Key School, at its current location and as an option school, to fully assess to what extent it is serving the population in the neighborhood or otherwise.
- It is unknown how many students who currently attend Key will move with the program vs. remain in the building or return to their neighborhood schools. In particular, without an assessment of how many students will remain in the current Key building, we don't know whether enough neighborhood seats will be opened to meet the need for neighborhood seats in the Rosslyn/Courthouse/Clarendon area.
- **Both of the proposed locations mean significant disadvantages for Key**
 - The ATS and Carlin Springs buildings are far smaller than our current capacity and enrollment.
 - Neither building is located in close enough proximity to public transportation to enable all of our current community to continue at Key School.
 - Many Key families are expressing doubts as to whether a move to ATS or Carlin Springs, especially the latter, is feasible for their families' situations.
 - Specifically, with respect to the ATS site—
 - We understand that APS plans to accommodate our numbers (-210 seats) “temporarily” using relocatable classrooms. This does not alleviate overcrowding in common-use spaces, such as gyms and cafeterias. We also don't know what is meant by “temporarily.”
 - It is our understanding that Arlington County's Emergency Services require the use of a great deal of space on the ATS property for a helipad that is used in life saving efforts around the area. This limits the amount of space that can be used by the school for relocatables and for future construction. This only further constricts the options we would have to sustain the program, much less grow it.
 - There are notably fewer Spanish speaking households in the vicinity of ATS than Key.

¹ Enrollment at Key is 675, ATS is 557, and Campbell is 401 according to the October 31, 2019 Membership Summary: https://www.apsva.us/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/U-MEM_281_Membership_Summary.pdf

- Specifically, with respect to the Carlin Springs site—
 - Moving to Carlin Springs would place both immersion elementary schools in the southwest quadrant of the county, and all APS immersion schools in South Arlington. This would reduce access to Immersion for North Arlington families.
 - Additionally, placing both elementary immersion programs within one mile of each other, in the same quadrant of the county, exacerbates the segregation in Arlington of our most vulnerable and disadvantaged students, including those who rely on free and reduced lunch, are new to this country, and/or do not speak English as their most dominant language.
 - The feeder boundaries for Key and Claremont will need to change. We have received no information about how that might be addressed, whether students will have to switch between Key and Claremont², whether students who are grandfathered into their existing school will receive transportation, whether younger siblings of students who are grandfathered will be allowed to attend their older siblings' school, and so on.
 - While a large Spanish-speaking population lives in the vicinity of Carlin Springs, we have no information about whether these families are aware of or are interested in immersion education. We are not aware of any APS plans to conduct outreach to these communities.
 - Option schools tend to draw more heavily from neighborhoods in close proximity³, and locating the two Immersion elementary schools in the same part of the county means they will be drawing on the same pool of families. We don't have information about how that may affect the numbers at either Claremont or Key in the short or long terms.
- **More busses will be needed, and some students' commute times will be long**
 - If Key moves to ATS, all of the students in its walk zone will need to be bussed, while some current bus-riding students will become walkers -- however, we don't know those numbers to be able to compare. If Key moves to Carlin Springs, our entire student body will need to be bussed. Additionally, and students coming from the north and east part of the county will likely face long commute times.
- **We will lose staff that are uniquely difficult to replace**
 - When a school moves, some staff leave. This poses particular challenges for Immersion schools, which require a specialized teaching pool. Ensuring our teachers and staff understand their value and remain with the program is a top priority. However, the missing data in both proposals, and the method by which the communication process has unfolded so far, has caused many staff members to feel that APS does not value the Immersion Program and its achievements.

² If students will be switched between Key and Claremont, they should be included in the counts of how many students will be moved.

- **Changes to Key risk the future of the K-12 Immersion Pathway**

- Changes or disruptions to the elementary Immersion Programs will impact the middle and high school Immersion Programs at Gunston and Wakefield. The concern is particularly acute for Wakefield, where the number of Spanish Immersion classes available is very low and students already spend much less than 50% of their day learning in Spanish. We know the numbers of Gunston Immersion students choosing to continue in Immersion at Wakefield has been increasing in recent years; a drop in the number of students at Key will decrease the number of Immersion students feeding up into Gunston and then Wakefield, reversing this positive trend.
- Drops in enrollment at Key in 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and 5th grades cannot be made up. Once a child who only knows one language reaches the 2nd grade, s/he is no longer able to join the Immersion Program. Even bilingual children must pass a test to enter the program after 1st grade.
- We deeply appreciate APS' public statement that it is "*committed to strengthening the dual-language Immersion K-12 Pathway.*"³ However, we do not have any visibility into APS' plans to strengthen immersion—we have only seen proposals that limit it. Both of the plans necessitate Key moving to a smaller building, and two of the three considerations for accommodating our larger numbers are logically opposed to the assertion of strengthening Immersion:
 - "[APS would] consider locating the PreK classes at another nearby site."⁴—The VPI classes at Key feed almost 100% into our Kindergarten classes, and almost all of those students are native Spanish speakers. If those classes were moved elsewhere, we would lose a significant percentage of our incoming kindergarten class who speak Spanish at home.
 - "*Reducing the number of incoming Kindergarten classes...*"⁴—Reducing the number of Kindergarten classes will impact the K-12 Immersion program for years to come, unless Immersion Kindergarten classes in other locations are opened simultaneously. We live in a highly transient area, and attrition throughout the grade levels is inevitable. Unlike all other elementary programs in the county, however, we cannot simply refill those seats at every grade level. As described above, once a child who only knows one language reaches the 2nd grade, s/he is no longer able to join the Immersion program, and bilingual children must pass a test to enter the program after 1st grade. Limiting incoming kindergarten classes will reduce the future numbers at the middle and high school levels.

- **If Key moves, the community that relies on us may suffer**

- As an urban, tight-knit community, we engage in continuous activities to support our large, ethnically and socioeconomically diverse population. These activities include outreach,

³ FAQs - Elementary School Planning for 2021 Boundaries:

<https://www.apsva.us/engage/planning-for-2020-elementary-school-boundary-process/faqs-elementary-school-planning-for-2021-boundary/>

clothing and food exchanges, and most pointedly, due to the current state of our country's immigration stance, serving as a safe haven for families who are struggling, transient, or concerned over continued status. Just this year, we opened the Family Resource Center, which includes a food pantry and "basic needs" closet. It also includes a small, kid-friendly meeting space where families are able to ask questions and receive information about local services they may need. We know our community and our community knows what we offer. A relocation of the school may force families in need to navigate a new administration that is unfamiliar with their needs.

Requests:

- **Provide more time, analysis, and engagement**
 - APS is actively soliciting feedback from across the county on these two proposals. Collecting feedback is the easy part, though. There is not time before January 9 to examine it all and to fully engage with school communities, as well as collect improved data, develop plans to mitigate negative impacts, and appropriately refine those plans. The data is not clear on the gains of the two proposals, yet the potential for loss is enormous.
 - Gather and assess information on the concerns and questions posed in the section above, and factor it into decision making.
 - Combine the Moves process with the Boundary process, so that all options, pros, and cons can be considered equally.
 - Allow us to work with you more closely. We have ideas for alternative solutions that we would like to share. We would like to collaborate with you.
- **Share with us specifics of how either proposal would actually work and not detrimentally affect the Immersion Program, and engage us so that we can help make the best decision and support positive outcomes**
 - Present a detailed plan for how ATS or Carlin Springs could accommodate Key School's current population. This plan would ideally include information about how many students would be in relocatables, how many relocatables would be on the property, and a plan for accommodating larger numbers in the common spaces, such as the gym and cafeteria.
 - Present a detailed plan for how students and families for whom the distance to either location presents a challenge will be supported.
 - Present a detailed plan for how recruitment to the Key Immersion Program, with the aim of achieving the 50-50 model, will be supported.
 - Present a detailed plan for how the Immersion Programs in middle and high school will be supported if elementary enrollment declines, despite efforts to prevent that.

- Elaborate on the potential plans to create “*concurrent opportunities to increase student access to Immersion that is[sic] not site specific.*”⁴

The Key School community wants to stay on Key Boulevard. We ask for the opportunity to explore more thoroughly whether there are any options for us to stay, and, if not, for a well-informed decision to be made, supported by sound data and ample community input. This decision cannot be rushed without the potential for long-lasting damage to the Key Immersion Program and the Immersion K-12 Pathway.

I would be happy to discuss the information contained in this letter in person or over email; my contact information appears below. Thank you for your time and attention.

Sincerely,

Alicia Rich, Key PTA President

Co-signed by the 2019–20 Key PTA Executive Board:

Erin Freas-Smith, President-Elect

Susan Gillin, Treasurer

Michelle Akerman Posner, Secretary

Dedra Curteman, External Affairs Committee Chairperson

Brian Posner, Fundraising Committee Chairperson

Eraina Reed & Sara Bryant, Internal Affairs Committee Chairpersons

Jenny Roahen Rizzo, Communications Committee Chairperson

Cc:

Cintia Johnson, APS Interim Superintendent

Tannia Talento, School Board Chair & School Board Members

John Chadwick, APS Assistant Superintendent, Facilities and Operations

Marleny Perdomo, Principal, Key Immersion School

Maura McMahon, President, Arlington County Council of PTAs

Christian Dorsey, County Board Chair

Gabriela Uro, President, Wakefield High School PTSA

Beth Hicks, President, Gunston Middle School PTA

Melissa Schwaber, President, Claremont Elementary School PTA