

November 10, 2020

Dear Dr. Durán and School Board Members,

On behalf of the Key community, I would like to point out several concerning issues that we noticed in the slides accompanying the [Superintendent's recommendation](#) for the Fall 2020 Elementary School Boundary Process, presented on November 5, 2020.

Slide 19: Community engagement at Woodbury Park Apartments.

The slide states that APS Staff spoke with 20 residents, of whom 12 were Key families. Woodbury Park families, surprised by such a statement, further investigated and were told that APS staff had conducted an unannounced visit and spoke with those who happened to be picking up free groceries from AFAC. While those conversations provided some insight, they would not qualify as rigorous community engagement. In 1997, the Center for Disease Control published *Principles of Community Engagement*, which is still being used today by many government entities. It defines Community Engagement as “*the process of working collaboratively with and through groups of people affiliated by geographic proximity, special interest, or similar situations to address issues affecting the well-being of those people*”. It also states that “*In practice, community engagement is a blend of science and art. The science comes from sociology, political science, cultural anthropology, organizational development, psychology, social work, and other disciplines, and organizing concepts are drawn from the literature on community participation, community mobilization, constituency building, community psychology, and cultural influences The art comes from the understanding, skill, and sensitivity used to apply and adapt the science in ways that fit the community of interest and the purposes of specific engagement efforts.*”

An unannounced visit to a community during food distribution is not good Community Engagement. First, it does not inform the community of the possibility to engage and therefore prepare. Second, it only engages a specific slice of the population; not all Woodbury Park families utilize AFAC services. Third, it does not take into consideration the dangerous and avoidable power dynamic between government staff and respondents from a low-income community in the vulnerable position of picking up free goods. We are concerned that this type of unannounced outreach is being used as a shortcut to tick the “Hispanic outreach” box. This is the second time that APS staff has done an unannounced drop-by of the Woodbury Park community in connection with a similar distribution of services. In the Fall of 2019, there was an unannounced visit during a free school supply give away. In that instance, a Key parent tried to engage, and they refused to speak with him when he stated his disagreement with the then-proposed school moves. At the November 5th School Board meeting, the Woodbury Park representative who spoke in Spanish on behalf of many families stated: “*Quisiera saber cómo APS dirige esta forma de comunicarse con la comunidad ya que en ningún momento hemos sido informados de que ellos llegarían a tomar información que posteriormente es usada para tomar decisiones muy importantes. Quisiéramos que de alguna manera se anuncie su presencia con anterioridad para nosotros estar presentes y dar nuestras opiniones y no solamente tomar la opinión de unas cuantas personas y basar sus resultados o decisiones en base a estas.*” (“I would like to know how APS communicates with the community, as at no time have we been informed that they would come to take information that is

subsequently used to make very important decisions. We would prefer that you'd announce your presence beforehand, so we could be present and give our opinions, instead of taking the opinion of a few people and base your results or decisions on that.")

We therefore request that APS conducts a more comprehensive and rigorous Community Engagement at Woodbury Park as soon as possible. APS staff should be aware of who the community leaders from Woodbury Park are, as they have been engaged with this process since the beginning and have spoken directly to School Board members, staff members, and at School Board meetings in the past year.

Slide 42: Work Session Tentative Agenda, specifically bullet 3, "Reducing enrollment at Claremont and Key."

Nation-wide studies, and even APS' own data, shows that immersion students overall score higher on standardized tests at the Middle School level than all other student groups. Key Immersion is a successful, award-winning program that is in high demand. It is also an example of true integration and economic and social diversity. APS itself regularly features the Key Immersion as a symbol of a progressive and diverse Arlington during Hispanic Heritage Month.

We understand that the Superintendent is new to Arlington County Public Schools and was not present for the school move discussions over the last two years. APS staff assured the public multiple times during the school move discussions that their intent was *not* to reduce the size of the immersion program and that APS would work with the community to address capacity issues of Key Immersion at the ATS building without harming the immersion program. We were assured by multiple staff, all five School Board members, and the Acting Superintendent, Cintia Johnson, that the school moves would not result in a shrinking of the Key Immersion program or the larger countywide immersion program. At our last PTA meeting on October 20th, with Barbara Kanninen in attendance, we again stated our desire for our program not to shrink, and reminded Dr. Kanninen that she herself assured us it would not. If immersion shrinks at the elementary level, it will shrink at the middle school and high school levels as well, leading to longer wait lists at each of the immersion schools.

In fact, the process to examine and strengthen immersion underway through the Instructional Program Pathways. During the IPP presentation in August, APS staff set the [timeline](#) for presenting recommendations on the IPP for Spring 2021, and then reiterated that timeline during the October 27 School Board Work Session (see 1:33:10 of work session). In addition, during the October 21 ACTL meeting, staff further pledged to both continue the Immersion Visioning work that has already begun, and also to allow "instruction to lead construction", rather than making changes at the onset and then scrambling to make the program fit the constraints placed upon it. It was stated that APS will use the IPP framework to determine adding programs, moving programs, combining programs, eliminating programs. We see this as APS' continued support of immersion and a recognition of the program's county-wide popularity. By making this premature move to shrink both the Key and Claremont immersion programs, before the immersion visioning process and the IPP framework are complete, APS is not following its own rules of process and best practices.

Slide 10: Key Immersion **is part of this boundary process**

Contrary to the statement on Slide 10 of the November 5 presentation, Key Immersion is a large part of this boundary process. Key's boundaries depend on the boundaries of its feeder schools. Moving planning units from Ashlawn to ASFS will transfer students from the Claremont feeder zone to the Key feeder zone. Moreover, APS has indicated that they intend to propose further changes to the boundaries of which students go to Key Immersion to include the ATS building in those boundaries.

Throughout this process, APS has refused to engage with Key Immersion on these issues and has not answered questions about whether Claremont students who live in planning units that change from the Claremont feeder zone to the Key feeder zone will be forced to transfer to Key.

Moreover, one alternative that has been discussed by many in the community is a pause to this entire process, leaving all schools with the current boundaries and locations until Fall 2022. One of the primary differences between the recommended boundaries and the pause option is precisely that Key Immersion remains at 98% capacity with relocatables instead of moving to a building where it is at 111% capacity with relocatables.¹ We understand that the pause option is not preferred by staff. It is, however, the natural alternative that the School Board is choosing between, and staff should be honest and transparent about the choice in front of the School Board.

We note that K-5 enrollment at Key only dipped 2% this Fall from what was projected pre-pandemic, whereas every other elementary school in this boundary process saw enrollment drops far above the county-wide average of 9.3%.² Nevertheless, the Key Immersion Program and the Key families are the ones that pay the highest price in this boundary process. Key will move away from a diverse neighborhood where it flourished for decades and into a building that will be at approximately 160% capacity.

In February, right after the School Moves vote passed, Tannia Talento and Monique O'Grady made impassioned speeches, explaining that they agreed to the school moves because they saw it as benefitting the entire school system and trying to reassure the Key community that APS leadership would make this facility move work for us with our input. This has not yet happened. This grand sacrifice that specifically the Key community is making is no longer for the benefit of the entire system, but is now for the benefit of students assigned to ASFS, Ashlawn and Taylor. This move puts Key at a great disadvantage by putting our school grossly over capacity while putting many schools affected by the move and boundary changes significantly below. Several plans were created by community members from ATS, McKinley, and Key, that served to keep all schools in place and create more capacity through boundary changes alone, saving APS over 10 million+ dollars and keeping more communities together. Fundamentally, APS is short by over 1,000 seats over the next half decade; what will this pricey school moves expenditure really buy us aside from mistrust in APS, more socio-economically and racially segregated schools, and a smaller county-wide immersion program?

¹ These numbers include the maximum capacity with relocatables estimated by staff on November 5 and assumes students do not transfer from Claremont to Key. Staff has indicated that the maximum capacity may change. We remain concerned that, due to the maximum capacity of the ATS cafeteria under the fire code, this maximum capacity with relocatables is overstated.

² Drop in enrollment based on the change in K-5 enrollment projected for Fall 2020 in the February 2020 Annual Update to the actual K-5 enrollment in the October 2020 Membership Report.

We are particularly concerned that the recommended boundaries would place one of our most marginalized communities, students who live in the Woodbury Park Apartments, in a neighborhood school far away from their community, not accessible by public transit. We recognize that some students, a small percentage, who live in the Woodbury Park Planning Unit (24120) already go to ASFS and therefore, for those families, it makes sense to keep them zoned to ASFS. But looking to the future, it is more equitable and fair for this Planning Unit, with an overwhelmingly large percentage of low income students, to be zoned to a walkable school, regardless of where current students attend. Please consider sending Planning Unit 24120 to the new school at the Key site.

We fundamentally ask for an earnest and inclusive look into the long term impact of these boundary changes and the shrinking of the immersion program. Time is on our side as we have historically low enrollment due to COVID-19, and many indications that at least some virtual instruction will continue into the next school year. For the 2021-22 school year, the new building at Reed can be used as swing space and a comprehensive, inclusive county-wide boundary process can take place. Please allow staff and volunteers to complete the important work of Immersion Visioning before fundamentally changing the capacity of the program. By looking at the whole county, staff can more adequately adjust resources and boundaries to create an inclusive and balanced school system that supports diversity and equitable access. Finally, we implore you to not look to past decisions as inevitable when there is still time to change course.

Thank you for your attention to this matter and your forthcoming reply.

Respectfully,

Erin Freas-Smith, on behalf of the Key PTA

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