



Oakland Mills Community Association
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July 28, 2017

Howard County Public School System
10910 Clarksville Pike
Ellicott City, MD 20142

Dear Acting Superintendent Martirano, Members of the Board of Education, and Ms. Kamen:

I am writing on behalf of the Oakland Mills Community Association and the residents of the Village of Oakland Mills to express our strong concerns about the redistricting process, the Feasibility Report, and the potential impact on Oakland Mills schools should the redistricting scenario presented in the Feasibility Report be executed. I request that after you review our list of concerns, you consider whether this process should move forward with its current schedule and scope. I also ask that the Superintendent and the Office of School Planning schedule a meeting with Oakland Mills Village and school leadership through the Oakland Mills Board of Directors and the Boards of Directors of the PT(S)As in the cluster of Oakland Mills schools.

Our concerns are detailed in the following statement:

MAJOR FLAWS IN REDISTRICTING PROCESS AND FEASIBILITY REPORT

Board of Education Policy 6010 defines the conditions and process by which school attendance area adjustments will be developed and adopted. After reviewing the process to date, we feel that the school system has failed to follow Policy 6010 in both spirit and letter and see no evidence that there is any consistent weighting of the provisions in Policy 6010.

Geographic Area representation. The Area Attendance Committee (AAC) is not representative of the Howard County School System (HCPSS) population or of the county's population in general. First, had a member of the Board of Education not spoken up, the AAC would have lacked appropriate representation from East Columbia. To this day, we cannot say with confidence that East Columbia is as well-represented as other areas because we do not know the backgrounds of the participants on the committee. I personally asked a committee member if the second East Columbia position had been filled; as of July 19, this member did not know.

Demographic representation. Second, the committee does not reflect the racial, ethnic, or economic diversity of Howard County. HCPSS is a majority-minority school system, yet the AAC is overwhelmingly white. The school system has tried to explain this away by stating that they selected from those who applied to the AAC. This is not an acceptable response. When the school system saw that it was not getting applicants representative of its student population, it could have made efforts to better advertise or target the opportunity to communities and groups that were not well-represented. For example, despite the size of the Hispanic population in Howard County, no material, including the Feasibility Report, was translated into Spanish. As a result, the committee established to make the redistricting recommendation that is supposed to consider demographic characteristics of the student population under Policy 6010 looks nothing like the student population.

Flawed Data set. The Feasibility Report and its recommended attendance areas also fail the Policy 6010 test. The report contains absolutely no data about students receiving Free and Reduced Meals (FARMS). However, Policy 6010 clearly states that the socioeconomic composition of the school population—as measured by participation in the FARMS program—should be considered. After pushback from the community and the AAC, the Office of Planning did provide FARMS data. Unfortunately, this data is incorrect and flawed—a fact that has been pointed out to school system officials and the Board of Education. Nevertheless, the AAC continues to rely on this flawed data during its decision making.

The flaws in this data are substantial and would have a devastating impact. For example, Oakland Mills High School reports a FARMS rate over 5 percentage points higher than the one provided to the AAC. Oakland Mills Middle School, which has one of the highest rates of middle school students receiving FARMS in the county, shows as only 11% in the AAC data – nearly 32% below what is reported in its school profile. There are also discrepancies of about 15% at both Stevens Forest Elementary and Talbott Springs Elementary. This failure to recognize the school system's neediest students, followed by a failure to retract and replace this data quickly, is disturbing.

Taken together, we feel this whole process is flawed and of very dubious legal standing. The composition of the AAC is questionable, and the AAC is using bad “official” data for its deliberations, yet we have seen no attempts to correct anything.

IMPACT ON OAKLAND MILLS SCHOOLS

The Oakland Mills Community Association and the community leadership at our local schools are very concerned about the potential impact of the redistricting scenario presented in the Feasibility Report. The following breaks down our concerns with the three schools most impacted by the proposal. The attachment to this letter includes a polygon-level

scenario that we believe alleviates some of these concerns without substantial impact on any school capacities.

Oakland Mills High School. Oakland Mills High School has the highest rate of students receiving FARMS in Howard County. The redistricting proposal would actually **increase** this rate. In a county as wealthy as Howard County, it is unconscionable that any redistricting proposal would worsen the poverty rate of the high school with the highest concentration of poverty while other high schools have rates far below the county average. The Oakland Mills Community will not stand by and watch as the economic diversity of the school system and of our local high school is destroyed.

Oakland Mills High School currently serves all three Oakland Mills Village neighborhoods: Stevens Forest, Talbott Springs, and Thunder Hill. The redistricting proposal would remove Thunder Hill from Oakland Mills High—a move that both the OMCA and many in the Thunder Hill community oppose. Policy 6010 calls for community stability. Oakland Mills is a community, and Thunder Hill is one third of Oakland Mills. Thunder Hill also consists of only single-family homes and has the highest property values in Oakland Mills. As stated above, removing Thunder Hill from Oakland Mills additionally concentrates poverty in the high school that already has the highest concentration of poverty in the county.

Furthermore, the Thunder Hill community as well as other students would continue to attend Oakland Mills Middle School before splitting off to high schools other than Oakland Mills High School under the current plan. This makes little sense and does not keep students together after they bond during the three years of middle school that are often the most difficult years socially and emotionally for children as they enter adolescence.

Additionally, the Oakland Mills High School attendance area would extend all the way to the I-95 and U.S. 1 corridors, while our own Thunder Hill as well as our adjacent neighbors in Owen Brown and Allview would be moved out of OMHS. This is another blow to community stability, contrary to Policy 6010.

Stevens Forest Elementary. Stevens Forest Elementary would see about 43 percent of its student population turn over under the current redistricting plan. It would acquire a substantial student population riding buses. After the last redistricting, the school system told the Stevens Forest PTA that Stevens Forest does not have the infrastructure to handle multiple buses. Should this take place, we see nothing in the capital budget to upgrade Stevens Forest to accept bus riders from outside of Oakland Mills Village.

Talbott Springs Elementary. Under the proposal, there are polygons that would move between Stevens Forest and Talbott Springs for the second consecutive redistricting. These polygons also happen to contain all the apartment complexes in Oakland

Mills, including a fully subsidized low-income housing project (Forest Ridge) and a non-contiguous, partially subsidized apartment complex owned by the Howard County Housing Commission (The Verona). These polygons are also overwhelmingly skewed toward Hispanic and African-American residents, and we feel these families are impacted disparately.

The redistricting plan's impact on Talbott Springs Elementary not only violates Policy 6010, but it also violates Title IV of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and takes public education backward by several decades. The data in the Feasibility Report clearly show that this plan creates a segregated school at Talbott Springs, increasing its minority population to 90 percent. Every apartment complex in Oakland Mills would go to Talbott Springs, and as noted above, several of these complexes are fully or partially subsidized. The FARMS data provided to the AAC are incorrect; however, we estimate that Talbott Springs will have a FARMS rate of 75 to 80 percent given what we know of the demographics of the communities being moved into and out of Talbott Springs. This is such an extreme case of *de facto* segregation of a school that the community will consider taking legal action if it is allowed to happen.

A better alternative for both schools—and the families they serve—would be to adjust the polygons to ensure they do not segregate students and create scenarios where the demographics at either Stevens Forest or Talbott Springs get skewed with each redistricting. The attached alternative redistricting plan demonstrates progress toward achieving this goal.

Ideally, the apartment complexes in Oakland Mills could be divided between the two schools. The last redistricting made the FARMS rate at Stevens Forest one of the highest in Howard County; now the pendulum will swing toward Talbott Springs. A better solution would balance the racial, ethnic, and economic diversity of both schools by sending the students in the apartment complexes that are closest to Talbott Springs to Talbott Springs—instead of making many of them walk almost a mile to Stevens Forest as they currently do. Stevens Forest could continue to serve the apartment residents who are closest to its campus. This would result in a more equitable distribution of students.

CONCLUSION

The Oakland Mills Community Association believes that the Feasibility Report, the redistricting process, and the data being used to drive decisions are substantially flawed. This will create a substantial negative impact on some of our schools. In one of the wealthiest counties in the country, the plan would make its poorest high school poorer and create an elementary school that is segregated by any statistical measure. This cannot happen, and the Oakland Mills community will not stand by and let it happen. The citing of Oakland Mills—by name—as an example of *de facto* segregation, in one of the nation's

newspapers of record, should be embarrassing for our County leaders. Leaders around the world will have seen Oakland Mills highlighted as exemplifying the "threats to [Columbia's] 'social mix' in the form of economic segregation" that has "exposed racial and economic fault lines in Columbia and in Howard County." Our government officials should be called to account for an untenable situation, and our school system should do all it can to alleviate the problem. (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/magazine/heres-a-suburban-experiment-cities-can-learn-from/2017/07/11/>)

We expect responses from the Superintendent and the Board of Education about how the issues discussed in this letter will be addressed, and we request a meeting with the Superintendent and the Office of School Planning that includes myself and the presidents of every Oakland Mills PTA so we can discuss this further.

Sincerely,

Jonathan Edelson, Chairman
Oakland Mills Board of Directors

Cc:
Howard County Executive Allan Kittleman
Howard County Council Members

Attachment:
Oakland Mills Redistricting Alternative Scenario