



Attendance Area Adjustment Recommendation "Equity in Action"

Presented by Dr. Michael J. Martirano, Superintendent
August 22, 2019

I am pleased to present to the Board of Education my proposed recommendation for addressing our school capacity issues.

Before I begin, I want to recognize the people who have worked very hard on this process:

- Board members, who initiated this process by unanimous vote on January 24, 2019 - I thank you for your support and leadership throughout this process.
- The many community members, staff and students who provided input and feedback that informed the recommendation that I will present tonight.
- AAC members, who have volunteered a great deal of time and made personal sacrifices because of their dedication to all students.
- Staff in the School Planning, Capital Planning, Pupil Transportation and Communications offices, who worked collaboratively to ensure the boundary review process ran smoothly, with reliable, full access to the public input, and transparent communications. This process has taken many weeks of staff time to review and process complex data and consider many options to prepare the most effective solutions to meet our objectives.
- Scott Leopold and Alex Boyer of Cooperative Strategies, the highly qualified consulting firm that we brought in with the support of our Board, to provide objective data verification and serve as a neutral facilitator throughout the process.
- Members of our County Delegation, our County Executive and County Council members, for their commitment to working with us to find solutions.

I want to start by emphasizing that equity is the underpinning for our Strategic Call to Action, guides all of our decisions and strategies, and has been the basis of our decisions throughout our boundary review process.

The HCPSS definition of equity reflects the common values of our Board, staff, students and community members. It states that equity means providing the access, opportunities and supports needed to help students, families and staff reach their full potential by removing barriers to success that individuals face. It does not mean equal or giving everyone the same thing.

As a system, we must ensure that we demonstrate equity through our actions. My recommendation to the Board is deeply rooted in this value and commitment.

Critical priorities

Our driving priorities for this process have been to:

1. Balance capacity utilization among schools throughout our system, cost effectively.

2. Advance equity by addressing the distribution of students participating in the Free and Reduced-price Meals program (FARMs) across schools to the extent feasible, with a goal to bring more schools closer to the county average.
3. Plan ahead for the High School #13 boundary adjustments, by minimizing double moves as much as possible.

The plan uses as guiding principles all of the priorities expressed by our AAC and community members, consideration of Policy 6010 standards, including transportation times and costs, our fiscal obligations to our county through effective use of existing school resources, our desire to keep school boundaries contiguous, and maintain neighborhood schools and walkable distances for as many students as possible.

This plan marks a turning point in how we look at attendance area adjustments. Previous boundary review processes focused more narrowly on capacity utilization, with other factors such as socio-economics taking a back seat. My proposal is in alignment with our Strategic Call to Action, leading with equity as our driver to provide all students with full full access and opportunity to receive the best educational services and supports.

Capacity Imbalance

Howard County has been one of the fastest growing counties in Maryland for many years, and the current state of our school capacity utilization reflects this fact. Many schools in some areas of in our county are significantly crowded, while we have unused capacity in schools in other regions. For SY 2020-2021, 32 schools (43%) are projected to be outside of the target utilization as defined by Policy 6010, meaning that enrollment at these schools is either below 90% or above 110% of their capacity.

As a result, we have now reached a point where we have critical inequity in capacity utilization in schools across our county. Specifically, we have 11 schools that are below 90% capacity utilization, with the lowest – Clarksville ES – at 70% of its capacity utilization. And we have 21 schools that are above 110%, with the highest – Howard HS – at 136%.

Previous redistricting processes have been limited in scope, including the process conducted in 2017, when decisions were made to put off a more comprehensive, broad-scale attendance adjustment as recommended in the 2017 Feasibility Study.

The situation is unacceptable today, and will only grow more critical unless we take decisive action. We have over 57,000 students in grades K-12 this school year, and the 2019 Feasibility Study projects that will enroll an additional 7,100 students by 2030.

If we continue to delay addressing this issue, continued growth patterns will only exacerbate this inequality, and deepen the strain on resources at even more of our schools. We have held on as long as we can using JumpStart, relocatable classrooms and the other temporary measures we have put in place to provide stability. But we can hold on that way for only one more year, and I have no other solutions at my disposal beyond the proposal I am sharing tonight.

Building on strength

Let me start by saying we have an excellent school system. We are proud of all of our schools.

The Maryland ESSA accountability Report Cards rank nearly all of our schools among the top rated schools in MD, with 4 or 5 stars, and our system and schools consistently place among the top tiers on many other rankings and lists.

For any community member to advance a narrative that any of our schools are less desirable than others; this is complete mythology. I know that all Howard County schools are excellent, and I can state that with great authority, based on my 30-plus years of experience in education, both in this system and elsewhere. I would put any of my children or grandchildren in any one of our schools, and have full confidence that they will receive an excellent education.

We are not a system of individual schools; we are a cohesive school system with consistent curriculum, excellent teachers, small class sizes, and comparable learning and enrichment opportunities at every school.

The prospect of change can always be hard. I urge Board members, parents, students and staff to bear in mind, regardless of the outcome of this process, every child in our county will continue to have access to an excellent education. Please remember that our children are always listening to the adults in their orbit. I implore everyone to maintain a civil tone throughout this process.

My proposal builds on our system's great strength, to further enhance the quality education that students receive at every one of our schools.

Process and data integrity

Board members, in implementing this boundary review process at your direction, we put in place a number of process improvements to ensure that all of our stakeholders – parents, staff and students – were fully informed, and had access to multiple opportunities to provide input.

We provided a comprehensive webpage providing full information about the process, opportunities for participation, AAC minutes and other resources, and we prepared a flyer summarizing the process. We issued weekly update messages to families and community members, and met with elected officials and provided them with resource guides.

We have held civility and respectful listening at the core of the process, giving all stakeholders an equitable voice.

We heard a presentation from our general counsel, Mark Blom, on the topic of using poverty indices in our data examination, and we have incorporated that concept in this recommendation.

We engaged an independent and highly experienced consultant, Cooperative Strategies, to serve as a neutral facilitator for the process and to verify the data used in the Feasibility Study, the AAC plans, and my final recommendation. The consultant's analysis included FARMs data, projected housing units and projected student enrollment. The analysis did not include student racial or ethnic demographics, because this data is self-reported by parents and thus cannot be independently verified.

Regarding data, I want to make two points of clarity. In some cases, there are students who attend a Howard County school other than the school they are geographically assigned to for reasons such as participation in JumpStart, special education, or JROTC. These students are counted in the attendance area of the school assignment based on their home address.

Stakeholder voices

Many voices were heard, and we considered all of the priorities that were expressed, giving no special consideration for any individual or group.

My Attendance Area Committee, or AAC, comprised members that represented community diversity and every planning region in the county. The AAC reviewed and made recommendations to me based on the options presented in the Feasibility Study.

The committee's consensus was that achieving socio-economic balance, represented by schools' FARM proportions, should be the driving factor for all attendance area decisions.

The AAC also recommended that we do more extensive reassignments at once, rather than more limited boundary adjustment processes more frequently. Other AAC priorities were to provide for neighborhood schools with walkable distances as much as possible, and to avoid the use of relocatable classrooms as a long term solution for school crowding.

Overall, the AAC recommended that we take dramatic action to make schools more equal social-economically, despite what would be a consequential doubling or tripling of transportation costs, significant increases in student travel time, and a need to create islands with feeder patterns distributed throughout the county.

Other priorities held more weight in the feedback expressed by stakeholders participating in our community input sessions and online survey. Over 800 participants took part in four community input sessions representing various regions. Overall, these stakeholders preferred options that limit student travel times and boundary continuity, and preserve the concept of neighborhood schools wherever possible. Socio-economic impact was also expressed as a priority consideration among participants at one of the four sessions.

Our online feedback survey received 2,176 responses, and 276 alternative scenarios were submitted. This feedback leaned heavily toward limiting student travel times, maintaining walkable distances, and boundary continuity.

I have also met with Board members and nearly all of our elected officials to discuss their priorities, and I appreciate the concerns about disproportionality in schools' FARM levels expressed by several County Council members in their press release issued last week.

The reality is, it is challenging to develop a boundary plan that simultaneously addresses all of our goals: balancing capacity levels, leveling proportions of students with high needs, providing for neighborhood continuity and walkable distances, and avoiding long bus rides and sharp increases in our transportation costs. But all of these priorities factored heavily in the development of this proposal.

Superintendent's recommendation

My proposal differs significantly from the Feasibility Study recommendations and moves us forward in balancing capacity utilization across schools with this boundary adjustment process, and will move us even further toward parity when we review boundaries again to open new High School 13.

In school year 2020-21, current projections show 9 elementary, 1 middle and 1 high school below 90% capacity utilization, for a total of 11 below without boundary adjustments. Further, the projections show 11 elementary, 5 middle and 5 high schools, for a total of 21 schools above 110% capacity utilization.

With my proposal, we would:

- Increase the number of schools within target from 42 to 53 schools.
- Decrease the number of schools below target from 11 schools to 5 schools, and we will

- Decrease the number of schools above 110% capacity utilization from 21 schools to 16 schools.

Impact: Capacity utilization

Under my proposal, we would narrow the gap between our highest and lowest utilized schools.

- At the elementary school, we would move from a previous low 70% capacity utilization and high of 126%, to a low of 75% and high of 121%.
- At the middle school, we would move from a previous low of 86% capacity utilization and high of 130%, to a low of 91% and high of 121%.
- At the high school, we would move from a previous low of 82% capacity utilization and high of 136%, to a low of 96% and high of 119%.

At the elementary level, we would make progress through my proposal in bringing down 9 of the top 10 above 110% capacity utilization. These include:

- Bryant Woods ES, reducing from 125 to 108%
- Cradlerock ES from 116 to 96%
- Elkridge ES from 118 to 83%
- Fulton ES 122 to 105%
- Hollifield St ES from 126 to 110%
- Pointers Run ES from 124 to 99%
- St Johns Lane ES from 119 to 99%
- Waverly ES 112 to 106%
- Talbott Springs ES 123 to 121%

We would bring 6 of the 9 schools below 90% into target utilization for 2020-21. And by 2024-25, the 7 schools that are above or below the target as a result of the impact of this proposal, would grow into the target range.

For middle schools, the greatest impact would be at

- Dunloggin MS, reducing from 115 to 111%
- Ellicott Mills MS from 130 to 121%
- Hammond MS from 116 to 108%
- Patapsco MS from 121 to 113%

We would also bring up Lake Elkhorn MS into the target range.

The greatest impact for high schools would be at:

- Howard HS, reducing from 136 to 119%
- Centennial HS from 120 to 111%
- Mt Hebron HS from 117 to 104%
- Hammond HS from 116 to 108%
- Long Reach HS from 114 to 107%

Socio-economic equity

My proposal also advances equity by making progress in FARM distribution across many schools.

Through this proposal, the number of elementary schools with FARM rates above 50% is cut in half, from 12 to 6. **No elementary school will be above 54%.** This is a significant improvement, considering we have 12 school above 50%, including 4 above 60% (Laurel Woods, Phelps Luck, Swansfield and Stevens Forest with the highest). Notably, our 10 schools with the highest FARM levels will decrease a combined 82%. 21 elementary schools will move closer to the county average.

Balancing FARM levels in elementary schools was an important focus, because it is so critical that students get a strong start in the early grades. But making significant inroads is challenging at both the elementary and middle school levels, because of county population patterns and the fact that school populations are small, and we are trying to avoid creating “islands” of very small numbers.

For middle schools, this plan brings all middle schools from a high of 53% to 45% or below FARMs, and 11 schools closer to the county average. The 5 highest schools are reduced by a combined 38%.

My proposal reduces the top 3 high school FARM percentages where rates were above 45% (Long Reach, Oakland Mills and Wilde Lake HS) by a combined 18%. Nine schools will move closer to the county average.

The elementary schools where we would see the greatest impact through my proposal are:

- Stevens Forest, moving from 68 to 54%
- Phelps Luck from 63 to 36%
- Laurel Woods from 61 to 49%
- Swansfield from 61 to 44%
- Ducketts Lane from 55 to 49%

The middle schools with greatest impact would be:

- Lake Elkhorn, moving from 53 to 41%
- Harpers Choice from 52 to 34%
- Oakland Mills from 48 to 45%
- Wilde Lake Middle from 47 to 45%
- Thomas Viaduct from 45 to 42%

The high schools with greatest impact would be:

- Long Reach, moving from 47 to 42%
- Wilde Lake High from 46 to 38%
- Oakland Mills High from 45 to 41%

Best supports for students and families

An important point to note is that our bottom line for every decision is always how we may best support our students and families. This involves multiple factors that go beyond simply lowering FARM rates. We need to consider the value of enabling both students and parents to walk or use public transportation to access school for after-school and evening activities, PTA meetings and conferences. Additionally, we may have assigned to schools with higher need a concentration of specialized staff, experienced school administrators, and the placement of specialized services.

For example, Stevens Forest Elementary has a FARM population of 68%, but has a continuous boundary of walkers, and is our only school that has no bus transportation other than two buses for students receiving specialized services. A decision to significantly disperse population out of that school would disenfranchise many parents in their ability to stay connected to the school. We have proposed some boundary changes to reduce FARM levels but ensured that these students would be within a short bus ride, and parents would have nearby access through county bus transportation.

Thus the issue is not simply addressing FARM distribution rates, but rather considering FARMs in the decision. For some schools, the most important priority may be to intensify supports for students who remain at the school, but not to move a large percentage of students whose families would otherwise not be able to participate.

In other cases, decisions were based on keeping in place existing regional special education centers, or other situations where we chose continuity due to the concentration of specialized supports and services located at a particular school. I want to emphasize also that staff at all schools are well prepared to support students, and we provide professional development to support staff in meeting the specific needs of the students at their school.

Title I

There have been some concerns about the impact of boundary changes on schools' Title I status, and whether that would mean a school could lose essential supports. HCPSS Title I funding is based on county-wide census data. Funds can be allocated to any school that has a higher percentage of students receiving Free and Reduced Price Meals (FARMs) than the county average. HCPSS has chosen to serve 13 elementary schools where at least 40% of students receive FARMs. Title I funds are allocated to an entire school, so they do not automatically move with students when they are reassigned to another school.

HCPSS determines where and at which levels we distribute the Title I funds allocated to our system. HCPSS has chosen to serve only the elementary grade span. Within that grade span, HCPSS must serve schools in order based on FARMs percentage. There is a 1-year lag in eligibility, so if a boundary change for 2020-21 results in a higher FARMs population at a different school, that school couldn't receive Title I funds until at least the following year. During that lag year, we would work with the principal, staff and parents to identify specific needs and plan how the funding will be used.

Title I is among several federal grants we receive to support schools with higher needs. Title I funding is used primarily for additional staffing, but can also pay for during- and beyond-school-day tutoring, additional curricular materials, and other supplemental resources. However, HCPSS provides targeted professional development and other supports at **all** schools where there is high need, funded through our operational budget. These supports can include additional reading specialists, BSAP and Hispanic achievement liaisons, special programming and other supports, although some of our most valuable resources were curtailed when many school-based reading and math support positions were eliminated with the most recent budget cycle.

I want to say this very clearly: HCPSS will not lose any Title I funds as a result of these recommended changes.

At this point in the presentation, Dr. Martirano presented maps showing elementary, middle and high school boundaries before and after the impact of the proposed boundary adjustments and Areas Likely Impacted by HS #13 Boundary Study, and tables providing details of the proposed

moves. All maps and tables are provided in the Board report: Presentation of the Attendance Area Adjustment Plan.

Transportation factors

Transportation represents an important factor for boundary area considerations, not only regarding student travel times but also the costs involved in adding buses, routes and mileage.

Our community wants neighborhood schools, and long bus rides are not conducive to a positive learning experience. We must also allocate our budget dollars responsibly, by making full use of the schools that we already have in our district. In a tight budget climate, we cannot afford to leave existing resources underutilized. Boundary changes resulting in longer bus rides add additional mileage, at a cost of an average \$2.44 per mile. (For example, if 50 bus routes are changed, and each change adds 5 miles, the annual cost would total approximately \$220,000.)

We must also factor in the number of students living in neighborhoods that currently walk to school, but after boundary adjustment would be bused. Through my proposal, that would impact 429 elementary, 39 middle school and 106 high school students.

Another important factor to consider is the option in Policy 6010 for reassigned 12th graders to stay with their previous school. This can add significant transportation costs, depending on the number of families choosing to take advantage of this option.

As a ball park example: My proposal would move 2,851 high school students, so approximately 713, or 25% of those would be 12th graders. If half of them choose to stay at their previous school and need bus transportation, up to 8 additional buses would be needed, at a cost of \$68,000 per bus, or a total of \$544,000.

If Board members decide to allow 11th graders the same option, the cost could potentially be doubled.

The Transportation Office has prepared detailed charts showing the relative cost impact associated with various options to support Board members in your decision making.

Recommendation summary

My proposal will result in a total of approximately 7,396 student reassignments, including

- 3,194 elementary
- 1,351 middle school and
- 2,851 high school

We have determined that our schools function most efficiently when utilized between 90-110%. My proposal would bring us to a total of 53 schools within target utilization, compared with 42 if no adjustments are made. Under my proposal, we would narrow the gap between our highest and lowest utilized schools, from a low of 70% and a high of 136%, to a low of 75% and a high of 121%.

These numbers should improve further following boundary adjustments for High School #13.

Free and Reduced Meals (FARM) percentages will be significantly improved, to a result where:

- All elementary schools would be at or below 54% FARM, and 21 move closer to the county average
- All middle schools would be at or below 45%, and 11 move closer to the county average
- All high schools would be at or below 42%, and 9 move closer to the county average

Together, these proposed changes have significant potential to substantially advance equity and access to the best educational services and supports for all of our students. At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that these changes don't work in isolation and will not, in themselves, achieve all that we are working to accomplish to improve student achievement and outcomes. We must continue our work, through our Strategic Call to Action, to support every student in all of our schools, and to monitor our progress using outcome data. In other words, simply reducing a school's FARM percentage, or its capacity utilization, will not automatically improve student outcomes.

Value of classroom diversity

I want to emphasize why it is so important to work toward leveling FARM rates among our schools. Substantial research shows that socio-economic and cultural diversity in the classroom can provide all students with a range of benefits. Children who have the opportunity to interact with classmates and experience communities that may be different than their own, gain tremendous benefits. These benefits impact ALL students, not only those who are more disadvantaged.

Diverse classrooms improve students' creativity, motivation, deeper learning, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills. And diverse learning environments have been shown to improve leadership skills and prepare students to succeed in a global environment.

In Howard County and in HCPSS schools we are all part of one community. To fulfill that vision, we need to give students a chance to grow up with one another. This work truly represents equity in action.

Ongoing process

It's important to look to the future because we can't solve all of our problems in one year, given our budget realities, population patterns and Howard County's rapid growth. This is a long-term, multi year process.

We moved the needle forward each year by opening new schools, adding capacity through additions and renovations, and by continuing to use relocatable classrooms to quickly add capacity. We introduced JumpStart two years ago as an innovative way to relieve crowding. And we have more new schools and addition/renovation projects on the roster, subject to available funding:

- Talbott Springs ES replacement in 2022, adding approximately 160 K-5 seats
- Open new High School #13 in 2023, adding 1,650 seats
- Complete the Hammond HS addition and renovation project in 2023, adding 200 more seats.

All of these projects are articulated in the Capital Improvement Program, which makes these the top three projects. We now have a number of land acquisitions that are in process, which puts us in a stronger position than where we were two years ago during our previous boundary adjustment process.

Outcomes: Critical priorities

Through my proposal we would effectively address all of our most critical priorities for this process.

1. We would **reduce capacity** at the schools most impacted by crowding, making better use of the schools that are currently below capacity utilization, while maintaining neighborhood schools and containing costs as much as feasible. We accomplish this by
 - Increasing the number of schools within target utilization from 42 schools to 53 schools
 - Decreasing the number of schools below 90% capacity utilization from 11 schools to 5 schools, and
 - Decreasing the number of schools above 110% capacity utilization from 21 schools to 16 schools
 - And, those schools at the elementary school level that remain above or below target would grow into the target range by 2024-25.
2. We will **advance equity** by decreasing the FARM proportions for the most highly impacted schools.
3. We have **planned ahead** for the boundary adjustments associated with opening new High School #13, minimizing double moves as much as possible.

We have coordinated these proposals with the priorities articulated through our Capital Improvement Program, and we will deliver on the added potential that the proposed boundary adjustments through our ongoing work guided by our Strategic Call to Action.

There is no perfect proposal. Neither this plan, nor any plan can simultaneously accomplish everything we all want. But my recommendation moves us forward across all of our driving priorities for this process: leveling capacity utilization, advancing equity by addressing FARM distribution, and providing the best learning experience for *all* students. My moral imperative, always, is to do what is best for kids.

We must act now and with conviction, to provide all of our students the best possible educational learning environment and opportunities. Our schools are already far out of alignment, and delaying a comprehensive redrawing of school boundaries will simply exacerbate these imbalances.

We have the opportunity to effectuate real and meaningful change. We need to do this because it is the right thing to do. This work truly represents equity in action.

Next steps

Tonight marks the beginning of the Board's deliberation, starting with receiving public input. We will be meeting with Board members to discuss this plan in more detail. This is the first time the Board is seeing this recommendation and I want people to remember that this is all this is: it is my recommendation. The final decision will be made by the Board on November 21 after a series of work sessions.

This is not a typical board report where the board members have to ask questions tonight or make a decision right away. Much as my recommendation was put together after weeks of thoughtful discussion and public input, and I did not make public statements until tonight, this

next stage of the process will be thoughtful and provide plenty of opportunities for the public to provide input.

This presentation marks the close of the Superintendent's phase of this process. The Board's deliberation is the next step in the process, and begins with the Board's public hearings. Three hearings are scheduled, all starting at 7 pm:

- Tuesday, September 17, for families that are assigned to Centennial HS, Howard HS, Mt. Hebron HS, Oakland Mills HS in SY2019-20
- Tuesday, September 24, for families assigned to Atholton HS, Hammond HS, Long Reach HS, Wilde Lake HS in SY2019-20
- Thursday, September 26, for families assigned to Glenelg HS, Marriotts Ridge HS, Reservoir HS, River Hill HS in SY2019-20

Seven Board work sessions are scheduled, all scheduled to start at 6:30 pm:

- Thursday, October 10
- Thursday, October 24
- Wednesday, October 30
- Thursday, November 5
- Tuesday, November 12
- Thursday, November 14.
- Monday, November 18, with a preliminary decision expected during this final work session.

The Board is scheduled to make a final decision on any boundary line adjustments with action on Thursday, November 21.

We know this can be an emotional process for many families. I ask everyone — parents and guardians, staff and the community — please remember that our children are always watching us. They will follow our lead in how we respond to any challenge or change. Please practice civility and model the kind of behavior, respect for others and positive attitude that we want to see in our children.

I want to thank everyone who has participated in this process and accomplished all of the hard work that has brought forth this proposal.

I thank the Board for their leadership and support in advancing solutions that best serve the needs and priorities of our students and community, and which lead to equity and greater educational opportunities throughout our entire district.

Thank you.