

DCPS Board of Education
Forum on Criteria for Closing and Consolidation
April 18, 2006
Randle Highlands Elementary School
Testimony of 21st Century School Fund

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We all thank the Board for the thoughtful guiding principals and the administration for the effort that has gone into the considerations for rightsizing criteria.

Rightsizing is very difficult. In order to be successful, data must be good and the understanding of the neighborhood situations has to be long and deep. We all want to make certain that our vision for the city welcomes children and families and schools are the biggest factor in creating child-friendly neighborhoods. This is an exercise in “first, do no harm.” Students, teachers, parents and administrators have to believe that if they are moved from their current school into another building, they will be moving into better space with better programs.

Neighborhood residents have to be included in these decisions. Deliberations on anything as important to the life of a neighborhood as closing a school have to be carefully considered. Good information and transparency is crucial; information from long-time residents is critical - - the schools belong to the city and the neighborhoods not to any principal, teachers or LSRT. These decisions have to be a community consensus and this takes time and attention.

There are two over-riding principles for right-sizing that are not specifically expressed in the draft criteria:

Location – Is this a good place for a school? Is it adjacent to parkland or a recreation center? Is it near public transportation? Is it serving a number of students sufficient for a school at a viable level (320 ES, 360 MS, 600 HS)? Or, if the building is small, is it full? Is the school near planned housing? Historically has there been a school in this location?

Demand – Is the program in demand? Is the school seen as a positive place and do people want their children to attend? The success of a program may have a lot to do with where it is. Successful programs are not necessarily transferable, they grow with a vision and vitality that transcends any principal or group of likeminded teachers and becomes institutionalized, schools are complex organisms and they are not necessarily moveable or replicable.

Right-sizing As Part of Modernization

Thanks to the School Modernization Bill recently passed by the DC Council - - prodded by the school modernization campaign and public school advocates - - DCPS now has the funds to modernize all of our schools in the next 10-15 years. This is a very positive situation. Rightsizing and any accompanying closing and consolidation must be considered as part of planning for modernization.

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Right-sizing in conjunction with modernization means that many fewer criteria for closing have to be considered. **Educational adequacy** can be considered in terms of modifications needed during modernization. If a school is in distressing shape, then its **physical condition** makes it a priority for modernization, not consolidation. The **cost of capital improvements** is a consideration for modernization more than criteria for rightsizing. **Program space adequacy** and **enrollment utilization** likewise are considerations for modernization if the space requires modification for programs or if an old addition needs to be demolished to make the building fit the enrollment. **Operating costs** as a criteria need to be reconsidered because so often operating costs for the newer schools are higher than those of the older schools.

At least two new criteria need to be added:

New Criteria: Is this building a good candidate to serve as swing space for the next decade of school modernizations?

Even with numerous school closings, modernizing all DC public schools within the next 10 or 15 years means that as many as 30 projects will be in some stage of planning or construction at any given time with as many as 10 schools in construction at once. DCPS will require swing space for elementary schools available to each ward, and the system may need swing space for more than one elementary school at a time in wards 7 and 8 where there are more schools. DCPS will need swing space to accommodate 2 high schools and 2 middle schools simultaneously. Altogether, something on the order of a million square feet may be necessary.

Also required is swing space for those DCPS facilities leased by public charter schools which also need renovation either immediately or in the near future such as Hyde, Rabout, Paul and Harrison. DCPS should consider leasing swing space schools to larger public charter schools for use during modernization of those buildings.

None of this square footage need be counted as permanently open, but it will be needed in order to manage the catch-up work required after three decades of neglect. The availability of swing space is a real gift to continued student improvement during construction and it will make it possible to finish modernization at a much faster pace. Swing space schools have to be prioritized for systemic rehabilitation so that the task of modernization can begin.

Criteria: Is this school needed as permanent space for central administration or school operations?

Administrative space needs to be identified for the space currently leased for the central administration at 825 North Capital and other school offices scattered throughout DCPS.

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The system must quickly inventory the office and operational space required so that square footage can be identified and renovated within a DCPS school or schools. This may be in the order of 350,000-400,000 square feet that should be located in conjunction with right-sizing. Space for new parent centers must also be a consideration.

More Complete Data

Demographics need to be more complete and better understood before responsible decisions can be made. Current data provided by DCPS is insufficient and not widely understood; formulas for determining school capacity or forecasting enrollment are not available to the public.

Neighbors, elected officials, principals, teachers, planners all need to understand student travel patterns and attendance patterns. DCPS should acknowledge the historic permeability of its school boundaries and the competition with openly enrolled public charter schools by removing the percentage of students attending a school from within boundary as negative criteria for consolidation.

School Performance

School performance should not be a negative consideration in right-sizing. No neighborhood should be deprived of a school because the students score poorly on standardized tests. Low test scores should be addressed as an academic issue with increased attention to administration, personnel, and programs.

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