

Public Comments for School Board Meetings

#847

I would like to provide: *

Written Public Comments

My public comments are related to: *

Equity

Topic *

Overcrowding/Disparate Capacity Utilization at West End Elementary Schools

Full Name *

Kursten Phelps

What is your relationship to ACPS? *

Parent/Guardian of an ACPS Student

See attached comments on next page.

Dear School Board members and ACPS administrators,

My name is Kursten Phelps, I'm a Patrick Henry parent, and I'm writing to you - my fourth comment this academic year - to urge you to take immediate action to address the disparate elementary school enrollment capacity utilization that is affecting Patrick Henry, Polk, and other schools, particularly on the West End. I hope that redistricting in two years will right size capacity utilization in the longer term, but we can't wait for long term solutions. We need short term solutions now.

Patrick Henry has an enrollment of 1023 students in a building built for 840 students. But you already know that because we have been bringing this issue to you for months - and brought this same issue to you repeatedly last academic year.

You know that this means a variety of adverse impacts, including:

- Larger class sizes, which means our teachers can spend less time and attention with each student in their class.
- Crowded cafeteria, playground, and other spaces, which lead to greater chances for injury and illness.
- School events in the evening must be limited to those who register, or events must be split over multiple nights, which means fewer families can participate.

We are told by ACPS Central Office that they have no choice but to follow ACPS School Board Policy JC-R/JCD-R, which was described last week to the Polk PTA as requiring capacity transfer students be sent to the school "closest to their residence" where there is capacity. Curiously, I could not find a version of this language in a policy document after searching the ACPS website. When I looked at the [ACPS School Board Policies Page](#) and select JC-R/JCD-R, the version of the policy does not state that the students must be transferred to the school with capacity closest to their residence. [Lines 25-29 of the policy state:](#)

Because ACPS transportation resources and utilization impact placement procedures, schools are organized into capacity-reassignment clusters. If an enrollment limit for a grade level at a school is reached, the Superintendent or authorized designee may reassign elementary students to an alternate school in their capacity-reassignment cluster where there is capacity at that grade level.

This is also how the capacity transfer policy was described in the presentation at the [June 15, 2023 School Board meeting](#).

This raises important questions. Which policy is accurate? If it's the former, why is it not on the ACPS School Board Policies website?

But more importantly, I urge you to recognize that existing policies are failing your most important stakeholders - students, teachers, and families. And when a policy does not meet the mission, a policy should be changed.

If the policy truly is that capacity transfers must go to the school under capacity nearest the student's residence, I urge you to recognize that this policy is complicit with a long legacy of housing policy that have resulted in self-evident racial and socioeconomic stratification in Alexandria. To remedy this, I urge you to change the policy to have new students zoned for overcapacity schools transferred first to the school nearest their home that is under utilized. This would address the perpetual cycle of West End schools being capacity transfer schools because they are located in the parts of town that are more affordable for families.

Alternatively, if the policy currently posted on the ACPS website is accurate, then I urge you to add Douglas MacArthur, which is underutilized, to the capacity reassignment cluster with Patrick Henry, James K. Polk, and other schools in the cluster. This does not appear to require a policy change, and would immediately address the issue in the short term. After all, we know that Douglas MacArthur sits at approximately 60% capacity utilization and, as of a [November 2023 School Board presentation](#), is net negative 9 students based on zoned student transfers across all transfer reasons (none being capacity reasons).

I understand bus transportation is a real challenge right now. And I understand that an underutilized school like Douglas MacArthur is farther away for many Patrick Henry zoned students than Polk. But let's also recognize that the entire City of Alexandria is 15 square miles. Douglas MacArthur is 2 miles from Patrick Henry. I ride my child on a bike between the two schools frequently. To what point will you insist on prioritizing the existing, failing policy, and a couple of miles over the real, everyday adverse impacts upon the Patrick Henry and Polk schools communities?

Policy choices and policy interpretations have to be made all the time. After all, it was a policy choice to not pair redistricting when the new Douglas MacArthur building opened, despite the awareness that West End schools have been at or overcapacity for multiple years.

And it was a policy interpretation choice not to use Douglas MacArthur as a capacity transfer school for Patrick Henry even when Douglas MacArthur was on the same campus – literally across a driveway – as Patrick Henry for multiple years.

You have past practice of making policy choices when they need to be made. We are asking you - and will continue to come to speak to you - to do what's right, recognize that existing policy and its interpretation are not working, and to fix it.

At Patrick Henry our motto is "Work Hard to Get Smart." And, boy, do our kids, staff, and administrators do just that. Won't you join us to work hard to get smart about equity in ACPS?

Thank you,

Kursten Phelps