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July 10, 2013

Dr. Kimberly Hill, Superintendent
Charles County Public Schools
Jesse L. Starkey Administration Building
5980 Radio Station Rd.
La Plata, MD 20646

Dear Dr. Hill: *Kim*

Congratulations on your appointment as Superintendent of Charles County Public Schools, and thank you for hosting Joan Schaefer, Jillian Storms, and myself on June 17 for a tour of La Plata High School, Benjamin Stoddert Middle School, and Dr. Samuel A. Mudd Elementary School. I appreciate the opportunity you provided us to explain our views on the school facility situation in Charles County: that while an impressive fleet of new schools has been built since the early 2000s in response to enrollment growth pressures, this almost exclusive focus on new school construction has likely resulted in a condition of considerable educational inequity. With no major renovation undertaken in Charles County in almost a decade and a half, it appears unavoidable that a very visible disparity will develop between the educational conditions offered in the new state-of-the-art facilities and those of the older buildings. We wish to assist you in every way possible to correct this situation.

Unfortunately, our tour of the three schools more than confirmed our concern. While the schools we visited were generally clean and maintained at a good level, and the professional involvement of the school administrators was evident at each school, it is still obvious that the arrangement, size and number of classrooms, the location of program spaces with respect to one another, the circulation systems, and the building systems cannot support an efficient delivery of the educational program. Below we list a number of our general observations, with more extended notes for La Plata High School.

Open Space Classroom Enclosures

The open space classrooms at all three schools have been enclosed using storefront glass and aluminum systems, with openings left in the storefront to allow for the movement of conditioned air:

- Although the schools were not occupied by students at the time of our visit, it is clear that the lack of acoustic isolation between classrooms will hinder the ability of students to concentrate.
- A very large number of the interior classrooms, including the art rooms at La Plata High, receive no direct daylight (a factor that research indicates may be linked to student achievement). The situation is somewhat better at Mudd Elementary only because the school is smaller and the interior classrooms are able to borrow a limited amount of daylight from adjacent corridors. In general, we found the lighting conditions to be below standard at the three schools. At Mudd Elementary, although the lenses of the corridor lights were removed as a result of damage following the August 2011 earthquake and have not been replaced since, this school was submitted as a very low priority to receive Energy Efficiency Initiative funding in the FY 2014 Capital Improvement Program.

School Security

In the wake of the Connecticut shootings in December 2012, Charles County Public Schools has provided its schools with a simple hardware solution to protect exterior doors against entry from the outside. Nevertheless, the space planning at all three schools is detrimental to establishing a secure school environment:

- At all three schools, the glazed storefront partitions do little to mitigate the security exposure of the open space classrooms.
- At La Plata High, the administrative offices are on the second floor, resulting in a lack of direct, continual visual supervision of the principle school entrances.
- At Benjamin Stoddert Middle School, the reception area is located in an open space that was formerly a large commons. The lack of spatial separation between the entrance doors and the reception area would give the staff little time to react or issue a warning in the event of an intrusion.

Health and Safety

- The health suites at all three schools were inadequate by contemporary standards of size, differentiation of functions, and privacy. At Benjamin Stoddert Middle, a single room the size of an office serves as the health site.
- The air quality at the three schools suggested the possible presence of mildew or mold. This indication is supported by visual evidence of water penetration, likely due either to leaks in the roof or to condensation on pipes. Where there are open above-ceiling plenums that connect from space to space, mold and mildew can quickly spread throughout the building.
- An excess of power wiring was observed at all three schools, a condition that can lead to overheating of wires, trip hazards, and possible damage to equipment. This is typically a sign that there is insufficient electrical power in the school building. These and other safety issues, including the blocking of exit doors and building equipment, were noted in our letters of April 30, 2013, and the reports sent to Mr. James Richmond on the FY 2011 and FY 2012 Maintenance Inspections.

La Plata High School

- Through discussion with Principal Evelyn Arnold, we learned that there are only two fully-equipped science laboratories in this school of more than 1400 students. We would normally expect to find at least 12 fully-fitted laboratories in a school of this size. As a result of this deficiency, many La Plata students will receive limited hands-on experience, a critical component of today's STEM programs. One classroom serving as a biology lab lacked a sink and biology equipment altogether. Most of the classrooms we visited did not have smart boards. These conditions contrast dramatically with the effort that has been made to ensure that the new St. Charles High School will meet or even exceed contemporary standards for science instruction.
- The locations of the science instruction classrooms that have been carved out of the open space pods force laboratory work to be conducted in non-adjacent spaces; as a result, a considerable amount of the principal's weekly effort appears to be dedicated to scheduling the movement of classes. With the limited number of laboratories, science students are regularly displaced in order to allow other students to use the laboratories. Teachers attempt to provide instruction for the displaced students in the Media Center, which may already be in use for testing, other non-science classes, and student research projects. We recognize that since the school is substantially overcrowded, some spaces are likely to support double-duty functions; nevertheless, this situation

may have been exasperated by the lack of a thorough renovation/addition project for the entire facility, which would address instructional adjacencies as well as provide an adequate number of classrooms, laboratories, and core spaces.

- The mechanical system appears to be extremely outdated and inefficient. Because of the system's lack of capacity, events cannot be held concurrently in the auditorium and in the gymnasium. The 280 heat pumps require the full-time attention of two maintenance individuals, and must be individually reset after each thunderstorm. Not only does the condition of this older facility affect the instructional program, it results in an inefficient use of Charles County Public Schools' maintenance staff, with consequences that must be felt by other schools in the system that need attention from trained staff.

We are well aware that Charles County Public Schools has seen continuous enrollment growth for many years, requiring a considerable dedication of local resources to building school capacity and resulting in the largest percentage of students in relocatable classrooms among all the LEAs in Maryland. Nevertheless, the disparity between the new schools and the older facilities is troubling. CCPS has not requested State planning approval of a major renovation project since fiscal year 2001, and that project, the renovation of Dr. Samuel A. Mudd Elementary, was apparently withdrawn before it could be funded or executed. The deferral of major renovation work in older facilities clearly hinders the education of many students; we understand that the building conditions at La Plata High may also have had some impact on teacher hiring and retention.

The deferral of building renovation leads to a slow-moving crisis that cannot be avoided indefinitely. At some point, the older schools will experience system failures that will result in temporary or longer school closings; with school utilization in Charles County schools generally near or above 100%, it is not difficult to imagine the impact such a crisis would have on many schools throughout the district. Deferral of renovations is fiscally imprudent, since the cost of maintenance, repairs and energy will only increase over time due to the continual aging of the building systems, and the eventual cost of renovation will increase due to escalation of construction costs. In the short run, the inefficiency of building systems like the mechanical equipment at La Plata High means that staff members cannot possibly attend to the requirements of all of the schools on a daily basis. The older facilities will consume maintenance and energy resources that could be better directed to educational purposes.

Out of the total CCPS fleet of 37 schools, the majority consists of older, unrenovated facilities. This is an enormous scope of renovation or replacement work to undertake, but it is unavoidable, and it can be approached rationally and reasonably. The problem is threefold: to persuade decision makers and the community of the necessity of incorporating major renovation work into the capital program; to prioritize the work in a rational, objective, and fair manner within a comprehensive facility plan; and to fund such an ambitious program.

- On the first issue, it might be worthwhile to initiate a discussion with the board members, superintendents, facility planners and local government officials of other Maryland jurisdictions that have faced similar challenges of enrollment growth combined with an aging school plant. While solutions in these circumstances are never simple, some districts have achieved a balanced capital program that has helped them to avoid the inequitable conditions discussed above. The task is to communicate the serious consequences that will result if work on existing facilities is not undertaken.
- On the second point, prioritizing projects in an objective manner requires an accurate and complete assessment of the condition of the building plant. A number of mid-size and larger school districts in Maryland have carried out facility assessment studies, generally using experienced outside consultants. The scope of these studies can be tailored to the specific needs of the school system; while all assessments involve an examination of building systems, it is also prudent to include an assessment of educational adequacy within the scope of the study.

The merits of using outside consultants include not only their experience and efficiency, but the clear objectivity of the findings they produce: we have found that when school priorities are based on an impartial, professional assessment, one that allows ready comparison to industry standards and the conditions of similar school districts, communities and decision-makers are far more inclined to accept the results.

The ultimate purpose of a facility assessment is to lead to a comprehensive, long-term facility plan, one that covers both basic educational programs and also the special requirements for science and technology, special education, and gymnasiums in elementary schools. As a policy document, such a comprehensive facility plan is invaluable in developing the community and political consensus needed to guide the system to prudent and equitable investments over an extended period of time.

- On the final point, the most important step is recognition of the size and gravity of the problem so that funds can be allocated to cover the full range of facility concerns, not exclusively the capacity problem. Concurrently, attention must be paid to methods to increase public funding. There are also a variety of public-private partnership models that may be worth investigating to leverage the existing funding to the greatest advantage.

Based on our experience with other school districts in Maryland, we believe it is entirely likely that a thorough assessment of the building and educational deficiencies in the Charles County Public Schools facilities will indicate that several hundreds of millions of dollars would be required to correct *all* deficiencies. While such a result may be discouraging and fiscally infeasible, the figure by itself plays an important role in the development of a balanced capital program, since it provides a snapshot of the magnitude of the problem. If this information is accompanied by a clearly outlined method for prioritizing projects within reasonable fiscal expectations and a well-developed plan for addressing the prioritized list of projects, then genuine progress can be made in moving toward a more equitable educational situation.

We welcome your leadership and look forward to working with you on this very significant issue, which affects not only the welfare of students in Charles County but also the long-term fiscal health of the jurisdiction. Please call me at any time to discuss this matter.

Sincerely,



David Lever

cc: Dr. Lillian Lowery, State Superintendent of Schools
Ms. Roberta S. Wise, Chair, Board of Education
Ms. Candice Quinn Kelly, President, Board of County Commissioners
Mr. Alvin Collins, Member, Interagency Committee on School Construction
Mr. Richard Hall, Member, Interagency Committee on School Construction
Mr. Timothy Maloney, Member, Interagency Committee on School Construction
Mr. Thomas Lewis, Member, Interagency Committee on School Construction
Ms. Joan Schaefer
Mr. Gerard Barrett