What should a new school boundary policy look like?

by Sunil Dasgupta

With school buildings closed this Fall, the contentious school boundary plans have been put on the back burner, but the issue has not gone away. We should use this time to set up a system that creates a new transparent evaluation process to take the politics out of the process

School boundaries have been a lightning rod in the just-ended primary elections. The results of the at-large and District 4 races show that **Montgomery County residents overwhelmingly support the idea of change**, even if we don't agree on the specifics of what those changes ought to be. Given the **population and demographic shifts, this change is now inevitable**. In 2019, there were 10,860 students overcrowded in about 100 of our schools and 9,357 open seats in the other half of MCPS schools. While not all those empty seats can be filled with students at overcrowded schools, a significant number can be, and school assignments in the future must keep abreast with population and demographic changes.

Historically, the problem has been that the demand for change builds over decades without any ready policy instrument for redress. School boundaries change mainly when a new school is built. The result is that when change inevitably comes—as proposed in the Clarksburg Cluster—it is seen as an imposition, opaque, and inconsiderate. In Clarksburg, school—and road—infrastructure have not kept up with growing population for reasons that go beyond the boundary controversy. This wrong has to be righted, but lacking effective policy tools to make change, overcrowding has caused at least one school reached 200 percent of capacity.

We have to make changes. The question now is whether we allow these changes to be forced upon us or we come together as a county to push for a predictable, reasonable, and fair way to manage change.

I was the only candidate in the primary—and now the only candidate in the general—who has provided specific solutions for dealing with overcrowding and under-enrollment and to address the problem into the future. My plan offers a predictable, reasonable, and fair way of dealing with student allocation. Much of this plan disappeared in the heated rhetoric of the primary, but I did write and publish the plan in December 2019. My thinking has evolved more since and below I highlight its main pillars below.

I want to be clear; I would like to see a sustainable policy of boundary review and adjustment, and the only way to get it is to bring a broad coalition of support in favor of a new policy. The results of the primary show that this coalition exists. What we need going forward is a specific plan around which to coalesce.

Systemwide rather than cluster-based change

In MCPS, cluster lines are sacrosanct, even more than specific school boundaries. Cluster lines are a big reason why over 30 percent of students do not go to the school nearest them. Many families prefer a 30-minute bus ride if it's within their preferred cluster over a 5-minute walk that crosses cluster lines.

To simplify this problem, think of three clusters A, B, and C. Cluster A abuts B and B abuts C. Cluster A is overcrowded, Cluster B is at capacity, and Cluster C is under-enrolled. In this view, the problem set is Cluster A and Cluster C. Cluster B is excluded because it is at capacity. This creates the fear that students from Cluster A will be transported past Cluster B to go to schools in Cluster C. If we took a systemwide view of the problem, we would have two advantages: it would allow Cluster A students to go to Cluster B and Cluster B students to go to Cluster C. In this way, *we would reduce the possible dislocation and share the burden more uniformly. MCPS has promised adjacency, but it is not always clear how adjacency can be honored. Systemwide review and adjustment provides the logic to make this feasible.*

Predictable adjustments with years of notice

A big concern about boundary change is separating students from their friends. My plan avoids this: Based on birth-year and location, we assign a child to an elementary school. **On the first day of kindergarten, we assign her a middle school, and on the first day of sixth-grade, we designate her high school. These assignments do not change.** What changes is the next time we look at demography, we can assign a different school for the next cohort.

For elementary school, any adjustment will provide five years of notice, for middle school a six-year notice, and for high-school a three-year notice. Since middle and high school numbers

are predictable based on elementary school enrollment, there is greater enrollment certainty anyway.

The downside is that the policy could sometimes separate siblings who are close in age. To address this possibility, we allow the family the choice to bring their older child to the younger child's school. The other option of allowing the younger sibling to join the older sibling's school would be a grandfathering allowance that slowed down rebalancing and would privilege established families over newcomers. In a county where about a third of the population is foreign-born and many more are new residents coming from other parts of the country, this would be akin to pulling up the ladder behind us.

This plan ensures stability of student assignment and predictability years into the future. Moreover, we are mitigating some adverse possibilities. Lastly, students entering the school system in the middle of elementary, middle, and high school will join schools as if they were in the school system since kindergarten.

Regular review and adjustment

A system of incremental change is only feasible if we open the door to regular review and adjustment. The problem with school boundaries is not that they exist, but rather that they become permanent and, as population shifts over time, they become unbalanced. While technically the Board is able to change boundaries as necessary, in reality change happens mainly when a new school is built. *The BOE needs a policy instrument that undertakes this task continually as population and demographic change.*

It is important to note that regular change here does not imply pulling students out of their current school. The thing to keep in mind is that the longer the time between changes, the more sudden those changes will end up being. For example, if we undertake annual review and adjustment, we can time-lag execution by several years. But if we review and adjust every four years, to take one argument, we will have to execute that change quickly and the sudden change will be dislocating. *If we do not want to see dramatic changes in one year, we have to make small changes over many years.*

Is this a plan to bus my child long distances?

The opposition to the idea of boundary change is in part predicated on the belief that students will have to commute long distances as a consequence. Now, what is a long distance and how much time a student should spend commuting varies vastly based on home and school location, sometimes on school choice, and really is a subjective call often based on a family's needs.

The boundary plan I have proposed is not intended to increase commute times. Given that 30-percent of MCPS students do not go to the school closest to them, mathematically, optimizing school boundaries should lead to reduction in commute times for some students and it may increase commute times for some others. My plan has countervailing principles. First, looking at the problem from a systemwide rather than a cluster-specific point of view, however, allows the school system to adhere to its commitment to adjacency in student assignments. Second, regular review and adjustment means that over time we develop a pattern of smaller changes rather than have to tackle big dramatic shifts. Third, rationalizing student assignment allows the county to better plan infrastructure, which when it comes to roadways could very well help reduce commute times especially upcounty.

School Overcrowding is an Equity Issue

A striking fact about the Clarksburg controversy has been the higher level of anxiety among middle school families than among high school families. One reason for this is that families moved out of Clarksburg to Seneca Valley High School recognize that MCPS is also making a huge investment in SVHS. But no such investment was made in Neelsville Middle School, where middle school boundary changes happened.

The Board of Education does tie capital spending with boundary change, but the coordination needs to be much tighter. When an under-enrolled school is not doing well, the BOE must make new investments there before sending more students to the school. What this really means is that BOE must reexamine its capital spending methodology and prioritize a different set of factors that sends investments to under-enrolled schools. Further, the investment is more than just capital spending and must include infusion of new leaders, new talent, and new educational approaches. With the infusion of new investment and new families, we should expect all schools to do better and the burden of boundary change to dissipate.

The second change we need is to how the school system communicates with families and residents which will help rebuild trust. Currently, many families feel unheard and disrespected. The way to address this issue is to follow through on promises to listen with a transparent policy instrument that enables predictability and fairness restores trust. A policy of regular, systemwide, predictable, and transparent school boundary review and adjustment will minimize disruption over time, foster legitimacy, and become a mark of good governance. A return of trust is going to be even more important as we face the consequences of the pandemic and push to recover from the impact of school closure on our students.

Will boundary change resolve all equity problems in MCPS?
No. Equity is a multifaceted problem that has been addressed in many different ways. We have

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to work on making the curriculum more inclusive, staff more diverse, and school culture more welcoming. Not only do we have equity issues between schools, we must address equity issues inside schools. The data shows that minority children do poorly in high and low poverty schools. These facets of the equity problem demand other mitigation measures that I have proposed elsewhere. What is important to keep in mind here is that school boundary review and adjustment addresses structural inequity in resource allocation in the school system, which if left unaddressed erodes other gains over time.

Let me explain this a little. Even if we put more resources into a high-poverty school, for which there is widespread support, over time overcrowding and underenrollment shifts as budget allocations move with students. This leads to underenrolled schools not offering some courses and services, both at the higher academic level and in things like ESOL. These schools also miss out on extracurricular opportunities and support such as mental health. Eventually, talented staff leave and the school is left with a reputation for underperformance. Coupled with social conditions, we can also imagine over-policing and school to prison pipelines.

Therefore, if we want to have long-term impact on inequity, we not only have to look at curriculum, staff, and services but also develop a policy instrument that allows greater balance between schools. A regular, systemwide, and predictable boundary review and adjustment policy is that long-term instrument. It will not solve all equity problems, but without a policy of review and adjustment, short-term measures we do take will erode over time and that is what makes school boundaries important in November 2020.

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