

January 9, 2021

Frazier O’Leary, Ward 4 Member, DC State Board of Education
Ruth Wattenberg, Ward 3 Member, DC State Board of Education

Dear Mayor Bowser and Chancellor Ferebee:

Cc: Chairman Mendelson, Councilmembers Cheh and George

We write to you about the sudden proposal to move the Lafayette pre-k program to the former Lamb School on Military Road. We write to you as the elected State Board of Education Representatives for Wards 3 and 4, the wards in which most Lafayette Elementary School families live. In addition, Frazier O’Leary, the Ward 4 representative, is also the representative for Brightwood Education Campus, which will be impacted by any move. Ruth Wattenberg, the Ward 3 representative, has also been involved in the Community Working Group, convened several years ago by DCPS to consider the overcrowding challenges faced by the Wilson High School feeder schools, including Lafayette.

We want to begin by conveying on behalf of our communities our enormous frustration that this proposal was made on an emergency basis--without the benefit of community feedback or the presentation of options--and was presented to the Lafayette community as a binary decision: Move Lafayette school’s PK program to the Military Road school starting in September 2021—or, likely, see your PK program diminished starting next fall, and, eventually, lose it. Further, the binary decision was initially presented as a permanent one.

We urge you to take the time to analyze other options—including those that we present at the close of this letter--and consider the impact the decision will have on various communities. Here is our understanding of how the decision-making process bypassed meaningful discussion with the school communities.

Lafayette Community: As we understand it, this 11th hour approach began when the LSAT was presented on November 18th with a binary choice--effectively, an ultimatum. As context, it is important to understand that the school has faced constant pressures due to growing enrollment, including: limited PK; lost common areas, as such space was turned into classrooms; lost rooms for foreign language classes, etc. Understandably, given no other options, the initial views of those to whom the proposal was presented were somewhat positive. Since then, it has become clear that other options may exist.

Even if it is necessary to decide quickly about new space for next fall, we see no good reason why such a decision must be regarded as permanent or why it had to be so sudden. The broad question of Lafayette’s overcrowding has been known for years, and it was the subject of a Community Working Group discussion that reported to DCPS two years ago about options for addressing overcrowding across the Wilson feeder system, including Lafayette. Even the narrow question of whether to move Lafayette to the Military Road site has surely been under discussion within DCPS and/or the city long before it was brought to the school LSAT in November. It was made known later than that to the broader Lafayette community and to ANC 3/4G.

Brightwood Community. As with the Lafayette community, there was no discussion held with the Brightwood school community--for whom this decision also has serious, concrete implications—or the ANC representing Brightwood before the proposal was put forward. Further, this lack of input and consultation may have poisoned what may ultimately be a basically good idea—that in some

form, the LAMB building should host a free-standing DCPS PK program that could serve students from Lafayette and Brightwood on a priority basis and possibly other school communities, allowing students to then continue to their in-boundary elementary schools.

In our discussions with stakeholders, a good number of options were posed for addressing Lafayette's space needs. In the short term, these include the use of trailer(s), the DPR building at Lafayette Park, existing room(s) in the Chevy Chase Community Center/Library, or an independent DCPS PK at the Military Rd site in cooperation with Brightwood EC and/or other Ward 4 schools. Medium and long-term solutions include leasing the Episcopal Center or other empty space, establishing a DCPS PK at the modernized Chevy Chase Community Center (for one or more elementary schools), a new school, and a new DCPS PK at Lamb in cooperation with Brightwood EC and/or other Ward 4 schools.

Many of these options seem very feasible for both the shorter- and longer-term. We are left with the strong view that there is no need to make a permanent decision in the next month; in fact, such a decision would be unfair and irresponsible. A decision such as this, with a major impact on school communities, requires a serious exploration of the options, as well as input and engagement with the affected communities.

We have included below further discussion about each of these options, along with more detailed concerns/questions about the urgency of this move and the needs of the Brightwood community. We look forward to continuing this conversation with you and other stakeholders.

Frazier O'Leary,
Ward 4 Member, DC State Board of Education

Ruth Wattenberg,
Ward 3 Member, DC State Board of Education.

Concerns and Options

1. Respect for Brightwood Education Campus.

As noted in #2 and #3 below, we are not convinced that moving the Lafayette pre-k to Lamb for 2020-21 is necessary or advisable for the Lafayette community. But regardless: Brightwood EC is across the street from the Military Road School. Our understanding is that Brightwood EC and possibly other nearby elementaries may need—or will soon-- additional space for their pre-k's (or other grades). Our further understanding is that the broader Brightwood community and their ANC, like the Lafayette community and its ANC, were left out of initial planning discussions. Since then there have been some meetings held recently. Have subsequent engagement efforts reached the range of those affected? What are their needs? What effect will the placement of a Lafayette pre-k across the street from Brightwood have on its effort to build a thriving school for its neighborhood? What are the immediate and short/long-term space needs of other ward 4 schools. Insofar as Lafayette needs extra space in the fall, we believe there may well be ways to make the proposal work for both schools/communities (see below), but it is critical that the Brightwood school community and ANC be engaged in these discussions.

2. Uncertainty about size of enrollment gains/urgent need for extra space in SY2021/22.

Our understanding is that the decision to make this permanent change on such an urgent timeline is based on enrollment projections that, given the effects of the pandemic, may be shaky. Unquestionably, Lafayette has space challenges—serious ones. Surely, it would have been best if a planful timeline had allowed for adequate research, surveying, and community engagement—and allowed for a timely, thoughtful decision in time for the opening of SY 20-21. But here we are.

Our immediate concern is that for the fall, the solution should be interim, while longer term solutions are thought through. What options, including those below, are feasible for next fall, especially if enrollment comes in lower than projected?

3. Short-term options (available fall 2021, for a single year) within Lafayette and nearby, to tide the school over.

If the size and certainty of the projections are sufficiently large to require additional classrooms in fall 2021, have other options within Lafayette been fully considered? Based on the questions above, we don't know for sure how many additional classes are needed. But here are options we have been informed about that we think should be considered.

A trailer on the parking lot. According to a slide presented at the ANC, it is not possible to put a trailer on the parking lot. We have been told that this impossibility may be because of the placement of a curb cut. Can't the curb cut be remediated? If trailer(s) are put there, is there adequate room for parking or how can that be addressed? NOTE: What about the double-decker trailers used by Deal, as a way to save space if two classrooms are needed?

A trailer on the concrete pad diagonal from broad branch market. If the parking lot can't work, what about putting the trailer on the concrete pad?

Basement. Our understanding is that the basement may include space for one more classroom. Is that possible?

DPR building. There is a DPR building on site which, based on our understanding, could house one or two classrooms. Certainly, DPR has its own plans for the building, but could those plans wait, as a longer-term solution to the Lafayette situation is figured out and put into place? Or is there a way to share for one year?

Chevy Chase Community Center/Library. Is there space in this building that could be used, again, for a single year, as a long-term solution is put in place?

A DCPS Early Childhood Center (PK and possibly K) at Lamb School, in cooperation with Brightwood EC. Brightwood is across the street from Lamb. It and other Ward 4 schools are gaining enrollments and will soon—or may already--face the kinds of overcrowding Ward 3 schools have been facing. They need—or will shortly need—additional pre-k space. Perhaps DCPS could temporarily establish a free-standing early childhood center there, admitting overflow students from both the Brightwood and Lafayette (and other Ward 4) catchments, with students then continuing on to their respective in-boundary elementary schools.

4. Medium-term solutions (available fall 2022, for 1-3 years)

We urge you to find an option from #3 above for next year and **refrain from making a permanent decision at this point**, when there has been inadequate time, research and input. Meanwhile, **now is the time to think, engage, and research about medium- and longer-term**

options, so that we don't find ourselves again in this position next year. Here are medium- and long-term options, some initially proposed in the Community Working Group report:

Leasing the Episcopal Center. The community is aware that the Episcopal Center is willing to lease its building. Our understanding is that due to the need for some renovations, this building can't be available for fall 2021. But it's worth asking: Is that absolutely the case? What is the possibility of it being available by fall 2022. How large is that space? How many classrooms can it accommodate? What renovations are needed? Is the Episcopal School willing to lease it for the short- or long-term? We understand that DCPS has initially indicated that it cannot lease the building because it cannot use capital dollars for a lease and the operational dollars aren't adequate for it.

Charter schools regularly lease buildings for their classroom space. DCPS must find a way to establish its ability to do so as well. Such leases will provide needed flexibility. **Establishing a way for DCPS to lease buildings was a key proposal made by the Community Working Group.** This is a perfect example of why this ability is needed.

Leasing empty space on Connecticut Avenue or elsewhere. There are multiple empty buildings along Connecticut, close to or within the Lafayette catchment and walkable from Lafayette. Perhaps space could be leased in one of these buildings? The entities responsible for these empty buildings are surely open to creative conversations.

Independent DCPS Early Childhood Center at Lamb, with priority for enrollment given to Lafayette and Brightwood students who would then continue on to their in-bound elementary schools. In addition to being a short-term option as noted above, this should be considered as a medium-range option, along with the full range of others as a permanent option.

5. Long-term options.

Whatever is done to accommodate Lafayette students next fall, the long-term need for space in the Lafayette and nearby catchments continues, and, as this situation suggests, the problem will become increasingly urgent if nothing is done about it. Here are several longer-term options that deserve exploration and consideration.

The Chevy Chase Community Center is soon to be modernized/rebuilt. Can DCPS put a long-term early childhood center in there? Potentially, it could draw students from both Lafayette and Murch, giving both of them more space for their older students and an ability to serve more families with pre-k.

The Episcopal School. Could this be a site for a long-term early childhood center?

Independent DCPS Early Childhood Center at Lamb. Per above: Along with other nearer options, it may make sense for DCPS to open an Early Childhood Center at Lamb and for that Center to be an option for Lafayette students as well as other Ward 4 students.

Additional pk-5 school. As we move to resolve this emergency situation, we need to keep in mind the broader context of this discussion and the longer-term need for facility space in this area, per the report of the Community Working Group. Even beyond the issue of inadequate space, Lafayette has an enrollment of over 900 and is closing in on being a 1000+ elementary school. Other nearby elementary schools are over-700 (Janney and Brightwood) and over 600 (Murch), on their way to even higher numbers. **These are not healthy sizes for elementary schools!** Other nearby schools

have outgrown their space even if their overall enrollment numbers are viable. **DCPS must, both for reasons of overcrowding and school size, reckon with the need for a new school.** We note that across the area, including at Friendship Heights and Woodley Park, there are large buildings/land parcels that are now unused and, likely, will be on the market. Thinking should be ongoing about whether these may be appropriate spaces and locations for such school.

6. No permanent decision now. No decision without collaboration with Brightwood.

We understand that if enrollment does grow substantially between now and the fall and no short-term remedy is available within Lafayette—all big questions for us at the moment—the need to move some overflow students to the Lamb Campus may be advisable. **But, under no circumstances, should such a move be made permanent at this time.** Neither the proper research or adequate engagement with Lafayette and Brightwood communities has been undertaken to responsibly make such a big, permanent move. Further, the move of Lafayette students to Military Road should only be undertaken in collaboration with Brightwood.