

MCPS

THE SQUEAKY WHEEL AND INEQUITIES HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT

AUGUST 3, 2020 DAVID LUBLIN

Today, I am pleased to present a guest post from Laura Stewart:

This past week there was a disturbing story that WTOP News covered that detailed the overcrowded, inadequate conditions at [South Lake Elementary School, which is a Title 1 higher poverty school](#).

I have been to South Lake ES before, and they have an amazing community who is passionate about improving their school. I have seen the community engage at every level of local government and I have sat next to them in Annapolis testifying for more construction funds. They did make it into the FY21-26 Capital Improvement Program (CIP), but had their project delayed due to scarcity of funds. The County Council was given the choice of keeping the Northwood HS project on time or keeping South Lake ES on schedule. Northwood HS is a school with higher rates of poverty and also has inadequate facilities. Hopefully, they will find a third way, and keep both important projects (and others) on time. When Walt Whitman HS's addition was announced two years ago and stayed on schedule, some people FELT like it was inequitable. Whitman is in District 1 where the average Free and Reduced Meals (FARMS) rate, a proxy for poverty, is less than a quarter of any other district. But is our county's spending actually inequitable? Has the wealthier part of the county gotten more attention?

A few months ago, I saw some analysis that over the last decade, District 1 (which includes Bethesda, Potomac, and Poolesville) had indeed received an outsized portion of major building projects like additions or new schools. But I noticed that major renovation projects were missing from the list. So I decided to dig into the CIPs over 10 years, from FY2011-FY2020. I only counted major school projects that finished in those years, or had a shovel in the ground. Too many scheduled projects get delayed, just like they did this year. Because the CIP uses one line item for all Major Capital Projects (major renovations and expansions,) I had to go to the state table in the CIP, where the county reports to the state what each project costs, and how much they are requesting from the state. All the data was available, but it was NOT easy to "see" unless you knew what to look for. So what did I find? Shockingly, District 1 had received twice the amount of money than three other districts over the 10 year period. But did they grow faster than the other parts of the county? The answer is no. Three other districts grew faster than District 1.

| Dist. | Total Dollars (\$1000) | % of Total Dollars | Mean FARMS | 2009-10 Pop | 2018-19 Pop | Enrollment Growth | Percent Growth |
|-------|------------------------|--------------------|------------|-------------|-------------|-------------------|----------------|
| 1 | \$670,009 | 32.27% | 7.93% | 26883 | 31357 | 4474 | 16.64% |
| 2 | \$319,485 | 15.39% | 36.50% | 29816 | 34005 | 4189 | 24.25% |
| 3 | \$322,831 | 15.55% | 32.79% | 27648 | 33025 | 5377 | 19.45% |
| 4 | \$488,612 | 23.53% | 46.16% | 29831 | 33426 | 3595 | 12.05% |
| 5 | \$275,184 | 13.25% | 48.68% | 24855 | 29520 | 4665 | 18.77% |

(not including special schools)

If this data had been easier to “see” would we have stood for the inequities that continued for a whole decade? If we had open data in MCPS, would it have taken me several weekends to compile all of the data from the online CIP books? Others have tried to point out the issues surrounding our planning, but it is frustratingly “hidden in plain sight” in PDFs. This is one of the reasons why BOE instructed MCPS to hire a contractor, WXY, to look at how we plan our distribution of approximately 166,000 students.

Instead of planning in an equitable fashion, every year the Squeaky Wheel gets the most attention. Currently, South Lake is squeaking, because that is what they need to do to be heard. In fact, community groups like Action in Montgomery have amplified their concerns. Many who have economic or racial privilege also have more resources available to their school, including monetary and political capital. (See the [latest OLO report](#).) I know many advocates that have direct lines of communication with decision makers. I have learned from these amazing advocates throughout the years, but I argue that dollars should be spent based on the state of the facilities, not whether you have a savvy advocacy campaign. I do believe MCPS is moving in the right direction, but they need to build trust by doing the following.

1. First, move to Open Data as soon as possible. Even releasing their next CIP and appendices in a machine readable data format, as well as their typical “book” format would go a long way in building good will in the community.

2. Look at every CIP through an equity lens. This does not mean ignoring facilities in well off districts. All kids need a healthy building in order to learn. Remember that the wealthiest districts received significantly more attention over the last decade and this cannot continue. During the COVID crises, shifting resources to improving HVAC where possible would be a great strategy, and I understand that MCPS is looking at just that.

3. Next, make sure the Key Facility Indicators are accurate. They should guide the system to improve the schools that need it the most.

3. Use the WXY report data to guide the efficient AND equitable use of MCPS facilities.

4. And lastly, our County and State Delegation needs to make sure that more Federal and State dollars go to our school facilities which have been underfunded for the last decade. The County Council also needs to pass a Growth Policy that ensures that our developers continue to fund the impact (only their impact, not more) that they have on our school population.

I want to make clear that I am writing this as an education advocate and not in any official capacity in which I serve. I have volunteered for several organizations, and because of that, I have seen MANY schools and I do know that MANY schools needed updating years ago, in all 5 districts. I sincerely hope that those schools get the improvements that are needed, but not because they are in a particular district, or could pull off a media campaign, but because they are indeed the most in need

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