

D.C. Student-Assignment Focus Groups
Prepared by the 21st Century School Fund

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Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

Community Input from Focus Groups	4
The Focus Groups.....	4
Purpose.....	4
Protocol	4
Participation	5
Feedback on the Student Assignment Review Process	5
Key Messages about Student Assignment and School Choice	7
Predictability.....	7
Equitable Access to High Quality Schools.....	9
The Quality of Public Schools	9
Middle Schools	11
Diversity.....	12
Equitable Access.....	15
Parental Choice	17
Strengthening Neighborhood Schools.....	19
Suggestions from Focus Group Participants	25
Vision	25
DCPS and Charter Planning and Coordination.....	26
Ideas for Improving the Quality of the Public Schools	26
Ideas for Changes in Student Assignment Policy.....	29
Implementing Student Assignment Reforms	31
Appendix A: Protocol Guide Used by Facilitators	32
Appendix B: Guiding Principles Worksheet Used in Focus Groups.....	37
Appendix C: Schedule and Location of Focus Groups.....	38
Appendix D: Average ratings of Principles.....	38
1. Elementary, Middle, and High School Grade Students.....	39
Appendix E: Notes and Transcripts (redacted) from Focus Groups.....	41
Focus Group 1A: Tenley Library, November 9, 2013	41
Focus Group 1B: Tenley Library, November 9, 2013.....	50
Focus Group 2A: Seaton Elementary School, November 13, 2013	61
Focus Group 2B: Seaton Elementary School, November 13, 2013	67
Focus Group 3A: Takoma Education Campus, November 21, 2013	79
Focus Group 3B: Takoma Education Campus, November 21, 2013.....	83
Focus Group 3C: Takoma Education Campus, November 21, 2013.....	92
Focus Group 3D: Takoma Education Campus, Thursday, November 21, 2013	101
Focus Group 4A: D.C. Bilingual Public Charter School, December 3, 2013	105
Focus Group 4B: D.C. Bilingual Public Charter School, December 3, 2013	110
Focus Group 4C: D.C. Bilingual Public Charter School, December 3, 2013	116
Focus Group 4D: D.C. Bilingual Public Charter School, December 3, 2013.....	119
Focus Group 5A: Deanwood Recreation Center, December 4, 2013.....	126
Focus Group 5B: Deanwood Recreation Center, December 4, 2013.....	144
Focus Group 6A: Turkey Thicket Recreation Center, Saturday, December 14, 2013	150
Focus Group 6B: Turkey Thicket Recreation Center, December 14, 2013.....	169
Focus Group 6C: Turkey Thicket Recreation Center, December 14, 2013	180
Focus Group 7A: Thurgood Marshall Academy PCS, December 12, 2013	196
Focus Group 8A: Capitol Hill Montessori, Thursday, December 19, 2013	203

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

Focus Group 8B: Capitol Hill Montessori, Thursday, December 19, 2013 212
Focus Group 8C: Capitol Hill Montessori, Thursday, December 19, 2013 223
Focus Group 9A: Lockridge/Bellevue Library, February 19, 2014 233

Community Input from Focus Groups

The Focus Groups

In October 2013, the Deputy Mayor for Education initiated a process to review and reform student-assignment and school-choice policy in the District of Columbia, with particular attention to be paid to the DCPS attendance zones and feeder patterns. Part of this initiative is a public-engagement strategy that includes a citizen Advisory Committee; focus groups of parents and residents; surveys; working groups; an interactive website (www.engagedc.org, to be available in April), open government-sponsored community meetings; and public hearings. In this memorandum, we provide an analysis of the input provided by parents and community members who participated in 22 focus groups.

Purpose

The purpose of the focus groups was to get input on how the current practices and policies of student assignment and school choice affect families and communities and to get guidance on what principles should guide the Committee, Deputy Mayor for Education and Mayor when they make their recommendations and then their decisions about reforms to the District's policies for student assignment and school choice.

In the focus groups, participants were able to hear and discuss the issues with each other. Each participant had a chance to speak and had time to explain why they had the issues and concerns they had. The focus groups were not limited to a representative sample of residents or parents. They were open to all.

Protocol

The same protocol was used by the facilitators for each focus group (Appendix A: Facilitator Protocol). Participants were asked to fill out a consent form, were given a survey of proposed principles to fill out during the discussion, and an evaluation form to provide feedback on the focus group. (Appendix B: Handouts to Focus Group Participants). Most sessions were recorded, but there was always a note taker in each group, as well as a facilitator. The survey asking participants to rate principles was designed to help facilitate discussion and to get participants thinking broadly about the impact and affects of student assignment and school choice policies.

The facilitator began with introductions and asked participants to give their first name and the school or community that they are most closely associated with. The facilitator then provided a brief description of the student assignment revision process and read a description of student assignment and school choice policies. There were questions and comments on the process at this point, but the protocol included a return to these issues at the end. The discussion divided into four main sections:

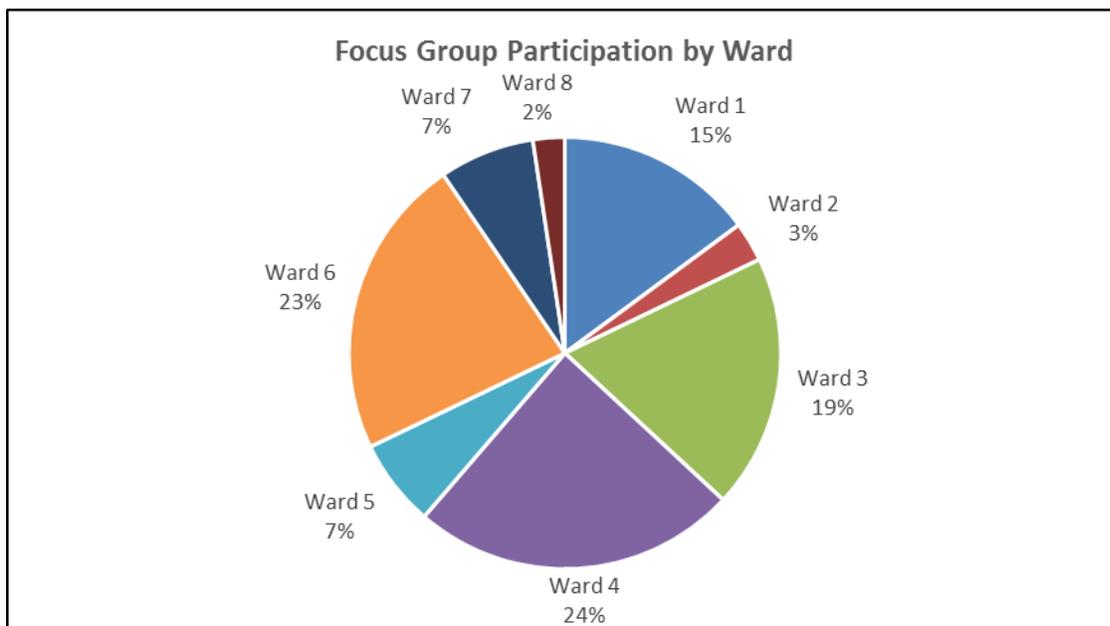
- 1) Discussion of the student assignment review and revision process
- 2) Discussion of what works in the current system of student assignment and school choice and concerns with the current system.
- 3) Discussion of the principles listed on the survey sheet, or what they might add to the list; and
- 4) Suggestions for how to ensure this process builds community in D.C., and doesn't divide the city.

Participation

The Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education (ODME) announced the focus groups in October 2013. Residents signed up for a focus group via a page on ODME’s website. In total, 310 people signed up for the focus groups and 177 people attended. Depending upon the number of people who signed up, anywhere from one to four focus groups was conducted at each location. A total of 22 focus groups were held, with the last one added in February 2014 to increase the input from parents and residents from east of the river. See Appendix C for the list of locations and schedule of all the focus groups.

Participants were self-selected and represented a particularly motivated and concerned set of people. The vast majority (85%) of focus group participants were parents. Twenty-eight participants responded that they were parents, but did not identify whether their children were in DCPS, charter or private/parochial schools. This is because, in a few cases, their children were no longer in elementary or secondary school age, but it was more common that the parents had children who were not yet of school age—infants and toddlers. Sixty-nine percent of the parents who stated they had school-age children had a child in DCPS schools. Eight percent had a child in a charter school and eight percent had a child in private/parochial school. Participants were asked to identify their race and level of education. Not everyone provided this information. Of the 158 participants who identified their race/ethnicity, more than two thirds identified themselves as white and one fifth identified themselves as black. Only 3% of participants identified themselves as Hispanic. The focus-group participants were highly educated, with 76% of those who responded reporting having a graduate degree and an additional 22% having at least a bachelor’s degree. Every ward was represented in the focus groups, but 66% of the focus-group participants were from Wards 3, 4, and 6.

Focus Group Participation by Ward



Feedback on the Student Assignment Review Process

The first issue raised in the focus group was how participants felt about *the process* for revising student assignment and school choice boundaries. In every focus group the response to the request for comments

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

about the process was that it seemed out of order and wasn't getting to the heart of the education issues needing time and attention. In every focus group parents expressed concern that this discussion was not guided by a city-wide vision and goals for public education that was focused on school quality.

"Looking at the Guiding Principles as a jumping off point puts the cart before the horse because we haven't articulated what we, as a city, really want for our schools. We don't have common city-wide goals. We can't talk about principles until we know what we want. What are the objectives - - this process can look at that better, i.e. what does "high quality programs" mean?"

"Before you change the boundaries and feeders...you need to improve the schools. They (DCPS) got an earful about what to do before closing schools, but they didn't listen last year; you keep coming with the black marks. There is a lot of animosity. We tried to tell you and you didn't listen. If you move forward you are going to start a war you don't want."

"It is hard to have this conversation without talking about the quality of the school. Clearly the schools in DC had a lot of problems and they have come a long way and people are excited about that and there are wonderful teachers in every single school in the city. But until people have confidence in every school in every part of the city there is always going to be a challenge. "

Some parents express their frustration with the process, and the lack of clarity around their role and their input. One parent finds that "currently, policies appear to be decided upon before parental engagement is even started. I don't know how much I trust this process." Another participant questioned how their input would influence decision-making: "what is really going to be the weight of the parents' issues, those of us who are making the time to come and be involved. Are we really going to be listened to?" Several parents also pointed out the political nature of the process, and one referred to it as "gerrymandering." For parents who took the initiative to participate in these focus groups or other engagement around the student assignment review process, there was a sense that they lack clarity or assurances that their involvement truly makes a difference.

Participants in the focus groups also expressed concern about representation in the focus groups. Focus group participants were not representative of the city's residents, and even less so of the D.C. public school parent population. The participants were keenly aware of the other parents and community members who were absent. In every Ward, participants raised concerns that other "less involved" parents were not being reached in the student assignment revision process. They spoke of these parents as those with "less resources and less time" who would be "left behind". Aside from economic barriers to participation, a few focus group attendees also pointed out that the process was not accessible to those who would be "most affected" in terms of the language, format, or recruitment for focus groups. If these families were not included in these discussions, focus group participants warned, there may be serious conflicts that could arise.

But despite assertions that focus groups need to be more representative, it is unclear what the participants think these parents or community members would say or what they want different from their own comments and priorities. One Ward 7 participant said,

"We want safe, good, well-staffed and well-funded schools. Why can't DCPS hear that? Why does DCPS think that Ward 7 wants something different than what everyone else wants?"

Key Messages about Student Assignment and School Choice

The second major discussion was of participants' thoughts and experiences with the District of Columbia's system of student assignment and school choice. The discussions were often personal and wide-ranging but there were key messages that were universal to all focus groups. The overarching messages communicated were the following:

I need to be able to meet the educational needs of my children and to plan for their future.

- **I want my neighborhoods to have good by-right public schools no matter the value of the real estate in my community**
- **I want local school and District administrators to welcome me as a partner in meeting the educational needs of the children of the school.**

HOWEVER, if my by-right neighborhood school does not meet my standards and reflect my values,

- **I want the right to send my children to other public schools that meet my standards and reflect my values.**

These messages reflect the parental responsibilities for the well-being of their children and underscore the fact that schools operate en loco parentis (in the place of the parent) and therefore require a higher level of trust and engagement with parents to function well.

The next sections excerpt comments made by participants in the 22 focus groups about the issues that were most important to discussants.

Predictability

"I need to be able to meet the educational needs of my children and to plan for their future"

While school quality was critical to parents, even more basic than school quality were parental responsibilities for the safety of their children and having the control to meet their responsibilities for their children's education and manage the daily routines of their family. Predictability empowers parents to make the arrangements and decisions that they feel are right for their child and their family. Predictability was highly rated by participants in the discussion and in the survey. Safety was identified as a principle that was omitted from the survey, but should have been included.

There are underlying racial and economic areas of the city . . . this [Capitol Hill] is a desirable neighborhood. But education is a pressing concern. Safety has not even come up. In DC there is incredible disparity. In some areas there are no good educational options and it is not SAFE.

Predictability was discussed in a variety of ways but primarily as the ability to know where your child would be attending school in the future.

I think the most important principle for elementary students is predictability, number one -- that's really what got us started. I have twins and in the lottery process they ended up in two different schools and I've got three kids so we had three different schools -- which is just insane.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

What I like is the feeder pattern. Families know where a child is going to be. We started at elementary school, which feeds into a middle and high and we know along the way we have options to veer from the path but we know that kids are going to stay together. So there is a possibility for continuity for cohorts, which I like.

I like the certainty of knowing one year to the next where my child will be going to school. It should be transparent for people who are not in-boundary as they need to know the odds for the lottery. I do not want people to game the system so this transparency should be maintained. With the PK3 and PK4 lottery, 2/3rds of the in-boundary students make the cut-off to attend their neighborhood school; if you have twins, and one is accepted, the other has a preference. The policy is simple; I could find it and read it.

Having the ability to track where your children will be attending school into middle and even high school was discussed positively. This allows parents to feel a sense of community with the other parents and children at their children's schools. Having the ability to build relationships with school administrators allowed parents to feel more connected to their children's education. Overall, predictability to know what schools your child would attend gave parents a sense of relief in knowing they wouldn't have to enter lotteries multiple times and their children would have stability by attending school with a community of familiar students and teachers. Many parents expressed, however, that predictability would not outweigh access to a high quality education.

There were many who said they would leave the city for the suburbs if they lost the predictability of their neighborhood school assignment and their rights to attend the destination feeder schools that they currently have. There was a lot of discussion about "gaming the system" where parents, frustrated with uncertainty that their child would not win a seat in a school, would find a way to get an address to secure a seat.

A number of parents thought that the policy to give feeder rights to out of boundary students from a feeder school helped with predictability, and they expressed their approval for feeder patterns that allow students to stay together and parents to be able to plan ahead. Feeder patterns were described as taking away uncertainty for students and parents and providing comfort in knowing where students would end up.

Having access to a desired feeder pattern motivated parents to purchase their homes in boundary for a particular feeder school. These parents made a choice by purchasing their home in boundary and expected that those purchases would result in their child entering into a predictable feeder pattern. Thinking forward about the boundary change process, parents expressed concern in losing that sense of certainty and requested that committee members consider grandfathering for parents and students.

I want to have choice to get my child to the best school possible but once they are in the system I want to know where they are going. My elementary school doesn't work but at the moment we feed into Deal and that is something that I am counting on. That was the predictability on which we based the choice of where I bought my house.

However, others shared examples of how the policy for feeder destination rights for out-of-boundary students was hurting elementary schools. In one case, a parent explained that families start a school in PS or PK and up till kindergarten the school was improving and attracting neighborhood students, but because

of the worries about middle school quality, families were leaving elementary schools to find seats in schools in different feeder patterns.

Equitable Access to High Quality Schools

“I want my neighborhoods to have good by-right public schools no matter the value of the real estate in my community.”

The discussions around equitable access to high quality schools divided into two discussions. One part of this discussion was about the inadequate supply of high quality schools, particularly about DCPS neighborhood schools, and the other part of the discussion was about whether the system for getting access to public schools was fair. One participant, with a long history and strong insight explained how declining enrollments and the early out of boundary, school choice policies contributed to the inadequate supply of high quality neighborhood public schools.

One of the challenges has always been that the beneficiaries of a difficult to navigate system are the most affluent people with the most social capital. I grew up in an era when there were lots of available seats in the desirable schools. Enrollment was low and the byproduct was that for people who knew how to navigate the system they were able to get into schools they wanted. So we never got to fix the underlying problem—that we have a city with a small number of good schools.

The Quality of Public Schools

While there were many positive comments about DCPS public schools and many DCPS and charter schools named by focus group participants were described in a positive light, there was an overwhelming perspective that there were not nearly enough good DCPS or charter schools. Although there was not a specific effort to define a high quality school, participants all seemed to think they knew what a high quality school was and many had a practical understanding that there are problems and assets in every school and that test scores alone will not tell you if the school is good.

Good education, safe school, they can get into a good college, low teacher turnover -- these are the things we would look for in terms of quality. If you just look at qualities of schools that people are going to -- you'll develop a definition of what school quality is.

It's about the teaching and the curriculum and about the culture of the school and the kids that are in it.

I look at the teachers . . . I look at everything, I look at the curriculum, I look at parent involvement. That's a critical issue. I've noticed that when you have strong parent involvement -- kids will act up -- but when you have strong parent involvement, those kids will get back in line. When you don't have strong parent involvement you've got off the wall issues. And that's not the fault of the institution and it is not the fault of the teachers. I don't believe that responsibility is theirs. I think the greatest problem is that of parents.

Program alignment is most important, and having language immersion in every community. What perpetuates inequality is that some schools don't have the same access to quality programs, like STEM etc.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

Out of boundary works because we can choose; I don't want my kids going to segregated schools; schools would be more diverse if they had good programs—good foreign language program; my kid is at Watkins she is there because it looks like the schools I went to in CA.

Programming is what is most important; tracking is important; and without tracking, programming isn't sufficient. Don't even have to go past the first one—simple to understand.

We need middle school and high school options with good academics – that's what's missing – reason why parents go to private schools – confidence level on academics is most important – not athletics.

"All schools can improve. Deal had a huge problem with students coming in with different levels of math abilities. They worked with the feeder schools to coordinate programs. There was coordinated professional development to provide program coordination through the feeder pattern."

"In terms of making the schools in every ward better, I wanted to say that when my daughter started elementary school, Deal was not a good school. Parents did not want to send their kids to Deal in 6th grade. People debated middle school for the next five years after Kinder. It was not until they renovated the school and got a good principal and changed the program to an IB program that it started to become a good school. I think it is an example of how that investment in the building and the staffing and the programming does make a difference."

Parents were well aware of standardized test ratings and there was an interesting exchange in one focus group between parents explaining what the test score threshold was acceptable. "...like 60-70% [on DC CAS reading and math] but like a 30-20% is a big NO. There's some flexibility." Another parent added..."I know at least 55-60% of people are proficient then they do have a baseline curriculum that I can work with and hope to enrich. So I would love her to be in with 99% but realistically I don't see those numbers."

Although many schools were described by parents in a positive light, this was not as true for participants from Wards 7 and 8.

A Ward 7 parent said, "There are no schools in my ward that parents want their children assigned to."

What I would say to this committee is that I'm in ward 8 and Leckie is probably one of the at least half way decent schools but most of the schools are underperforming so if you're in Ward 8 you don't have a chance even if you did the boundaries. So my concern is how are you going to improve the underperforming schools? What are you proposing as far as safety? Boundaries are not my concern because I'm east of the river. Whatever school I look at is underperforming. So what do you say to that parent? This is not advantageous to me in Ward 8 because the boundary whatever it doesn't matter. I'm saying they need to look at this a little closer than how they're looking at it particularly with ward 8."

"It's sad that parents don't have quality options to choose from in EVERY neighborhood. Equitable access to schools is so important."

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

I just wanted to say that I work with a DC welfare-to-work organization and I meet with parents once a month and the parents for the most part have to be there at these seminars. They are by and large products of DC public schools - - they care deeply about their children's education. I know this is a small sub-group of people out of work- - but they are so invested in their children's education. At one of the lectures I said "How many of you would be willing to use your in-bounds neighborhood school?" The answer was none; 35 people, and not one.

Middle Schools

There were particularly strong concerns expressed related to middle schools and among Ward 4 parents, since there is no DCPS middle school in Ward 4 and among Ward 7 parents because there is only one DCPS middle school in Ward 7.

I'm here because I'm concerned about accessibility; we live in ward 4 and we went through the out of bounds lottery. We bought our house in an area where we didn't have confidence in the schools but we were confident in the lottery system and we're appreciative of it and so I'm ultimately concerned about accessibility. In Ward 4 there is no middle school you know. What is the option there?

And at least in our neighborhood, when you talk to folks they are feeling good about most of the elementary schools; people are feeling good about what's going on with the high schools and it's just - - what are we going to do for the three years in between all those things that seems to be the biggest thing that I tend to hear from parents.

People are leaving at 5th grade to get into the 6, 7th and 8th feeders. What also happens is that 5th grade students leave and you have a small pool of kids and then it is harder to have good test scores and then the school scores go down which feeds into a self-fulfilling prophesy. So . . . without high quality seats at middle you've got this void . . . it's like you have to get across this moat from elementary to high school.

DCPS only has one bilingual middle school, so it doesn't make sense if a parent wants to continue that programmatic option into middle school or high school.

I live in Shepherd boundaries. If we were removed from that feeder [to Deal] where would the kids go? Paul is a charter school [there is no middle school in Ward 4.]

Many parents would like to send their kids to the local public elementary school but don't because the middle schools are bad, so they go for charters at the elementary school level to ensure that they have a good middle school option and don't have to move out of D.C. There are strange disincentives operating here.

Ward 5 has just acquired McKinley Middle School. But the middle school is housed in a high school. They do their best to keep kids separated because in that high school setting it's all about . . . and that's a hindrance to the middle school. And so I think this pattern now of the middle schools being located in high schools is following the pattern of Columbia Heights Education Campus (CHEC) which I don't like – the 6th through 12th.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

Another major area of discussion that came up at nearly all levels, but particularly for secondary schools—middle and high schools was the idea that the schools should be able to have schools within schools, academies, gifted and talented programs, or some way to serve students at all levels. It sounded a lot like tracking, but the idea was not to make it rigid, but to ensure that you didn't have to change schools to find a cohort of classmates who were going to advance at a common pace.

Diversity

The survey provided to all attendees of the focus groups asked them to rate academic, racial, and socio-economic diversity separately. In their comments, participants sometimes distinguished between the three types of diversity, but did not always do so. Participants often spoke vaguely or elliptically about the apparently sensitive topic of diversity.

Overall, there was a practical understanding that having racially diverse public schools is difficult for D.C. because “there are not enough white people to go around.” But schools that are racially and economically diverse were viewed as being higher-quality schools. Although they did not necessarily state why, a considerable number of participants stated that they valued diversity highly.

“We learn from each other; it enriches our experience as human beings; we live in a diverse world.”

“So diversity is important to me but also when we consider not just racial diversity but also cultural and socio-economic diversity as well. I think it is important to have people from every walk of life together. That's how we better understand each other.”

With regard to racial/ethnic diversity, at least one participant stated that total segregation by race is not acceptable.

“[I]n this global society, it's important [for kids to] have interactions with children from other races, abilities, disabilities, so [that] they are sensitized to other people's lifestyles [and prepared to interact in life with people from different backgrounds].”

More than one participant stated they had moved from one neighborhood to another in order to be in a more diverse community and school.

“Racial diversity is important too. We moved because my husband is a minority. We moved from Janney to Shepherd. There is so much privilege in Ward 3. You have to mix it up a bit.”

Some participants of high socio-economic status (SES) stated that diverse schools are especially important for kids in less diverse neighborhoods such as some in Northwest D.C.

“Cultural and racial diversity is important to me—especially NW is not particularly racially diverse and I think it's important to me (that it be diverse).”

Others stated that socioeconomic diversity benefits lower-SES kids as well.

“Socioeconomic diversity is a value in a school because it benefits lower-SES kids.”

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

One low-SES parent wanted higher-SES residents to trust and use the local school because the school's students (mainly low-SES and Hispanic) have limited exposure to people outside their own SES and culture. Some participants also stated that schools with high out-of-boundary percentages are valued for their diversity.

With regard to academic diversity, one participant stated that spreading out high-performing students across the city would result in improvements in school performance across the city.

"If you have academically high students at every school in the city it is going to be a great way to make all the schools good."

Academic diversity is viewed by some as more important in the early grades. "Academic diversity sets the standard for kids to do better by example." There is a strong desire for diversity and rigor to coexist.

"Getting a mix of rigor and diversity is very hard but it is the most important thing DC could reach for."

But not all participants stated a high value for diversity. Some participants stated that diversity is an added bonus, but is not essential and is not a priority. According to one, cultural benefits are not as tangible as we think. To some, academic diversity is not important at all or is even viewed as a negative thing at the high school level; to others, it is only less important in the higher grades.

Many participants stated that diversity was not valued as highly as some other principles/values, in particular academic-program quality or academic achievement/results. Comments suggested that few parents would be willing to send their high-performing student to a school with a majority low-performing student body.

"I would not want to see academic rigor sacrificed for diversity."

"I value diversity, and I am willing to put up with some lower quality in a school to get diversity, but not if it is too low quality. It's a tough balance."

Some stated that cultural diversity is valued less highly than economic diversity because having higher-earning parents—who are perceived to be better educated, more knowledgeable, and more empowered—produces benefits for a school and therefore for all of the students in it. And academic diversity was clearly valued less highly than racial and economic diversity.

Some believe that diversity results in schools not maintaining a high level of academic rigor, and those families accordingly leave for private schools.

[T]he public schools are "too diverse, not intellectually rigorous enough" so kids end up in private schools.

Specifically, participants stated a belief that academic diversity can be a hindrance to academic achievement particularly in the higher grades, and that, to prevent academic diversity in a school from hindering academic achievement, the school must offer classes at many different academic levels so that all students' needs are met.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

"Ultimately, [academic] diversity in schooling is a hindrance. That's how I understand it."

"For academic diversity, I think at ES level it is okay to have diversity but at the HS level you should not have academic diversity."

"Academic diversity is important for elementary school, but there should not be academic diversity in higher grades."

However, it was recognized that, in D.C., academic segregation may result in some economic stratification. Some participants wanted to know what the research says about the effects of academic diversity on both lower- and higher-performing students. One participant stated that simply commingling diverse students does not bring up performance of lower-performing students and therefore perhaps it should not be done. Another stated that "we want to think that diversity works in every direction for everybody and that everybody benefits, but it mostly benefits those students who are better prepared."

Participants stated a belief that high-performing students are underserved where schools focus their attention on low-performing students. Others recognized that a school whose diversity is the result of out-of-boundary attendance or travel from faraway neighborhoods can have difficulty building a sense of community. Some stated a fear that diversity brings reduced safety for students.

Desirable schools are not distributed widely so as to foster diversity in low-SES wards. Because some participants with higher-performing children (mainly higher-SES parents) stated a belief that diversity means an academic drag on the progress of their child[ren], it is apparent that efforts to increase diversity may face resistance in some areas.

"Deal is well organized; teachers are supported enough to help high-achieving students. But Deal is still not preparing students well enough for competitive environments. The range in classrooms is too wide, so the pace of instruction is too slow to challenge my daughter."

In addition, maintaining diversity in the face of the perceived drawbacks of diverse student bodies (e.g., effects on academic achievement, behavior) may be difficult. Some stated that, in order to increase the diversity of lower-SES schools by attracting more higher-SES families, some use of academic differentiation within the school would be required.

Participants stated that current boundaries are viewed as preventing diversity, and that schools need to be larger to accommodate and support diversity.

"The current boundaries cater to exclusion; it caters to preventing economic diversity."

Some stated that racial diversity is easy to achieve in comparison with economic diversity. Others stated a concern that a citywide lottery that replaced the current zones would prevent some schools from being diverse.

"Because we have a city-wide lottery, there's no way to make it a diverse school when you have a lottery."

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

Equitable Access

On average, participants rated equity of access to a high-quality education as one of the top values because of a belief that all students have or should have the right to a good education despite economic or geographic circumstances.

“Everyone should have access to good quality education. You shouldn’t have to be lucky to get into a good school.”

Participants were concerned about the existing disparities in the quality of schools depending upon where you live in the District and about the fact that residing in a given neighborhood determines the quality of education that is available to a student.

“So if you are in-boundary for a school that is quality then the system works for you, but another person who lives in an area where school isn’t good then the system doesn’t work for them.”

“Well do you say that every child should have the opportunity to attend a good school or do you say every neighborhood should have within its boundaries a charter or public school with some level of preference that meets a certain quality standard?”

“Some people need to come out of their little palaces. I know that sounds rude and I’m not trying to be rude - - but we know that some children aren’t even eating every night here. Some children have no homes. Who’s advocating for those children? They would love to be anywhere where they are welcome. And they should have just a right to go anywhere and have that school draw them in and out of their poverty for whatever reason they may be in poverty.”

“When you have a kid coming from high poverty they’re not going to do well. Not willing to write them off but that’s always going to be true. How much do you privilege the neighborhood vs privilege opportunities for kids to get out?”

“I know traditionally those great neighborhood schools have been in the higher income areas because, #1; if you have the money to buy then you can buy wherever you want. If you don’t have the money to purchase your home, then your child is what? STUCK in what you can afford.”

“Ward 3 shouldn’t be the only area of the city that has good quality schools, so equitable access to quality schools is the most important value.”

The extent of variation in school quality based on neighborhood was a great concern to participants. It was a problem not just for those in the neighborhoods with the lackluster schools, but also to the neighborhoods with schools in high demand. The inequality in the educational opportunities from one neighborhood and school to another affected the participants pride in the city and their community.

“Equitable access is crucial because not everyone can easily travel.”

“I feel pretty strongly that actually if we’re going to have an environment that says anyone is going to have access to good schools in their neighborhood then everyone has to have that. We’ve given that only to the most affluent in the city. Because of economics people have a different set of choices. If there were no neighborhood schools and we got into a school that was in a different

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

neighborhood, we could just move. But most people in the city cannot afford to do that. I feel pretty strongly that we have to figure out a way to deliver high quality to people wherever they live. It can't just be for kids with two parents with two cars who can get anywhere in the city who have a good default and option to go to better places.

"Nobody in ward 7 or 8 wants to send their children across town to go to school. A lot of times I get the impression that people think we want to send our kids to Ward 3. I don't want to have to drive all the way up there. I want them to be in the community where they live (ward 7), that's why I purchased there. I want them to go to the school up the block. I don't want to participate in a lottery every March - - that is stressful!"

In a system with a great degree of choice, the resources needed to both make good choices and to take advantage of options are critical. These include equitable access to information, technology to apply to schools, transportation, and formal and informal information networks of parents, officials, and informational organizations. While information can come from a variety of sources, more and more information and access to opportunities is online through the DCPS and other websites, the out of boundary process and now the common lottery.

A number of parents commented on the importance of transparency and how they believe it is lacking. Parents desperately want information when making decisions. One parent lamented:

"I wish we had more on which to measure schools than just test scores. I want to see how schools do other than teach to the test; but I don't know how else to evaluate the quality of schools. I'd like to know how much parents at a school value education."

Many participants expressed frustration and lack of knowledge.

"Also the whole boundary question - - I really don't understand it. People who are nearby might have different boundaries some people have two options, so that is just confusing."

Some families struggle to secure both formal and informal types of information. Parents also indicated that they were affected by what other parents are doing. According to one participant:

And then everybody thinks that everyone else is leaving [the elementary school]. Like with so many 4th and 5th parents this year they would say, "Well if I just knew that someone else was staying"... and we stayed with my son. .. It was a leap of faith but we did it.

Parental resources are needed to make decisions about enrollment as well as to access schools if and when enrolled. Parents with many financial and economic resources can more easily derive advantage from the current (or any) boundary and enrollment process.

"The amount of work that is required in order to navigate the system, having to do tons of research, and sometimes going beyond the legal limits and using loopholes to get your child into the best school option seems to further divide the city as the 'haves and the have nots.'"

"I don't think it is fair for us to have to drive across town to get a good education."

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

“And to me the big tension is the long term and the short term. Where I was in X neighborhood, the people who were in the neighborhood could have made a great school. But because there was so much choice they never even thought about the school. Everyone immediately went out.”

Parental Choice

HOWEVER, when my neighborhood school does not meet my standards and reflect my values...I want the right to other public schools that meet my standards and reflect my values.

Over the last decades, parental choice in the District of Columbia has meant using private schools, out-of-boundary schools, the DCPS high school magnet schools and more recently charter schools. But families have long exercised parental choice for schools by their selection of place of residence. This is still the case in Washington, D.C. Parents with financial means can move into another area of the city (or, as some parents point out, leave the city) in order to access good schools. Parents with greater economic means described their residences as their single largest investment; their purchase was guided in large part by considerations of school boundaries, and access to feeder patterns.

“It is an emotional topic because it is my children. We cannot afford to move where the good schools are.”

Rated Maximum choice for families at all grade bands as very important. Giving them the opportunity to choice is important. She thinks choice is as important since she doesn't have a lot of faith in DCPS. When I think of the DCPS schools that are a good fit for my child, I realize that I don't have a shot in getting into any of them.

Parents value having high quality options for their children. Being able to choose a school that is the right fit for their child is important. One option for accessing high quality seats is through the lottery; a system many parents feel is frustrating, tedious, and unfair. Parents appreciate having options to opt out, but feel that the true solution to having equitable access is to strengthen neighborhood schools. With more quality schools, parents felt there would be fewer people wanting to “opt out” and “exercise choice”. With increasing demand for high quality schools, parents feel that the idea of “choice” has turned into having many low quality options and would prefer fewer high quality ones. Many parents expressed concern with maximizing choice as a solution unless it involves a focus on increasing quality across schools.

The ability to exercise choice emerged as an important option for parents. However, this expectation of choice appears to come on the heels of increasing uncertainty in high quality neighborhood schools. Parents “want the choice to get into the best school possible” or “the option to do what’s best for my child”. Parents noted though that choices are needed primarily in neighborhoods with struggling schools. However, choice was a divided issue among parents:

“People have a knee jerk reaction that choice is good. But it's more important to have quality options available. That has to be done through DCPS because that's the only place where people are guaranteed a seat” and “What we have now is a family can have dozens of bad choices at every school level. The problem isn't a lack of choices; it's that the choices are not very good. If I had few choices, but they were all good, then I wouldn't complain.”

Several parents brought up the idea that there are too many options;

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

"I'm torn on the choice issue - - I have options fatigue right now".

"I don't think having maximum options is that important if [instead] you have two or three good ones."

We appreciate all the choice - - formerly there were not many quality offerings. But there is TOO much choice now and no coordination of options with all the charters opening. There is a dispersal [of programs and students]; there is no critical mass because everyone is changing [schools].

Having the maximum amount of choices seemed misleading to parents who found that many of those options were not to high quality schools. Parents also expressed their disapproval for having maximum choice before there were better quality schools to pick from.

Maximum choice for families is not a high priority. It's in conflict with all of the other values which are more important to me. Maximum choice throughout the system undermines equity because it means you have winners and losers - - unless you have high quality everywhere. Then maximum choice means you are choosing among similar level of quality. In high school it's different because there are specialized programs that appeal to kids.

The fundamental concern about a system that advances choice as its main value and principle, was that it was only necessary because there were not enough good quality schools and that if the city were actually providing the quality of programs, facilities, staffing and funding to meet the needs, standards and priorities of its families, that they would not need so many choices. In addition, there is a strong feeling that it is unfair that some families have to enter a lottery and travel far for a good school.

"Nobody in ward 7 or 8 wants to send their children across town to go to school. A lot of times I get the impression that people think we want to send our kids to Ward 3. I don't want to have to drive all the way up there. I want them to be in the community where they live (ward 7), that's why I purchased there. I want them to go to the school up the block."

While many parents do agree that allowing parents and children to opt out of a less than ideal situation is beneficial, they also find that the currently, choice is more of an illusion. They feel that there are not enough quality spaces for students who want them. One parent highlighted this problem by saying:

"There is more demand for high quality spaces than there is supply so we are faced with this King Solomon task of splitting the baby".

"When options are limited you don't have [real] choice, you need luck and resources to have choice [in this system]".

Luck was a common theme among parents who discussed the lottery option. Again, parents appreciated having an option for students who wanted access to higher quality schools. However, the unpredictability of the lottery was something that parents were frustrated by. Parents expressed feeling distressed over the process calling it stressful and challenging.

"You shouldn't have to be lucky to get into a good school. Everyone should have access to good quality education".

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

Some parents felt cheated by the lottery system saying, “The lottery failed us two years in a row” and “the idea of choice is false. It’s not a true choice; it is people getting lucky”. Again, they felt that when the lottery did not work out in their favor, they lost the option to attend a high quality school and they found they were met with uncertainty on where to send their children. Some parents also expressed the desire to have some neighborhood preference options added into the current lottery system. Parents seemed to concur on the idea that having more choices might be most beneficial as students get into high school and might prefer more specialized options.

The lottery process feels out of their control, and that they are putting their child’s education into a game of chance that comes down to luck. Opinions were divided - some participants among felt that some parents know enough to “game the system.”

“The word lottery I assumed that it was drawing out of a hat, but it is so much more than that. There is so much manipulation that goes into the process: you have in-boundary, in-bound with sibling, out-of-boundary with sibling, etc.”

The lottery system as it stands is stressful and challenging.” “It’s nerve wracking process...and not a fair process for [out-of-boundary] folks.”

But for others, the lottery has provided benefits and they felt positively toward the lottery system.

“That’s the wonderful thing about the lottery system - it gives me a chance to go to a very good school.”

For those who **were satisfied** with their school assignment and/or feeder patterns, and who feared that they would lose this following changes to student assignment and school choice policy, it was not uncommon to hear parents threaten to leave the District. Some parents with means said that will vote with their feet - their choice will be to leave city schools altogether.

“If you take away the choice and options and things that are working then you drive people out. “ Many parents go out of zone, so when DCPS wants to change zones, it must consider how the population will react to new boundaries. Parents may simply change their behavior. An option for many is not to accept the changes and leave town. What will happen to quality overall in DCPS if many such families leave?”

“Changes may well engender more movement, traffic, and flight from DC. Don’t force people out of schools they want; make MORE schools that people want.”

They acknowledged that they were privileged in being able to do this, but felt that it was what they would have to do, even though they really didn’t want to.

Strengthening Neighborhood Schools

HOWEVER, when my neighborhood school does not meet my standards and reflect my values...I want parents and community members to be welcome partners in the improvement of neighborhood schools.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

Overall, focus group participants largely adopt an efficacious stance towards their role in improving schools. They believe that parent involvement is not only important in supporting academic achievement, but a vital ingredient in school improvement efforts.

“DCPS can't do this alone; it does take a village.”

Scrapping the idea of neighborhood high school would be a bad one; (1) I at least know which high school my child is going to and can make decisions accordingly. Whereas lottery is too much chance for me to plan on and for me to stake my child's future on; (2) I've got my focus on Eastern and I will ensure that they are building towards quality. If I don't have any high school that I am headed towards at this stage (before my kid is high school age) then I'm not doing all of these things to invest in its quality.

But even if the school is high quality I still want to be involved. And I think a part of a school's quality is involved parent community. And my 5-year old isn't the best recorder of information so I would like to be involved.

Much of the discussion about parents involved in school improvement was tied to the strong desire of parents to have a healthy community and neighborhood life in the city. The desire for strong neighborhood schools was a desire for strong community. People said repeatedly that they want neighborhood schools within walking distance; they talked about how neighborhoods can create a strong school and a stronger community for students if families know their neighbors and concentrate efforts on their local school. There were comments about parents realizing the benefit of knowing the parents of the children their children play with and that living and going to school in the same neighborhood meant that this was easy to do and a good thing.

One of the reasons we wanted to live in DC and live in our neighborhood was because we rejected the suburban model. We have neighbors, they walk to school; we walk to school.

Your three year old can be with the same kids forever if you stay in the same school, the same feeder. They grow up together, and it really enhances the community and really roots the neighborhood so well.

You want those kids staying together as long as possible, throughout education. The people I met in Kinder I had relationships with and helped me with social transitions through high school and even to today.

Parents realized that with the proliferation of choice, it is more difficult to build a local community without a common school attended by most of the neighborhood children.

. . . [W]hen families are invested in the school and neighborhood it is really powerful for the school. [I'm] not a big fan of the lottery system since it doesn't allow them to invest in the neighborhood school. So non-neighborhood schools have their disadvantages since they cannot get families to invest more in the area, and instead send them to other schools.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

I've got very young kids in school. You go to the local playground and there are 12 kids who live within a block of each other and each one goes to a different school. That's one of the things that really frustrates me. Life was easier when you didn't have so many choices.

Having too many options dilutes our resources, our parental resources, teaching resources . . . If there are parents who are engaged, they can elevate that school for everyone. Right now that energy is diluted across so many charter and public, and city-wide options... it feels like we're all scattered to the wind.

Some parents who were concerned about their neighborhood school talked about experiences working to develop it into a dynamic, well-supported neighborhood school - - or they related how this had happened at other schools. They assumed that parental involvement was crucial for this to happen.

Capitol Hill Cluster was formed based on a group of motivated parents who committed themselves in going to Kindergarten class together and things began to happen and improved the schools. That was 40 years ago. Then about 20 years ago this happened in Ross. And now I look at statistics for Ross and over 50% of kids are in-boundary and they are doing pretty well. So this is going to take some grassroots efforts of some parents to turn around schools. Charter schools offer a lot of choice to parents and it is easy for parents to not support neighborhood schools and causes less grassroots efforts to pop up.

. . . What happens when people don't have access [to "quality" in-boundary schools], to a certain degree, they go in and they bring another school up. And that's what I'm helping to have happen in [the Columbia Heights area] and what's happened on the Hill and what happened with Maury. [Maury was] a school that everyone was fleeing from to the Cluster or was fleeing for upper northwest. We went into Maury before Maury was Maury. And now you can't buy a house in Lincoln Park.

Parents expressed discomfort and ambivalence about their desire to support their local school by enrolling their children - - but then choosing to attend other schools outside of the neighborhood.

To me there is such a tension between having the right schools for your kids – which I totally get as I just moved to get into the right school for my kid - - - and having a neighborhood school. I really see the benefit of having neighborhood schools. When we started at Takoma EC I was shocked by the number of children who were within a block or two of where we lived who we had never met. And it was just such a nice feeling. Now I also decided that it wasn't going to be long-term good for my child [at Takoma] so I moved. But I do really love the idea of neighborhood schools and getting to know people.

I want to just emphasize because I am one of those families where it actually really kills me because I live basically between Ross and Garrison and I chose not to send my kids to Garrison because we won the lottery. . . . But if I didn't have choice and I had quality and proximity I would be at Garrison. I think more of my neighbors would be at Garrison and maybe we could turn Garrison into the next Ross. And if each of us could do that in our neighborhoods and turn that next school into . . . I wish that's the way it works but it doesn't. We all opted not to even take a chance on our neighborhood schools because quality is the most important thing and until quality changes, we are all going to keep this problem going.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

Others do not believe that they have enough time or the necessary resources to build up a ‘quality’ school in their neighborhood. They acknowledge that trying to build an effective school/neighborhood culture is no guarantee that your efforts will pay off soon enough to do your own children any good.

I don't want my kid to go to an up-and-coming school if it's going to take from now to the time he is in college until "well, this school is great now". I want him to have a good education today.

. . . how do we keep great schools great, how do we take transitioning schools into great schools and how do we take "bad" schools into transitioning schools and ultimately into . . . We're all parents here and in the big picture we want to make all the schools great - - but I have my own kid who I want to make sure gets a great education right now, not in ten years.

People talked about looking for parental involvement at a school as a necessary component of “quality”. But parents also related how exhausting it was to be an involved parent. Some deliberately choose schools with more parental involvement because they were over-taxed by the strain of having to do so much alone.

At elementary we were at HD Cooke. At HD Cooke our PTA president did all of it . . . did the whole nine yards beyond what . . . But I picked that school [Hardy] because I needed a break . . . Hardy has a well-established PTA and . . . so Hardy has all of this so it gives me a break. I need a break from dealing with schools and that's what I'm looking for in a high school for my child - - one that's got that good PTA setting.

If I have to put my son in a school where I've got to do parent involvement every day and still work and still have work with phone calls? It's overwhelming.

Out-of-boundary parents found a solution to their search for “quality” but at the expense of disinvestment in their home community. To go this route, parents have to have the resources and time to research schools and manage the transportation and the fortitude to handle considerable uncertainty. Choosing a school far from home put a strain on families and there was an acknowledgement of that opportunity (and burden) falling on those with fewer resources.

But why do I have to send my child hours away from my home to get that high quality programming, budgeting, the teachers – everything! Why do I have to search! Why do I have to send my child from Deanwood to Hardy? Yes, Hardy is a wonderful school. We know Hardy is a wonderful school. But there are potentials to build other wonderful schools.

. . . [W]e didn't go to our neighborhood schools (growing up). Our mom struggled to get us into other schools. Now my family is having the same struggles now getting our nephews and nieces into schools, but there is less choice.

We have neighbors who spend their entire day, they have to drive to Capitol Hill every day, but I want my son to be able to walk to school with the kids in the neighborhood. It's frustrating that we don't have that option. My husband and I both work and our involvement will be affected if we're 40 minute drive from our house.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

I would love to send my son to Noyes and his friends would be there. But no; instead I'm going on 20 plus different open houses. My husband is afraid . . . I keep sending him invitations "we have this open house and this application "- - I mean it is overwhelming. It is overwhelming.

At the same time, people struggled with what and who their community is and what is their neighborhood or frame of reference. Parents often find or create a very positive community within their adopted out-of-boundary school that takes the place of community based at a school close to home.

Parents talked about their community being the children at the school and so feeder pattern coherency was important because their child's community was their school cohort and that this was from all over the city, but they liked this because then their children had a diverse community of friends.

JO Wilson has a high out-of-boundary population. Students can get into JO Wilson and follow the middle school feeders into high school. That's a benefit for the middle school. It creates community. Out-of-boundary students may not be close to home but they have a community at JO Wilson. They go on to Stuart-Hobson and Eastern High School and it builds community.

I also wanted to say that cutting out the feeder patterns for out-of-boundary kids really will fracture some of these peer groups and communities . . . kids going to elementary school making dozens of friends and then saying "some of you have to go to one school and some of you have to go to another school". I don't think is beneficial for any of our children.

With so many children going out-of-bounds, the feeder pattern allows them to stay together. It kind of re-creates the community that is lost since we've gotten away from neighborhood schools so that's important to maintain.

But even for actively engaged parents and community members, there are numerous factors that either limit their power or render it a far less potent force for change. These limiting factors are discussed with a mixture of frustration, guilt, anger, and at times fatigue.

While most parents expressed a willingness to go wherever the quality schools are, they also expressed a desire to have schools that were close to home. Besides the ease of transportation it would afford them, many parents also expressed a keen desire to be involved in the life of the schools that are in their communities. But the current assignment system has spread out communities in ways that make it difficult to build the power needed to really improve schools. One focus group participant suggested that "...maybe we'd all be working harder for DCPS if we were not splitting our support across 2 systems."

Another parent echoed this sentiment, and acknowledged that while parents had the potential to exert a lot of energy to fix schools, "that energy is diluted across so many charters and public and city-wide options... it feels like we're all scattered to the wind." Other focus group members in Ward 1 noted that grassroots efforts to improve neighborhood schools were diminished due to the expansion of charter schools.

Some parents and community members report having faced hostility to their involvement in schools. They mention that their involvement is cut short because of school administrators who don't facilitate it. One parent noted that even when others in the community said "'we're willing to roll up our sleeves,' and rather than getting assistance, we run into opposition." A teacher at one of the 40/40 schools targeted for

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

improvement expressed that she feels shut out of conversations around school improvement because her school has already been branded as “low quality.” The participant shared that she feels “written off” and that her role in determining how to improve educational equity for her school is diminished. This was not limited to experiences with DCPS, but also in relation to a charter school, where a Ward 5 participant mentioned how after getting actively involved in his child's charter school, he ran into problems getting information about the school's budget from the administration and so he moved his child from the school.

And parents acknowledged that having local school administrators who would work with parents was a key ingredient for success in building a local school community.

My children are in-boundary for Maury. Eight years ago it nearly was closed – now it is one of the top five schools for applications. It doesn't take long with committed parents and a visionary leader.

For the past five years, however, under the leadership of an excellent new principal, Takoma has been welcoming, so neighborhood sentiment is changing. Community involvement in school is very important, and being able to drive less is good.

Some focus group participants suggest that school officials have put too much of a burden on parents and their involvement in improving educational opportunities for students. In a few instances parents said things like fixing schools is “not my job.” A Ward 7 focus group participant asserted that you can't “fix parents then fix schools.” Instead, the participant placed the onus on the District to guarantee that schools are adequately supported to serve all students. Another participant spoke from her personal experience:

“I'm a really involved parent who is constantly frustrated by this dominating conversation that parent involvement needs to be more and I want to feel like DCPS is taking more responsibility for this because there are a lot of involved parents. Is the accountability forever going to be on us? Where do the local officials come in? We're all trying to do our best and we're all getting push back.”

Some parents who expressed a desire to take an active role in their local schools said they would need more support from DCPS. Some wanted to be given more specific, data-driven areas to improve in their local schools. One parent suggested that “parents shouldn't have to come up with the plan to open great schools that attract great students.” Parents are happy to consult in a focus group format, but they are looking for expertise “from the professionals at DCPS.” So even while believing in their power to impact school quality, some parents want a greater sense of shared accountability with DCPS.

However, there were parents who expressed resentment that they seemed to be expected to fix the problems of their neighborhood school, considering that the responsibility of the city.

It is not my job to fix the school. We have full-time jobs, limited amounts of time and energy. Parents can't fix schools.

Even when the student assignment system is working for parents and their children personally, the distribution and system of neighborhood schools, out of boundary, applications, and charters is confusing, difficult to navigate, unpredictable and inequitable.

Suggestions from Focus Group Participants

Focus group protocol was primarily an effort to learn about the experiences and values of participants. However, some participants had thoughtful suggestions on how the District could advance equitable access to high quality schools. There was not consensus on any of the suggestions. Participants proposed ideas and language for a city vision, educational programs, resources needed, and specific policy suggestions for student assignment. The suggestions made often applied to both DCPS and charter schools.

Vision

Many participants voiced frustration that there was a comprehensive process to look at student assignment policy, but not school quality.

We can't talk about principles until we know what we want. What are the objectives - - this process can look at that better, i.e. what does "high quality programs" mean?"

But it was clear that participants understood that this process provided an opportunity to do more than just fix boundaries.

My advice is to think bold, think holistically. This is not just about school assignment and boundaries. This is about quality education. It's about education in our city. . . the job is to find the educated, bold, nuanced ideas that have worked in other cities and that have worked in parts of DC and invest in that. Don't go through just the boundary issues - - that it is going to be parent vs parent. That's not what we should be doing. They should get the right leaders and the right, innovative ways to improve education.

We shouldn't be looking at how do we get everyone to a median, but how do we keep great schools great, how do we take transitioning schools into great schools and how do we take bad schools into transitioning schools and ultimately into [great schools].

Another theme was that there was too much blame put onto DCPS for the achievement gaps and low performance of students from low income families and that the city needs to pull together more so that there are high-quality schools everywhere.

I think that most of us agree that there are societal issues going into why a lot of these schools are having trouble—like kids showing up hungry and sick . . . I think it's a little bit too much to put on DCPS to ask them to fix society's problems. I think it's a piece of it. But there also has to be that bigger vision that the city has so it's "how are we going to fix those kinds of problems so our schools can succeed?"

There was also a sense that the way schools and school quality is described is problematic and sets up some of the supply and demand problems experienced in the District's schools because "good schools" are basically schools with either or both a larger share of children from higher income families or selective practices in admissions or participation.

The Deputy Mayor on down needs to drop the competitive view of our schools and that includes highlighting whether they're a focus school, developing school, or a rising school. That's not giving

information, it's manipulating the marketing in west of the park schools which don't have a lot of low income schools.

DCPS and Charter Planning and Coordination

There was often agreement that the current system of DCPS and charters has significant shortcomings that should be addressed. A part of this new vision shared by many participants was for a more planned coordinated and accountable system of public schools that would equally affect DCPS and charters.

But there's got to be some urgent collaboration and coordination between DCPS and the charters because I think there are some charters that can step in and provide those neighborhood seats. But they are so silent. And I can't even wrap my brain around it – you've got the Deputy Mayor, you've got OSSE, you've got the Chancellor, you've got the charter board and there's no single point of accountability below the Mayor. One of the things that needs to be added to this discussion is that there needs to be a single point of accountability for coordinating not only the decisions but also the implementation of this that is accountable - - making sure they are looking at both pieces. Because if the tough decisions are going to be made – such as some of the ones you are talking about - - and if charters are not brought into the equation as to how they alleviate some of this then it's going to be a disaster.

I don't get the charter dump thing. I don't understand why it is allowed. If you want to be a school - - I'm not nearly as well informed as a lot of you here – but it seems to me that charters should be living by the same rules and starting at the same grades and having to deal with the same students. If they are having trouble - - well they chose to be a school in this neighborhood and they're going to have to deal with it.

Well there is no path for you to live in whatever neighborhood you live in and plot out your child's path from DCPS to charter and back to DCPS. I mean you can try it and roll the dice. Collaboration across sectors might be useful.

Tomorrow the Public Charter School Board could start 30 more schools. There is no planning or coordination if one branch of government can cut the legs off another. New boundaries without larger more comprehensive planning won't work.

Ideas for Improving the Quality of the Public Schools

Participants had a number of suggestions for improving the quality of the public schools, particularly at the secondary grade levels. But overall there was agreement that D.C. couldn't afford to lose what was working.

We need to maintain the energy around existing good DCPS schools while simultaneously building up other DCPS schools into alternatives that will attract people back to DCPS.

I think in this process we need to create places where kids want to go to school and where parents want to send their kids; [maybe] by creating magnet or science/math specialty middle schools. So they have this idea that "I really want to go to Ward 8 because they have this really cool school for

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

environmental education”, etc. That’s a way to get kids to move around the city – give them something to go to - - both the buildings and the culture and the programs.

If you don’t want to pit parents against parents and divide the community, it can’t be about... taking resources from one community and giving it to another. It’s got to be about how you replicate what works and create it in another community.

We are going to have to plan for overcapacity like we did before to anticipate growing enrollments and allow for diverse student bodies and not cause Ward 3 schools to become less diverse.

Ideas came up around relocating DCPS magnet high schools, but most discussion about school quality was about middle schools. People were fairly divided about magnet middle schools and just having really high quality general education middle schools. But there was strong consensus that DCPS had many options for addressing the exit of parents at the middle school levels.

If DCPS does not create general education middle school alternatives around the city you will leave people up in the air – have to do it if you are considering changing boundaries and feeder patterns.

While all parents agreed that all DCPS middle schools need a strong general education foundation, some thought magnet or specialized middle schools would be a way to address the need for high quality middle schools in all parts of the city.

We haven’t talked a lot about what DCPS does well. And I see a solution to middle school because one thing the system does well is specialty schools. And so I agree with your point. They could start by going east with specialty middle schools. School Without Walls does well, Banneker does well, McKinley does well - - and McKinley proves that it doesn’t have to be west of the park. So specialty middle schools I think are a short-term solution to this problem. But you could do a blend. And also they would be feeders. If they had a tech middle school that fed into McKinley, if they had a performing arts school they could give people an advantage to getting into Ellington . . .

Create a magnet at the middle school level that has a neighborhood component and then people will like it and build neighborhood school around it.

Maybe we should do some reverse magnet schools. I mean the areas where people have run from; maybe we need to put the programs not only in those schools but specifically in Ward 7 and Ward 8. I’ve testified that now that they have taken Ron Brown out as our neighborhood middle school, and stated that Kelly Miller now is the pie in the sky, that Ron Brown is actually that pie in the sky. It is right next to a train station, it’s huge, and it is right next to a library, right next to a swimming pool.

Not maximum choice, but some choice in middle school when kids differentiate and begin to choose things based on interests. Not having a middle school in Ward 4 is a problem. I like the programmatic “foci” of some schools (arts, STEM, etc.). If there were more choice at the middle school level in terms of programmatic focus, that would be good – D.C. is deficient in that area.

I wonder if there is a question about size of middle schools. There are catchment areas that are very far from the elementary schools they are assigned to. You are going to have kids coming from a

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

long way around, and you have charters pulling kids out. I wonder if there is an option for more, smaller middle schools... Maybe you can have more program alignment from elementary to middle school - - but can't do it with huge middle schools that take in large swathes of students.

- We've got to positively increase the schools east of the park. We need to set up magnet schools. There is no reason we should have 5 education campuses [PS-8s] and no middle schools. Why can't there be these all in a mile of each other and make one a middle school.

In discussing how to attract and retain families in high schools ideas came up about relocating DCPS magnet high schools, exporting Wilson staff and students to create a core component of other schools, and using technology for distance learning.

Ellington is way over in Georgetown; if it were here [Ward 7], students would travel to come to here.

If middle school and high school are not working and open for decades then maybe we need to re- envision what a HS should look like in the city. Start by breaking up Wilson into two or three different High schools, so you have a bunch of high performing teachers and students and move them east of the park. So you would end up multiplying the number of spots in Wilson and would be more immediately attractive to students and parents. And what makes a school attractive is safety and quality of school.

There's plenty of school stock available. Why not put Ellington into buildings on the UDC campus, reopen Western High School, foster growth and expansion of DCPS, and keep communities together. Reopen Old Hardy, etc.

We're going to continue to have this problem of trying to squeeze scarcity (in terms of quality) in these schools. But we are in an urban environment and I think there's a way [to get quality in all schools]. Technology is here and I think we need to start thinking bigger than just the four brick walls. If your kid is at Eliot-Hine and the class that they really need to be in is at Deal, then that takes 15 minutes and five bucks to set up. You put a couple of cameras in the classroom and they're getting a lecture . . . because they want to take that algebra class. And DC has the advantage of being a postage stamp compared to Fairfax or Montgomery County. For distance learning the technology is there and this is a really low-cost fix. We need to start thinking outside the definition that we have of school.

However, like with magnet middle schools, parents were not in full agreement on increasing the number of specialty magnet high schools.

I think that having specialty schools around the city is great but there's a lot of kids who are just kids. They don't have this one driving passion. They don't know if they want to go into science and math, they don't know if they want to perform . . . so what I'm looking for is really nice good middle schools and high schools for the vast majority of kids. They haven't made up their mind by 14.

However, they did agree that the existing comprehensive high schools need more support and better academic programming, not just aligned to test taking and college preparation.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

The pool is not open at Woodson; we need programs in place; quality instructors; programs beyond the school day; we have student with high ratio of IEPs [Individual Education Plans: special education]; we need the attention of those kids, as well; this is why Hillcrest parents are afraid; the school program does not hold the attention of EVERY child; vocational holds the attention, so the focus is school; HD [Woodson] already has athletic programs to keep the kids; we need to stimulate the brain cells.

In answer to the question, “how are we going to fix those kinds of problems [children hungry and sick] so our schools can succeed?” focus group participants suggested that the District offer wrap around services for children and their families through the public schools.

What happens in a lot of low income neighborhoods . . . 50% of kids in low income neighborhoods come malnourished, sleep deprived, so these other issues are not addressed because of parents having to work two or three jobs or have other issues. When you provide all those services at the school then any kid can learn.

One thing I thought was missing was wraparound services, and the need for that with parents who need extra assistance. If you didn't get a meal at home then you don't really care about school, or you need a doctor to come in once a month. In the past things that weren't the duties of the education system have become the de facto responsibilities of the education system we have to include those. If those things are not taken care of, kids can't be successful.

Increasing budgets to schools with greater needs and even for small schools in order to improve educational quality for students was proposed by many participants. There was a perception that currently resources are not allocated fairly, but that if they were, it would give the district a chance at achieving equitable access to good education.

Over the years we've been expanding access to pre-k programs. I certainly appreciated it and benefited for it because I no longer had to pay for private pre-school but the reality is in the grand scheme of things the District would have been far better off to deliver those resources to those children who were in far greater need than parents who could find other options and pay for them. The lack of investment in a group of children in the city who desperately need that to have a fighting chance is a bad resource allocation.

Ideas for Changes in Student Assignment Policy

The purpose of the focus groups was not to propose or consider changes to student assignment policy, but to provide more insight into the challenges and perspective of the public on the current system and to get guidance from them on principles to apply to any changes to be proposed. However, there were many thoughtful comments about what might be done to improve our system of public schools and to improve the DCPS schools, in particular.

I think we need to expand our definition of what is a neighborhood and make the boundaries a little bit broader than a couple of blocks around us. So think of the Hill has an entire neighborhood. We just need to be careful since neighborhood schools can be code for some really yucky things. Neighborhood schools can be a code for problematic things. Neighborhood schools are a good thing but we have to be careful about how we draw the boundaries so we don't promote lack of diversity.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

And an area of stability in children's lives is the school, thus it is important to keep allowing a child to attend the school even if their parents move. You give them the option to stay in original school or attend [a school in] their new in-boundary school. This will help provide stability for the children.

There was a significant amount of time that focus group participants spent trying to figure out how to better coordinate and integrate access to DCPS and charter schools. In the surveys the participants had rated "flexibility for the Local Education Agency (LEA)" at the very bottom of the list of principles to guide student assignment. Many participants were interested in how to provide more predictable access to charter schools.

If there were boundaries for charters it would help better serve ill-served students. If there were better facility integration - - give the buildings to charters - - then you could establish stable boundaries. We would be well served if we re-defined charters.

The open-enrollment charter option (lottery) is a benefit when the local DCPS school is not a good option. It is good to maintain these additional lotteries but neighborhood preference for charters might be a right too.

When charters first were created it was all a great unknown; now there is a definite reality. We need to intertwine the two systems – [doing] this should help the September shuffle. Charters need to be brought into the feeder system.

Could charters also be affected in terms of neighborhood boundaries? It could be something to think about in the process. If there's a charter across the street from me maybe that should be an option?

But there was not consensus on this, with a participant responding:

[If they had boundaries] charters would then become essentially public schools which would defeat the purpose of charters.

There was concern about the idea that high schools would not have feeders into them, or boundaries, but would be application only.

The Chancellor fielded the idea of having no boundary options available at the high school level - - a crazy idea. They should at least leave a boundary option open. We don't have magnet programs now and setting magnets up would take a long time before they were functional.

The Chancellor's proposal for high schools would be a complete non-starter and would damage the elementary schools. People move for the feeder pattern. [If those change] people would move to the suburbs.

I will be very unpopular with people who have a seat at Wilson. But I actually am one who is leaning toward the no-boundaries for high schools idea but with specialization... We need more of a trade network of schools so that everybody who doesn't fit in can learn an actual trade that they can come out of school with a skill - - hairdressing - - car mechanic – my son will do STEM I hope.

Implementing Student Assignment Reforms

Because of the concerns about the current system and how confusing and inequitable it is, there was a sense that even when the system worked for you personally, it needed to be reformed, but the advice from participants is that experimenting with children and communities or disrupting their routines and plans for their children and families should not be done except with the greatest care.

So with each phase, let's stop, let's re-assess, let's have some more focus groups, let's try to go out in the community and pull people in so we can get more representation and make sure that this is not just about the Chancellor and the Mayor and all these people making decisions that don't even have children in the school system.

My suggestion is that we transition these boundaries in phases and not everybody at one time. And during those phases do an assessment. Don't slam this down everybody's throat. Because whatever is, it is. And that's the position that a lot of parents are taking.

I think that grandfathering is something that is extremely important. Because all of us sitting at this table have made choices for our kids, have done things based on what was expected to happen years down the line. So I guess the big thing on my mind is "give us time". Not a year, not two years - - give us three or four years so we can keep our kids on track for what we told them what was going to happen.

It was also expressed that many families have already had great upheavals due to the closing and consolidation of their schools and that in the implementation of any boundary or feeder pattern changes, that these families and students should have special treatment to not disrupt their schooling and family routines and plans again.

Appendix A: Protocol Guide Used by Facilitators

When people arrive, they will be greeted by co-facilitator or 21CSF representative. They will be asked to sign the list next to their name. When they sign in they will be given the following documents:

Focus group consent form – (in green for us to collect)

Intro from the policy brief and worksheet to rate principles (green, this is coded to their focus group ID-- there will be extras if people want copies to take home)

Evaluation form (green)

They will be directed to begin to read the policy intro and rate the principles while we get everyone settled, etc.

Introduction to Focus Group Start at 6:30

Hello. My name is _____, I am from the 21st Century School Fund. We are working with the Deputy Mayor for Education's Office as technical support to the D.C. Student Assignment and Boundaries Review Initiative. Here with me is my colleague _____, [from Georgetown University, office of the DME, etc.] who will help facilitate the focus group.

The **Purpose of this focus group** is to gather input from parents and citizens on their concerns about student assignment and school choice and to ask you to articulate the principles and values that you think should guide recommendations of the Advisory Committee.

A focus group is NOT the same as a community meeting. It is a structured small group conversation directed by a discussion leader. I'm here to ask you questions and help direct the conversation. We are here to talk about YOUR experiences and opinions. There are no right or wrong answers and nothing you say will be publicly attributed to you.

As we go discuss student assignment and school choice, I may ask you for more information or may steer us back to the main topic if we get off course. The comments from the session are being noted and recorded and they will be compiled, written up and given to the advisory committee.

CONSENT FORM

Before we begin, I need you to sign the consent form. We will collect these and your worksheets at the end of the meeting. There are extras (white) if you would like to take them home.

Complete form

CONSENT FORM

I have volunteered to be part of this focus group conducted by the 21st Century School Fund to discuss student assignment and school choice.

- I understand that the purpose of this focus group is to raise concerns about student assignment and school choice and to articulate the principles and values that I think should guide decisions about student assignment and school choice.
- I understand that a focus group is a structured and guided process that works from standard questions asked of participants across multiple focus groups and so will not encompass all issues of concern.
- I understand that participating is completely voluntary and I can choose not to answer any question.
- I understand that the session is being recorded, and that the input may be used for policy and research purposes, but that the information and opinions I provide will not be linked with my name.
- I understand that a written analysis of the session will be made available to the DC Advisory Committee for Student Assignment and will be posted on www.dme.dc.gov.
- I understand that there may be academic or governmental observers at this focus group.
- I understand that there is NO payment for participating in this focus group.

If you have any questions or concerns about the focus group, you may contact the dme.studentassignment@dc.gov.

Signature

Date

Participant's Name (please print)

Ward of Residence

School/Community

REVIEW PROCEDURES Start at 6:35

The procedures for tonight will be:

1. First, we will do a round of introductions;
2. Then _____ I will provide you with some basic information about the student assignment review process.
3. I will read you a short introduction to the policy issues associated with student assignment and briefly go over DC's current student assignment and school choice policies.
4. Then I will ask you about your experiences and views on DC's system for student assignment and choice.
5. Following the first set of questions we will take a moment to make sure everyone has filled out the worksheet and I will ask for input on what principles are most important to you.
6. Finally, I will ask for your thoughts on how to ensure the city engages in a positive process that will reach a good outcome for families and communities.

Let's start our discussion by introducing ourselves. Please tell us your first name and what schools and/or community you are most connected to.

Do you have any questions or comments before we continue?

Introduction to Student Assignment Process Start at 6:38

I would like to highlight a few key elements related to the process the city is undertaking now.

- Starting this October, a 21 member **advisory committee** appointed by the DME began its work on student assignment and choice. It includes parents, community leaders and civil rights advocates from across the city and agency representatives from DCPS, PCSB, DC Office of Planning and DME. The Advisory Committee will issue preliminary recommendations to the public in May and final recommendations to the DME in August 2014.
- This is one of 8 **focus groups** being held across the city. The questions and process will be the same for each focus group.
- Starting in March, there will be separate geographic **working groups**. Many of you have signed up for them on the DME website;
- In May and June there will be large **city-wide community meetings** where parents, citizens and school staff will provide input into preliminary recommendations of the Advisory Committee.
- There will also be **online surveys and other interactive web based venues** to bring public insight and opinion to the process.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

We can answer questions about the process at the end of the focus group. But let's get started. [I would play this by ear—might need to get questions first.]

Background (from draft policy memo #1)

Just to provide some background on student assignment, I will begin with reading you a short excerpt from a policy memo on student assignment. The full policy memo can be found on the DME website.

Student-assignment policies and practices refer to the processes that determine which school or schools each student living within a jurisdiction may or must attend. Student assignment is a key component of a community's system for managing the demand for education services and allocating the supply of education services.

Student assignment is also inextricably enmeshed with school choice. Although a community may compel every child to go to school, which school(s) a student attends ultimately belongs to the student's parent or guardian. Which options are available and how families access them is a crucial part of student-assignment policy. When it comes to the utilization of public resources for education, communities must weigh competing values to make decisions about how to allocate those resources. In assigning students to schools, the community must balance its values, needs, and desires with those of individual families.

The current system of student assignment in DC is:

- Elementary, middle, PS-8th grade and high school geographical attendance zones for the DCPS neighborhood schools;
- Feeder patterns and rights for out of boundary parents to stay in a particular DCPS feeder pattern;
- Lottery for attending schools outside the attendance zone or feeder pattern;
- Lottery for PS and PK if there is more demand than seats;
Lottery for public charter schools when they are oversubscribed;
- DCPS also has 6 select admission high schools.

There are policies that affect transfer and involuntary or administrative assignment in DCPS, but there is little policy about transfers between DCPS and charter schools.

Your experiences and concerns start at 6:45

Now I would like to hear from you on your experiences and concerns about student assignment and school choice.

What aspects of student assignment and school choice do you think work well? What do you want to preserve about the current system?

What aspects of student assignment and school choice do you want to see changed? What is not working well?

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

Principles and Values Start at 7:20

Now I want to shift our discussion to what principles you think should guide decisions being made about student assignment and school choice.

When you came in, you were given a worksheet and asked to rate the principles listed on the sheet. Now we are going to discuss these principles. Has everyone had time to fill out their sheets? Do you need a few minutes to complete them?

I would like you to rate how important each principle is to you with 5 being the MOST important and 1 as the LEAST important. There is a space for you to rate the principles for elementary age students, middle grade students and high school students.

You can also add items if these principles you think these are not adequate.

What do you think is the most important principle to guide the city in its revisions to student assignment and choice?

Why is that important? (In response to comments by participants)

What of the principles listed on the sheet did you think was least important?

Is there anything missing?

Wrap-Up Start at 7:50

We are coming to the end of our discussion.

Do you have thoughts or suggestions about how to make this a public dialogue that builds community and does not divide our communities?

Thank you for sharing your experiences with us today. Your input is important. Again, thank you for coming this evening, be sure to complete the evaluation forms and turn them in.

Appendix B: Guiding Principles Worksheet Used in Focus Groups

Please rate each guiding principle on a scale of 1-5 with 5 as "most important" for Elementary, Middle School, High School	ES	MS	HS
Simple for parents to understand: <i>How important is it that school choice and assignment policies are simple to understand?</i>			
Simple to administer: <i>How important is it to have policies that are simple for LEAs (DCPS and Charter) to administer?</i>			
Predictable for families: <i>How important is it for families to have predictable school assignments?</i>			
School proximity to residence: <i>How important is it that the schools are close to where a student lives?</i>			
Opportunities for racial/cultural diversity: <i>How important is it for students to attend racially and culturally diverse schools?</i>			
Opportunities for economically diverse enrollments: <i>How important is access to schools that are economically diverse?</i>			
Opportunities for academically diverse enrollments: <i>How important is access to schools with academically diverse students?</i>			
Maximum choice for families: <i>How important is it for families to have as many choices as possible?</i>			
Equitable access to high quality programs, staff & facilities: <i>How important are quality programs, staff and facilities?</i>			
Efficient use of public funds: <i>How important is it that the city is using its funds for public education efficiently?</i>			
Flexibility for LEAs: <i>How important is it for DCPS and the charters to have flexibility in student assignment and school choice?</i>			
Strengthens system of neighborhood schools: <i>How important is it for policies to strengthen neighborhood public schools?</i>			
Fully Utilizes public school buildings and grounds: <i>How important is it that the District fully uses its public school facilities?</i>			
Others?			

Appendix C: Schedule and Location of Focus Groups

Date	Time	Location
Saturday, Nov. 9	2:30-4:00	Tenley Library 4450 Wisconsin Ave NW
Wednesday, Nov. 13 (Spanish interpretation will be available)	6:30-8:00	Seaton Elementary School 1503 10 th St, NW
Thursday, Nov. 21	6:30-8:00	Takoma Education Campus 7010 Piney Branch Rd., NW
Tuesday, Dec. 3 (Spanish interpretation will be available)	6:30-8:00	DC Bilingual PCS 1420 Columbia Rd., NW
Wednesday, Dec. 4	6:30-8:00	Deanwood Library 1100 50th Place, NE
Tuesday, Dec. 10	6:30-8:00	Capitol Hill Montessori 215 G St., NE
Thursday, Dec. 12	6:30-8:00	Thurgood Marshall Academy 2427 Martin Luther King Ave. SE, RM 206
Saturday, Dec. 14	1:00-3:00	Turkey Thicket Rec. Center 1100 Michigan Ave., NE
Thursday, Feb. 20	7:00-8:30	Lockridge/Bellevue Library 115 Atlantic St. SW

Appendix D: Average ratings of Principles

One part of the protocol was a survey worksheet of 13 proposed principles, each with a short description. Every participant was asked to rate how important each principle was to them as they related to student assignment and school choice (Appendix B). Participants were given these worksheet surveys as they arrived and some filled them out before the focus group began, others did them as the discussions took place, and others filled them out at the end. The surveys were collected at the end of the focus group. A rating of 5 meant that the principle was the most important and a rating of 1 meant that the principle was the least

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

important to student assignment and school choice policies or practice. A chart showing the average ratings of the respondents (including the Advisory Committee members) is in Appendix C. It is important to be cautious with the survey tabulation. The survey was used to facilitate the discussion and to ensure that people addressed a range of issues in the focus groups. The results are interesting and seem to reflect a broader community, but it was not a scientific sample and so the differences between the ratings may or may not reflect the ranking of the principles.

1. *Elementary, Middle, and High School Grade Students*

Figure 1: Focus Group and Advisory Committee Member Principle Ratings for Elementary Grade Students

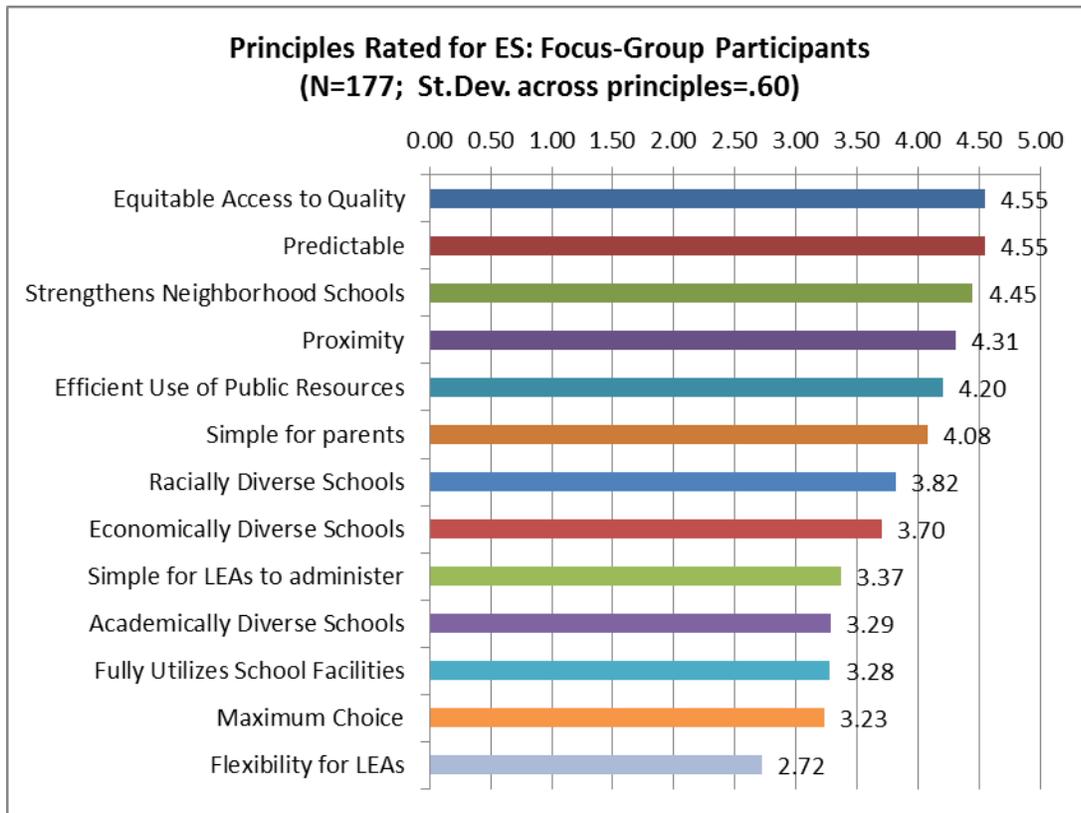


Figure 2: Focus Group and Advisory Committee Member Principle Ratings for Middle Grade Students

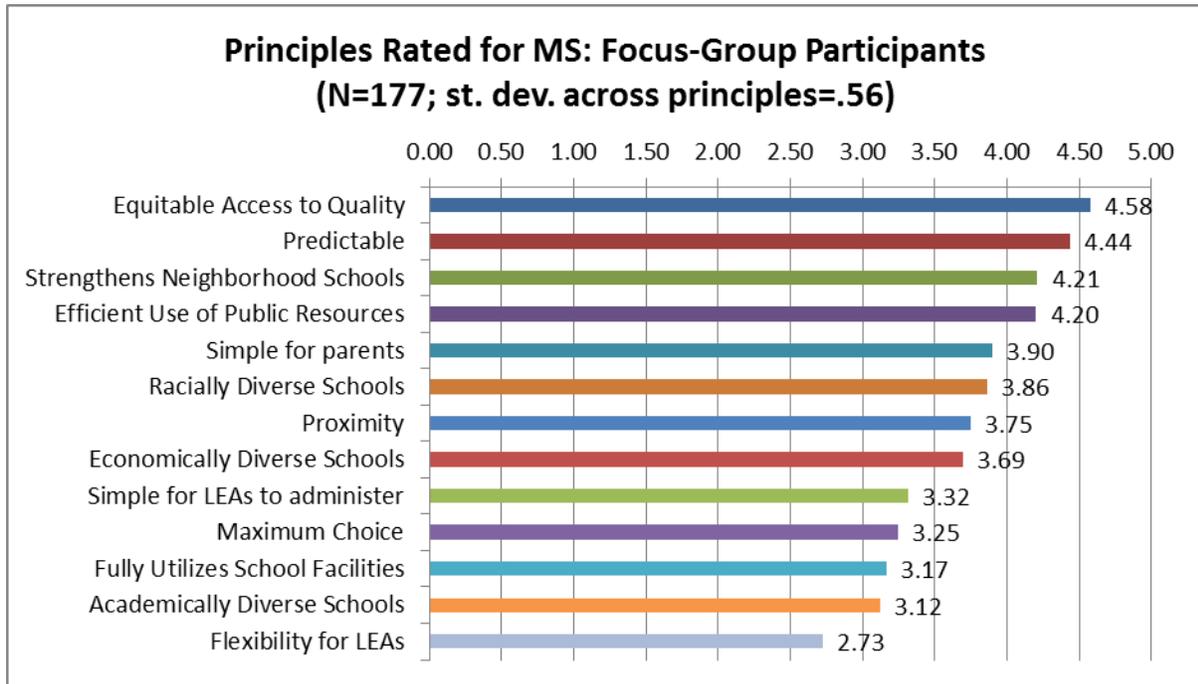
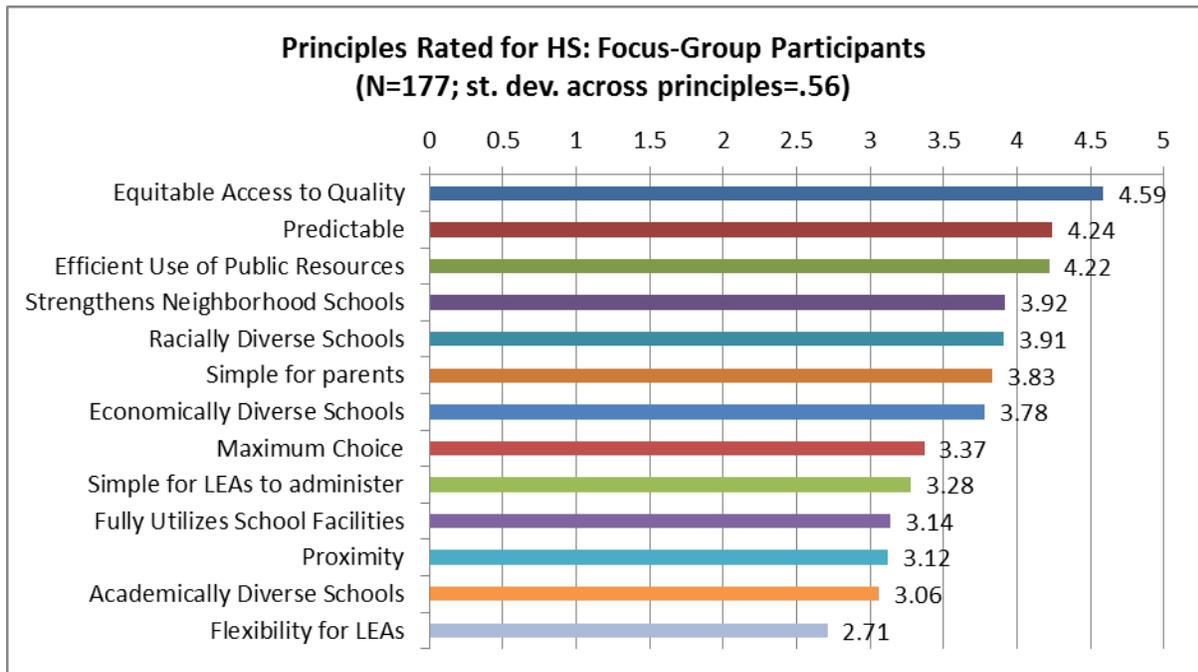


Figure 3: Focus Group and Advisory Committee Member Principle Ratings for High School Grade Students



Appendix E: Notes and Transcripts (redacted) from Focus Groups

Focus Group 1A: Tenley Library, November 9, 2013

After greeting the group and introducing the format for the focus group, the facilitator asked everyone to introduce themselves with the schools that were most of interest to them. All but one of the 14 participants had students in Ward 2, Ward 3, and Ward 4 schools with the outlier a resident of Mt. Pleasant who had no children. Schools included: Janney, Hearst, Eaton, Deal, Wilson, Ellington, Hyde-Addison, and Lafayette.

The facilitator started the session by asking what aspects of student assignment are currently working well for them. Statements included:

- Neighborhood –based schools are crucial at the elementary school level, and practical too as a matter of convenience.
- This is a touchy subject because my children started out at a Ward 7 elementary but used an NCLB transfer to attend a Ward 3 elementary. The hours commuting across town have been very hard, but I believe in public school. My first child wanted to continue on to Deal to maintain access to a quality school and to stay with students we knew and who had the same level of preparation. It was hard for my child too because it was difficult to have play-dates with friends because we had to drive across town. But we made it work for us.
 - I thought my youngest would have a sibling preference to my first child’s elementary school but found that was not the case. However my youngest got an out-of-boundary slot to a different Ward 3 school and that turned out to be fine as the oldest is now at a nearby DCPS magnet school. I’ve been active at my children’s school’s LSAT and volunteer at the school I live nearest; I’ve worked to help keep diversity in the feeder patterns to Deal.
- Out-of-boundary at my child’s Ward 3 school adds greatly to the diversity and the opportunity has worked well for the out-of-boundary students.
- I like the certainty of knowing one year to the next where my child will be going to school. It should be transparent for people who are not in-boundary as they need to know the odds for the lottery. I do not want people to game the system so this transparency should be maintained. With the PK3 and PK4 lottery, 2/3rds of the in-boundary students make the cut-off to attend their neighborhood school; if you have twins, and one is accepted, the other has a preference. The policy is simple; I could find it and read it.
- Principals still need flexibility; there need to be caveats that provide principals (or other administrators) the freedom to make decisions that help families. It can’t all be numbers and pure luck.
- The open-enrollment charter option (lottery) is a benefit when the local DCPS school is not a good option. It is good to maintain these additional lotteries but neighborhood preference for charters might be a right too.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

- Successfully keeping people in the city is a huge deal - - there is a distinct increase in people staying. We need to build on this success.
- This process is very important. Although I attended private schools as a child and have no children of my own now. The public elementary schools seem to be doing very well - - at least in a lot of areas. But there are concerns about middle schools; the stakes are higher with middle school.
- It seems that everyone at this table has children at really good neighborhood schools; *everyone* wants to have neighborhood schools that you would want to send your children to.
- Whatever it is that is stopping some schools from being as successful as others (needs to be addressed). I worked in Montgomery County Public Schools and before I had children I assumed that we would move there for the schools. But it has been great to have wonderful schools to attend in DC. I want it to be great for everyone.
- At Eaton a lot of the out-of-boundary parents are very stressed out because (they have to commute and they don't know if a second child will be able to attend). With older students, they can take the bus. Why can't DCPS provide for everyone in the city?
- Having schools in our neighborhoods - - schools as centers of a community -- helps everyone; training in parenting is important so people know [how important it is] to play with and feed the babies well.

Facilitator sums up that people are in support of strengthening neighborhood schools . . .

- But what about those parents who are not even considering their neighborhood schools? My family used NCLB rights to get to a good school in another neighborhood. I want to strengthen education in ALL neighborhoods.
- Teachers at Hyde-Addison (Ward 2) and Orr (Ward 8) are sharing professional development; the former principal of Hardy did a great job at outreach to families from outside of the neighborhood.
- At different developmental stages many children need the availability of out-of-boundary because they need a change among their friends or a fresh focus. This socio-emotional development is important.
- HD Cooke has changed; Garrison has changed with the work of the parents there; Ross has changed. But I just need immediately to have my child get a solid education.
- People who use the out-of-boundary system need to figure out how to give back to their neighborhood schools.
- When you don't have options in your neighborhood, you have charter options. My family has a good feeder pattern but in a charter lottery I would compete one-on-one with others in the lottery.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

Families who want to attend Washington Latin have to compete. But if they are accepted **and** had a feeder spot in a desired school, in theory if they attended the charter that DCPS slot could be freed up for others out-of-boundary.

- I'm a fan of neighborhood schools that families can walk-to but we also need to use resources effectively. If a school is half empty it should be closed. If it can be moth-balled, there will be economies of scale that benefit across the city. The new Ballou High School (Ward 8) has three times more space than there are students; maybe it would have been better if a smaller school nearby were retrofitted for Ballou students. [Point of information: Ward 8 is only served by Ballou; Ward 8 has more high school age children than any other Ward in the city.]

Facilitator: So the priority for strong neighborhood schools is important . . . What are the strengths of the current system?

- It may be easier to send more kids [out-of-boundary] to an effective school but the long term goal is strong schools everywhere.
- Having access guaranteed to before and after-care is very important; this is not guaranteed in Virginia. It is very important to have these options available for parents who are driving a great distance to get students to school.
- Having before and aftercare available does not mean that it has to be free; it is especially important at the elementary level to have before and after-care available. Parents who use before and aftercare should have to pay; means testing is important and financial aid should be available.
- All schools can improve. Deal had a huge problem with students coming in with different levels of math abilities. They worked with the feeder schools to coordinate programs. There was coordinated professional development to provide program coordination through the feeder pattern.
- Curriculum, especially language offerings [needs continuity]. Eaton students study Chinese and their teacher is in touch with the teachers at Deal and Wilson. We feel very fortunate to have Chinese at Eaton. It is now a whole program - - and continuity is very important.
- But then IB programs don't coordinate through the feeders.
- DDOT manages good drop off and pick-up plans so it is safe for both the out-of-boundary and in-boundary families who drive. They have safe plans for traffic movement and schools have worked with DDOT in installing cross walks which makes it easier to get students in and out safely.
- We now have free city buses for school-age kids, which is fantastic. No free Metro passes though. It was cumbersome before with tokens.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

- The DC1 card concept is great but with students, they lose the ID and the DC1 cards. It is a great plan but it doesn't work perfectly. The bus drivers deal with card problems individually. Some bus drivers are great.

Facilitator: About assignment and choice: what should be changed - - not how. What's not working or not working well?

- Some principals exercise quite a bit of discretion over out-of-boundary transfers; you can work the system. It is not transparent and completely in-equitable.
- Some authority from outside the school should have responsibility - kids show up just before the (enrollment) count.
- Both of my kids got in out-of-boundary a week after school had started.
- There are out-of-boundary brown areas - - students at 5th grade at Janney who will not attend Deal; one family had two kids at Hyde but the third child could not get into Hyde. We need considerations for siblings.
- Mt. Pleasant has issues with kids getting into the local free PK programs; some people may use false addresses. There are complaints that they don't actually check addresses – but there are lots of Maryland license plates. Does DCPS share the same requirements for verifications as charters?
- Some parents are divorced but have legitimate access to the school even though one may have Maryland plates. However, the IS residency fraud. People should take down the license plate number and have the police trace it; verification is based on your calls to the authorities.
- I tried to get my children into Bancroft but they *never* have slots in PK; lots of in-boundary children don't get in either.
- One challenge of having more students in-boundary is having fewer slots out-of-boundary. This affects diversity - - which is a good goal.
- How to address this should be a priority - - costly though because there is no room now for out-of-boundary to provide opportunity or diversity in a school that already has 800 students. A second school would have to be created.
- Eaton has lots of out-of-boundary students too. With the feeder schools are they not considered as in-boundary once they get into Eaton?
- You still are out-of-boundary for Deal but you have a feeder right to go to Deal.

Facilitator: Principles and values - - what priority number would you mark on each of priorities your worksheet? Talk about what is most important, starting with the elementary school level.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

- Proximity is especially important at the elementary school level. People are more willing to make trade-offs for proximity at the other levels.
- We need to strengthen the system for neighborhood schools: opening new ones or investing in existing schools. Engaging parents at their local schools is also important.
- Predictability is important - - do I stay or sell?
- The Chancellor's proposal for high schools would be a complete non-starter and would damage the elementary schools. People move for the feeder pattern. [If those change] people would move to the suburbs.
- A family's largest investment loses its value if feeder patterns are not good or are not predictable. [Otherwise] your house is not a predictable investment. This would have a disastrous effect on house prices.
- I moved within DC specifically for predictability, from U Street to Woodley Park. We needed to *know* about middle school – high school is a less important issue.
- Real estate clients want to know about the elementary school and middle school - - high school they figure they can work out later. High school includes other options including private school.
- DC could target high schools to different academic specialties.

Facilitator: So the values for elementary school relates to the predictability of the middle school and less for high school . . .

- I will need to leave if the in-boundary middle school or high school is crappy.
- The perception is that Montgomery County schools are universally good schools.
- Predictability needs to be there but options are important too.
- Flexibility for LEAs; simple to administer is much less important - - the administrations can just deal with it.
- Do we interpret this to mean [flexibility for LEAs] that the school has the ability to adjust enrollment?
- Maximum choice for families? Families should have at least one good choice but offering everything is a mistake.
- But there are not good choices all across the city - - school assignment is not solving the problem.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

- Choice at the higher levels is important too. Our child was really lucky to have both Walls and Wilson as two good choices. This is not the case across the board.
- I don't really care about **academic** diversity. I like having diversity but I won't use my child to try to solve this problem; I'm not willing to make many trade-offs there.
- The neighborhood make-up determines the market and school diversity.
- Academics draw value; reading specialists who can work with different students are important. Every school should have teachers who can help students who need help; so academic diversity is not so important.
- Each teacher should be able to differentiate student levels. It is not easy but the goal is to target all levels.
- There is no DC Gifted and Talented program which is not great. There are lots of kids who are academically ready to move ahead. These students deserve attention too.
- My children's school *can't* be geographically far away - - I didn't move here to have to drive across town every day.
- Proximity is at the top again; I would find having a 6th grader on the Metro to be terrifying.
- I could see a bus maybe if there were no need to change buses but it can't take 1 ½ hours to get to school.
- Predictability is important.
- The goal is local neighborhood school and also strong schools - - equitable access to high quality programs.
- More choice and equitable access is less important at the middle school level. I have more interest in my older child taking the Metro. Southeast would be OK.
- How do we define equitable access? We can't solve that problem here.
- Maximum choice isn't important at the elementary school level - - choice is more important later on.

Facilitator: what is not so important on the principle's list?

- The system still needs to cater to families.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

- Fully utilizing public school buildings and grounds - - maybe mothball ½ the building [if it is not full]. Mothballing is an in-active use of space.
- I'm on-board with charter choice. But we need to manage it better - - how many charter high schools do we need?
- The charters are not a priority for us at Janney; they are a priority only for those who don't have other options.
- I'm NOT for giving neighborhood preference to charters; charters allow increased choice.
- Allowing neighborhood charter school preference increases choice.
- Children develop at different rates; they don't all test well and [arbitrary] cut-offs for entrance [are harmful for them]. Cut-offs should not be interpreted too narrowly; you don't want too many doors shut too early. In high school students have a longer track record from which to [made decisions].
- Academic diversity is important. I don't support the idea of selective high schools because they cream off the highest performers to the extent that you worry about the non-selective high schools. Skimming may make it easier to tailor teaching to that level. The top Deal students go to the selective schools.
- We need the best research and studies to guide us. There are barriers to enabling children to do well. Walkability is important. Academic diversity sets the standard for kids to do better by example.
- Hyde (Ward 2) and JO Wilson (Ward 6) are collaborating. JO Wilson students had a high percentage of kids with IEPs but all were expected to do well and everyone did better. Kids need to learn how to behave in the real world. My child did well in the out-of-boundary school and had a collection of very diverse best friends; in middle school those children drifted apart but in high school they were back together again as friends. We need actual research [on how diversity affects students].
- What about evidence for the opposite effect of low performers on high performers. High performance is linked to socio-economic status and race. We need to cultivate diversity.

Facilitator: What would be the top values and principles for high schools?

- Equitable access [is needed] for the gifted and talented programs that require a test to get into and the opportunity to be really competitive. But there are a small number of seats available.
- Predictability is important. Proximity is important.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

- Continuity of academics like IB programs is important. A great elementary to middle to high school continuity is preferred.
- The principal of the middle school talks to the principals of the elementary schools [in the Deal feeder] and now the principal of Wilson high school is talking too. They are tailoring the academics.
- High school is a lot easier - - there are only a few good elementary school options and lots of demand. There would be good options in the early years if there were more options at the high school level.
- The Chancellor fielded the idea of having no boundary options available at the high school level - - a crazy idea. They should at least leave a boundary option open. We don't have magnet programs now and setting magnets up would take a long time before they were functional.
- We should focus on the elementary schools and then the high schools will take care of themselves – there are lots of options at high school: BASIS, Latin and the private schools as well.
- Parents want to look at high school differently. At high school transportation is not an issue. We should focus on the elementary schools and middle schools to get the buy-in at that level.

Facilitator: Can we get your thoughts on how we can make this a public dialogue that builds community as opposed to divides people?

- It's about making ALL schools better - - maybe with DCPS as the common enemy.
- There are bigger issues affecting this – it is not all school based. There are lots of non-educational things involved. We need to focus on those other problems. Having everyone in a lottery won't solve it.
- Focus groups in other neighborhoods would be different. How would it work to have a diverse focus group? It would help with community-building to talk about these issues with others whose response might be “but I've got nothing over here”. It's a zero-sum game for too many. Discussion of boundaries keeps it at a zero sum.
- Charters expand good slots.
- There is tremendous opposition from any Ward 3 family [to feeder-pattern change], including Lafayette families.
- How to make this less divisive? This is a huge change; people will be upset. We need a little change here and a little change there – not everything all at once. We need [an incremental series of] gateways to access.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

- If you take away the choice and options and things that are working then you drive people out. Our system is somewhat broken but some of it works. The administration should look at what is working.
- People without options will say “wreck it all”. Change should happen in places where it isn’t working well. Leave it where it is working.
- There are success stories in more challenged areas: charter examples exist; Ross and Garrison are examples.
- How do we make good schools more [widely] accessible?
- Schools in strong neighborhoods are asking about walkability and high performance as a priority; the answer will be different in schools that are not in strong neighborhoods.
- We need to break the language down in other areas - - schools such as Deal and Hardy have done surveys; we need surveys.
- Local schools’ proximity for walkability is often important for safety reasons.
- There has been no transparency of process; how were people picked for the Advisory Committee? There was no one included from Lafayette even though we’ve been working on these questions for more than a year and we know a lot. If some options are not on the table then that should be clear. You need our buy-in.
- What my kids at Eaton have gained from diversity is whole worlds’ better understanding of people than I had.

Facilitator: There will be lots of options to participate further.

Focus Group 1B: Tenley Library, November 9, 2013

Participants:

- M1: Parent of DCPS student
- W1: Parent of middle school student
- M2: Parent of high school student who recently graduated; active in PTA
- W2: Parent of elementary school kid
- M3: Parent of elementary school student and future student
- W3: Parent of elementary school student and future student

W1: Problem in ward 5 where there are a lot of charter schools and you don't have a right to go to charter school (like you do with DCPS)

M: What aspects of assignment and school choice work well and what do you want to preserve and what do you want to change? What's not working well?

M1: I feel for us that our school that the neighborhood school aspect is something that is very valued. We like to be able to have play dates and have our neighbors go to the same school. We actually have a lot of out-of-boundary kids at our school (Hearst?) and those families bring a lot to the school. So having folks motivated to go to our school is useful and enriching. So neighborhood rights with out-of-bounds lottery works well.

W1: It's working now... the out-of-boundary process was critical for me to be able to stay in DC especially when there weren't as many charter options. Um...if - - I'll be honest with you - - I feel like I individually benefit my children by being able to feed and eat ... in my neighborhood ... essentially my neighborhood has a lot of people [it] is bursting and nobody chooses the neighborhood option. Very few of us would have stayed if we had to go to Burroughs elementary. We're all fleeing WEST. The kids in Burroughs come from NE because it's better than NE. When we went from high poverty school to a low poverty school my daughter was able to get the special ed. interventions that she needed. I chose that school because it was still a better option than the other one for me. The lottery process is really a difficult process (I was excluded from a lot of lotteries).

M: So you felt your child wasn't getting the support she needed at a high poverty school?

W1: They told me that at the high poverty school they had to help the bottom 10% and she was only bottom 20%.

M2: WHAT?!

W1: I was a middle class parent who could afford tutors; they were dealing with parents who could not read or write. Even schools who want to do intense enrichment they, are always having to prioritize 20 kids needs. Unfortunately kids on the west have more resources and fewer kids to work with.

M: How easy was it to get into an out-of-boundary school?

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

W1: We did 10 lotteries (5 DCPS and 5 charters) and I did not get a call for any of them, I got the call for Eaton on the 1st of August and I got a couple of calls in Mid-September. So it was...at that point we were transferring schools no matter what. It was such a negative traumatizing experience.

M: So you didn't know until earliest August after a process that started in January?

W1: Yes.

M2: What you just said, I wish were the exception to the rules. Unfortunately, the school you just mentioned, Burroughs, is two blocks away from me and we're doing an intervention on it this upcoming week but that doesn't have to do with this. My son attended a Ward 4 high school. I left DC, came back, and left for family reasons. My son was at one of the top 15 high schools in the country, so we figured we would transfer to McKinley because that was in the boundary, but it became a lottery school and since we missed the lottery we had to enroll in [another Ward 4 school].

M: So you moved sometime between January and . . .

M2: I was still working in Baltimore because I wanted him to have that top 100 in the nation atmosphere and when I checked out McKinley ... what McKinley has now other top schools had 10 years ago. Then when I got involved at my son's new school in DC I did not like what I saw and that's when I joined PTA. But what you're telling me . . . my son is the first student who won a [names national scholarship] from that high school... but the reason why I'm still here is because what my son did I want it for everybody. When you have children from Ward 8 getting into school in ward 5 because of the boundary - - that's a problem.

M: Help me understand that? They live in which ward?

M2: They live in ward 8 and they have to get up at 6 in the morning because their boundary school is Roosevelt HS.

M: They may have been involuntarily assigned.

M2: There were behavioral issues that went from ward 8 to ward 5. For a ward 5 child to have to go to ward 4 and then hear the same thing, he must be subjected to the same thing that you are, family involvement has to be great or those children are going to get lost in the process.

M: Yes and the kids are just all over the place and [the school you mentioned] is a good example.

W2: I agree with the earlier comment I think, I have an elementary kid, but I think with junior high and high what I really think is good about DC is that it is turning into a really community oriented city and that ...so neighborhood and community is important to me. I think some of my kids' best friends are out of boundary. And cultural and racial diversity is important to me especially as NW is not particularly racially diverse and I think it's important to me (that it be diverse). I don't think that, it seems to me, that there is a core fundamental problem that we don't have enough schools in the right neighborhoods. Like I live in ward 4 but we feed into Lafayette and there is no junior high in Ward 4?! For anybody. And I drive into the city down 14th and I see Roosevelt high school is shuttered. I know charters are growing and I haven't looked myself and I think we can talk about the assignment process but I think we should double down interest on more junior highs and not enough talk about it. They also don't talk about Travel.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

W1: In DC they take three times as long to go the same amount of miles as a student in Denver (talking about a GAO study).

M3: I think the community is really, really important as a core component for education. I also think proximity is very important. The neighborhood that they can walk to school . . . I think those are probably the two more important things for me. I haven't had much experience with out-of-boundary children because my son has only been there for 1 year and 2 months. We're new to the system.

W2: No out-of-boundary student gets into pre-k. The lottery is really competitive.

M3: The cradle to career initiative . . . I think it's important that people stay together. . . that schools stay together.

W2: I agree.

M3: You want those kids staying together as long as possible, throughout their education. The people I met in Kinder I had relationships with and helped me with social transitions through high school and even to today. I think keeping kids together is going to support academic outcomes.

W2: I think that's a piece of certainty too. Knowing how I can get my kid to school as they phase into different levels. Knowing that they will get into a place where they at least know some kids, for a parent, the movement of your child is hugely [important] like I didn't realize it till I had kids, that takes up 30% of my time every day. How is he going to get from here to there?

M3: Not really about school assignment but I know there is a lottery for Pre-K in this city, and some kids start at 3 and some at 4. There isn't enough space for all the kids that want to go to a certain school at age 4 but in other part of the city have budgets for age 3.

M1: It is upper NW that doesn't have age 3; most of the city does have age 3.

M: It's essentially to ensure that kids that don't have advantages at home have the advantage of early childhood education. Not as a daycare piece but as an education piece.

M3: I just know children in my area are waitlisted to start at 4 but at other areas they can start at age 3.

M: It's an issue also of crowding. With the growth of these schools and the feeder pattern into the middle and the high schools it's actually not really sustainable.

W1: At Eaton, they dropped a PreK3 class this last year because they actually have more kids staying in 5th grade than they had previously so they had to add a class. So when you're talking about the cohort in the district is that a lot of kids leave at 3rd grade or 5th grade for boundary schools so if you made a shift that's when you would do it.

W2: A lot of kids went to public school when [their parents] lost jobs and economy went down and they are now all going to private schools.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

M2: And the other thing, if you live in Ward 5 for example and I'm picking on Ward 5 but I'm going to use Burroughs as an example. If I'm hearing from a parent in W5 that I can't get what I need at this particular school that's a problem for me because I can walk down to Burroughs; I can go one block to the left and to the right and my neighborhood is changing with a lot of young people coming into our neighborhood. I want to see the neighborhood school flourish but I understand that all parents in this room, you don't have the time to go in everyday and sit down and say I'm going to help you in this area no matter what type of talents that we have. The city is going to have to take a look at where it's putting educational dollars. Taking a look at some of the best and not so good schools and say "what can we work together to achieve". . . some type of parody where you can wake up in the morning and say "ok I feel comfortable taking my child to school". Aesthetics are fine but no one in this room sends our children to school because it looks good.

W3: Four main things, which echo a lot. I too have a strong preference for neighborhood schools. The two things I think work well: related to feeder pattern, if schools have clear feeder patterns the schools can integrate their curricula better. Not just about socialization but also about academics.

W2: I agree!

W3: Second, that's worked well; right now there are not enough school slots. I think the out of boundary process have given kids an opportunity to move around. But now demand is outpacing supply. So now we're having this huge discussion about assignment when really the fundamental problem is that there are not enough good schools. If there aren't enough we are going to have trouble because we cannot make everyone happy. Also the amount of energy it takes to do lotteries, and figure out the process, and then the time spent taking kids across town. It's a lot harder for out of boundary parents to get their kids involved. It's hard to live life when you're shuffling kids around time. It should be directed to bringing up neighborhood schools.

W1: Can I just say, I am eight years into DCPS. I started elementary school with my daughter believing as a middle class parent I should be able to do whatever. I think we are asking our schools to do too much with poverty; to solve poverty. You can't ask them to do too much. You can't think there is anything fixable within our children's elementary school career. So fundamentally, I really question, a lot of times I say I think I've helped my child or helped my community. I don't know how resources get allocated but I do know that this idea that you can have all these good schools is not real. And every single one of us, if you're a parent at NE who sees Burroughs as 50% failure instead of 10%, we all keep moving. It's like any number of crises - - my individual situation is always going to determine why you're going to move.

M1: So you don't think there are going to be enough good schools so you say we're all going to go at it. . .? Ha! Ha!

W1: The chancellor said it was the hardest decision she had to make, hurting one child and benefiting the other.

W2: I get your point but I think a lot of the problems are societal problems, completely agree. But I wonder if there is just more that can sort of be done that is not baby steps but there are great community schools all over DC and there are tensions between those and charter schools - - not blaming anyone, just saying I hear about it. A lot of people [are] moving into SE. Capitol Hill schools come back and maybe that's because...

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

W3: It's frustrating because there is this implications that there are only five schools in the city that are any good but there are other schools that have potential.

W2: But that could be SES.

W3 There are a lot of good [and] bad schools and in between. . .

M2: Parents don't talk to each other anymore. Back in the day, I worked in Richardson elementary and Shad, and a couple more in the area and there was one thing that I knew, the first Monday of every month there were going to be 400 people at a PTA meeting. One thing we did in ward 7 in those days - - if Richardson got something, parents got together and Shad got it; parents got together, and other schools got it. When we stopped communicating and became our own entities, if it was good enough for my child it was good enough for everybody else's. Those children came up with decent educations. We have 3 times that amount of money now, and we are not going to have 100% parenting, but what I see is the more that parents can help where they can the fewer problems I guess.

M1: I fully agree that we can't take a magic wand and make more good schools but as an end goal I think that's the only goal we should all be shooting for: to have better schools across the city. For folks in better areas they will have to lose out and move to other schools.

W2: A lot of teachers say they don't get as much money as teachers in harder schools. There should be another way to allocate salaries.

M1: I agree . . .

W1: The amount of money HSAs raise . . .

M1: Looking at PTA budgets, they are small compared to school budgets.

M3: One thing that . . . I'm curious about - - so when all this was announced by the school two years ago about a school closure process and boundary process, I didn't really understand why those processes wouldn't take place at the same time. I don't understand why if what's affecting boundary is space crowding, why wouldn't they happen at the same time.

M: That's a fair comment and that's the way it was supposed to go in 2008. Boundaries are supposed to be reset...part of the process is that it's associated with crowding and schools closed and it's a mish mosh. It should have been done- - and they tried.

W1: Where the kids are and where the buildings are doesn't line up. If people in NW saw the size of campuses in NE they would die. There were a lot of kids. There are younger families moving in, not a single one of them is using public schools. They are all in the lottery process.

M: One of the things, I'm curious about is how able people feel to actually affect the quality in their schools. Is it something like "oh yeah we know how to make this school better." If we go there and it's not working, well there is a path people can see for changing it.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

M1: I think there is one thing: that change is slow but possible, so I feel like this year parents have banded together to expand after school enrichment activities. My daughter is doing something every night after school. We've worked with the principal to get a high learners program, gifted and talented, and to provide more tutoring for students in 3rd and 5th grade. But you know it's slow; we don't have resources.

W1: I don't believe it anymore, I used to. I think the factors underlying poverty undermine children in high poverty [so much] that I don't think there is anything middle class parents can do to help them.

M2: One of the things I did as PTA VP was ask what are we doing that's good and then we began to expand onto that. One of the things I also learn to realize is that from elementary to high eventually these young men and women are going to go out into the workplace. WE cannot rely on the government alone to answer our problems. And we went out, 21st Century went out, and we started getting partners from different areas to appoint people and say "look this is what we're producing if you don't like what we're producing you need to tell us what we need to do to put it in our curriculum". We want to start from elementary and work all the way up. And in most conversations it blew their minds. I agree some people won't get the message, but if parents work with the schools and schools work with the organization that are willing to go out into the community and say this is what we want... that is key. What we see in 5 or 10 years is going to be a manifestation of whether or not the 5 year plan works or not.

W2: I think that a lot of it is a luxury of money and time and I think there is lots and I think we're able and some of our schools can band together and raise money for our schools but I do think there hasn't been a good process in the city, there has not been enough outward communication from neighborhood schools into neighborhoods. They (neighborhoods) went to Ross and they are very active group in that neighborhood. I think you're right in the businesses and we're moving offices and we've been talking to McKinley because we want our dollars to go into that school and I think many more businesses might be interested in not living but working in those neighborhoods to help those neighborhoods. I don't think we've done a good job of asking DC to get involved in local schools.

M3: Maybe because I know I think we can make a difference I can make a difference. We talk about raising outside funds. It seems like there is always a greater need. Is it a school, community, or parent responsibility? It's trying to piece together where the funds come from in order to make change.

W3: It's funny because I'm actually an education and policy researcher and policy . . . and I know the studies say: "No, we can't improve outcomes". I think it takes personalities. There is a good book about how to walk to school... out of Chicago... neighborhood parents got communities involved... what I think of when I read that book. . . . It took really committed parents and a principal willing to do things differently and being very energetic. More power as a parent is tutoring, you identify the kids who need a little extra help and then that needs money.

W1: Can I ask one question: my sister pointed this out and she said ever since NCLB every single one of us looks around and says this is the rank in my school. What failure rate am I able to accept to think this school is sufficiently good enough? These are calculations we all make.

M: I understand.

W1: I realized other issues later. I am not willing to accept less than 75% of kids scoring proficient and scoring in advanced. Not necessarily because they have bad teachers, schools or administrators, they are taking kids that have had that much support in their lives to get them at the trajectories to where they

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

need to go. We're saying those kids with less resources have to start a couple links behind. I don't see many 75s on the test scores, I see 90s and 30s, 40s. There is no medium.

W2: Yep, I hear you.

M: Interesting. So clearly you all have had principles you have applied in your own life. If you're advising the deputy mayor, what values do you want the Committee to use? How differently for different grade level?

W2: I think it's the same for most; I want more diversity so I think it's good to have that in bigger schools. But it doesn't mean that. . . I thought that was a weird set of values to rank one above the other.

M: Well it's a rating . . .

W2: All of those things are important, but I put 1's on some to make it easy, but I think some are more important and will allow other things to happen anyway. You're asking boundaries to solve way too many problems. I wish this process was happening for quality of schools. This seems like a Band-aid on top of a chest wound.

W1: If I had a magic wand, I would say everyone should be in a lottery to desegregate and bring resources, but as a parent I would not want that at all. But you can't do it. I want to be in a diverse neighborhood but I want my kids to be academically successful, but those things don't meet up.

W2: I feel like DCPS has given up on junior and high schools. I think they're all about the charters now.

Group agrees.

W2: I want the public school system to work, it's a right.

W3: We would have a disaster if neighborhood preference went away and it's all lottery. I think the city has a risk of the charters becoming that *de facto*.

W1: I think DCPS won't exist east of the Park in 10 years.

M1: I think there are places east of the Park where it will but I agree...

M3: Everything in the city is a charter, every few months there are scandals at charters, but also I think there is this perception that if you put your kid in a charter, everything is fine. But the average is probably the same or below as the neighborhood schools.

M1: I put higher numbers on neighborhood schools. I feel strongly that our end goal is that everyone can send their children to a good neighborhood school. I hope even a charter school can get themselves to enabling folks some certainty.

W2: It is bizarre to me that kids near charters can't get into those schools easily.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

W1: When you have a kid coming from high poverty they're not going to do well. [I'm] not willing to write them off but that's always going to be true. How much do you privilege the neighborhood vs. privilege opportunities for kids to get out?

M2: I call it fighting the battle at Roosevelt. A lot of people look at test scores at Roosevelt and think this is a horrible school. People don't know that we have 75 students that graduated with an average scholarship of about \$125,000 and about 1/3 of students spoke at least 2 languages. When you look at conditions at the school, it's not the parents fault that for whatever reason the schools were neglected. But if I were a new parent moving into the area you're going to check out the elementary, the middle, and the high while he's still young and you're going to ask yourself "do I want my child in THIS"? And if you don't like what you see now and you don't see an improvement by 8th grade you're going to have charter school flight. If you move up in salary, you're going to have private school flight. All that being said, what I see is it's almost too easy to blame them on the kids because a lot has to do with parents. Sure, it does have a lot to do with parent engagement or lack thereof, absolutely. I wish I had your budget, but . . .

M: It's hard not to imagine that if 400 kids from Deal were at McFarland, that McFarland wouldn't be fine.

W2: But why isn't the better school in McFarland and . . . pulling the SE kids there!?? It makes me mad that there are east of park west of park and north . . . there are different ways to break up the city.

M: That's a good point.

W2: I feel like geographically that everything goes to NE and I think that there are enough economic diverse parents that would support a Jr. high or high school in NE.

M: The question is more there are schools that are crowded and not crowded and they aren't necessarily far apart.

W1: They've tried this, if you take 400 kids from Deal to McFarland you don't take the money that Deal has.

W3: But what could you do to make McFarland attractive to parents.

W1: It's a trust issue!

W3: IS there nothing you can do??

W1: Everything I see, the problem with DC and the reason it has very few . . . is because functionally it ended up being segregated.

M: There are six test-in high schools that are not segregated.

W3: I would like to think about solutions. There are not enough good school slots so what can we do to make that an easier transition.

W2: You have to be careful about radical changes though. I think to your point - - incentives can help move people around but I think you can look try to get past traditional separation and look at different ways. The

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

city is changing in lots of different neighborhoods. The city is doing better economically and there are opportunities. So I think that we have to think about some of that and I also think it's important to look at different pressure points - - so it might not be the politically right thing to say "I want to build more junior high schools in ward 4" because it seems like it's not fair because the problems are happening elsewhere - - but I think you've got to create places where people want to go.

M1: But I agree you must find a short-term solution that builds credibility so it's not just Deal. The example of Hardy is a crazy one.

W1: I don't think Hardy is a disaster!

M1: But that's an example of your credibility issue. No parent will trust Hardy. Create a magnet at the middle school level that has a neighborhood component and then people will like it and build neighborhood school around it.

W3: Find out what people would make people take a risk on this school.

W1: The elephant in the room when I have conversations with parents – the kids who were poorly behaved were black. Kids in DC are afraid to send their kids to a majority black school.

M1: Hearst is a ward 3 school that is majority black and people say "there are rowdy kids at the playground". I think you know though that it is a good school and I'm happy sending my kids there.

W1: Eaton too and it's fabulous. There was no majority there; it was Asian, Hispanic, and Black kids. The perception problem... I don't know how the city gets behind it. They are going to have to be a lot more upfront about the elephant in the room.

M2: Another thing that has to happen, you can't put it all on the PS system. You can put legislation on top of legislation on top of legislation. What I'm getting when I go to Hendley or Garrison or schools in ward 7 or 8 is that these rich white folks are getting all the money and we get nothing. I know that's not true you know that's not true.

M: There is some validity to it. Because funding of school is student based. So the number of kids you get entirely defines your budget and a child from a very poor home gets no base funding gets no different amount than those from a middle class home.

M2: So if I'm in a poor neighborhood and I'm going to Safeway and my Safeway is always empty and I go on a bus and I see Harris Teeter has a lot of food and everyone's smiling and the store is clean, I'm not going back to Safeway. If we do that with food you don't think people in ward 7 or 8 aren't thinking the same thing with children's schools.

M: So we're running out of time. I'm curious about what you called it the elephant in the room; how does the city have the conversation about that? You know in many ways it's about families; it's very personal but also it's about what do we want our city to be both now and in the future. How does this conversation happen in a way that - - and I think you've all done a great job - - works?

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

W2: You have to start it bigger. You're going to turn everybody off if you start talking about changing the [boundary] lines. I would say everybody wants every school in DC to be as good as it can be and you have to articulate a vision to get there. If you just use this process to become a symbol of where you draw the lines it's going to be a disappointment. You have got to articulate better, because if you have this conversation it's not. . .

M: So let me ask you again, what I hear you saying is . . . developing principles around - - what vision? So the vision that I'm hearing is that all neighborhoods should have schools that feel like good options for your family. W1 you don't think it's possible...

W1: Well do you say every child should have the opportunity to attend a good school or do you say every neighborhood should have within its boundaries a charter or public school with some level of preference that meets a certain quality standard. But you have to choose between the neighborhood and a child.

W2 and W3: You can have both.

W3: If you have a good neighborhood school you'll have a good school with [every] kid.

W1: Property values are at stake here and that matters.

W3: Again if you had a good school associated with your property that will help your property values.

W1: You have to give people a good sense of the history. The mayor needs to articulate "are we doing this for kids" "are we doing this for diversity? What is the fundamental ranking of priorities?"

M: YES. We're trying to get a sense from the community what those priorities are.

M3: This process is supposed to be transparent but it doesn't seem transparent at all.

W1: How are you defining a good school? They need to give real bench marks. Where is the data coming from?

M: That's helpful. Part of what I wanted to do was talk about process – some of this I can answer but before I do are there any comments/questions about process?

M2: I want one quick statement right now – we have to stop thinking just in terms of property values because the biggest property we have is our children. Now I'm more concerned about the fact that if we give every child the best shot possible and we get them to a certain point we know after a certain point in middle school they will choose their own path. If it's the right path it will be better for our city. The bigger issue is and should always be - - are we giving the best to the kids?

M: Well I mean I think that's right. But we're trying to get from there to what is both an administrative problem and a vision problem of how are we going to actually get there. Let me just speak to the process issues... We need you all to help with this.

M1: These sorts of groups are helpful even if it ends up that it's not the thing that I perfectly want [but] then I at least feel like I've had an opportunity to speak. So advertising this publically would be helpful.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

M3: So is there no Counsel vote on this?

M: No.

M3 & W2: Nobody knows that.

M3: The timing seems odd. (Re: mayoral race?)

W2: I have to go back - - I think there needs to be a better articulated vision with where the mayor wants to take the schools.

M: What are the elements of the vision?

W3: How to increase quality of city schools??!

W2: There is no real report that the mayor's office has put out about the attendance and quality of high schools. There is no information, no facts about these schools put together. If the city is going to have a conversation about school boundaries they need to put out the facts so that people can decide what they think.

W1: For me it's less the vision than what are they calculating as this is high quality? The IFF report said Hardy is HQ but people dispute that.

You can't just say next year. Parents say if I don't go the private school route I need to know a year out (September) what is going to happen.

W3: In order to have a conversation about solutions you need to better understand the problems.

W2: I would not go the ward route; I think they're weirdly drawn in the city.

M: THANK YOU

Focus Group 2A: Seaton Elementary School, November 13, 2013

Concerns from community members:

Participant: There isn't a lot working with regard to current student assignment policies, to be quite honest. He feels blessed, no MS in his zone, but Seaton is in his zone. It would have been Gage Eckington. Lottery is a very nerve racking process and very difficult for people living out of boundary and not a fair process for them. He reiterated that lottery is a difficult and nerve racking process.

Participant: From a DCPS employee perspective, worked in a school where most kids were out-of-boundary and it was a sought after school so it had a lot diversity both academically and politically. But, they believe strongly in neighborhood schools. And DC has really diversified (except east of the river is still homogenous) and when families are invested in the school and neighborhood it is really powerful for the school. [He is] not a big fan of the lottery system since it doesn't allow them to invest in the neighborhood school. So non-neighborhood schools have their disadvantages since they cannot get families to invest more in the area, and instead send them to other schools.

Participant: There is a lot of uncertainty prohibiting parents' investment in schools. There are a lot of specialty charters and it may or may not make sense for your own kid to send them to these specialty schools. But if the schools are high ranking and get results then they will send them there. Participant is meeting with other PTAs from other schools to find out their recipe for success for creating good parent involvement. Participant is very involved with a start-up PTA.

Participant: Lottery system as it stands is stressful and challenging. They applied to 14 schools and were on waitlists. Really interested to see what happens in common lottery process and hopefully this new process helps eliminate some of the pressure. They have gotten calls 2 weeks into the school year for being accepted at a school where they were waitlisted but they were already attending another school. She realized that the sense of community is important to her because she got an offer from a well esteemed charter school and declined it to attend a DCPS neighborhood school. But she has to see how things happen for her MS options.

Participant: He likes the lottery system since he was able to get his child into Hearst. But growing up in the area with non-quality local schools, people go to charters or other schools to gain quality. He is concerned with reducing the ability to gain options to quality schools. He doesn't want to narrow the city if we get rid of school choice in DCPS system or charters and will have people just moving to neighborhoods. His son currently has the opportunity to get diversity with students and his son knows students who live in Ward 8 and his son even knows areas of ward 8 even though he hasn't even visited the area. He thinks it's really important for school choice and diversity. And he is concerned how they mess with MS and HS feeder systems; if you get into a more neighborhood based system it would be problematic from a political and homogenous population.

Participant: School choice is more important as the child gets older and progresses in his or her education. But they value neighborhood schools on ES level. You best serve the city by making strong neighborhood schools at the ES level, but give more options of choice as students age and the kids know what they want to do and then can go to more specialized schools.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

Participant: He finds that neighborhoods have tough tradeoffs in terms of quality when looking at neighborhoods schools. Some neighborhoods don't have good elementary school options, but they do feed into Wilson and Deal and so he knows they will have good options later on. Whereas some neighborhoods have great elementary schools they lack good middle schools or high schools.

Participant: We have talked about boundaries in the focus group but not feeder patterns really. He knew his feeder pattern feed into Deal. His first choice was to go to Oyster. But for him it wasn't that important where the schools were, but that it was a good school. Agrees parents have to be invested in the school but this is difficult. But he felt that he wasn't going to make his kid a guinea pig and send them to local schools that don't have a good reputation for good quality. He believes his kids school right now is a great school and thinks it will get better with construction and will have some uptick and it also feeds into Deal. He will have to see though if his options change with sibling preference on the table.

Participant: They are interested in the process and currently their kid is going to Janney. Curious about how new student assignment policies will impact their kids and their siblings. She is in-boundary for Janney and currently has a newborn. Janney is crowded. In her kid's 4th grade there are 24 kids, but she wouldn't call that crowded.

Participant: Something that concerns her is that there is now no standalone middle school in ward 4 . . . but sees there is a large middle school charter presence. So there is no good logical option for her to go to a DCPS middle school. And she even reached out to see if she could work with McFarland to turn it around but still at the end of the day it was closed. But at the same time she appreciates that Powell is dual language where her students current attend and she really likes that. DCPS only has one bilingual middle school so it doesn't make sense if a parent wants to continue that programmatic option into middle school or high school. She thinks you should invest in ward 4 middle school option since population growth is growing. Also since her daughter now would have to be transferred to go to K-8th education campus or CHEC with its 6th-12 school. She likes the idea of sending her kid to a stand-alone middle school. And a lot of families across the city are investing in bilingual middle school and high school options and should invest in more of these programs.

Participant: He also worries that the last time we did true change in boundaries and feeder patterns it was in the 1970s. And if we change them now based on today's demographics then we will miss ward 4's growth and how it will change in the future. There seems to be a massive disconnect between the government decision on where to send kids and the personal decision for your own kid. There seems to be a lack of understanding that the very personal decisions that parents have to make, where the Advisory Committee will be looking at numbers and not thinking about faces and names that are attached to them. He also recognizes if middle school and high school are not working and open for decades then maybe [we] need to re-envision what a high school should look like in the city. Start to break up Wilson into two or three different high schools, so you have a bunch of high performing teachers and students and move them east [west] of the park to Ellington. So you would end up multiplying the number of spots in Wilson and would be more immediately attractive to students and parents. And what makes a school attractive is safety and quality of school.

Participant: Another member is concerned about what it takes to make a school appealing. She believes it may take a generation of kids going to a school to change people's perceptions about a certain school. And she knows that some parents wouldn't send their students to Cardozo, even though she sees DCPS teachers working their tails off and trying to improve it. Eastern is churning to become the pride of Capitol

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

Hill that it once was, but parents aren't giving them the chance. And instead of parents going down to Eastern they are instead pounding down the door to go to Deal or Wilson.

Participant: But even if a school is on the uptick, it may still have some violence or safety issues. So a school may be on the rise but violence still may be present, especially at the middle school level.

Participant: In terms of magnet schools, is that an option or on the table to redraw in this student assignment process? So you could have a magnet program in every ward. There used to be more magnet schools such as Dunbar Engineering and at Ballou, but they are not magnet schools any more. They are not there anymore, but this certainly could be an option. But the Chancellor has also put on the table that all high schools could be lottery based and not geographically based.

Participant: So that means student would have to go from one corner of the city to another, with citywide high schools? There may be geographic preferences but still citywide. The distinction is that they wouldn't have a feeder pattern to enter into high schools. There would still be special admission options for magnet schools but citywide comprehensive school (nine of them) would be lottery based and anyone in any part of the city could apply. The participant is afraid that a good student could be assigned to a bad school and wouldn't do well in that environment; however the student could have done well if they were assigned to a good school.

Participant: Wilson still has majority of students attending the school that are out of boundary and probably acts as somewhat of a citywide high school.

Participant: He feels torn about making high school lottery-based and he understands the reasoning behind it, but it would be going through hell to go through two lotteries.

Participant: DCPS currently has feeder patterns, but the Chancellor mentioned in a group conversation the potential for making braided feeder patterns between DCPS and PCS schools so that the feeder patterns are fluid between charter and public schools. Participant would be interested in hearing more about that option since that could be a great move for the city.

Participant: She thinks it's hard to influence quality at the middle school high school levels, but at the elementary school level she believes you can still affect quality. So even if teachers are working really, really hard it's hard to affect quality at upper levels.

Participant: And it's really tough to move financially in the city. So that is a big deal. If you find out your fate in March, then you only have until August to make a decision on whether you will stay at that school or move to go to another school. Too short of a turnaround to pick up and move based off the lottery decision. He knows of another person who moved so they could specifically get guaranteed entrance to Oyster and they paid private school for a year until they could move and get into Oyster. It's a very difficult decision, to be thrown to the wolves waiting to hear that decision on what school they got into.

Participant: But NYC has more magnet school options. But magnet programs in NYC are very challenging; DC doesn't have options as good as NYC magnet schools.

Transition to reviewing the values worksheet:

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

Participant: It is rare for a parent to have two good options for schools. For her they were looking at Janney, but also looking at another charter school too. They should expand the schools that are high quality to allow for more students to attend since it is public money. For example, classrooms with only 18 students could increase to handle 25 students. In France, there usually was a teacher and one aid for 30 students, and she thought it worked.

Participant: Another member is uncomfortable with the idea of expanding classroom sizes, and 25 or 27 students seem like too much.

Participant: When people enter into the lottery they self-select. So some people go to Amidon, knowing that school is only at an 18% reading level but [don't] change schools since they don't want to travel. So some people don't self-select into charters and want to stay in their neighborhood school. So she wonders how you influence people to go elsewhere and be willing to travel. This may be the case with new student assignment policies so she is not sure how you convince people to travel for school.

Participant: How do we get kids who don't self-select into the lottery process?

Participant: Bilingual education or specialized options are missing from the values. Charter schools are beginning to extend their grades to start creating their own feeder patterns so parents don't have to leave the school system. But in theory if have International Baccalaureate schools and they are good, there won't be enough spots opened up for people to apply to those schools out of boundary.

Participant: Another value that is missing is minimal or no disruption for parents who are already in the system.

Participant: The values they felt were most important were equitable access, racial and economic diversity, and strengthening neighborhood schools. Racial and economic diversity is important, but they struggle with equitable access because the participant wants the District to spend more money to turnaround a poor performing school but the District should just split money evenly for the sake of it [equity].

Participant: Another participant felt that equitable access, diversity and neighborhood schools were most important.

Participant: The values they felt were most important were equitable access, maximum choice, and diversity and predictability.

Participant: Another member feels that diversity and equitable access are very important, and neighborhood schools are important but that becomes less important as they get older.

Participant: At the high school level the academically diverse environment becomes less important since they have more options to attend magnet or application schools.

Facilitator: How to think about costs associated with student assignment policies?

Participant: We need to remember that the district isn't operating in a vacuum and parents can move to Montgomery County or out of state if they don't like the new policies. You cannot make everyone happy but need to strike a balance so parents don't move.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

Participant: But the new policies need to be effective for everyone. People who aren't educated and are not well off deserve good quality options too.

Participant: The efficiency or smart use of funds is far more important than equitable spread of funds.

Participant: Seems like it should be important but not sure what efficiency means in this context. So for example wouldn't transportation be provided to middle school kids to enable them to travel across the city? So then kids are in buildings that are fully utilized?

Participant: There is a figure being thrown out that DCPS spends more per pupil than any other district in the US. It may not be the most, but regardless it is very high. But DCPS' central office may be bigger than it should be?

Participant: That is why diversity is important: you don't want to drop a bunch of money in one area where people aren't interested in building schools in their neighborhood. They believe that it is better to integrate students into other schools to diversify schools and help turnaround the existing schools. So you don't have one single socio-economic class all in the same school. Quality and socio-economic status rub off from each other and could help improve schools by diversifying them. A child with bad habits could pick up good habits from good kids and vice versa, but they believe diversity is a key to guiding the student assignment policies.

Participant: To make schools higher in quality then you need to attract parents from all over the city, and this will slowly turn around the school. Ward 3 has too many kids, but if there were other options for them to send their kids to high performing bilingual schools or any other high performing school then she would send her kids to them. So it's important to attract parents so they can help improve the school.

Participant: Special education isn't on the list of values. And charters don't do well with special education. And DCPS has the most segregated school system based on disability and those without a disability, and in her ideal world she would be able to fulfill IEP (Individual Education Plans) plans in every school and not have to send special education students to specialized schools or send them to non-public schools. This would save the district a lot of money, since you wouldn't have to bus these students across the city, which is very expensive. The District should strengthen schools so that all special needs students can go to DC public schools and this would help reduce costs and [the District] could reinvest the savings into existing schools.

Facilitator: How to best engage the community going forward?

Participant Part of the reason you go to a charter school is because your local school is insufficient. So incorporating [guiding] principles into the discussion and into policies would help to make this process seem less political - - that the city officials aren't just gerrymandering. She thinks it would be important to get panels of teachers together so that their voices are heard and listen to veteran teachers too would especially be helpful when incorporating feedback to this process.

Participant: Parents don't really know how to fix this, administrators kind of know but they haven't been able to fix it, so you will need other experienced or on-the-ground people to help out.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

Participant: Try to get in front of families where they live as much as you can when doing outreach to the community. Most parents in her neighborhood don't have access to the internet and 2/3rds of them live right in the neighborhood; their kids attend the local schools, and they don't speak English and they don't travel outside of the neighborhood. So principals can be gatekeepers to help bridges the gap for low-information parents. You need a lot of grass roots communication to families to reach all of them. You can use a lot of social media tools to gain input.

Participant: Town halls are not constructive and only the loudest people get heard during those meetings.

Participant: They know of teachers who would go around to everyone's home helping them understand certain changes in schools. You could try this method and have teachers go around and ask parents simple questions, and then aggregate that information as well into what values and principles should guide the process. So if you engage at that local level then people are better apt to respond.

Participant: Since she has joined the schools, she feels like her own PTA could be more welcoming to people outside the PTA who want to help. She feels like PTAs can be on their high horse sometimes.

Participant: Meeting people at the school so they don't have to travel when conducting community outreach is important.

Participant: Residents are disappointed with how the Advisory Committee was put together. She realizes that they got people from around the city, but she feels like people were selected and not all opinions may be heard. Should have liked it if there were open invitations for anyone to apply to the Committee and have it be an open process.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

Focus Group 2B: Seaton Elementary School, November 13, 2013

Participants:

- Parent of a PK student at Francis Stevens;
- Parent of two children, one at Deal, one at Wilson, both went to Oyster;
- No children in DC Schools, children went to public schools (not in DC), new resident of the Seaton area;
- No children at present, lives in Crestwood, Ward 4;
- Parent of two children, one at Watkins, one at Stuart Hobson;
- Parent of a PK child at Hearst; lives in Ward 5;
- No children at present, lives in Ward 4, involved with education policy;
- Parent of two children at Excel PCS, lives in Ward 7;
- Retired DCPS teacher in Wards 1, 3, 5;
- Parent of one child at Bancroft;
- Parent of two children at EL Haynes PCS, lives in Crestwood, Ward 4;
- Parent of one child at Eaton.

Q. Why isn't the DME staffing this? Why is the city not doing this process themselves?

Facilitator: DME staff is very small; they needed to hire people to help them out.

Q. I've met you at public forums; say a bit please about your background.

Facilitator: I'm with the 21st Century School Fund --- we focus on facilities, and are deep into data tracking, school planning, etc., so this is just down our alley; I've had two kids through DCPS, they are now out of college.

Comments will be compiled and written up and give to the Advisory Committee.

What aspects are working well? What would you like to preserve?

- I am really unhappy with the current boundary system. Our elementary school and middle school is nearly 80% out-of-boundary. This is good because students get to go to school with students from all over the city and it is tremendously diverse, every Ward is represented except Ward 3. The downside is that it is difficult to build community when so many families live so far from the school. One of the reasons we wanted to live in DC and live in our neighborhood was because we rejected the suburban model. We have neighbors, they walk to school; we walk to school.
- I'm very unsatisfied with the boundaries too. My daughters go to a charter in ward 8 even though I'm concerned about the neighborhood there, I like the school. I live in Ward 7 but can't send my children to my neighborhood school because my closest school is simply not good enough. Most of the neighborhood families send their children to out-of-boundary schools. This is really the first part in my crusade to make it so my daughters can go to the school that's a couple of blocks from home. We're stuck as my oldest daughter is in 5th grade and I don't have a place to send her unless

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

it is to . . . If I put her in a lottery . . . I don't think it is fair for us to have to drive across town to get a good education.

- I think the fact that you can move around and find something that works is good. The fact that there are options when the neighborhood school is not acceptable is good.
- The current boundaries cater to exclusion; it caters to preventing economic diversity. We all can't move into a zone where the schools are good because it is too expensive. I want DCPS to either give us easier access to the better schools without preventing . . . we are in DC too. It is an emotional topic because it is my children. We cannot afford to move where the good schools are.
- Have you attempted to do anything to make the local school better? This is a building, the building doesn't do anything. School is a proxy term, what we're really talking about is curriculum, the teachers, other students. Nonetheless it is run by a central administration that is responsible for providing what everybody expects. This is not a guilt-or innocence question, but what kinds of things have you done to make it better?
- My daughters go to a Ward 8 school. I sit on the board of that school and I do things with the PTA of that school to make it better. But in Ward 7, I'm trying to decide what do I do? Do I put them in the local school (Anne Beers)? The school just does not have a very good curriculum. The charter school they are in has a very good curriculum. As the girls grow up I'm concerned about what my daughters will be exposed to and what will happen around them. There's a lot going on around the charter (Barry Farms), and the school is trying to make it better but the school is a work in progress. I'm just not willing to have my children experimented on. So I'll drive all across town for them to get a decent education. I'm grappling with this. This is my first step to figuring out what approach to take.
- My children have been in DCPS for a long time and it has really changed over the years. The current boundary system worked as long as there was more space in better schools. But now that has changed. And the diversity was one of the things that I wanted my daughters to have, so children would have that diversity on both sides. Right now the way it seems is that all the Ward 3 schools are full and they are going to lose that racial and economic diversity.
- Parents are always going to go where they have the best education for their kids where ever they can get in. I'm going to guess that this multiplies as kids get older. I've got very young kids in school. You go to the local playground and there are 12 kids who live within a block of each other and each one goes to a different school. That's one of the things that really frustrates me. Life was easier when you didn't have so many choices.
- We live in a neighborhood where our elementary school is not up to par (Powell). Nobody in our neighborhood sends their kids to school there. It is not up to par in terms of test scores, it is 80% ELL, and they don't cater to the broad range of kids academically. Academically it doesn't fit our needs. Most parents vote with their feet. I'm not going to experiment with my kids and you can't expect parents to do that. We all live in DC for various reasons but one of the values to living in DC is diversity but we want a community . . . we all pay taxes and one of the things that is the responsibility of the city is to provide a good education. A school is a very important part of

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

building community. So it is friendships - - relationships - - that are the things that DC should foster. It is sad that we can't have an environment where the kids can go to the local school. Whatever comes out of this process . . . it is very unfair if parents are asked to experiment with their kids. Parents ought to be able to send their kids to the best schools, to the schools that meet their standards, whether that is grandfathering in or creating neighborhood choice options.

- Nobody in ward 7 or 8 wants to send their children across town to go to school. A lot of times I get the impression that people think we want to send our kids to Ward 3. I don't want to have to drive all the way up there. I want them to be in the community where they live (ward 7), that's why I purchased there. I want them to go to the school up the block. I don't want to participate in a lottery every March - - that is stressful!
- I have something hard to say . . . It is the job of the public schools to educate everyone in the city. I guess what I hear a lot of parents saying is "my kid is too smart to go to school in the neighborhood" - - which isn't always the case. Schools teach the kids who are there. If you don't want to go to school in the place where the school is educating everyone in the neighborhood, then that's one thing. If the neighborhood is not safe . . . those are really hard decisions. We don't want to put our kid in a position where they are living out our political but the reality is that we have a really diverse city, racially, economically, culturally and the neighborhoods we choose to live in don't always have the type of kids some people want their children to go to school with. I'm here because I want the best for my kids, but we have to think about what we're asking. And I have a hard time saying those words.
- When my kids leave Ward 7, they have to be able to compete with anyone. A lot of the teachers that we get in Ward 7 and 8 in the charters . . . they get new teachers. They may be good teachers with good educations but they may not know what they are doing in the classroom. I don't want [my children] to get to college and not be able to handle it.
- We all live in this city because we embrace diversity.
- That's the fundamental problem with DCPS. They have not been able to get the trains going - - they're doing a little better. The wonderful thing about the lottery is that kids have an option to go to a better school. The downside is that those better schools get overcrowded. The lottery system worked for me. The problem is that we have no local school [that is acceptable]; Seaton is our school. We met with the principal; they didn't have much of a PTA. That's the wonderful thing about the feeder pattern rules. You just don't take a risk with your child. So I want to be able to lean on DCPS - presentation is important, what it looks like on the outside. It's that gut instinct - it's like choosing a day-care. DCPS needs to do something . . . here at Seaton the PTA involvement is minimal. At Hearst they are active, the PTA doesn't sleep. Also at Janney, Murch - - but these are all Ward 3 schools. That's the wonderful thing about the lottery system; it gives me a chance to go to a very good school.
- For the past year and a half or two I've been analyzing transfers between charters and DCPS. Something over 800 students got dumped out [of the charters]. Between 9th and 10th grade when the charters can decide who they want to keep, they transfer them out. I bring that up to make a point. Have you heard Kaya Henderson complain about that? That's kind of odd because it is mostly those with lower scores and difficult behavior who are asked to leave.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

- Clearly the Chancellor is not in favor of cannibalizing the schools?
- I'm here to lobby on behalf of parents and teachers. People are saying they want a good local school, but the people who are in charge don't seem to be upset that they are being gamed by the charters schools.

Facilitator: That's an interesting point. But as far as the boundaries and feeder rights are concerned, the charters don't have a whole lot to do with that. I'd like to get back to School Assignment. I'd like to scour around possibly for some more positive things: you found the lottery good, the diversity good?

Q. Please clarify – when we talk about student assignment we are talking about boundaries and feeders?

Facilitator: It's a lot of different policies that are added to just the boundaries and feeders. It is transfers, feeders, who gets priorities in the lottery.

- I do have a point about that. I do think that the current feeder system is good because if your child is in-boundary or out of boundary they have the opportunity at least to move to another school together with classmates. The fact that all Deal students can move to Wilson if they want to is positive. If we just opened it back up to another lottery it would be destabilizing.
- At my kid's PS-8th school the kids who live in the boundary can feed to one high school but the kids who are there out-of-boundary feed to another school. The feeder is Wilson; if they are out-of-boundary they go to Cardozo. Not everything is aligned.
- Isn't that part of what needs to get fixed? Aligning the boundaries with the population?
- It is very disturbing to me that the public education system is associated with the word "lottery". I like the way someone put it a while ago . . . we pay a whole lot of money to a whole lot of people to provide public schools. People should not have to take a chance to get those services. The quality of the education should be equal. I don't know how we are going to get it to be that way. That would go a long way toward simplifying things for the administration.
- The word lottery I assumed that it was drawing out of a hat, but it is so much more than that. There is so much manipulation that goes into the process: you have in-boundary, in-bound with sibling, out-of-boundary with sibling, etc. In my opinion the only priority should be to the siblings -- to keep the brothers and sisters together. That should over-ride any in-boundary priority.
- We really need to see that the neighborhood school system is preserved.

Facilitator: We need to get on to the Guiding Principles. Please fill out the Guiding Principles worksheet if you have not had a chance. Please talk about what is most important with respect to elementary school first.

- I didn't give "simple to understand" a very high priority. I'm fine if it is a little more complicated as long as it is fair and people can understand it. I gave a 5 to "School proximity to residence"; again,

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

it is hard to have this conversation without talking about the quality of the school. Clearly the schools in DC had a lot of problems and they have come a long way and people are excited about that and there are wonderful teachers in every single school in the city. But until people have confidence in every school in every part of the city there is always going to be a challenge. In terms of boundaries are concerned the real challenge is to create good schools in every neighborhood: elementary, middle and high.

- Academically diverse enrollment is an important way to level all the schools. If you are academically diverse it is a great way for schools to level themselves. Where you don't have all the kids from privileged backgrounds at one school, you have kids spread out throughout the city. Kids do a lot to bring up the culture of the school. If you have academically high students at every school in the city it is going to be a great way to make all the schools good.
- Putting kids who do well with kids who do not do well . . . as a city we have the responsibility to meet every students where they are to help everyone move up. Our children are going to rule the world so they have to grow together. My role is to be [first for] my children but we as parents want to help all the children.
- I taught at DCPS for many years. At the west-of-the park school there were many students from Ward 7, Ward 8, many from very difficult circumstances, and diversity tended mostly to work for the middle class parents, whether they were black, white or Hispanic. The kids who created the diversity for them by coming from other parts of the city didn't quite benefit as much. There were a lot of issues, student coming with great learning deficits . . . all the issues we know about. I simply point this out because we want to think that diversity works in every direction for every body and everybody benefits but it mostly benefits those students who are better prepared. This is true at Oyster . . . and at a lot of the schools where there are very diverse populations. I think that you want to be careful before you exchange that for the neighborhood school because every neighborhood school should create those opportunities -- starting with safety. You should not have any doubts that your child will be safe whether diverse or not.
- While I agree that there are positive benefits from being diverse academically, there are corollaries in that the school has to be able to cater to kids at both ends of the spectrum. And that's often where we get into trouble. We need to cater to children with tremendous special needs but also those at the other end of the spectrum.
- So the problem is schools that are not bringing these kids to a certain level . . . at what point are they going to have that little lift? If it doesn't work to bring them together [then we shouldn't do it].
- At Montgomery County public schools teachers catered to kids where they were on the academic spectrum. It doesn't matter where kids are, you should be able to meet them where they are and cater to their needs.

Facilitator: Are any of these principals not at all important?

Q. What does it mean the LEAs? Is it important for it to be easy for LEA's to be flexible in policies for student assignment?

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

Each of the charter schools and DCPS is a Local Education Agency -- legally a school system in itself.

Q. I'm wondering about the parameters of the boundaries and feeders in that you can talk about DCPS boundaries but charter flexibilities -- how are we encompassing charters in this conversation?

Facilitator: It depends. You can't really talk about the DCPS system without talking about the charters. How that may happen with the Advisory Committee we don't know at present.

- We don't have any control over the charters . . .
- But we don't know what the recommendation coming out of the Advisory Committee will be.
- But administrative flexibility for me is a bureaucratic convenience -- not what this process should be looking at -- which is providing academically acceptable or rigorous curriculum.
- They shouldn't have any flexibility at the administrative level to decide who they take or don't take. If you are letting individual schools decide who they will or won't take that is not fair. I'd give that a one. That's saying whoever can have a chat with the principal . . .
- The rules would be consistent within the LEAs. A charter school should not have the right to move a child unless there is a reason. There is a process that is followed such as if they are violent. But no flexibility should be possible [in assignment] otherwise the whole system would erode.
- I understand flexibility once enrolled -- but flexibility in assignment -- should the LEA have flexibility in who gets in? No. That's rated low.
- My husband and I volunteer teaching kids at DC General -- homeless kids, bright kids. But they asked us where our child goes to school. They said "it must be Ward 3" and "They don't want us there". This is a serious discussion to have. "They don't want us at their good schools;" we'll just go to our charter schools and get by. This was a 15 year old boy. These are actual feelings. People don't like to have these discussions. This kid just said it.

Facilitator: Do these principles change when you get to middle school or high school?

- I rated cultural diversity lower as a priority than I did economic diversity. And for me, having kids in schools in ward 8, you can see that having economic diversity could make all the difference. If you had parents who were better educated, who understood better the value of a good strong PTA, who understood that they are the best advocate for their children, who felt confident advocating on behalf of their children, that boy probably wouldn't have asked that question. It is more about economic diversity than racial diversity.

Facilitator: So the middle school question or the high school question?

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

- I guess the proximity changes a little bit. You don't expect them to go to high school at the other end of the block but you don't want them to have to go to the other end of the city. You're willing to let them go a little farther.
- But I actually think that for middle school the proximity is even [more important] than for elementary school because for elementary school you are not going to let your kids walk to school by themselves anyway no matter what neighborhood you are in. But in middle school when you have an eleven year old you don't want them spending a long time on the metro or the bus. That is a critical consideration.
- I think that simplicity of programming changes for me at the secondary level. I feel that when you get to high school it should be easy to understand that the school offers IB or AP or whatever program. The simpler the better so I understand what I am getting when I'm choosing.
- The higher you go, how the specific programs are explained to families becomes more and more important.
- Is that how you read that? I guess I like that interpretation better.
- I guess understanding the high school process is important too. Understanding that this application school deadline is this, another is later, etc., and with private schools too. It would be good if that could be streamlined.

Facilitator: There is a common lottery for almost all of the schools that is coming on line this year. It involves both the DCPS out-of-boundary and the charter lottery; there are just a couple LEAs that are outliers.

Q. What's an LEA?

Local Education Agency; DCPS and all the individual charters are LEAs equivalent to a school system.

- Efficient use of public funds? It is a very strange thing in that once you are in the system you see lots of funds that you think are not being spent well. Who is the arbitrator of what is being done efficiently? To me, that seems a hard question to bring to us. Maybe there is a better way to put it.
- What does this have to do with boundaries and feeders?

But we're talking about improving programs all over – and that is going to cost us.

- I think it relates to simplicity of administration. If you have a very complicated lottery system, it is likely to cost more money to administer and support. It does relate but I think it is a little bit more distant.
- You look across the city and there are huge pluses and minuses. You look at an elementary school that can't afford a librarian – which is kind of absurd - - and you look across the city and you want

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

that for every school. The frustration comes with the per-pupil formula. Very little of it arrives for the principal to spend. And not many of us really understand where all the money goes.

- The transparency . . . could be a value.

Predictability? We haven't talked about that much.

- I rated that as a 5. Relationship building is important and if you know where [your child will be going because] you can attend that PTA and you can build a relationship with that school before your child even gets there.
- I want to have choice to get my child to the best school possible but once they are in the system I want to know where they are going. My elementary school doesn't work but at the moment we feed into Deal and that is something that I am counting on. That was the predictability on which we based the choice of where I bought my house.
- So the predictability is about the feeder patterns? I think of it a little broader. But people would want more predictability from the get-go. So a lottery is not very predictable.
- I think people make their choice early on based on the long-term predictability when their kids are 3, 4, 5 - - and to have that system turned over is pretty shocking.
- It is really important though. Every decision I make is based on where my kids are in school. When I changed jobs, I thought about how I could pick up my kids from school every day. All those decisions are based on where my kids go to school.
- The flip side of that – I live in Ward 5 and I'm not in a school which may be good for 7 or 8 years. In not liking the path my kid will take to go to high school means that you are always looking to trade up or get out or get into a charter. (And my high school option may be great by then.)
- And it only works if you have good feeders. Everybody wants to go to Deal. If you have to get into charters it is terrible just sitting and waiting, not knowing.
- I'm getting the call August 24th. You are just waiting to find out.
- I bought my house where I could afford to buy a house and the school is just kind of a secondary thing. Now I have to figure it out.
- I think the issue is also about the timing. So many of us have made this decision about where we live and where our kids go to school. Any changes that shift need grandfathering. So you grandfather where people are and then you start with the new kids who come in and maybe you create other options.

Right not the DME's website says something to the effect that there is an expectation that there will be grandfathering. But we don't know how that will come out.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

- Predictability also addresses the closing of schools. What number of charter schools have opened since we started closing DCPS schools?
- I guess the only really good answer is they need to make 8 great middle schools, 5 whatever . . .
- The boundaries have not been changed in thirty years. It is very odd how the system had managed with the recently closed schools. With some the boundaries have simply been added together, with others students from closed schools have the rights to attend up to three nearby schools. How do you create a good choice everywhere - - and what do you do in the meantime?
- I would say - - although I agree - - that predictability should matter. You do expect that schools matter. I would say though that the only way the school system can get better is to take some bold steps. Even if it had an impact on our kids, if I thought it was going to make things better, I would be open to it. I would encourage the system to take some really bold steps to try to make things better rather than just tinkering around the edges. A good example is school closings. I think that anyone who has objectively looked at it can see that we have way too many schools. Thankfully they have closed 20 or 25 in the last years to make it more efficient. You have so many more resources with more kids. If my kid was at a school with 150 kids and they had friends at schools with 500 kids they would be missing out on things.
- If the Chancellor makes the whole thing more efficient, I would be OK with some loss of predictability as a trade-off for better schools.
- In terms of making the schools in every ward better, I wanted to say that when my daughter started elementary school Deal was not a good school. Parents did not want to send their kids to Deal in 6th grade. People debated middle school for the next five years after Kinder. It was not until they renovated the school and got a good principal and changed the program to an IB program that it started to become a good school. I think it is an example of how that investment in the building and the staffing and the programming does make a difference.
- What prompted the changes? I look at the school building closest to my home and it looks dreadful. What I want to do is take them out [of the charter school] that they are in and put them into Anne Beers and try to make it better. But if they come home one day and say "I don't want to go to that school" there are fights, etc. That's what I'm afraid of. That's a great story about Deal but I want to know about my school. Can I go over there and say "fix my school". I want to know what prompted the change at Deal.
- It's not an easy thing. I think it was all of those things. It was the money to fix the building, the money to attract a principal and the money to invest in the IB (International Baccalaureate) program. I think it all comes down to that investment piece and that's what's not happening.
- Do you know who led that effort? Was it a DCPS led effort or was it a parent initiated thing?
- That was DCPS. That's one of the great things that the city has invested so much in the facilities. It was really only a short time ago when DC schools didn't open on time. The roofs leaked and the boilers didn't work. And it would happen all over. Investing a lot in the capital is a huge way to turn

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

around a school. Deal is beautiful like a college campus. But every school should get that. I give a lot of credit to the current and previous administration.

- It's not just the facility, it is the culture. My kids loved middle school. The other part is the culture. You can re-model something but if you don't change what's important. . .
- Do you have to apply for the IB program?
- The whole school is IB.
- So why isn't that curriculum in every school? I agree that renovation and making the school look good is important. I fear that this exercise is going to be moving kids into renovated schools like Cardozo to justify the expenditures. It's about the teaching and the curriculum and about the culture of the school and the kids that are in it. That level of investment is not happening across the city; it is happening in a few isolated schools. Renovation is happening across the city but the rest of it is not.
- The equity of the investments should be clearer across the board.
- Is there something on the table to remove the feeder patterns completely and take away the whole boundary process?

Facilitator: Everything is on the table at this point. We really don't know what the Advisory Committee is going to recommend. They will have to deal with a lot of information and this is part of it. We don't know what they are considering yet.

- But they are pitting neighborhoods against neighborhoods. People who have in-boundary good schools won't like change and people who don't will like it. So they are actually considering taking away the feeder system and the in-boundary preference?
- The chancellor floated the idea of all high schools being lottery; removing all geographical boundaries for high schools. I think that indicates that everything is on the table.
- Unless all the schools are good, no new boundary system is going to work.
- One of the destabilizing factors is that there is no limit to the number of new charters that can be authorized. That contributes to the decline in the enrollment within DCPS. So there is a continuous churn going on and unless that is stopped there can be no improvement in the DCPS schools.
- I don't buy that. Charter schools have evolved. There are good charter schools and there are not so good charter schools. The reason the charters have grown is that DCPS hasn't delivered for students. So getting rid of the charters won't help.
- I'll grant you that, and there are some good charters, but the fact of the continuous expansion is a problem.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

- Charters are a public school of choice. But the problem is that there are lots of neighborhoods where the kids who are left behind at the schools and the reasons why we don't send our kids there are because the parents are less engaged and less motivated to research and find the best options for their kids.

Do you have suggestions about how to make this public dialog to build community rather than divide community?

- In DC we seem to have people who are highly active control the conversation. There used to be a very active outreach in the neighborhoods where the schools were not as good.
- When this process was announced, it struck me as premature. At this point in time in the city, with the reforms and all of the other changes going on, it seems to me that this is getting the cart before the horse. I would like to see all the changes with the consolidating and an improving public process and more input into what those changes are. But the input process into what changes are needed in DCPs is improving and those changes are slowly getting put into place. But everything that is needed for DCPS to serve all children in the city in equally good schools has not been done yet. And until that is done, trying to re-establish boundaries and feeder patterns just feels like going backwards.
- I want that too but that's not going to happen. I disagree. The boundaries should have been re-drawn years ago. Demographics have changed. Charters have been created; public schools have been closed.
- I think in this process we need to create places where kids want to go to school and where parents want to send their kids; [maybe] by creating magnet or science/math specialty middle schools. So they have this idea that "I really want to go to Ward 8 because they have this really cool school for environmental education", etc. That's a way to get kids to move around the city – give them something to go to - - both the buildings and the culture and the programs.
- That's a little bit of what the charter schools have done. We have a little bit of that right now. But we still have all these kids who want just a basic comprehensive high school.
- I think it is about programs but what bothers me about this process is not this issue. The issue is about the quality of schools and this process is not going to fix that. And in fact it is going to exacerbate some other problems. I would rather all the energy go into making more Deals.
- I also have a political concern about the timing of this process. I find it remarkable that this is going to happen at the end of the mayor's term and it is likely that these changes will be implemented by an administration that has a lot of political challenges. This is a political toss-up. And for the person in the Councilmember's office, you can send this back to your boss - - but this should be something that the new leadership of the city should take on. To do this at this time is a major mistake and I think that the council and the people running for mayor need to have [this process] in the public discourse.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

We are supposed to vacate this place soon, are there any last comments.

- This is more next steps. If I understand the process properly, summaries of this and the rest of the focus group conversations will be sent to the panel, which will make recommendations to the DME who will recommend to the mayor.

Everything, all the materials from the Advisory Committee will be on the DME's website including summaries from these focus groups.

Q. Do you know if there are any representatives from Wards 7 and 8 are on the advisory committee?

There are several; the list is on the DME's website and it includes which ward people live in.

- What other categories are people putting down? I have transparency, and special programming: IB, immersion, STEM . . .
- Also the question about grandfathering . . .
- In this process and all decisions about my kids' education, I feel that I have two hats – what I feel is best for my kid and what I think is best for the whole city. Sometimes the two are together and sometimes they aren't. That's the hard thing about school choice and education.
- It's the same with me. I'm the president of a PTA so I have one interest in my kid and one interest in the welfare of all the kids - - and parents who may not be so involved. We have already talked about the LSAT and PTA doing testimony on behalf of our group.
- For my kids, they are going to be OK. But it makes a difference for a lot of kids. But you don't want your kid to be fine; you want your kid to be good.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

Focus Group 3A: Takoma Education Campus, November 21, 2013

Participants:

- 1- Woman from AU Park in the Janney boundary;
 - 2- Man from Petworth;
 - 3- Woman from Takoma with 5th-grader in a charter school;
 - 4- Man from Barnaby Woods with one PreK kid in Lafayette and a 5-month old.
- 2- Zones are important.

4- Is betting on DC, moved from Hill to upper NW, east of Utah, paying attention to politics and quality of schools in the neighborhood.

Experiences with and Concerns about Current Student Assignment Policy

4- Proximity to home is important, especially with no charters in the neighborhood; based his home choice on neighborhood school options and existing boundaries – wants to keep what they have. Values walkable communities, walkable schools.

3- Former principal was unwelcoming at Takoma, so parents at the time started LAMB as an alternative. Parent didn't consider Takoma, but enrolled at Shepherd, had good experience for 2 years but Shepherd wasn't supported in doing a language program, so she transferred her child to Stokes. Has to drive. All of her child's peers do not go to Takoma. For the past five years, however, under the leadership of an excellent new principal, Takoma has been welcoming, so neighborhood sentiment is changing. Community involvement in school is very important, and being able to drive less is good. But Takoma EC in grades 6-8 does not have what you'd expect a middle school to have (science laboratories, breadth of offerings) – and that is a problem. Ward 4 now has no middle school. Coolidge is improving but it still isn't the best choice, so her son will go to new the DC charter high school to be established on the Walter Reed campus, but she wants to see neighborhood middle school with resources for this area. It's unclear whether or not you can go to Deal if you live in Shepherd Park but don't go to Shepherd . . . The feeder pattern thing is problematic in this area.

1 – Why is Shepherd part of Deal/Wilson feeder pattern??

3- I see neighborhoods that have invested in their schools and have built good programs; others that have nothing; really need geographic based school assignment but . . .

1 – Positive about neighborhood schools, just need to bring the program quality up everywhere. Cohesion in community enhances education of students and is profound beyond test scores. Something important about community being involved in school and kids attending school near home. Charters sound attractive but I remain an advocate for neighborhood school zoning. Commuting and traffic is a problem.

2- There is a strong appeal in neighborhood schools due to ability of kids to get to school by themselves; but neighborhoods are self-segregated so if you live in the wrong neighborhood you are in a bad position. The system can be gamed unfairly by those who have resources to choose where to live. A lottery may be more fair in some ways. The existing hybrid of zones and a charter lottery is messy. Can it be done better?

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

4- Wanted kids to go to traditional public schools; looked at charter school map, and found no nearby options, so stayed with neighborhood options. Worry about charter schools that siphon off money and are not providing a benefit because of lack of oversight. The two separate systems need accountability – the dollars are public dollars – under one entity; DC is a national experiment. There are some phenomenal charters though.

3- Charters were started because parents thought DCPS wasn't working. Philosophically I feel that the public school system needs to be supported and strengthened; DCPS needs active parents; maybe we'd all be working harder for DCPS if we were not splitting our support across two systems. What is working well is neighborhood schools with geographic zones and having some other options. Concerns: boundaries as they are now; assignment policy as it is now [because its' so outdated].

3- Overcrowding at Deal is a problem, but how to get the quality and energy of Deal out to other schools? Need to grow other good schools, reduce the pressure on Deal and Wilson.

1 –Good leadership and parental involvement are key.

2- Grandfathering and pressure on some schools are problems– need to have other options for families, especially families of means, who if pushed out of Deal, may leave D.C.

4- Most families on my block moved from other parts of D.C.; everyone talks about schools. Most parents on the block will not consider Coolidge because they expect it will take too much time and effort “staying on top of the administration” to get good results from the school.

Guiding Principles

Question about meaning of academically diverse – it is confusing.

Principles Most Important at the Elementary School Level:

4- Proximity to residence because I want kids to be able to walk to school and have friends together in the neighborhood and in the schools;

3- Equitable access to high quality, ideally by bringing up all schools together.

2 – Equitable access to high quality. You can't choose the family you're born into, but every child should have access to good schools.

1- Equitable access to high quality, but also proximity because neighborhood cohesion is important: want both,;

3- Interested in the idea of neighborhood preferences for charters; families living close to a charter should have some preference in admissions there.

1 –Predictability is important; ideal is to strengthen all neighborhood public schools; so then you'll have predictability and equity of access.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

4- Predictability is important; I bet on D.C. as a place to live based on current boundaries.

Most Important Principles at the Middle School Level:

3- Not maximum choice, but some choice in middle school when kids differentiate and begin to choose things based on interests. Not having a middle school in Ward 4 is a problem. I like the programmatic “foci” of some schools (arts, STEM, etc.). If there were more choice at middle school level in terms of programmatic focus, that would be good – D.C. is deficient in that area.

4- I didn’t want charters but didn’t like the middle school options on the Hill, so we moved to the Deal area.

2- Many parents would like to send their kids to the local public elementary school but don’t because the middle schools are bad, so they go for charters at the elementary school level to ensure that they have a good middle school option and don’t have to move out of D.C. There are strange disincentives operating here.

1- Having predictability in charter K-12 means traditional schools will not improve.

3- Equitable access is crucial because not everyone can easily travel.

4- Good bus routes are key to making schools feasible.

1- Need to strengthen neighborhood schools rather than create more LEAs; some travel is OK but not all the way across the city; especially at the elementary school and middle school levels. I have questions about the equity of funding of charters v. traditional public schools... it’s supposedly equitable funding, but I’m not sure. I have questions about accountability as well.

1- If Wilson is the model and there were a successful high school like Wilson in each neighborhood, people would go there. But people won’t roll the dice with charters for high school level and so will still try to get into Wilson.

4- Is there a way to put charters on a performance schedule? Fixing the facilities in D.C. schools makes a difference, but doesn’t fix everything - - witness Eastern, which is not full despite a nice building.

Most Important Principles at the High School Level:

3- Equitable access to high-quality schools.

4- Proximity to residence.

1- Cohort connections are important; but a high school should not be too big.

2- Schools that are too small cannot offer what’s needed; but when a school is too big, kids will get lost in the numbers.

4- Need high school to challenge kids and prepare kids well for college; even Wilson does not do that thoroughly for all who attend it.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

1- Proximity at high school level is less important than at middle school and elementary school levels.

3- I value predictability but also value racial, economic, and background diversity. The efficiency issue is a crazy thing; when a facility is not attractive, and the school's enrollment is falling, the system can't justify keeping it open, but then the neighborhood loses its school, and that's a problem.

Advice About Building and Continuing A Public Dialogue that Builds Community:

3- Don't take something away; open up options (for example open a good middle school close to Shepherd). Grandfather any child and his or her siblings in their current schools.

4- But grandfather them into the school OR into that feeder pattern?

3- Into the feeder pattern until the last kid in the family graduates from high school! But also simultaneously create new options to attract families. Remove the anxiety from those who have an expectation. Be clear about what's going to happen.

1- Get as many involved in the dialogue as possible. Have more public engagement dates. How did these dates get publicized? I wouldn't have known about the focus group except by reading about it on the Shepherd e-mail list.

4- I heard through the Lafayette Home and School Association. I have doubts about how the Advisory Committee was created and why it suddenly came into being with no prior discussion. It's great for show purposes, but my worry is that the plan has already been baked by the Mayor. Question: what will happen to this process in light of the election and politics coming up? [We] can't trust the mayor, or the council members who are running for mayor, to be fully honest on these issues.

1- Need to strengthen schools, hire good, energetic principals who will hire good teachers, build schools and engage communities, make a better city, so that the boundaries benefit the most people possible.

4- I give more credit to Henderson than Rhee, for incentivizing teachers so they can grow. I don't want to see teacher turnover, I want to see teachers staying in good schools in the community.

3- The principal at Takoma is the key to the turnaround here; she's determined to have a good teaching staff. Central has to put the right people in the schools, then give them freedom and support.

2- My proposal: The most dangerous thing in this process is changing boundaries so that those who took a financial risk in moving into or staying in D.C. are not threatened. If they become angry, it will result in at least a short-term disaster, if not a long-term disaster for D.C. To make it all work, we need to think about our children's children and set things up to make it good for the grandkids; consult demographers. The fallout will hit those who invested based on the old boundaries; to get buy-in – state that, based on your residence on a date a date such as Jan. 1, 2015, you can do what you planned (i.e., FULL grandfathering) – you can choose old or new rights. Give 100% predictability, but show that things will shift. This may result in housing price dislocations but should avoid student educational dislocations.

4- Need to publicize this process more and better and get more people involved!

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

Focus Group 3B: Takoma Education Campus, November 21, 2013

Participants:

- Parent, young child at Janney
- Parent, young child at Lafayette
- No children, DCPS central office staff, Ward 6
- Parent, children in private nursery school, Powell resident, Ward 4 resident, Crestwood
- Grandparent of Janney student, children graduated from DCPS, went to DCPS
- Parent, young child at Janney
- Parent, young child at Hearst, lives in Ward 4, zoned for Powell
- Parent, young children at parochial schools in Ward 3
- Parent of one young child at Janney and a toddler
- Parent of one young child at Janney and a toddler

Summary:

A total of 8 moms and 1 grandmother attended the focus group along with 1 person from DCPS's Family Engagement Office. Five of the nine were affiliated with Janney ES (including the grandparent), and the four other parents had children at Hearst, Lafayette, private preschool, and private placement for special education. All had children (or grandchildren) who were around 1st grade. All were white except for one Ward 4 parent; all were female.

Because there were so many Janney parents, the conversation was predominantly about how the Ward 3 schools should be more neighborhood-based and provide predictability for parents to attend. For instance, they think that since they live near those schools they should attend Janney and feed into Deal and Wilson.

They are very worried about overcrowding due to too many schools feeding into Deal and Wilson and the fact that Wilson's boundary is so large. The Janney and Lafayette parents talked about how they have between 5 and 6 kindergarten and 1st grade classrooms per grade so the overcrowding is going to get even worse at Deal/Wilson. (They discussed how many in boundary children didn't get into PS/PK at Janney because of siblings.) They are very concerned about the lack of DCPS's strategic planning for population booms.

Parents at Hearst and Lafayette and those who live in Crestwood are worried that they'll lose their feeder to Deal/Wilson and they have no middle school option.

All parents talked about the problem of the lack of quality schools across the city, and most parents prioritized equity for access to quality schools. (The Lafayette parent pointed out the tension of ensuring equity of quality but making sure that her child gets into Wilson.) The Janney parents' solution was to have DCPS improve quality across the schools and the non-Janney parents' solution was out-of-boundary placement in the short term since no one wants their children to be the "guinea pig." The Crestwood parent talked about how school choice in DC is a false set of choices since most aren't quality. She's had little luck in the out-of-boundary lottery, and has put her child in a private preschool.

Charters did not come up at all during the discussion as an option.

Notes:

What works well with the present system of school assignment?

- I don't know enough about how it is done now to answer that accurately.

Facilitator reviews the bulleted material outlining school assignment from the Focus Group Guide.

- For a lot of people we bought in our neighborhood with the expectation that our children will go to Deal and Wilson. That works well for us.
- You don't want to see that changed: "Whoops!" changed from Janney, Deal and Wilson . . . and then?
- Or you don't want to have children spread out in different schools.
- Leaving neighborhood boundaries works . . . for the boundaries we know -- they are working well.
- Although I'm a native Washingtonian and I've always lived in Ward 3, I don't know the boundaries for Wilson.
- Fifty years after the boundaries [for Wilson] were drawn the number of pupils has tripled -- we now have lots of kids. We now have to compete with other kids [for school space]. DCPS did not plan how to keep schools open . . .
- DCPS now has a short amount of time to figure out how in-bounds children . . . it seems we have to worry about our kids because there are not enough schools for all the kids.
- Janney is OK for my house [location] but my concern is for [space at] Deal and Wilson. Maybe it's happening in other parts [of the city too] so in-bounds is fighting [for space] with out-of-bounds.
- Our First grade is the largest class to come up in a number of years.

So there are too many feeders into Deal and Wilson.

- I attended a tour of Wilson recently for the graduating class from fifty years ago. The man giving the tour said that kids from Capitol Hill go there.

Wilson's boundaries are huge. We may need to have maps at future focus groups.

- It's looking like my kids will go to Cardozo or Wilson.
- We purchased eight years ago in 16th Street heights in Ward 4. We had to go the private school route because the neighborhood school is very low-performing. Now our child has been at Hearst for two years.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

- Where is Hearst?
- It is difficult to think of how boundaries are drawn. The neighborhood school is not an option. We did the lottery for two years and didn't get in anywhere.
- The second child has a sibling preference.
- Wouldn't it be better to go to a DCPS school and get that low-performing school to be higher?
- DCPS screwed up selling buildings. You should have some high-performing schools everywhere.
- The problem is that people do not want their kid to be the guinea pig.
- That's hypocritical but . . .
- Out-of-boundary has been a pressure valve for everyone else [who is not in Ward 3]. If you close off [admissions] west of the park . . .
- Everyone in DC [including those in Ward 3] should take their lumps.
- We are zoned for Powell but it does not feed to Deal and Wilson. But our zone also feeds to Deal and Wilson.
- Powell feeds to Columbia Heights.
- Crestwood's neighborhood group brought our concerns to the Council.
- We need Crestwood to be in bounds for Deal and Wilson and to bring Powell up.
- There are not quality options all over.
- The options are on the cusp. DCPS wants to push these families into these schools and it feels really unfair.
- DCPS has a terrible time with special education kids. So many go to private placement because they can't fulfill what these kids need. It siphons off funding.
- The lottery for PK was frustrating. The timing of decisions is late in the process. There's a rush early in January and February for the private schools. You get on a waiting list but have to put down a deposit in case you don't get in [to the desired DCPS school]. The timing this Fall is better.
- We are looking at private schools too. You have to commit to the privates long before because of wait-list movement.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

- In 2007 our local school saw such an influx and demand to get into Pre-K; nothing was communicated back down [to the school level] . . . [we were] 332 for Janney. We need better communication.
- When you fill it out [the form] you get a number.
- You don't know how many preferences are going to go to siblings.
- We didn't even apply - - only 10 spaces were available for non-siblings.

There is now myschooldc.org for information and a common lottery coming up for DCPS and charters.

- I saw an article in the Post. You are supposed to hear [the lottery outcome] by March 31st.
- But that's not early enough for the private schools.
- I wish there was more room for them [students].
- Wilson, because of the great influx . . . how do we handle the influx of students in these facilities in the next years? And the cost?
- After 2007, what's the cohort like [at Janney]?
- Five 1sts, 5 kindergartens, 4 PKs and we are expecting 6 kindergartens next year [at Janney] to accommodate in-bounds students.
- Hopefully the other feeders are not in the same situation.
- How are Deal and Wilson going to accommodate . . .
- We've talked about how big the boundaries are for Wilson. It does not promote neighborhood cohesiveness. Going 40 minutes on a subway isn't good [for a student].
- Lafayette parents have a lot of the same concerns. We've got 5 kindergartens and trailers all over. I love walking my own childhood to Lafayette and when I was at Shepherd I walked to school with a bunch of kids. As more and more neighborhood people send kids the capacity is an issue. People at Lafayette share concerns about Deal and Wilson.
- I live in Shepherd's boundaries. If we were removed from that feeder [to Deal] where would the kids go? Paul is a charter school; there is no middle school in Ward 4.
- A bigger issue is that we live in DC, the nation's capital, and it is unfortunate that not all of the schools in the system are performing. We are surrounded by educated people. If the schools would all come up there wouldn't be a problem.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

- Capitol Hill students used to go to McKinley and it was just renovated. Why are they having to go to Wilson?
- I would love to send my child to the neighborhood school.

Facilitator summarizes and introduces the Guiding Principles: What is most important for the city?

- Should we answer questions about Guiding Principles in terms of my children and my family, or in terms of what is best for the city at large - - the answers can be very different depending on the point of view.
- It is not our concern that our school would not get in [continue with the current feeder pattern]. The feeder pattern is too big given the population in-bounds for that school.
- Predictable. I don't want to spend the next 12 years guessing where my kids go to school. If I have to choose a private school - - Gonzaga or St. Johns - then I need to know now and figure out how would we pay?
- Has the city thought about the implications? Do you want to see what you saw 25 years ago when at 7th grade people moved out to the suburbs?
- Proximity to residence. Walkability is important. Children should be in a school that's close. If my child is across town I don't have the means to get there. Parental involvement is hugely important and it's hard if you are a long way away.
- Strengthening the system of neighborhood schools, efficient use of public funds, predictability - - these are all underpinnings. Schools should be diverse but these three are foundational. It is hard to separate diversity and choice - - they are all in a bundle together but based on the same three foundations.
- DC spends a lot per student but where does the money go?
- DCPS is paid to administer the system. That's their job.
- If a neighborhood school is not strong: there are good teachers and families are trying hard to participate and there is a cadre of families that support the school and there is money for the essentials . . . public schools are the great equalizer. There should be a media center in each school. There is a domino effect . . .
- Racial diversity is important too. We moved because my husband is a minority. We moved from Janney to Shepherd. There is so much privilege in Ward 3. You have to mix it up a bit.
- Flexibility for the LEA - - what do you mean? Are you saying you want charter operators to be able to make their own assignments?

Charters use a lottery system and DCPS has boundaries.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

- I don't want the LEAs to have flexibility in assignment.
- We have not discussed equitable access to high quality programs. I gave it a 5. West of the park PTAs raise money, but not elsewhere.
- Why?
- Families are poor.
- It is not fair. DCPS should pull money from high grossing PTAs.
- Janney raises money for Janney so there is extra funding left over for the other schools.
- Powell is 99% free lunch eligible. PTAs operating budgets west of the park are over \$200,000 a year.
- PTA is above and beyond the base but they [PTAs] are paying for aides in the classroom.
- Is base [budget] for all schools the same?

The uniform per pupil funding keeps the money tied to the students. But the LEA can decide where it puts its money.

- I gave a 5 to equitable access to high quality programs.
- I have a 5 as well. That's what's so hard. I believe that but I still want to preserve my feeder pattern and there are a limited number of high performing schools.
- PTA funding is above and beyond the budget. I grew up in the mid-west, but its haves and have-nots. What can we do in our communities? We moved to raise our child in a diverse community. This is important. With that said it is important to say that PTAs are raising dollars to feed the system into making them [schools] better. It shouldn't be that way. It should be an equal funding. Everyone should have the resources. PTAs are compensating for lack of funding in DCPS.
- I asked an administrator at our school who raised her kids through Ballou and she said what makes it [our Ward 3 school] so great is parental involvement and PTA funding. It's about the fact that schools are not getting the funding they need. It is about getting resources across the board at all schools.

Equitable amount of resources and efficient use of public funds . . . equitable use of funds? 5's or 1's?

- DC has one of the highest per-pupil spending in the region . . .

The special education population in the region as a base amount is small.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

- 5's for utilizing public school buildings because we are not. Some are deteriorating and empty, others are re-building. Let's bring more middle schools back on line if they are important. Sell those that are not important.
- Predictability and easy to understand is important. Parents don't have two hours to go over it. It needs to be easy to understand. Predictability and easy to understand.
- I have 1's for easy to understand. (She said that she can figure out the system.)
- Opportunities for academically diverse enrolments: 1's for high school and middle school. The idea of being able to test into a school is a nice option to have.
- Maximizing choice; equitable access to quality programs; I live in a city with public schools and I should be able to choose where I want to go [non-Janney parent.]
- 1's - - academically diverse enrollment doesn't matter.
- If there is good funding and high quality staff then the diversity will spread over the schools.
- That bothers me. We talk a lot about choice in DC; it looks like we have choice but most families don't. The lottery failed us two years in a row. The idea of choice is false. It is not a true choice; it is people getting lucky [Crestwood parent].
- The base-line for me is that you shouldn't have to try to get in - - they should all be high-performing schools. That's what bothers me. Push to get high-performing teachers in low-performing schools. There should be something in the contract that they are hired by DCPS and DCPS can tell you where you teach. That would help quality. Teachers should have to go [where they are placed]. If they won't go they should leave; they are not true teachers.
- My mother was a DCPS teacher who taught at Hine. She left DCPS and went to Montgomery County to teach
- What does the union contract say about transfers?
- It will divide our community if no one wants to give up their feeder patterns. There's nowhere to go but Deal.
- What's the [focus group] activity throughout the city?

There is more activity in different parts.

- I would truly want to go to one of the focus groups which are under subscribed.
- The city was set up for walkable schools.

Two people said it's because of luck?

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

- I hope it doesn't get to that. Everyone should have the opportunity for their children. What can we do to hold DCPS accountable?
- Wilson is not a hugely [well] performing high school.
- There are two paths at Wilson: some tracks are general and some are AP and honors.
- It is very divided; honors track students matriculate together.
- There a lot about that that isn't ideal but that's what it will take to get students into lower performing schools would be this tracking.
- Our middle son was at Wilson but we took him out of Wilson because of an altercation on the football field – the other team tried to kill him. We sent him to Dematha. He took French at Wilson but started the exact same textbook in the same chapter [at Dematha]. The quality of education at Wilson was good and Wilson kids went on to top colleges.

How can this process bring people together and avoid division?

- We need new options - - otherwise we will divide. We need new schools or new programs in existing schools to be appealing.
- You could bring people together by making everyone angry and by making everyone enter a lottery. [Jokingly.]
- There would be a mass exodus out of this city [if the ward 3 feeder patterns are disrupted].
- You talked about Janney and privilege and I take offense. People choose to be there because services aren't available in another part of the city but that doesn't mean privilege. People came to Ward 3 but that's not considered privileged.
- I lived in Montgomery County but we moved to DC to live with my in-laws so our child could attend Janney. We did that so our child could have a good education.
- Is the Advisory Board actually going to be deciding anything? I don't know how to ask this – are they ready to make really hard decisions?

The Advisory Board is a committee of 21 appointees that is very diverse. They will have a proposal to be publicly vetted in May and the Mayor will make the final decision in September. If they recommend policy change with the charters, then that would have to have legislative involvement.

- Then is it strictly a political decision, and what happens to this input?
- When would the first changes start?

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

Changes would probably start in school year 2015-16.

- Can you go to more than one focus group? I would like to go to listen. We are hearing this end but I would like to hear what others think.

There are lots of other ways to be engaged: there will be an interactive website, surveys, working groups and city-wide meetings. We could ask about having people attend more than one focus group.

- One concern with charters is about neighborhood preference for charters. I don't want it. I have a friend who works for charters in real estate. The all tend to be in Petworth or Northeast. . . .
- Charters provide at least hope of access to quality.
- That works for the city. DCPS can't fix it; when schools don't have the involvement then the city has to subsidize them.
- They can always be helped by PTA funding . . .
- It is not easy to do a suggested per/child dues of \$650 per student. [Reported to be Janney's PTA dues].
- I'm so offended [that a PTA charges that much].
- I contributed hugely to my PTA but I had been paying for private school . . .
- We don't need a specialized teacher to supervise lunch and recess.
- That embarrasses me.
- But you can't keep up with the Jones's - - you can't afford to buy in Mt. Pleasant any more.

Focus Group 3C: Takoma Education Campus, November 21, 2013

- 1: Parent of a 2nd grader lives in ward 4
- 2: First grade Lafayette parent with future kindergartner; lives in ward 4
- 3: Parent at Takoma Education Center
- 4: Teacher at Lafayette
- 5: Lives in ward 4 and kids go to Lafayette
- 6: Has two kids but not school age yet
- 7: Parent of a student at charter school and lives in ward 3
- 8: Parent of a child in PreK
- 9: Parent of two kids in DCPS, one is a high school senior
- 10: Parent of 3 elementary school kids; lives in ward 4; kids go to school in ward 3

Voice experiences and concerns with student assignment and school boundaries in place today:

7 – Lack of attendance at some schools across the city is a big issue

4 – Biggest concern about Takoma Park neighborhood is the failure to attract a core group of students to Coolidge high school. I'd love to see Coolidge return to its former self and see it become what it used to be. It used to be one of the best high schools in DC but now you have so many kids who are just not coming back to this neighborhood school. You could go to Deal but when you left Deal you went back to Roosevelt, Coolidge, and Wilson. I think there was another involved as well but I can't remember. But there was always a core group returning from Deal to Coolidge and that is simply not happening anymore and I think it's too bad because I feel like Coolidge could be something and we just have to get the kids to come back.

6 – I'm here because I'm concerned that I think DCPS is hurting elementary schools right now. I think the benefits of having a good neighborhood school are immense.

5 – I feel the out-of-boundary kids are given same preference as those in ward 4, I have a friend who rented a house for a few months and got her kids in Janney and she's all set and we took a step to move and it's a much bigger issue. I feel like if it were parking and somebody had a zone 2 sticker and moved to GT [Georgetown] and they moved to another place they wouldn't keep their Zone 2 sticker, their next car couldn't get that zone 2 sticker - - why is that process

3 – In your objectives do you see dealing with process of the lottery? What auspices does the group have to make recommendations? What are the boundaries? What should feeder systems be? What's inside the egg and outside?

So what we're telling people is that the Deputy Mayor's main goal is redoing school boundaries but we can't just look at DCPS in order to make these changes, we're looking at both sectors (public and charter).

10- I'm here because I'm concerned about accessibility, we live in ward 4 and we went through the out-of-bounds lottery. We bought our house in an area where we didn't have confidence in the schools but we were confident in the lottery system and we're appreciative of it and so I'm ultimately concerned about accessibility. In ward 4 there is no middle school you know. What is the option there?

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

2- Along the lines of both of your points, I think people look to the lottery in the early stages but I think you know kids change a lot from pre-k to 5th grade and I think levels of motivation and interests change and I don't know why you couldn't have another type of lottery that comes with recommendations from teachers and seeing where these children are and ... so why you start at Pre-K and automatically you're going through a feeder pattern that isn't close to where you live. And some kids begin to lose interest in academics and with a difficult commute if they're not motivated maybe they're taking up space for someone who is more motivated. I think the feeder pattern is problematic because children change and I think it should be reviewed.

9- I am here for a lack of equitable access to schools. I don't think anybody wants their kids going an hour away for school; our in-boundary school is Coolidge and our in-boundary school is Deal and we're a split family and looking back at 15 years of DCPS . . . I see the much more fundamental issue [is that] we wouldn't have fights over boundaries if we had more equitable and effective schools across the board.

9 - On the feeder school issue the benefit is that you are building bands of cohorts that have had similar experiences – I know at Wilson the principal meets with all of the schools in his pyramids which doesn't mean it shouldn't be re-evaluated, but I think there are some educational benefits for the feeder system and it wouldn't be such a hot button issue if there were higher quality schools.

2- I definitely support that but I hear that it's basically really bad for teachers who go teach at schools that are underperforming. I feel like there needs to be . . . we need to distribute the good educators and administrators and there needs to be redistribution at that level. I don't think you can just throw a bunch of students together with teachers who are struggling and it's going to become a good school.

4- I think most teachers get into teaching because we have a true desire to teach in those poor neighborhoods. I did, but that's not where I ended up. I only ended up there because they got a new principal when I was looking for a job. But every interview I went to in wards 8, 7, 6, and 5, where I used to live, no one wanted to hire someone in their early 40s who is just starting to come into education. But what they don't understand, when you've been in education with your children for 10 years previous from going back to get your masters that didn't seem to count for anything. Also a lot of principals did not want a certain type of teacher in their school. It is just amazing to me how much the schools have changed in the past 14 years that I've been at DCPS. So all I can tell you is you're talking about IMPACT . . . yes I get those e-mails all the time: "please we would love for you to go to another school in a poor neighborhood" and then you talk to your cohorts in those schools who are saying don't do it and here's why. You go there and after 3 years when you know your test scores are in the toilet suddenly they want to IMPACT you out of DCPS simply because here you were high performing at a high performing school but when you go to a low performing school there is no way that you are going to raise test scores from 35-85% over 3 years. It's simply . . . I mean I don't know where this is coming from.

5 - I teach in Montgomery County. One of the things of interested to me is that when kids have choice they become interested. The charter schools kids have a choice to go there and schools have a choice to keep them or not. If there was a school in each ward where the expectations were the same as charter, I think that school would be ok because you can work with kids who are low performing if they are making efforts. It's a joyful thing, a struggle. You can do it with work. DCPS is shooting itself in the foot without giving that ability to say "If you behave you can stay here, if not you don't". If there was one school in the ward that had that privilege you'd pull a lot of kids back in the schools.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

Also if you have good schools in every area everyone would be happy - - there would be no issues.

1- Just on the lottery system, from my perspective, having the predictability of the feeder pattern was really important to us and made a difference understanding where we were going. It makes a big difference to be able to think 5 or 10 years down the road. Being able to understand that and get information on ... you know there is some question about balancing what those in-boundary populations are doing in those schools . . . about who gets into the lottery so once that is ... I don't feel there is a distinction in citizenship in the schools (in boundary or not) so I don't feel there is a two tiered system once people are in school.

8- My experiences living in ward 4 . . . we literally sold our house to create the greatest amount of flexibility with where we landed our kid and participated in the lottery. But I just staggered at the disparity between various public schools. There were a lot more neighborhoods we wanted to consider but because of the boundary system we just couldn't. I feel the lottery is a really broken system. I guess my approach would be you potentially force a lot more of the issue in regards to quality of education available to citizens of DC. There aren't a lot of people here (Hispanics) that are from my boundary. It seems to be the boundary discussion is somewhat supporting a poor fix. It's addressing a symptom not a fundamental cause. I think for myself I'd like to look in new neighborhoods and aside from affordability issues, I had to plan how to commute to my kids' school. It's crazy. It's an absurdity you wouldn't think people would accept.

3 – There are clearly things that we could incrementally change that would improve current processes and some things that are hard to change like demographics that won't change in our life time. I think it would be useful for the Advisory Committee to be thinking in those terms. What can we change in 1-2 years? What preferences should be given in lottery? Should there be preferences for “gray zones” for children in walking distance ... There's talk of charters - -allowing them to use a geographic preference if they want to. We have a problem of scarcity, we don't have a middle school, and unfortunately this has all been created by policies starting with Michelle Rhee because . . . there was a principal of competition. If we made schools compete with one another, give them a lottery, we would reward teachers and pull resources into those schools. Competition has resulted not in choice for best schools but chance. So we have a Las Vegas system not a true school choice system. The ultimate is to move to that school and get to go to that school. That's what parents have to do. It's chance with a lottery. We don't have a lottery system for choice because we have a few empty spaces. We have a wheel of chance and so that doesn't advance education in the city. The Deputy Mayor on down needs to drop the competitive view of our schools and that includes high-lighting whether they're a focus school, developing school, rising school. That's not giving information, it's manipulating the marking in west of the park schools which don't have a lot of low income students. We're going to continue to have this problem of trying to squeeze scarcity (in terms of quality) in these schools -- we've got to positively increase the schools east of the park. We need to set up magnet schools. There is no reason we should have 5 Education Campuses (PS-8th grade schools) and no middle schools. Why can't there be these all in a mile of each other and make one a middle school?

Are there things you want to preserve that you like right now? What should be addressed?

6- I think we all know there are schools that just don't work and I think I would love to be in bounds for whatever schools . . . Janney or Lafayette; but the moment you tell me I have to take my kid across town then it's a non-starter. I really want to see neighborhood schools preserved at the elementary school level. But if I have to drive across town, and not [have a] local [school option], I won't be in DCPS.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

4- I feel demographics are changing quickly in DC, and that's one of my concerns, we have a lot of young people coming into the city and we're seeing schools being closed, sold off to become condos, and I worry that those buildings are now gone and that we will not have adequate schools for what I think is going to be an influx of children wanting to go to neighborhood schools. Right now you know you look at my old neighborhood, Brookland. It is so different from when we moved there a long time ago (1980?). So you know it's just amazing how different that neighborhood it is now and how many young people with little kids are now there. And you know they're looking for those schools over there to really beef it up so . . .

2- I think it's the teachers and the principals that draw people to these schools. That's why we wanted to go to Lafayette: because we'd heard about the principal and the teachers. The same goes for Janney or whatever - - the schools that are getting these reviews. I believe your take is erroneous. I don't think it is driving people away from their neighborhood schools from places like Brookland. There was a very motivated group of parents at Francis-Stevens who banded together and keep the school open and I think you would find that in Takoma Park, The Hill, Brookland . . . I think what happens is these [IMPACT] scores drive teachers away from schools that have potential. And then people feel these 'bad' schools are the boogeyman.

9 – Getting back to what I want to keep – I currently would like to keep an in-boundary system for elementary schools. Something that hasn't come up is sibling preference. The family commitment and making it as easy as possible should [determine that] most families do end up having the choice to have all their kids in the same schools.

6- It's a logistical nightmare otherwise.

4- Grandmothers are there at [parent/teacher] conferences because families are trying to go to 3 different schools.

9- Sure and sometimes by choice but also because some kids can't continue up through the ranks. And then the other thing that is still important and it goes to the predictability piece is the feeder system. Not necessarily the same feeder system. But I have seen the benefits to the students and the administrators of having those pyramids and building those relationships. Knowing what you're doing is going to be a key component.

3 – It impacts elementary because of how many parents Shepherd has - - it is under 40% in- boundary. Most of the parents going there are out-of-boundary because those schools are Deal feeders. So the children going to Shepherd are there because of what's predictable down the road. They have no chance – they have certainty by putting them at Shepherd at Pre-K Levels.

So with elementary schools, a strong neighborhood preference is desired. So what about city-wide lottery high schools?

2- I don't think that would translate into better education across the board. Just mixing the students doesn't improve.

10- What's the benefit?

Diversity ...

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

6 – I don't think that diversity should be put above academic achievement. I'm not willing to agree to that.

8- I'm less concerned frankly about the lottery. I don't love it because I feel like we are so far away from having a full and robust range of high school options. So in the short term -- the boundaries have to change -- it seems like I feel that is true. So you have to take into account changing the boundaries within a short-term . . . and [changing] student assignment ...

6- It is a way to solve having terrible schools in big parts of the city.

5- We left Palisades and it was a big sacrifice because we can't afford to move to Ward 4, we took a huge hit -- we didn't know how we were going to do it -- but ward 3 people want to go into Deal and Wilson like crazy and I think it wouldn't be right to take out people in-boundary in a preferred school and put in people who are not [in-boundary].

5 – If Hardy was a viable option . . .

2- I think it should be! The problem is principals and teachers are unable to attract momentum but the neighborhood should alleviate Deal's pressures.

10- I am [thinking] on the same lines. I think that for those of us who have bought into the lottery, I think anything they decide should have some grandfathering of existing families into it. I think of my kids in school and they're part of a community -- they have their friends and they're all ready to go to the middle school and they send people over and get incorporated into our 4th and 5th grade communities.

3 – How far back would you grandfather?

10 - I don't know. And the lottery system is a Band-Aid. But my concern is that the DCPS central won't think about the strategic way of fixing the boundary system and building neighborhood schools. I'm a really involved parent who is constantly frustrated by this dominating conversation that parent involvement needs to be more and I want to feel like DCPS is taking more responsibility for this because there are a lot of involved parents. Is the accountability forever going to be on us? Where do the local officials come in? We're all trying to do our best and we're all getting push back...

3- What are the auspices [concerning] charter schools?

So recommendations can address charters but the District needs legislative approval to make that happen. Charter recommendations are put forth through the council.

1 – Just to follow up about feeder patterns. I've got one kid so I don't have the prior experience that a lot of people here have but we do have a strong community at the school. 90% of the kids he's with are kids he started Pre-K with so there are really close relationships and I think at a lot of the high schools they are really stepping into independence and taking on responsibilities for doing their own work and you're going to break up that network and it seems really disruptive.

2- Yeah I agree -- I think keeping an entire elementary school cohesive is important. That transition from elementary to middle is a big one developmentally and emotionally.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

3- People talked about neighborhood schools and what I recommend is principals – these schools are neighborhood classics. They give a sense of community and that’s true for middle schools to and some high schools. Friday night football is a community effort here and [the community] gives neighborhoods that sense that these schools are part of that community. They are not some private group that just gives our kids’ education. I think having neighborhood quality schools is a good principle.

OK. To switch gears – take a couple of moments and finish the worksheet. The next step is to go through the most important and least important values on that sheet.

1 –So the one that I had the highest is “strengthen system of neighborhood schools” and the other one was equitable access to high quality schools. I think the other one I have high is “predictability that you understand what’s going to happen” and it goes along with . . . the other is looking at economic diversity.

2- I also have strengthening the system of neighborhood schools and equitable access to high performing staff and facilities - - as well as proximity to residence. I think those are the highest ones. I feel like academically diverse environments are less important that racially and culturally and economically diverse.

4- I have five things I thought were probably really what needs to be considered. It’s basically what I’m hearing – school proximity to residence but also there needs to be a more efficient use of public funds. I don’t really see that happening within DCPS. I worry about you know how exactly are they doing this. I hear these horror stories that schools have to have their budgets in to chancellor’s office by the end of February and then in June principals are then informed “oh well you didn’t know you were going to be responsible for purchasing this!? Oh well, too bad”. So more communication - - and I don’t see it happening in regards to budgets especially. Not having a reading curriculum for schools is ridiculous. Why teachers are required to go online to download books and then copy those books and DCPS is not going to supply the copying paper. So I don’t know. I’m trying to figure out what are they doing with their money. I know they spent 3 million with some private company doing social outreach to parents but that’s something where they should be bringing people up through the ranks and teaching them. If Los Angeles unified can do parent college for every school in LA why can’t we do that. But meeting with Michelle Rhee we were told DCPS failed those parents, we’re not going to get them to buy in, but you can’t if you don’t reach out.

5 – I put strengthening neighborhood schools, proximity, and predictability for families.

6- I had the same.

7- I had school proximity, same with allocating funds, to have a good administration you’ve got to make sure there is good pay. You know also, just strengthen neighborhood schools. Like Hardy Middle to release stress from Deal

8- I had predictable equitable and strengthen system. Also, efficient use of public funds seems separate from all of these so I don’t see this as top of discussion for boundary that’s just the expectation.

9- The form was poorly designed. We should be ranking them against each other. I think neighborhood schools, predictability and diversity.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

10 – I have roughly the same. Also how important is it for policies to strengthen neighborhood public schools.

What is least important or shouldn't be part of boundaries? You can voice that now.

1- I would agree, equitable use of funds, I don't see I mean . . .

4- I think efficient use of funds goes towards the one right above that when we talk about having schools across the city that are using the same math and reading programs that all teachers and staff members at those schools . . . that everyone has access to being trained with University of Chicago books, not just at a few select schools, and that every school has access to Singapore math. Everybody wanted to have Singapore math but it was just a few select schools that were picked to have that. Take a curriculum and stick with it.

9 – YES stick with it.

4- Make sure we are choosing wisely, because we're invested in programs where there is no teacher buy in . . .

5- Or teachers have to create the system and then the next year the school buys one.

1- I think I was going to add easy for LEA's to administer; I also ranked lower maximum choice of learning. I feel like the basics of what we've been talking about is you should have a number of stable choices that are a good standard for you. I have a lot of schools I could put on my lottery list ... maximum choice means nothing if they aren't quality choices. Also low were about DCPS and charters having flexibility. I think some of these arguments people have made is schools might have some flexibility like with the gray areas, but flexibility should be related to highly ranked criteria like proximity.

7- Not being more creative with the usage of the existing facilities because I anticipate as my kids come in – having a middle school in ward 4- - we're going to be talking about some of these things. But I think also a bigger systemic thing for all schools regardless of boundaries. It's going to be an issue period.

5- I interpreted fully utilizing in a different way. I thought if you have activities in the school at night that can be very disruptive. You want it to be vibrant but not a core.

Yes and also fuller enrollment.

5- That's a very poorly worded question.

2- Yeah what are you interpreting our data as?

I'd think enrollment is fully utilized around the school.

3- DCPS makes it hard to use the school after 8 p.m. because that's the hour at which the custodians leave and you have to go through a process so get approval and to pay like \$180 an hour to get it to run till 9 p.m. so we can't have a community meeting because it's too cost prohibitive. We have to rely on donations of church space.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

4- I thought there is someone there till 9 p.m.

5- Our after school meetings were dropped down because of the cost of renting the space.

So is there anything missing?

6- Yeah. They need to dramatically expand the PS3 system. I mean if you catch these kids at kinder it's too late and that means we need to do it early.

3- All Title 1 schools have PreK3 programs.

4- Some of them are now having Head Start for 2 year olds.

6- If DC could get on board with being a case for Head Start for 2 year olds I think they should.

4- You've got kids in high schools who - - this is one of the things the high school kids are doing to put on their resumes - they're running these after school programs. The butterfly group from Wilson is teaching French to some children in Adams Morgan. You've got kids who are looking to do good things at the schools but getting permission to do that and getting to do it without paying these ridiculous fees . . . I mean when they were told well you might have to pay a fee to use the room here they just kind of said well we won't be teaching French here.

2- It seems like if there is an elementary school being under-utilized then you can put a PreK3 there because you start momentum in the school.

9- But that's largely what the case is now. The under-utilized schools are Title 1 and so they have PreK3.

3- But Thurgood Marshall is closing and the young families are there. Also planning around facilities; use both medium and long term. Last spring there was a first time Master Facilities Plan and I thought it was very good. And various bills in the education committee also asked the Chancellor to come up with long term plans for school sites before they get moved towards charters or for other city uses. What we don't have though is - - and this could only be from the Deputy Mayor or the Mayor working with the public charter school board - - to strategically position charters in neighborhoods where there are no quality options. It is not a requirement for them to be in a certain area geographically. They can put the school in Columbia Heights and try to attract a target population. It's not clear that the charters are strategically placed to meet the needs. We should put a school in Ward 8 and have people bid on it. We need to have the charter sector cooperate with geographic placement of facilities.

7- Are the facilities there the big issue?

3- They're looking at closing down DCPS facilities. So the city has a choice to put a public or charter school there.

OK. I'm going to take a couple quick comments and then transition...

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

5- Along lines of facilities planning – Lafayette had a plan for many classrooms and even if they were to renovate it this year we'd be low. They need to look at [population] trends before they construct it. They need to look at trends for several years.

8- To follow up on that, I would say the city is seeing something it hasn't seen since post war periods with growth and diversification across all neighborhoods. They need to identify with developers that you know you're going to have to support a potential new school through directly building or funding it. But I also think the city should commit to families that do invest such as urban homesteaders. If the school is not turned around, we will give you preferential treatment to move kids. That would incentivize families to move to these neighborhoods. That could be a quick solution to strengthening neighborhood schools.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

Focus Group 3D: Takoma Education Campus, Thursday, November 21, 2013

1- Biggest concern is the misinformed - didn't know about this meeting – east of the river will suffer – won't change a middle school in one or two years – will be a long process.

1- Diversity is most important – second would be the funding/money - it is all going to high schools but not to middle schools – is not fair – better to spend on librarians etc. at middle school level – money being spent - thinks tests are tweaked to make schools “Reward”.

1- He personally started at Takoma and wanted child to go to Murch so could go to Deal – stayed in Takoma through 8th grade – did not get into Wilson – got into Coolidge and went for 2 years – and got into Wilson.

0 -Son started at JO Wilson – started in pre-school and was diverse – but in K it was no longer diverse – applied for lottery and got into Shepherd, patterns haven't been changed for 30 years – if you close down the current feeder pattern everyone will be stuck – the good schools are over capacity – once he got into Shepherd his son was set – but if you change the patterns then will you cut out the other half of the city – when he went to Wilson it was different.

2- Arbitrary decisions on staffing means they can't attract students – example of staffing at small schools such as librarians, foreign language.

2- Conversation needs to encompass issues like low income housing placement – there is no low income housing west of the park.

2- DC is a segregated city – economically – problem with some schools overcrowded but if change the current system you will have segregated schools.

2- Open a dual language middle school east of park – re-open MacFarland - rejects suggestion that they just go to a charter – what is the reason to push a charter vs. a traditional public school.

2- Child at Powell out-of-boundary – zoned for Oyster – child is in Pre-K and wants her child to stay at Powell even though her child could go to Oyster – loves it at Powell but has the security to know that if Powell continues to feed to Columbia Heights EC she can avoid that as they are in boundary for Deal – her interest in this is that the situation is horrendous – the only way to get a decent middle and high school education is to get into Deal and Wilson – everyone has to get into Deal and Wilson which is insane – need schools everywhere that people will think are fine – Powell is majority low income and they don't have resources to schlep their kids to Deal and Wilson – after 5th grade they're screwed – most don't speak much English and won't have teachers that are fluent in Spanish – she met someone trying to get kid into Adams for language program but doesn't even know how she'll get him in – school quality has to be addressed.

3- Because you don't make a lot of money doesn't mean you are disabled, unable to learn or stupid – not enough is expected of low income kids – doesn't mean you can't learn.

3- City has changed so much that it is diverse in most areas except wards 7 and 8.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

3- Comment on background info – implies the norm is that you go to a neighborhood school – makes it sound like there is always a choice.

3- Deal and Wilson are so crowded is because of the out-of-boundary kids at places like Hearst - Allow out of boundary at Deal but have to end cohort.

3- Financial meltdown made things worse – and then Deal was renovated and that has contributed to overcrowding.

3- If DCPS does not create a general education middle school alternatives around the city you will leave people up in the air – have to do it if you are considering changing boundaries and feeder patterns.

3- In 1999 moved here – they did lottery and were lucky – got into Capital City – not as much choice anymore – if they change Deal so that when you get in west of the park and you feed with your cohort it leaves everyone east of the park “out” – there are no other middle schools (beside Deal) – are being converted to Ed Campuses.

3- Took child out of parochial school – because they live in boundary for Deal.

4- Academics are the most important – would sacrifice diversity for good academics – need middle school and high school options with good academics – that’s what’s missing – reason why parents go to private schools – confidence level on academics is most important – not athletics.

4- Deal and Wilson are over-rated – depends on the type of kids – academies – DC does not have a track record of starting something new – would be a great idea to start something new for them east of the park but there is no confidence that DCPS can start something new – innovation is coming from the charters – if DCPS could innovate then would not be going to charters.

4- Husband was native but did not go to public school in DC – was not a choice then – African American middle class moved out to go to better schools – did not feel like there was a choice – they were living in Arlington when they had first son – moved to Shepherd as had no friends in Arlington – just started at Shepherd last year – went there as it feeds into Deal and Wilson and were starting dual language immersion but it was a mess – did not have enough resources – moved into neighborhood to put him in Shepherd – but when couldn’t implement the language program it was a deal breaker so put him in a private school – language/French was important and is hard to find – that’s their choice – only Stokes offered it – and Shepherd couldn’t implement – they drive by the school every day and son wishes he is going there – is the luck of a draw - when options are limited you don’t have choice – need luck and resources to have choice.

4- Process is premature – they don’t know what to expect if boundaries change – process should have happened before Deal and Wilson were overcrowded or after they create a good new middle school

5- DCPS are victims of their own success – attracted kids to pre-school – if solve where they will go then you will be in good shape – have a captive audience

5- Is the only variable between schools the kids who go there? Or is the funding different? Shouldn’t there be an analysis on the minimum number of students needed in a school

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

5- Redistricting of schools is a prisoners' dilemma – reject the problem we suggest they solve – they would rather have good schools for everyone - if there is not enough quality – how distribute half a loaf

5- Will resources be changed?

5-Chose where they live based on neighborhood schools but don't understand why the feeder patterns are the way they are or what the current rationale is – don't know the history of what neighborhoods go where – would be useful to have this historic info. When lived in Adams Morgan were in walking distance to cook and chose to stay in DC and enroll child there – great principal and school was renovated, committed parents, were in boundary and walking distance. But there were many criteria and could understand if people were confused. They got a letter telling them they had enrolled in a sub-standard school and could enroll in another school. Didn't understand this. Took kid out to go to a private Jewish school but not because they were unhappy. Other child enrolled in Powell – were very impressed – problem was some kids would go to Deal and others wouldn't – didn't understand why – seemed to affect Powell and had trouble recruiting – enrolled but got into LAMB PCS via lottery and chose to go there for language program – and was no bus route so was not accessible (otherwise would not have gone –accessibility is crucial/big consideration for #5) – may not be in the neighborhood but still accessible – want son to go to middle school at Deal and Wilson after out of the private school he is in – he went to public school and is committed to public school education.

5- Parents west of the park could go southern to downtown – would rather have a kid near his work – better downtown where there used to be school buildings than up at Walter Reed – transportation/accessibility is important.

6- Also feels strong about neighborhood schools – school should be the center of the community.

6- Implies you get your choice – but you don't.

6- Scores are tied to SES [socio economic status] at Deal and Wilson.

6- She stood in line for days for Deal for her kid – “choice” – excellent 3 and 4 year old programs – hard to build on the gains of our pre-schools – influx of kids during school year from charters just before testing – homeless kids – have a diverse residential community but the school is not reflective of the community – people feel like they have to go somewhere else – can't talk about feeder system when don't have anything to feed into – programs are too small – funding is not what's needed at middle school level – how can boundaries be re-drawn when don't have options.

6- She would turn Whittier into a middle school and get rid of upper grades in the Ed Campuses – send them to Whittier- over capacity at Takoma – advantage of Whittier being next to Coolidge which is being renovated – would have a site for a real middle school.

6- This used to be a Black neighborhood and is very different now – young white families have come in – could have an integrated school if people feel they can stay here – some of the schools would become integrated if you change the pattern.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

7- Two daughters 4th and 6th grade – kids have changed schools often – at Yu Ying she learned that what she needs to learn is a social group – hard for a new school to have this – peers were not kind – at Watkins it was a far distance but she had friends there – she drove her there but started taking metro as a 5th grader – was hard – now at Stuart Hobson and her peer group stayed intact as they moved to 6th grade – younger one had a hard year at Shepherd – then at Yu Ying where had an easier time but got into Capitol City which had the promise of being closer to home and had a good reputation but it was a disaster for her – class size of 3rd grade was big – unhappy with teachers - Grace Episcopal Day School now but hope to get her back to a public school – she drives her there – she needs a calm quiet environment.

7- Could be middle school at Brookland and is an easy commute.

7- Feeder pattern system means parents don't put kids in neighborhood schools – and contributes to the overcrowding at Deal – Stuart Hobson and Hardy are good middle schools but have funding problems.

7- High value she holds is for elementary schools to be neighborhood schools – rights to a feeder pattern leads to convoluted decisions by parents – erodes neighborhood elementary schools – leads to kids switching schools.

7- I would make Brightwood the middle school – end the Ed Campuses – kid at Stuart Hobson having a great time – there is a myth about Deal – its huge – it's not the best thing since sliced bread – she is happier to have her kid at Stuart Hobson.

8- Both kids in Barnard – 2 blocks away – good principal and teachers – question is how long will stay there – characterized as low income – if school can retain diversity it will have a lot of promise – numbers that defect change demographics and not sure what to do to maintain diversity – at Eaton they boast about diversity but are trying to convince affluent families to send kids there and will lose diversity – how to attract and preserve diversity at various schools.

8- How to create new options and attract people from west of the park.

8- Must have a long term plan for the schools? (Laughter) – If already have mind set on what's to happen then this is a waste of time.

8- Thinks expectations have changed in DC – with emphasis on testing how you teach to a broad range of abilities – an enormously difficult task and the reason middle class families avoid – think their kids won't be served.

8- Would like Barnard if it were more diverse – is a class issue – is musical chairs – some neighborhoods in DC won't be diverse now so would be favoring our area which is diverse.

Focus Group 4A: D.C. Bilingual Public Charter School, December 3, 2013

12 participants from:

- Mt. Pleasant (Hearst)
- Mt. Pleasant
- Mt. Pleasant (Bancroft)
- Adams-Morgan (Reed)
- Adams-Morgan (Oyster, Deal)
- Columbia Heights/Raymond (Hearst)
- Mt. Pleasant
- Forest Hills, Van Ness (Hearst)
- Chevy Chase (Lafayette)

W- Entering schools at PS3 can help get a child into the system. It's your first shot and can set you up into a feeder pattern, so it's valuable.

W- We only applied to DCPS for PS3 because no charters were close to our home/commutes. Got into Reed bilingual program. Very happy with that school. But now I wonder whether I should apply OOB for Oyster so my daughter can take advantage of grandfathering to stay in the Wilson feeder pattern if boundaries change.

W- Lottery is a gamble. Moving targets. We prefer walkable schools, but will travel for quality. Might consider doing lottery soon if there's a risk of losing my access to Deal and Wilson. I am concerned about whether out-of-boundary options might be restricted in the future (= fewer options for us).

W- It is not my job to fix the school. We have full-time jobs, limited amounts of time and energy. Parents can't fix schools. There is a lot of dysfunction in a lot of DCPS schools, which is why there's such a focus on Deal and Wilson. Aside from charters, I don't think there's another middle school to high school feeder pattern I'd be comfortable putting my child into. Looking at the pace of change in the last 6 years, I'm not expecting more DCPS schools to improve enough to change that. So we may need to enter charter lottery or move to Maryland. I don't think there's another legitimate option besides the Deal and Wilson feeder pattern.

M1- DC appears to be abandoning its public schools in much of the city; it's disingenuous for DC to conduct this process after having closed so many schools already. DC appears to be giving up on neighborhood schools in poorer areas; less so in richer neighborhoods. There should be a way to match capacity to the need (people to whom commitments have been made). Need to redistribute seats to serve the families in the local areas. It's a bad idea to lease Old Hardy to the Lab school for 50 years when there is such demand for more school seats in that area.

W6 - DC needs to make better long-term plans. For those interested in bilingual education, there are issues. Bancroft PTSA wants to continue to feed to Deal, but kids who want a bilingual program should be able to go to Adams for MS; this could be helpful in dealing with Deal's overcrowding. What about feeding to bilingual charters with priority for kids in DCPS bilingual programs? How much can be done with boundary changes when so few school options are "good"? DC needs to plan with a K-12 perspective.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

W3 – I want a high-achieving peer group for my daughter. The pace of instruction in most DCPS schools is not adequate for my child – even at Deal. Hardy isn't performing well, and is not convenient. Deal is more convenient because it is on Metro. Deal's size is not a problem. Deal is well organized; teachers are supported enough to help high-achieving students. But Deal is still not preparing students well enough for competitive environments. The range in classrooms is too wide, so the pace of instruction is too slow to challenge my daughter.

M3—Many parents go out of zone, so when DCPS wants to change zones, it must consider how the population will react to new boundaries. Parents may simply change their behavior. An option for many is not to accept the changes and leave town. What will happen to quality overall in DCPS if many such families leave?

M1- Changes may well engender more movement, traffic, and flight from DC. Don't force people out of schools they want; make MORE schools that people want.

M2 – There are no charters in Ward 3, so we looked at Deal and Wilson. Statements from DCPS such as "everything is on the table" and "open citywide lottery" worry me.

W2 – Charters: Washington Latin, BASIS sound good. DC International (middle school and high school) sounds good in theory but hasn't opened yet.

W3 – We would have considered Washington Latin if it had competitive admissions, but it doesn't, so the school isn't an attractive option for us.

W2 – How many application middle schools should DC have: One or two? It's hard to start one, however, because families will not be attracted initially to an unproven school.

W3 – It's a problem that even the DCPS special-admissions high schools (except for two of them) are not very selective.

W1—Yes, sibling preference or sibling right is a very high priority.

M1-- Strong neighborhood schools make that happen! Need to add safety as a value.

W7 – DC should say QUALITY, not equity of access to quality, because if there were quality everywhere, then there would be no equity problem.

W5 – Segregated housing leads to segregated schools and differences in school quality.

W7 – I agree; we should separate school-quality and equitable-access concepts.

M1 – The recent closures resulted from parents choosing not to send kids to crappy schools. The system is failing. DCPS doesn't manage its schools together within feeder patterns; it isn't putting in place effective programs to meet all needs.

M4- DCPS has a top-down mentality; it isn't using teacher compensation to support equity well enough.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

M4- Deal isn't competitive with many middle schools in the metro area – it isn't that great – it is just the best available within D.C.

W5 – I wish we had more on which to measure schools than just test scores. I want to see how schools do more than teach to the test; but I don't know how else to evaluate the quality of schools. I'd like to know how much parents at a school value education.

W2 – Most of DC schools appear to have a preponderance of low-performing students; I don't want to send my kid to a school with below-level kids because it's too risky.

M1 – Add behavioral problems to the low academic performance and you have a downward spiral.

W2 – It's not that the kids have no potential; it's that the schools aren't doing what's needed.

W6- We are in a diverse school and it's fabulous. Lots of benefits for all from that. But I would not want to see academic rigor sacrificed for diversity.

W2 – I agree. I love seeing Hearst being diverse, it's wonderful, it appealed to me greatly, but Hearst also seems to have good and improving academic performance. But if it didn't have that, we would not have considered it. Academic diversity within a certain range is good, but a substantial percentage of students being non-proficient is not OK.

W1 – Diversity at Hearst is an added bonus, but it's not my priority. It's not something I would pursue, but if it is there, then that is great.

M1- We need to see some diversity coexisting with rigor – see Wilson for example.

W5 – Getting a mix of rigor and diversity is very hard but it is the most important thing DC could reach for.

M4 – Some universities now say that diversity is a requirement for a successful school.

M3 – Boundary changes will reduce the diversity at Deal. That will be a loss.

W2 – The suburbs seem to be more varied, less segregated, so schools there have more diversity, but that is not the case in DC. There's only so much parents can do in a school; they can't influence everything there.

W5 – Socioeconomic diversity is a value in a school because it benefits lower socio-economic status kids.

M1- What caused the population decline in wards 7 and 8?

W1—Transportation is an issue for us; we got into a charter school east of the park, but didn't accept because it would have required too much time to drive there every day.

W2 – With one parent, the school options are constrained greatly because I just can't transport two kids to some locations and then get to work on time.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

W3 – Many people now do not have cars, so DC now needs more schools that are within walking distance of home OR are on the way to workplaces. DC needs well-located schools accessible by metro. So proximity is terribly important. DC needs to build more schools in the center of the city.

W3 – DC needs better transportation to/from schools and links between schools and transportation mechanisms.

W2 – Build quality schools and people will figure out how to get there. It is not worth discussing transportation until families have 2-3 good school options at the MS level.

M3 – Maybe schools need very small class sizes so that all students get what they need within a diverse school.

M1 – DCPS needs better coordination between programs within a feeder pattern. One principal candidate for Cardozo returned to their original school because DCPS would not give her any say in the feeders to Cardozo.

M4 – To learn about schools, I look to parents of children who are ahead of mine in age.

W7 – I value diversity, and I am willing to put up with some lower quality in a school to get diversity, but not if it is too low quality. It's a tough balance. For those in Mt. Pleasant, Deal is a decent balance.

M1- We made choices because we saw upper NW to be a more real and realistic neighborhood than those in the suburbs, even though the quality and course offerings at Wilson may not compare with those in the suburban high schools.

W2 – To evaluate school quality, we can look at test scores, demographics, and word of mouth evaluations. But there's a dearth of good, objective information about schools. People now make decisions based on incomplete information.

M1 – I knew a kid who fell into failure at Hardy mainly because of peer problems, so I would not consider sending my kid to Hardy. I learned firsthand from neighbors who are diplomats. If Deal and Wilson got better because "people went there" - -why not foster the same process at Hardy? Parents need to have a say in their schools; currently, policies appear to be decided upon BEFORE parental engagement is even started. I don't know how much I trust this process . . . First it was DCPS running the process, now it's the DME.

M3- I saw a document suggesting that the proposal was out already – has it been decided? If so, that's a problem. DC needs to put information out to the public ASAP with details about the plan for all residents in all areas.

M4 – In Mt. Pleasant, there will be an uproar if people lose access to west of park schools they currently access. Too much invested, but folks will still leave DC.

W2 – DC needs to consider issues beyond the schools in order to keep people in neighborhoods.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

M1 – This process seems to be more of a process of tearing down existing education infrastructure, as opposed to the building up of neighborhoods that paralleled the expansion of Pre-K services in DC.

M3 – We need grandfathering. It will allay the fears of a large segment of the population.

W5 – We need access to high quality schools.

M1 – We need to maintain the energy around existing good DCPS schools while simultaneously building up other DCPS schools into alternatives that will attract people back to DCPS. There's plenty of school stock available. Why not put Ellington into buildings on the UDC campus, reopen Western HS, foster growth and expansion of DCPS, and keep communities together. Reopen Old Hardy, etc.

Focus Group 4B: D.C. Bilingual Public Charter School, December 3, 2013

Participant #1: Two daughters went to DCPS schools and lives in Georgetown

Participant #2: Has two children (KG and 3rd grade at Janney) and they attend in-boundary school

Participant #3: Has a 2 year old and is in-boundary for HD Cook

Participant #4: Has 2 children at Bancroft, and is part of the PTA at Bancroft

Participant #5: Is in-boundary for Bancroft, with a child who is not in school yet

Participant #6: Is currently in boundary for Oyster, child attended Oyster, graduated from School Without Walls.

Participant #7: Spouse of participant 6

Participant #8: Has two children, one in 2nd grade and another one in 8th grade. They are at Janney and one at Deal.

Participant #9: Lives in the Mount Pleasant area and her child didn't get into Bancroft for preschool so he is attending Appletree but she will go back to Bancroft once he starts Kindergarten.

Q: What is working well and want to preserve?

Participant #1

The schools that my kids went to were ward 3 (which now are in ward 2) and at the time when her kids went there it was very diverse since so few in-boundary kids attended the schools, so my children were able to attend a diverse school. Things are very different nowadays, so population projections are very important data point to be included in this process. She has seen community members with a lot of resentment from west of rock creek park, regarding that Ward 3 schools are taking away their children from ward 4 and other areas of the city. Wards 5, 7, 8 come to Ward 3 schools and will travel long distances leaving less quality schools in those areas. Wards 5, 7, 8 want to improve quality, but they don't have the enrollment to improve the quality of the school since parents are deciding to use out-of-boundary or choice options. It is hard to influence parents to always attend in-boundary schools since choice is important to parents as well. So parents value neighborhood schools and choice options. If you have good schools all over the city than most people don't need choice, and thus there would be less disruption in the neighborhood when they have quality school options nearby.

Participant #2:

I don't think anything works well for everyone in terms of student assignment policies. So if you are in-boundary for a school that is quality then the system works for you, but another person who lives in an area where school isn't good then the system doesn't work for them. But the system doesn't work well for everyone across the city.

The right to a school in-boundary keeps people in the city. Continuity of a community or neighborhood is important and it is tough when people within a couple blocks from each other are split into different middle schools etc. She is confused why there are weird boundaries in the city, where people on the same block go to different DCPS schools.

I would like to see programs in other parts of the schools that are targeted in areas where they don't feel good or quality schools are located. Charters have a lot of interesting programs, and I would send my kids there if I thought it was a good, safe school and I could get them there in a reasonable way. So this would

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

alleviate some of the overcrowding in Ward 3. People on my block send children to Yu Yang and charters all over the city, so if DCPS could draw some of the students across the city then it would help. Some of the progressive programs such as Reggio or Montessori are a great way to attract families.

I want my student to be a part of a cohort of prepared kids. She doesn't care so much about the kids in terms of race, but a cohort that is prepared is very important.

Participant #3:

I am entering the lottery for the first time since my child will be 3 next year. One thing that works well in regards to student assignment policies is that DC offers free pre-school. One thing that comforts me is that they can move in-boundary to a school they want to attend, and move to an area so you have the right to a school. Clearly the boundaries need to be re-drawn. Janney is way overcrowded. It isn't good to have kids in trailers.

Participant #4:

She has grown up in DCPS schools and currently has kids in DCPS schools. First of all, if parents are spending the night outside the Oyster school then that should be a signal to DCPS that the program is in high demand and they should replicate that around the city. It's taking DCPS way too long to realize this. It doesn't make sense that so many charter schools have interesting program across the city that attract parents, but DCPS cannot come up with programs that do the same as charters to create programs that attract families. Siblings get preference even at early childhood and rated even higher than the in-boundary preference.

Participant #5:

Lotteries have preferences. Sibling has a preference and founding members get a preference for Charter. DCPS has an in-boundary preference.

Predictability depends on your neighborhood. She chose Mt. Pleasant because she likes the area and good schools is an important factor for why people move to places.

As a community we need to improve the quality of all schools across the city. This will help with the diversity, and the answer shouldn't be more charter schools.

Participant #6:

Something that was working and now not working is that Ward 3 used to have space and could allow more out-of-boundary students to attend, and this helped to create diversity both racial and economically. But now that there has been an increase in the in-boundary students attending Ward 3 schools that this approach isn't working anymore. And this may decrease the diversity of the schools.

He is more concerned with the current trend that as more in-boundary students being to attend Ward 3 schools that it will push out people from other areas of the city.

Participant #7: She is concerned with the zoning of the two schools. The two schools merged and were promised that Adams will be drawn right into the Oyster school. The School Board has since then overruled that. She saw the damage that it did to that community, and the school is so important to the neighborhood and provides stability for many students that don't get stability in other parts of their life. She is a real advocate for double zoning, and thinks it is important to not tear communities apart.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

Are the age cutoff grades the same across sectors? No they are not the same yet. So that causes challenges.

We are going to have to plan for overcapacity like we did before to anticipate growing enrollments and allow for diverse student bodies and not cause Ward 3 schools to become less diverse; would like their diversity to stay the same.

When talking about the rights of students, it is tough when schools are overcapacity. We don't protect children when families move. And an area of stability in children's lives is the school, thus it is important to keep allowing a child to attend the school even if their parents move. You give them the option to stay in original school or attend a school in their new in-boundary school. This will help provide stability for the children.

I heard from the council; people complaining about Woodson and how so much of the school is going unused. So why couldn't that school be turned into a magnet school to draw more families in?

Participant #8:

She thinks the feeder patterns aren't working very well for people. They are good for her, but she thinks the feeder patterns could be more equitable across the city.

Participant #9:

She thinks pre-school in the city is amazing, but is not sure by the lottery. She would need to look at the data to see if the lottery process is fair. But she thinks that the lottery system bifurcates people since people on the same block will go to different schools.

Q: What are the most important and least important principles and values on the worksheet you filled out?

Participant 4:

They believe school choice and student assignment policies that are easy to understand are the two most important. At the elementary school level this was rated a 5. A lot of parents are not native English speakers, so this is an important feature to help them get into the school system. Simple to understand and accessible in various ways are most important at the elementary school level, and less important as they age.

Participant 6:

Opportunities for racial and economically diverse enrollments are very important.

Participant 8:

Efficient use of funds and equitable access to schools are most important. If people in all neighborhoods had a right to a quality school then many of these problems would be solved (since they won't have to live in a specific neighborhood). So community is important, but we first need to have equitable access to quality schools.

It's important to have maximum choice for families but don't think that this is a realistic option or value for DC right now.

Participant 3:

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

Rated Maximum choice for families at all grade bands as very important. Giving them the opportunity to choice is important. She thinks choice is as important since she doesn't have a lot of faith in DCPS. When I think of the DCPS schools that are a good fit for my child, I realize that I don't have a shot in getting into any of them.

Participant 1:

Strengthening neighborhood schools and equitable access are important values and she rated them the highest. It's important to not make children travel far at the elementary school level, and you shouldn't burden the kids or parents.

I downgraded efficiency (had in mind the central office not school buildings) since an important factor is that you need to really understand the right enrollment projections throughout the city to effectively plan. That is what happened in our area in ward 3. We knew Ward 3 schools would be closed [two decades ago] with such low-enrollments and our communities rallied around them and chose to allow out-of-boundary students to enter their schools. Now the opposite is happening and Ward 3 schools are overcrowded. And we need to project in the future and swallow hard on building efficiency today in order to project adequately.

Participant 2:

Predictability (especially at elementary school and middle school bands) and equitable access to high quality programs are most important. The second one, equitable access to high quality programs, is key. If you don't have access to quality programs then parents will leave the city or the system. Parents don't want to experiment with their child's education.

I think quality middle school options are a hard nut to crack. Targeted programs with good academics at middle school level is really lacking in the city.

Participant 9:

Ward 3 shouldn't be the only area of the city that has good quality schools. So equitable access to quality schools is the most important value.

Participant 7:

DCPS owes us a route straight through at elementary school, middle school and high school. And we shouldn't just ship them off to charter schools at the middle school level just because DCPS doesn't have good quality schools. They should improve them and not ship them out.

Participant 5:

Confused on what efficient use of funds means? It is hard to argue against that, who would object to that?

Participant 8:

I would like equitable access for everyone not just Ward 3 parents.

Participant 4:

Efficient use of funds is a tricky question. This could be closing under-enrolled schools, but we should believe DCPS is making logical decisions around this and I often doubt that they are. So DCPS isn't creating a good portfolio of schools since they are not thinking big picture and this causes problems.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

There are concrete examples that efficient use of funds didn't work for communities since they closed schools, i.e. McFarland. And then you see a charter school pop up right where a DCPS school closed. So DCPS doesn't have to close schools to be efficient if they start viewing their schools as a portfolio of schools citywide.

Participant 3:

It's hard to replicate good schools like Deal and Wilson elsewhere in the city.

Participant 9:

A factor that is important to do is a trend analysis to help support the boundary work today, and the review process needs to be data driven. And it is hard to be patient when you have a kid currently in the system, but you also need to think long-term and sell the new choices to the parents. So need rigorous analysis to show the public their thinking on their decision making.

Participant 5:

One question I have: is work being done to improve curriculum through this process? Will this be addressed in this process? Need to improve where DC ranks overall from a national perspective.

Participant 8:

What does flexibility mean for LEAs?

Participant 2:

What does this flexibility with LEAs mean? Does the law or mandate say that this is applicable to charters? The extent in which DCPS isn't serving the needs of community determines the need for charter schools in that area to fill that need. It would be interesting to allow charters to create Magnet schools.

Participant 9:

Being creative is missing on values sheet. One size doesn't fit all so families in Janney have different needs than other parts of the city. Some areas of the city cannot support enrollment based on projections, so how to right size the program is important. I feel like more creativity could happen. Schools should be the appropriate size and programmatically right, but still should be able to have efficient use of funds if we are more creative.

Participant 3:

She mentioned that she would like to see more logic when developing feeder patterns and in-boundary lines. She is in-boundary for HD Cook and feeds into Columbia Heights which is 80% Spanish. And this makes no programmatic sense. So not going to have a daughter who isn't fluent in Spanish and have her go to a school where math is taught in Spanish. And then you have Hearst which is so overcrowded it has trailers. Just seems like there isn't a lot of logic.

What isn't acceptable to me, even over diversity, is that all my neighbors go to different schools and that there is not community feel. She can't have play dates with kids in her neighborhood since they all go over the city and are on different schedules. It makes her sad that she isn't willing to apply to HD Cook since it isn't a good fit for my child.

Participant 7:

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

If you really cut down on numbers for overcrowded schools then you will significantly decrease the diversity of schools and have all white kids going to schools and all black kids going to schools and this isn't acceptable either.

Participant 8:

It's sad that parent's don't have quality options to choose from in EVERY neighborhood. Equitable access to schools is so important.

Participant 3:

It's sad when you are losing in-boundary parents, such as HD Cook because of performance. Need to improve quality at lower-performing schools to start attracting students to stay in-boundary.

Participant 7:

Capitol Hill Cluster was formed based on a group of motivated parents who committed themselves in going to Kindergarten class together and things began to happen and improved the schools. That was 40 years ago. Then about 20 years ago this happened in Ross. And now I look at statistics for Ross and over 50% of kids are in-boundary and they are doing pretty well. So this is going to take some grassroots efforts of some parents to turn around schools. Charter schools offer a lot of choice to parents and it is easy for parents to not support neighborhood schools and causing less grassroots efforts to pop up.

Q: Ways to improve the process to ensure that it is inclusive and doesn't divide communities?

The group did not have time to get to this question.

Focus Group 4C: D.C. Bilingual Public Charter School, December 3, 2013

Opening Question: What works about the current enrollment system?

L3 Likes the option of Charter schools can supplement the public school options

L6 Likes the lottery

L5 Likes the continuation of a feeder pattern when the child starts in a particular boundary.

L2 Is concerned about how the closest school might not be available for her kids, when she purchased the property with the expectation of their future attendance.

Second Question: What are the concerns about DC's current enrollment system?

L4 Desires the maximum amount of choice when she lives in a neighborhood she doesn't like. In other words, not to be constrained by geography.

L8 If she wants her kids to attend Bancroft when they are of age, but she is concerned that competition for enrollment could edge out her kids.

L2 On some level, choice lends itself to abuse of the system. This mother sees that many families from all over the city enroll their children in one of the few Pre-K programs offered at the current school (Hearst), but leave after it is completed. She feels that kids who would stay for subsequent years at Hearst are crowded out of the early program.

L4 Observes that Kindergarten and Pre-K are not required, yet they take up "airtime" in many discussions.

L6 Doesn't want the right to feed in the schools west of the park

L3 Believes the schools get overcrowded because they want to have the funding that follows the students.

L8 Observes that the Wilson is the only high school west of the park.

L1 Some schools are overcapacity and others are half-empty.

L8 believes that the reason for schools either having too many or too few students is due to how unequal the quality is distributed.

L3 Wants to "send the message" that parents shouldn't have to come up with the plan to open great schools that attract great students. The parents are happy to consult in a focus group format, but they are looking for expertise from the professionals at DCPS.

L5 States the importance of race and socioeconomic diversity in schools.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

L3 Admits her education helps privileged parents get the most out of the system where there should be some obligation to get all parents equal access.

L2 Doesn't like the uncertainty of the lottery. Wishes she could rely on the neighborhood school.

Facilitator summarizes: The amount of choice and information can be overwhelming both to parents who have the energy and motivation to navigate the system and to those who don't.

L9 Was on the waitlist for a school that she lived three blocks away from. Thinks DCPS should disseminate the information better to Latino parents because of the scheduling conflicts they may face.

M2 States association with Powell and is pleased with the dual language program. He feels limited with the selection of middle and high schools that have a dual language program that his children can build on.

M1 Says he sees a "lack of collaboration between the charter school board and DCPS. They need to work together and leverage all the resources."

Question 3: What should the guiding principles of the new process be?

L8 Predictability of schools in the neighborhood. Buying the house in the neighborhood means you chose the school on some level.

L5 Residence is Woodley Park. States the public schools are "too diverse, not intellectually rigorous enough" so kids end up in private schools.

M2 Wants to see a school system that works for the entire city. "Now the system only works for folks west of the park and Capitol Hill. Some predictability should be broken so the system can work for everyone." He wants to see the higher class people in his neighborhood trust the local school. The kids currently at his school are mainly Hispanic and have limited exposure to people outside of their culture.

L5 If the parents are asked, mix up the students for diversity, then all the schools should be good.

L3 Wants more emphasis on making the schools better.

Question 4: If quality is a non-issue, how should the boundary review be guided? What is the next most important thing?

L4 supports the earlier point about continuing programs (the previous example was the bilingual program) from one school to the next in the feeder pattern.

M1 Is satisfied with his elementary school. Says charter schools have good middle school options and wants to see both groups collaborate and leverage facilities.

L7 Wants to see renovations for some of the other schools in city.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

L8 Choice becomes more important at the high school level. As a child gets older the neighborhood school might “become less of a fit.”

M1 Create unique programs that attract students. Specialty programs can make some schools stand out.

L5 Proximity is less important to older kids because of their independence.

L3 Wonders if program choices are being affected

M2 Would like the local schools to be good.

Thoughts and suggestions for how the conversation can build community and how to engage the process:

M2 Wants meetings that include minorities and lower socioeconomic levels: “They need to be heard.”

M1 Leadership needs to do what is best - - “not try to please everyone.”

L3 Needs communication to reach all the socio-economic levels and all races and get feedback from those groups.

L2 Present a proposal and gauge reactions to draw parental engagement.

L8 Agrees with previous ideas, but also thinks this puts pressure on the parents to mobilize and find solutions.

M2 Wants to more meetings rather than the proposed three. Also wants deadline for the changes, so parents know the timeline.

Focus Group 4D: D.C. Bilingual Public Charter School, December 3, 2013

Participants:

M1: Faculty at Georgetown U. Has lived for 7 years in Mt. Pleasant; 9 month old baby

W1: Resident of Mt. Pleasant for 5 year; works at a Federal agency; has a 7month old child

M2: Resident of DC since 09; works in Alexandria, spouse of W1

M3: Grew up in DC and went to DCPS and served on municipal committees/boards dealing with education; 8th grader at Deal and 3rd grader at Shepherd Elementary school.

What are your experiences and concerns for student assignment and school choice? What do you think works well and you would like to keep? What do you want to see changed? What's not working well?

M3 What I like is the feeder pattern. Families know where a child is going to be. We started at elementary school, which feeds into a middle and high and we know along the way we have options to veer from the path but we know that kids are going to stay together. So there is a possibility for continuity for cohorts, which I like.

W1 I actually worked on a case related to DCPS before my current job so I have some exposure and I mean the biggest concern that I hear relates to feeder patterns is just there are relatively few schools that a relatively great number of people want to attend. So there is a lot of anxiety about moving into districts with those schools especially because there do seem to be ways to get into out-of-boundary schools.

M2 So right now essentially for elementary school it's based on geography is that correct?

Yes but there is also DCPS out of boundary lottery, charter school lotteries, and there are the feeder patterns, which currently might be different for your boundary school? . . . Explaining how feeder patterns work for people who don't yet know about them . . .

M3 What I think doesn't work well about the boundaries: the boundary lines in some cases defy any workable logic. Like Irving Street divides Cook and Bancroft but any reasonable person on the south side of Irving Street would more likely want to go to Bancroft than Cook.

W1 We're in the exact situation because we would want our kids to go to school with kids across the street.

M1 I think the quality issue underlies most of the under problems. People want to go to good schools and when they don't get good schools then there are a lot of process things to complain about. There are a lot of opportunities for perceptions of unfairness and a complicated process. So I think the overriding concern that's more important than patterns is that schools be good.

W1 Exactly what I was trying to say before.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

M3 Right.

M1 It doesn't matter to me if my kid can walk to high school but if it's the best high school in the city then I think it's OK he can walk to that high school. I think the first issue is to fix that. Wishful thinking but yeah . . .

I'm thinking we might go on to principles and values or do you want to talk more about what's working and what isn't?

M2 It's difficult for me personally because I'm unfamiliar . . .

M3 Now that we're in the high school journey now it becomes complicated. Now we're going to open houses and my son is interested in learning more about a couple of the application schools. One of the challenges is as a practical matter. My concern is if my kid goes to [an application] school and it doesn't work out then it defaults to Coolidge. Now we start making strategic decisions that are maybe less about the upside potential and thinking about reducing the downside. If it doesn't work out in a year or in a semester, then we're going to Coolidge. That's a lot to take on. In effect, while we've got choices, a lot will go into making that decision because we're essentially giving up on investing on something that might be great and ending up with something really poor.

M1 Why do so many people drop Banneker after first year?

M3 Well it's really about fit. They're a very rigid school and they are the way they are. The underlying issue is that it's all about quality and the lack of access to quality. I don't want to suggest that the plights of most people are like mine - - most people's options are bad, worse, and awful: that is real. The reality for most people in the city is that the quality they are picking from is much lower.

Let's run through the Guiding Principles. What's most important to you?

M1 Can you help me understand some of the assumptions of the survey? If I assume that the schools are all good then I don't care how easy it is to understand. I mean it would be nice but I figure I can figure it out. If they aren't good it's a lot easier to deal with negative result if you have a predictable system. So under which scenario would you like me to answer this?

I would look at it from the standpoint of the reality we have now: Not all of our schools are excellent but some of them are.

M1 I don't care how skilled the LEAs are. As long as the schools are good, I don't care.

M3 The school system, we pay you to do the job: deal with it. The fact that it's hard, if you're not up to the task - - we'll roll somebody in there that is. One of the challenges has always been: the beneficiaries of a difficult to navigate system are the most affluent, the people with the most social capital. I grew up in an era where there were lots of available seats and lots of desirable schools. I mean enrollment was low but the byproduct was that for people who knew how to navigate the system they were able to get into schools they wanted. So we never got to fix the underlying problem that we have a city with a small number of good schools.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

So do you want to talk about what's most important? What's least important? What's the easiest way to tackle this?

W1 Simple to administer and fully utilizes public facilities and grounds: bottom of the list.

Efficient use of public funds?

W1 That is ideal.

M1 I think that's important because it's a measure of solidarity. If the system is inefficient then the rich will be able to trick the system.

M3 Interesting. I think of it differently. I think sometimes stuff are not particularly efficient and distribution of resources needs to be less equal to achieve the outcome we want for everybody. When we say efficient use of public funds what are we..?

Well that's the question: Efficient or Effective?

M3 Effective I'm all for.

M1 We want the most knowledge production per unit dollar so you would put all the money in one school effectively.

M2 For me personally? I don't know. When I think of school I think of the quality of the education and then the potential logistics for attendance right. In my mind those are not equal obviously. I'd opt for quality, so the logistical part would be less important but it's still pretty important especially at a younger age.

You mean you'd opt for quality even if it required more distance to travel?

M2 Yes.

W1 But you value distance right? And strengthening neighborhood schools.

M1 I think in the maximum choice - - quality, for families to have as many choices as possible. I don't think that's as important as if you had two or three good ones.

M3 Agreed.

W1 I think that might vary by age of the child. There might be something about how the child learns – you might want more choices as the child gets older.

M1 I would agree with that but I think from a system design perspective I wouldn't want to maximize choice before getting better quality.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

M3 What we have now is a family can have dozens of bad choices at every school level. The problem isn't a lack of choices, it's that the choices are not very good. If I had few choices but they were all good then I wouldn't complain.

Well as you are mentioning lotteries, what about predictability of families?

M1 I think it's really important because at least it gives you time to plan if you don't like what you're going to get. Plan financially; you have to arrange your life around these things.

M3 Yea it's very important because when you talk about housing it's a long-term investment and when you talk about your children, each one is 12-14 years in. That's a long time for us. We started this neighborhood school with a different set of assumptions than there are today. And those assumptions will change again. If you knew "this was up for debate every 10 years" then you make decisions accordingly.

So predictable would be, sounds like 5s? What are other 5s we've got here?

W1 School proximity for elementary school. Less true for middle and high school.

Agreed all around.

M1 I think economic diversity is important.

W1 More than racial and culture?

M1 Yes. I think in my line of work racial diversity is easy to achieve compared to economic diversity.

What about academically diverse?

M1 I think that's important early on. I think it's less important later.

Why?

M1 Because when kids are young they really benefit from exposure to people with different abilities and they learn a lot. That's really important but as they progress through the system, to maximize their own skills it might help to be with some like-minded people. If you play this out towards graduate school and beyond -- you get more and more specialized and people are more and more skilled the same. Ultimately, diversity in schooling is a hindrance. That's how I understand it.

M2 I don't find sorting by academic ability very important.

Strengthening the system of neighborhood schools?

M1 So if you read this as "should everyone have access to good schools" then I agree. If you combine that with some geography then I agree elementary school is good to have locally. So I'd prioritize that there should be a really strong elementary school in every neighborhood. But that's not as

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

important in middle and high school. There doesn't need to be a great high school in every neighborhood.

Are there other things that are really important that we don't have here?

W1 I think as a value, the equitable access to high quality programs in the abstract it's a very high value as a parent. Would I like to have the best access, certainly yes, but as someone who wants our whole city of parents to have that I would place that as High. It's just that that's intention with not putting choice over everything. If you have neighborhood boundaries then as a result of that you are not going to have equitable access because people's neighborhood costs of living are related to people's neighborhood choice so you just won't have that value aligned with the neighborhood schools.

So neighborhood schools then . . .

W1 I think neighborhood schools and equitable access is important but I don't see those things aligned as we know it because as it currently is we have more privileged neighborhoods with more privileged school choice and vice versa. So you don't have equitable choice. If you keep the neighborhood proximity as a high value the school value has to change across the city for that to exist as a value.

M3 I'm there with you and actually feel as though . . . I feel pretty strongly that actually if we're going to have an environment that says anyone is going to have access to good schools in their neighborhood then everyone has to have that. But we've given that only to the most affluent in the city. Because of economics people have a different set of choices. If there were no neighborhood schools and we got into a school that was in a different neighborhood, we could just move. But most people in the city cannot afford to do that. I feel pretty strongly that we have to figure out a way to deliver high quality to people wherever they live. It can't just be for kids with two parents with two cars who can get anywhere in the city who have a good default and option to go to better places.

M1 I think this is how we allocate funding.

M3 I agree. Over the years we've been expanding access to PreK programs. I certainly appreciated it and benefited from it because I no longer had to pay for private pre-school but the reality is in the grand scheme of things the District would have been far better off to deliver those resources to those children who were in far greater need than parents who could find other options and pay for them. The lack of investment in a group of children in the city who desperately need that to have a fighting change is bad resource allocation. The problem is we don't want to say those things to people.

W1 There is also maybe support for that spending. Politically, there may be more support for that spending under certain circumstances – pay for more affluent students too.

M3 Right. And people don't believe that the additional margin spent by DCPS won't manifest itself in an additional unit of benefit for each child. It's hard for me as a rational person to look at the span

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

of Pre-K. It makes no sense: where we're putting money and who we're spending money on? There are children in this city who need more than what we're giving them.

I think we've covered all of these items. Is there more that you want to add?

M3 Well there is no path for you to live in whatever neighborhood you live in and plot out your child's path from DCPS to charter and back to DCPS. I mean you can try it and roll the dice. Collaboration across sectors might be useful.

There's been talk about assigning feeder rights into DCPS from charter school . . . Thoughts?

W1 It does make sense. It does as a way try to bring schools back into the DCPS system, but when you talk about people moving between them . . . and I think it could have a lot of benefits, I can see how there could be benefits. But those schools have specialized in ways, or many of them at least, that I think would limit the value of some of the basic schools around the neighborhood and feeder patterns.

M1 The implementation would be . . . I mean you don't want charter schools to exist because they have slots. You would want to sustain predictability so you need some blend of that. I'm not opposed but I don't know how you implement that.

M3 One reason I raise that is because there is something there that addresses issues around predictability for parents – one of the challenges for not having this – I mean the reality is we build this school in the neighborhood the residents of the neighborhood have no greater right to attend. If you have a good charter school you could have a benefit to the neighborhood except you don't because there is no right for them to go there. We have more good schools now than 10 years ago but because there is no connecting them then it hasn't done much. You just have more lottery tickets to buy.

We're running out of time but we need to talk about any suggestions on how to make this a public dialogue that builds community . . .

M3 I think someone else said this, I think they have to get out in front and address the primary issue here that it's ALL about quality. I mean I care about the assignment policy as much as anybody else but if they don't fix the quality then this is a process that begets losers. There are no winners. I think one of the challenges here is that DCPS hasn't demonstrated a capacity to improve schools for people to feel confident that they will be able to be in a good school. That conversation has to be embedded in it a real viable workable plan to increase the number in a significant way of good schools peoples can send their children to. IN the absence of that, this is ONLY a divisive conversation. The diversity one is a great divisive issue. My neighborhoods all talk about how we've got to push the diversity issue. To be honest, it's important because it benefits us. But listen, I'm not going to push that as the most important thing because the reality is we're just benefitting us. You can fix diversity, but we're still screwed. It's about the supply of quality because otherwise it does divide. Most parents will fight for what's good for their children.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

M1 The solution of these collective action problems is hard. If people really believed that the system could provide better schooling then they'd say, alright you can flex the line. What you have now are cases such as at Deal where people don't have that belief that schools will get better. So they're putting up this suboptimal situation but they're nervous so they accept it. To move away from that the real challenge for the public system is to rebuild the trust, get more rich people back in it and get their money and use that to better the system. Moving in the direction of improved schools also means finding ways to retain high-income people who want that service.

Would grandfathering provide the time necessary?

M1 Meaning in Mt. Pleasant we might be able to stay in Deal and Wilson?

M1 In a political calculation, there are several ways to start. One is to engage the beneficiaries. Convince them to become politically active. Another is to get a plan that doesn't harm the interest groups and convinces them they won't be harmed. That kind of strategizing is probably the underpinning of a major reform. Otherwise you're just talking about this nervousness that ends up pitting one family against the other.

M3 I think the grandfather is just to keep everyone from completely flipping out that you have to do because there are going to be some significant shifts and you have to give people . . . the question is how much time? That's a hard one to answer. We bought a house 8 years ago and how are we going to feel if things change in the near term that cost us something? People who are buying houses right now may be working under assumptions that they are able to go to a specific school because of that house. There also needs to be a promise of improved service though. Does the school system believe they can actually deliver on their end of the equation that in that amount of time the problem is solved? The feeder pattern is a perfect example. They were going to change the boundaries in 2008 and for whatever reason we got the feeder patterns, which in the near term made things better for a subset of people but it also accelerated the problem we have now. We still don't have enough good schools.

M3 If all the schools are just not even great but "we raise the floor to a certain point" all of this goes away and everybody is happily skipping along. The painful part is the people who are getting served the worst have the least awareness of just how bad they really have it. They just don't know. They aren't making a calculated decision to send their kids to bad schools, they just don't know. They may think they are sending their kids to schools with good indicators, but they're not.

Focus Group 5A: Deanwood Recreation Center, December 4, 2013

Purpose of the focus group is to gather input about your wishes and concerns about student assignment and school choice . . . (Introductory matter).

I'll ask you to introduce yourselves and say if there is a school that you connect to or a part of the city that you hail from . . . just so we get to know each other. . .

Participants:

- Facilitator: I teach at a local University.
- Assistant Facilitator: I am a graduate student and I'm helping out.
 1. I work at DCPS.
 2. I live in the Rosedale community which is in Ward 6.
 3. I live in Ward 7.
 4. I teach at HD Woodson.
 5. I live in Ward 7.
 6. I am a Ward 7 resident; I have no children as yet.

Thank you all for coming and spending a weekday evening with us as well.

Facilitator explains process, reads through a paragraph of information. . . .

What aspects of student assignment and school choice work well and what aspects of the student assignment and school choice process work well. And please feel free to jump in . . . I'll just act as traffic monitor.

4. I definitely want to keep a neighborhood system. I wouldn't want to say that it is working well in terms of maintaining it but I definitely want to keep it.

F – So you want to keep the geographic boundaries for neighborhood schools?

4. I know we need to keep neighborhood high schools - - the comprehensive high schools - - and more than just three. Not just Woodson, Anacostia and Ballou.

F – Other folks? **Nodding heads . . .** What aspects are either working well or you would want to keep?

3. The lottery system. We would definitely want to keep.

F – So the lottery system where you apply to different schools . . .

5. I would say that some things work well for some people, depending on who they are and where they live. And because I am a long-standing resident of the city where my children were born, and where they attended schools. Choices were not always available to me. Many parents - - their only choice is a poorly performing and under-resourced neighborhood school and a poorly performing charter school. So I think

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

that talking about boundaries and their alignment, particular before you talk about program and the common core is a mistake.

F – So you would change the conversation to talk about program alignment before . . .

5. I would change the conversation to evidence as much equity as possible so people have real choice. If I am interested in a lottery, I have to be very much aware of what's available to me in my neighborhood so if I have to resort to a lottery, then my options are probably limited to what I would prefer. And that does not exist in my immediate neighborhood.

F – So using the lottery if things aren't working in the neighborhood . . .

5. Well I have a long history. My own children were subject to bussing. A lot of people do not know that bussing happened in the District. I have a lot of institutional memory. My oldest son – who was born in SE Washing DC, raised up in Washington DC - - was not able to attend a public school all day because they were over-crowded. At that time there were about 150,000 DC public school students and people were bused from SE Washington to NW Washington. And that was to benefit the community in NW Washington because there were no children in NW Washington, pretty much. So very clever systems were devised to keep those schools open, and as you see now some 40 years later, those NW schools remain open and many of the schools in SE Washington and NE Washington have been closed while many of the students who go to DC public schools continue to be transported across the river to those schools in the western part of the city. And that's possible because of the lottery system. Prior to the lottery system it was pretty much political decisions as to who had access, who could negotiate access and who could move their children - - who could afford to do that.

F – Thank you for sharing that. Welcome. [Greets a late-comer] We're talking about the current student assignment and school choice system and what aspects would you want to keep and what aspects you want to see changed. We've talked a little bit about the neighborhood school as something that folks might want to keep but also about what works well for whom. But other people, please continue and chime in about things you want to keep - - the lottery has been mentioned -- and things you want to change . . .

2. I think there's been a lot of change as a result of school closures and so I believe that we should have good schools in every neighborhood, that there should be equity across the board and you shouldn't have to resort to a lottery to have a quality school in your neighborhood. So I think - - I don't know exactly how to frame that but I think that making sure that all of our neighborhood schools are adequately funded, staffed, that have the resources and quality program options. A concern that I have – I want to be upfront right now that I don't have any kids yet - - but just thinking about down the line. My neighborhood school assignment changed because of the recent closings. My neighborhood school assignment has changed. My neighborhood school would be Minor, but the middle school is actually Browne EC which is not a traditional middle school but is a PK-8 school - - and the high school options - - well I have 3 options now: Woodson, Eastern and Dunbar, which are really in three very different geographic areas. I don't know what the programmatic differences are right now but I think it is very interesting the way it is set right now. The way that is right now, if I wanted my child to go to a traditional middle school of 6th through 8th – if I wanted my child to have the option to do what I think would be best for my child, just to be able to have that right [to a traditional middle school] - - I don't know that it is evenly distributed. I don't know how

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

other neighborhood patterns play out but I just know that for me and my wife . . . how this process is going to play out and what options will be available is a concern.

F – So issues of equity across different schools and also it sounds like access to different options, like middle school, for example [are important].

1. I would agree with that. With so many schools closing, I feel that a lot of families with the situation with the high schools. So you have Eastern over here and Dunbar over there and Woodson a hike away . . . and if Dunbar doesn't have any feeders, then the last one is Woodson then that isn't really fair. So I think the whole idea of the boundary re-design is so families have equal opportunities. So many families have 4 feeder patterns and some have one. So I think to make it more parallel across feeder patterns and destination schools, then that's what's going to make it better for more families because some families have so much choice and some families have one option.

F – Great, great.

4. As a teacher at a high school I'm greatly concerned by a unified lottery and by lotteries in general because it tends to provide And when our kids do get siphoned off by the lottery - - and boy they do get siphoned off - - because of our label as a poor performing school which I [do, don't to agree with] - - kids don't want to go to the school. So if you have never seen the school . . . So the lottery concerns me because it doesn't suggest that there is that dedication to equity but rather it is a kind of free-for-all where whoever can grab the kid gets the kid. And unfortunately the schools that keep getting the same label of being failing over and over, where they are pretty much telling you that "you must not love them [the students]" – this is a terrible label. We are not going to win that game. We are just destined to lose. And the fewer kids we have the more they are going to take away from us and it's a spiral that we can't escape from. The lottery is a real problem and the proliferation of charter schools - - because they are untested and they fail the tests but they still manage to stay open and not get the kind of labels that we get and they can spend lots and lots of money on advertising - - which they do – and in my opinion not telling the truth, and then sending back their kids once they get the money. And it's now December and but . . . I'm really concerned. I see way more that is good at the moment and I think that neighborhood schools are the ones that are suffering because of the system and that un-tested and pretty much un-regulated charter schools - - I mean they regulate themselves – and not closing themselves down and inflating their work to get that money . . . I'm really concerned right now and this process of deciding which kids go where and how they are assigned and perhaps then how they can transfer - - and the transfer thing is a big issue, especially the voluntary ones – they call it voluntary because they make it so terrible for the kids that they make it unbearable and they leave – and the kids' going to leave. But there has to be some rules to make it fair.

6. Question: help me because I'm trying to come in on the tail end of - - not just this question but the whole re-districting of it - - how would it work. I mean what is the proposed plan right now.

F – Well right now there isn't a comprehensive proposed plan yet that we would have to share with you in these focus groups. The purpose of the focus groups is to provide input about what's working well, what's not and what we're going to get to in a little bit - - what values are going to guide the process of developing the plan.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

3. I kind of listened to what you have said and I kind of agree with a lot of it but it is like a half-dozen here and a half-dozen there. My kids have used the lottery system and it has worked well for them but it is unfortunate because in our budget we have a gas fund so we are able to get them to where they need to be. And it has not presented a hardship for us but there are many times when I wish I could open the door and say “walk to school.” But I cannot and have not been able to do so. I think the charter schools. . . I do not understand why they continue to allow charter schools to continue to open but you want to increase your enrollment at DCPS. It makes absolutely no sense to me whatsoever. It’s just a defeatist kind of attitude. Why would you continue to keep doing that? Either model what they are doing if they are doing so great . . . but I’ve had plenty of conversations . . . if the charter schools are doing so great, then they should be far exceeding what DCPS is doing. But they are not doing that. They are maybe a little better. I haven’t seen . . .

5. In some instances.

3. Yes. But I have not seen more than 50% of charter schools exceeding what DCPS is doing. I just think that they [should not let them] keep doing that. And just like you said, the money follows the child and when you put your child out there. I have plenty of parent friends who say “if [my child] doesn’t [pick it up] then in January, he’s out”. You know they ran to the charter schools: “Hey! This is a great new school! They’re going to do this and they’re going to do that for my child!” And I was like: “Look, sometimes you jump out the pan into the fire.” And not giving things a chance, and it just seemed like the greatest, newest thing - - and now you’ve lost your spot. Now what are you supposed to do? And what I see is with, I guess what have we got now, about 600,000 people now? You’ve got a lot more people and I think with a lot of people who had their children in private schools move back into the city and now they can’t afford the tuition AND the house now. So they are moving to make the schools better – which is great – but I think a lot of it is parental involvement. You can have the best teachers there all day long from 8 to 4, but if you don’t get to the parents . . . It’s just like you said. It’s not necessarily that your high school is a low-performing school, you have other issues that you have to deal with. If parents don’t appreciate education it doesn’t matter if you have good teachers, bad teachers or mediocre teachers, if you don’t get to the parents and I think that’s the biggest part that we miss out on. We’re going to put all these resources into the school but what are you doing to get the parents to have more responsibility for their child’s education. I mean I can send my children to school but at the end of the day, it’s my responsibility if my children don’t learn what they’re supposed to learn.

5. Well the research suggests that it is not parental involvement that makes the big difference, but that it’s economics and the educational attainment of the parents that make the difference. Being poor makes a difference. So if schools are located in neighborhoods where there are limited neighborhood resources and limited income, then it seems to me that there are many places in America, even in urban America, where public schools perform well in the midst of poverty, that’s also a fact. So the fact that schools are under-resourced contributes to failure. It contributes to failure because of the fact that those parents who contribute to the lottery won’t send their children to schools in their neighborhood. It contributes to the fact that violence, lack of safety and security issues are prevalent because when students are not engaged - - irrespective of where they come from – they tend to act out. I’ve been an educator for 40 years and I have seen both sides of that coin. You put the resources, the programs, you engage young people, you have great expectations for them to achieve . . . you not only put the hard resources there but the human resources there - - and you prepare children for success - - but the parents aren’t going to be there. It’s not going to happen. So parent who have the ability to negotiate access, who know how to go to the computer, download the information, apply for the lottery, those parents are seeking the options outside

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

of where they live because they have not been willing to fight for the resources in their own neighborhoods. It's better to switch than fight. That's what I've seen in 45 years living in Washington DC, being a teacher in the school system and being a parent of children who went to DC public schools. It breaks down along income; income and the educational attainment of the parents. Middle class parents who are educated are more inclined to invest in finding options for their children whether they are in the public or the private sector. And that has happened in Washington DC over time. And it is still happening. The change in the composition of the city, not just necessarily the 100,000 plus new residents in the last two or three years bring us from about 600,000 to about 650,000 residents now. A lot more people are coming into the city with children, opting to put their children in their neighborhood schools rather than pay tuition, irrespective of whether they can afford it or not. Those are options that sometimes parents choose because that's what they want for their children.

3. So parental choice? So people who don't have that income don't make that choice?

5. In many instances they don't.

3. I have to disagree with you. And I understand and respect that you've had that experience, but what I'm saying to you . . . we have a low performing school in our neighborhood and I volunteered with some activities there . . . but what I realized is that it is difficult for students sometimes to read. And sometimes when they have difficulty, when they are taking the tests . . . and a lot of times if you don't speak grammatically correctly it is difficult for you to read a grammatically correct sentence. And if you have no reinforcement for that in your home, then how do you expect for that child to perform? It starts somewhere with the parents at home. I totally disagree that it does not start at the home. People, parents make a choice. If you think that it is strictly income, how do you suggest to resolve it? We've got to start somewhere.

5. The research says that the educational attainment of the parent - - not just income but home resources - - how parents are able to access resources - - may depend on how capable they are. And I'm suggesting to you that whether they are perceived as being active or not they need to have good schools in their neighborhoods and that can make a difference for that generation maybe that it didn't make for that parent's generation.

F – So let me jump in here and just shift us a little bit. I hate to interrupt a good discussion but I also am mindful of the questions that we want to cover and I want to get folks questions surfaced before that.

Before I move us on I want to get us back to where we started which are issues of assignment and boundaries. And I'm totally hearing that there are issues that feed into that but that are not that. And I know I'm narrowing you but bear with me. So in thinking about student assignment and boundaries I want to make sure that we've uncovered anything that you think is currently working well that we haven't already raised, and with these concerns and the issues we've talked about, what is it about the assignment and the boundaries that is a concern or that isn't working well. Are there are aspects related to how the current boundaries and assignment that are not working or that need to change. You may not know how they are not working but that they are not working at the moment.

4. Does that include actually identifying just where the kid lives? Because now people sometimes sort of skirt the system -- like giving false addresses to get the school they want, or they live in Maryland but give a false address to get the school they want. A part of what's not working is that it is left to the schools

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

themselves to try to figure that out. Like there is one registrar and no . . . Especially now; we get new kids every week. We can't go to every kid's home to figure out where they live; plus these kids do legitimately live in more than one place, especially with our population. Like, even if they tried to show up in the home, they would not necessarily find their parents. I know it's hard to figure out a system to try to figure out a more accurate system for registration. And I know that to have students register every single year, changes the documentation on a regular basis. To fill out forms - - that is not going to feel purposeful. We're the ones that have to try to fix their mistakes. We have to send home forms to the parents and then get the forms back again. And all of that is our money just sitting there. If those forms don't show back up . . . Just that entire process. And then on the back end if a kid leaves . . . we're supposed to track them? That kid just goes off to a charter school and doesn't really tell us where they go - - we get accused of having a drop-out on our hands. So like the entire process depends on the school and all of our livelihoods depend on the process. That literal process just to check on and make sure it is legitimate . . .

F – That's a great example of the things that we hope this will help to surface. So the actual process of the registration and verification that follows on assignment of boundaries. Thanks for that. Other things? Either way that as the process goes forward you say "let's keep some aspect of this" or something that's related to the assignment and boundaries that currently is not working or we should change or revisit. And I don't mean that there is one, I just want to make sure that we get all the things. . .

3. I think just the closings of all the schools in Wards 7 and 8 and there are so many issues that touch all of that everybody else brought up like security issues and neighborhood gang issues. And thank heavens the kids can ride the bus for free which helps with transportation issues. But kids, little kids, have had their neighborhood schools closed and they have no way to get them over . . .

5. And the cost of gas and that's a big thing with some budgets . . .

3. We make the sacrifice. We have a gas fund. We deliberately and intentionally take money from the budget that could be going some other place to do that because that's what's important to us as parents.

And I don't think everybody values education the same way . . . I'll leave it at that. That's a whole other focus group.

F – Right. [Laughs] I know. I feel badly keeping us on the task. . . .

3. It's the closure of all the schools and bringing all these neighborhoods together . . . that's just a major security risk.

4. The lack of a plan. That's a constant problem. It's random in many ways. Obviously they planned something but it wasn't a plan that involves a lot of thought or discussion. It's created a lot of involuntary transfers.

F – So when you're talking about a plan, you mean a plan for the closures?

4. Yes.

F- Yes, got it.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

4. I mean we could have a ten year plan. I get it. Demographics change. Fine, great, I get that. But in terms of closing a school, they should only be closed for demographic reasons. And it should be planned years in advance. With a plan for where kids are to go with a plan five years out. Like, this neighborhood's been shrinking for a long time now, this school is going to close but we've already got the five year plan up and we've already fixed everything up.

2. I don't know that I necessarily agree that we should never close schools. I don't want us to get into a situation like we are just preserving things just because. If it is not producing results or offering quality programs. . . I don't want us to get into that level of "you can never close a school". But I looked it up to see "OK, there's no middle school right here". I think that because of the closures that it's a bit all over the place right now and it would be helpful through this process if they really thought about for every family in the city they really thought about what is a reasonable, within walking distance, quality option that people have. And I don't know that we have that. So I would like for this process to try to in some way provide some of that equity. Or think about some of the options that someone could have that's within a reasonable distance of their home. And if there are shortfalls, then that's where we may need to identify, if there is no viable middle school option here, then we need to build one or create a program. I would just hope that this process is looking at how to look at that kind of problem and how it would impact individual families so that it is somewhat predictable at least for elementary school families. I think for elementary school and preschool I think every kid should be able to walk to school and feel safe doing that and not having it based on just an arbitrary distance. Because even some times when you look on a map, distance might be a half-mile but you have to cross 3 busy streets and I think that that has to be considered as well. But I think that just really making sure that families have actual options in light of all of the changes that have happened in the past few years.

F – Thank you. Well that leads us nicely into a shift into talking about what principles and values should be guiding this process so I'm going to move us just a little bit now to begin to talk about as this process is going forward, what do you recommend or advise or prioritize as the principles and values that should be at the top of the list for guiding this process. So you were just talking about a principle of maybe walkability or access and that would be an example of one of those principles. On the green sheet that is in front of you that looks like a somewhat complicated table are some examples of principles or values that could guide the boundary and assignment process. And if you are willing before you go, we would love for you to fill in as many as you can and want, rating. You could have all 5s - - you don't have to rank them vis-à-vis each other - - and they are for the elementary, middle school and high school level. I'd like to use this as a starting point for this discussion about principles and values to guide this review. Let's start by focusing on elementary school. With this list or something that's not on this list, if you - - which we are - - advising the advisory group on how to do this what would you say to them about which of these things are going to be at the top of your list of things that are going to guide your decision about assignment and boundary. "This is a priority for me for elementary school".

2. I would put a 5 by proximity just because I think for elementary school I think it is very important that a school is close by. Not that I don't think you can go to an elementary school at a distance but I think it is very important for elementary school that it is close by.

F – Great. So you would put a five on proximity as an important value or principle.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

5. I would say program alignment. That in every community there are [should be] language immersion programs. What tends to drive this whole pernicious system that we have cultivated in this District of the haves and have-nots is this business of having in their schools what other people and neighborhoods don't have so they are coveting and wanting very much to have their children in elementary schools with language immersion programs, with some semblance of STEM programs. So I would say that that's why I am opposed to boundaries at this point. Until there is evidence of a greater amount of equity across the city with respect to what all public consumers want for its children or what the community must want for its children then to talk about values inevitably leaves somebody out of the conversation. Because folks who want lots are not going to have their way unless they are grandfathered in. They are taking advantage of it now because what people are going to say who have the power is that "we are no longer interested in transporting children from one part of the city to another. Because our schools are becoming over-crowded so we want neighborhood schools to be preserved.

F – So this issue of equitable access . . .

5. Equitable access is critical.

1. Efficient use of public funds . . . I think a lot of times the schools that have specific programs such as IB and dual language, it comes from the community involvement. And supporting this to the principal and administration and them requesting that to central office in the hopes of getting those programs in their schools. So I think that if they have efficient use of public funds, and the community can get together, they can actually get these programs in these schools and actually re-build them so it's . . . somewhat . . . a part of these boundary redesigns so that creating these communities . . .

F – Great. So if I'm hearing you correctly, this efficient use of public funds is around how they work or how they are used in different neighborhoods.

1. In terms of the program alignment . . . that those public funds and joining other communities to take advantage of those public funds.

F – Got it.

1. Maybe making communities aware of the funds that are out there and how they can be utilized in the schools.

F – Great, thank you. What other things as we think about elementary school that are on this list - - or that are not on this list - -that you'd say in advising the advisory committee, that when you're talking about boundaries for elementary schools, you need to be thinking about this as you do it. We've talked about proximity we've talked about efficient use of public funds . . .

4. Strengthening neighborhood schools

F- Policies that do that.

6. I'm sorry I came in a little bit late. So are we ranking. . .

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

F - So the table is designed for you to rate how important each is, it's not designed for ranking. So it's rating for each of these principles, how important for example would it be for school choice and assignment policies to be simple to understand, just to take the first one when we're talking about elementary school boundaries. . . . So it sounds like we might have talked about all of the top ones we have for elementary schools . . . and we can always come back. But let's talk about middle school, and that's come up a couple of times in the discussion. What should guide or influence the discussion about boundaries when we're talking about middle school?

[all together not intelligible]

F – That there needs to be one? [Laughter]

4. There should be an elementary school clearly feeding into middle school so when you get your assignment, you know “OK”. Choice is always kind of floating around there but there should be some point where I know there is a guaranteed spot for me at the those three locations. They if you want to decide if you like your three locations, then

F – So that there's a clear, predictable progression from elementary to middle to high and you know where that's going to be.

4. If it's predictable then the schools can talk about aligning. What's the point of aligning when a middle school can just disappear? So the school you spent all this time aligning with . . . Like in terms of predictability you also need to know who's in there. If the principals are constantly changing like every two years, like we've had for seven years now - - we can't align program because every two years the programs change. We get new people and they have their new ideas. But even for parents who are making a choice, how can you plan long-term if everything is so unstable within the schools that you can't plan because there is constant change.

F – So thinking about predictability of staff is one aspect of thinking about that stability when thinking about middle school.

5. I think that one of the flaws in considering boundaries for any schools, elementary, middle or high school - - I would have less concerns for high schools except for feeder patterns - - but these concerns tend to accentuate the fact that we are putting the cart before the horse. We have so many problems around how we educate children in this city it becomes almost absurd to talk about drawing lines. Further depriving families and communities from having some input into how they would try to grow good schools. In the face of this privatization - - this whole movement in the country of consumerism driving education as opposed to good citizenship - - it should be the objective of public education to produce good citizens. We are going to be indicted if we fall short of creating a sense of urgency around getting people involved in ways that would give buy-in to people having access to what we know what best serves young people irrespective of how much money they make or how [well educated] their parents are.

F – So the notion of engaging the community, parents and others in this entire process and the notion that quality cannot be divorced from or come after boundaries . . .

5. There's already been controversy around how the Advisory Committee was put together initially, and who made up the Advisory Committee has been a source of controversy already about the lack of

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

transparency around the meetings, that they are not open to the public and that people's names don't want to be associated with certain ideas. I mean you are talking about public discourse here. Public schools, public property, public money. And so I think that somewhere in this conversation you would want to let a point of focus be "is this really the right way to proceed with leveling the playing field" - - whether this is the objective or not. But how do we get the best bang for our buck and how do we best educate all of our children irrespective of who they are or where they live.

F – Thank you. And transparency I heard – something that we had not raised so we'll add that to the list of priorities in this process. Other folks?

6. I'm looking at these . . . and some of this has to do with what was said earlier about consumerism . . . but I think at first glance when you say maximum choice for families, I mean that means as many options as possible? I think that most families, their knee jerk reaction would be that you would want to have as many options as possible. The problem is that people may have a lot of options but they don't necessarily consider them quality options. I mean, it is great if you go to the cereal aisle in the grocery but if none of those things work for what I need – if they are not nourishing me, sustaining me, then what's the point of having all of those choices?

5. Good analogy.

F – So the quality of the choices that we have . . .

6. I mean, I think you don't need as much choice if you have several strong options. And if you don't have strong options you don't really have choice. For me it's more important that we have a strong system of neighborhood schools because that then affords the people to have the opportunity to have choice. I'm just concerned with the way its presented. I think that most people, their knee-jerk reaction is to say "I want as many options as possible". Even though you don't really . . . I mean you are going to enroll your kid in at least one school at a time so you just want that to be the best school for your kid.

F – So this one that says maximum choice for you is not as much a priority as talking about quality choices being available.

6. Right. It's not just available; there are lots of things available. DCPS is the only place you are guaranteed to have access to. You are not guaranteed to have access to a charter or private school or anywhere else. So it has to be DCPS has quality neighborhood choices, otherwise the rest of the system can't sustain itself.

F – The system that everyone is guaranteed access to - - DCPS – has to have those quality choices. Not just quality generally.

6. Right.

2. Could I ask a question? I don't know how this plays in but is out of the realm of possibility that charters might have to be subject to a boundary process too? Could it ultimately say that if there is a charter school for instance right across the street from you that you are guaranteed a slot there or are they protected from that level of . . . is that something that could be a part of this process or something that they should consider as they are looking at . . .

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

6. They could give charters feeder rights and say that if you graduate from Cesar Chaves you could then feed into Woodson because the students from that neighborhood feed into Woodson. But I don't think there is anything that says that because this charter school is across the street from you that you then have the right to go to that charter.

5. Politically I don't think that's going to fly.

4. The council . . .

2. So it's never like a guarantee. Like DCPS is guaranteed by law . . . I just wonder if that's something to eventually think about - - for this group to think about at all. Practically speaking if I am looking across the street but you're telling me that I have to go all the way across town if I don't win this lottery, it just seems intrinsically a little bit unfair. I'm just wondering if that's like part of the discussion at all or if that's just completely off the table?

F – What I should say just about this group is that there aren't rules about what's on or off the table. So whatever you think should be considered in that process as we are talking about priorities I would say "say it" so we at least capture it for you and can summarize it as it goes back up as a consideration that you-all thought was important.

2. So I would like to add that. [Laughter].

F – Duly noted.

5. I would like to disagree with that because in my view, and I think history will bear me out, charter schools are not public schools of right. We give federal money to Harvard and Yale but I daresay they are not called public institutions either – they are private schools. So getting public money at the end of the day does not make a charter school a public school. What we are witnessing in the District is a dual school system of the haves and the have-nots, where many of the have-nots are literally going to be forced to send their children to charter schools because those are going to be the only schools that are accessible to them. So I would like to stick with the public discourse. When you look at a charter school like KIPP for example, they have already envisioned owning their students from day one from middle school to high school, and they already have a plan on the table to build a high school in the city which will probably not be in the immediate neighborhoods of many of the children that they educate. So I doubt if we are ever going to get neighborhood preference as a law. I don't think that's going to fly.

2. But why not push for it? If KIPP is coming into the neighborhood and it is a good option, then I want to have my child to have the right to get there.

5. Because right now . . . and let me be real clear. People talk about choice. It might be that their only choice is a poorly performing charter school and a poorly performing traditional school. So the end game is that those young people are being deprived of a quality education because we don't have a lot of oversight over the charters. We don't have the ability - - and that's a reality. And that's why I think that at some point there has to be moratorium on charter growth because it is really killing off the traditional public schools. And at the end of the day you cannot say that because Johnny is not performing well at this charter that he is going to get the support that he needs and that child will stay there. Oftentimes they are pushed right out, back into the very schools that their parents chose to remove them from.

6. I'm not sure where this fits into the conversation, but I do think it is relevant. I do think that the intentions around neighborhood preference are good intentions. I am concerned though when I see -- I don't have anything against charters -- I am concerned when I see most of our charter schools in this ward -- they are not really out-performing most of our traditional public schools. So when you give somebody the right to go to another school that is not doing a kid any more good than the school they automatically have the right to go to -- it doesn't help. I do think it is something to think about when we have concentrations of charters in certain parts of the city and not in other parts. I think it goes back to what I said about choice, people will want to have quality choices. And a lot of times I think there is the assumption that charters are better and that's why people put their kids there. But they are not all better. Just as there are some great DCPS schools there are some great charter schools there are some bad charter schools there are some DCPS schools that are struggling. I just don't know what good it does me to get the right to go to a school that is ultimately the same. I saw something about facilities on here . . . some of the facilities are worse off than DCPS . . . but are you really giving students more access to something that is going to put them in a better place? I don't know.

F – So this emphasis on the quality when we are talking about what options and what choices are across whatever the domain is whether it is DCPS or charters. Absolutely.

3. I think we really need to change the oversight of charters. I think they need to be held to a more restrictive standard. They shouldn't be allowed to . . . we should change the way we distribute funds to them. It's not fair that they get the money for students but then they push them out a couple of weeks later.

F – Let me move us to thinking about high schools. So high schools have come up in our discussion tonight. Again in thinking about assignment and boundaries and that process that is being considered and re-considered over the coming months for high school boundaries and assignment what's most important to you in guiding that process in determining what values and principles should guide . . . And again it is not restricted to what's printed here. What's the top of your list? It could also be the same as elementary schools or middle schools but I want to make sure that we talk about what's a priority for high schools.

3. I think they are a lot the same. Maybe more with safety.

F – Safety -- could you just say a little more about what you mean by safety?

3. I think the example with Spingarn closing you dumped a lot of kids into Woodson, Anacostia, Dunbar, and that created cultural problems. You had different neighborhoods that were joined together which created major security concerns. And for this ward the only high school there is Woodson.

5. As far as traditional schools are concerned -- there are charter high schools -- I actually think that this would be an opportunity for the city to really do something really great and that is to allow for a lot of options around specificity. That if I'm interested in the arts I get to go to Duke Ellington. If I were destined to be an engineer, I should have access to a high performing STEM school irrespective as to where it is in the city. I think we would have to be very careful. We've made provision for those students who are more inclined to liberal arts. They have strong humanities programs and . . . This is where I really do think that choice, competition, options . . . But at this point it would be a little unfair because some of the kids would have a decisive advantage over others if you were to revert to test scores. I would not allow test scores to

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

be the driving force in determining who gets into which school but there would have to be other kinds of authentic assessments to give the students - - much like at Ellington where the students have to demonstrate both an aptitude for learning, they have to display some considerable talent for the area they are going into and I think we would really alter. . . I was happy to hear that there is now some consideration for some changing the high schools in the District. But I think that for so many of student in the District, I think the dropout rate has been driven by the fact that we have not been visionary, nor have we had a plan to address what happens to someone when they have failed the latter part of grade school, failed completely through middle school and you are looking for somewhere to send them for high school where they are not prepared to do anything but cut-up, disrupt . . . And we have a decisive problem in this city with youth and youth crime and we have not prepared the learning environment or the necessary kinds of schools that would service these young people and give them a second chance to find a way forward.

3. We need more vocational programs. All of the schools closed that have vocational programs. But then look at Phelps. That's an application school right here in this area. How many of the kids in Ward 5 - - where Phelps is - - how many of the kids from that area actually attend Phelps? The same rules should apply - - the application schools like Phelps, Wilson, they are almost like charter schools where they kick the kids out as well. And they go back to Anacostia . . . Woodson . . .

5. They are like private schools.

4. I am going to push back just a little bit on the idea of school choice just for high schools because I saw this play out in Chicago with disastrous effects. Arne Duncan single-handedly dismantled CPS - - which was already struggling, no doubt. When you open it up like that the kids who were already prepared to make a good choice, they pretty much did it by applying to McKinley Tech, or Walls or Banneker or they found a charter school that suited their needs. And the kids who did not bother, went to one and got kicked out of it - - they are going to end up at the comprehensive schools. I think we deserve all the high quality programming [at the application schools] but my kids at my school, they don't necessarily have a direction. I went to a high school that was strong in history and figured out that I was way more suited to history. And I still didn't figure it out until college. But I think there's something to be said for exposure across the board. And it's not that Tech and Phelps don't offer that - - I think they do - - I think they have pretty strong programming over all. But Woodson can offer some electives and that's great but kids just need a lot of exposure within their programs. I think kids do . . . there are some who are very talented artists, like "I want to be a singer and I'm going to Juilliard" and they go to Duke. We have kids at our school who are not quite that talented, they are not going to spend hours and hours just singing - - but they love to sing. So we want our choir program and we want our art program and we want our science. We have kids who may figure out that they are scientists but aren't quite at Tech level; just ready to dive into a bunch of engineering classes. I think I might agree that we should open up Phelps a bit more. I was looking at their magnet rate and you can have a like a 2. something [grade average] and still get into Phelps. But even the comprehensive schools should have the options that Wilson has. Wilson is huge so they can offer everything.

5. I taught at [one of the application schools] for ten years and let me tell you that a lot of times kids were selected if they didn't have bad remarks about conduct on their report cards.

4. I agree with that but I just don't think we should be sending our high schools into this specialty zone. Because I think there is something to be said for kids who don't know what they want and that they should have options in the high school to explore.

F – So one of the priorities for high school that you’re talking about is the neighborhood comprehensive high schools being a priority and the breadth of programming that should be available.

6. I grew up here. And I remember when we had academies inside the comprehensive high schools and I think that can be a good thing. Not as a way to track students but as a way to make sure that neighborhoods have comprehensive options and you don’t have to trek all the way across the city to get to a big comprehensive high school but at the same time allow for specialty programs. Like Woodson had the academy of finance inside Woodson. Why couldn’t you do both? One thing about high schools though - - and this goes back to feeder patterns - - Woodson right now has no feeder pattern. We talk about Wilson and why it is so successful, and how huge it is but that’s because of the strength of its feeder pattern. Like it has three schools that feed into it; it has Hardy feeding into it, it has Deal feeding into it and it has Oyster-Adams feeding into it. Deal has over 900 students where Kelly Miller has maybe 300. Deal will have more students graduating from its 8th grade class to go into Wilson than probably like 4 times over the number of students feeding into Kelly Miller . . . for the remedial classes for the kids who are not up to par. And we know that in DCPS your budget depends on how many kids you have. I think that is a recipe for failure. I really think that in this boundary process, if we are going to have these comprehensive high schools we have to be able to feed students into them so they can be schools. I don’t know how you are a school with no students. I think we have to look at how these schools are feeding, how big the classes that are coming into them are, because right now it’s not mathematically possible for Woodson to survive. It’s not mathematically possible for everybody who has the right to be able to go to Wilson to go to Wilson. It doesn’t make sense.

F – So that clear and strong feeder pattern for each of the neighborhood schools . . .

6. It is the feeder pattern and it is the physical catchment area. Woodson’s catchment area almost does not exist. I could go to - - based on right - - either Eastern or Anacostia - - and I live in Ward 7. I’m not saying that everybody in Ward 7 has to feed into Woodson, but a lot of people have no way to get there and they shouldn’t have to go through a lottery to get to the school that’s closest to them. It is not set up in a way for the school to stay alive let alone be successful, thrive. It doesn’t work and we’ve invested all this money in the building. I don’t know how those things go together.

F – So that’s terrific. So thinking about how the feeder patterns, the geographic catchment areas as strong priorities for the high school and high school boundaries. Are there any other priorities in thinking about high school . . .

6. Woodson is a matter-of-right school. Nominally it is a STEM school, but there are no other STEM schools in its feeder pattern. So if we are going to have a real conversation about program offerings, I don’t know how you can have just random scatterings of program offerings. That goes back to predictability, it goes to quality, it goes to all of it.

F – So that continuity of planning does cut across, our elementary, middle and high school discussions. It is somewhat artificial, the distinctions, but that’s come up across all those, the feeder patterns, the continuity. Other folks in terms of high school boundaries? . . . I just keep bringing us back to boundaries and assignment knowing that it’s all related. Anything we haven’t talked about yet?

3. I have just one question. When . . .

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

5. 1968, about. And that was propelled by lawsuits. The Skelly Wright decision on discrimination. There was pronounced discrimination in the nation's capital, coming away from a dual school system one for colored folk and one for white folk. In fact having a white superintendent at one time and a colored superintendent and a pernicious segregation system that was stopped. But all kinds of things were done to circumvent truly creating a dynamic and viable public education systems. Because largely, we had the exodus of black middle-class people 40 years ago away from the District. And we had lots of poor people who were locked into certain areas of the city and over time the schools went from about 150,000 students now down to 70 or 80,000 students.

F – We can pick up on the dynamic that you were talking about. We're coming to the end of our time. And I want to ask one more thing of you to consider or talk about that we're asking all of the focus groups . . .

5. Before we leave high schools, if I could just add one thing . . . Whatever happens from this initiative there has to be a re-visiting of how we engage disaffected populations. Young people who have been summarily left behind . . . not having an infrastructure that supports them early enough to see that they are headed down the wrong path academically. Even as we re-consider high schools we need to think about how willing are we going to be . . . I noticed the initiative to add money in the student formula for poor students. Some districts have been able to do incredible jobs of creating part work, part school days . . . a different effort of trying to catch these young people and prevent them from going to jail or creating havoc. That's a human a civic concern. It's a concern that we all have because somebody may not live in my neighborhood but they live in my world. It all portends to make life less safe and less harmonious for everyone.

F- That's a perfect segue into this last thing that I'm going to ask you to talk about. As we continue to have focus groups and through the decades this has been an on-going community discussion. So do you have any thoughts or suggestions as to how do we can make this public dialogue one that builds community as opposed to one that divides community? I know that's kind of an abstract question. But in thinking about how to make this conversation over the coming months . . . so we were thinking about how the advisory committee in March . . . What do need to recommend to say this is going to be a community building dialogue and process as opposed to a separating process?

2. That's a loaded question! [Laughter] I would think it would be helpful to ask about the boundaries but I think any discussion is going to have to come back to quality. Quality and equity are going to be huge. And I feel like it might be helpful . . . I mean, what is DCPS doing around quality? What is their plan in providing more equity across schools? What is the conversation if there is one so people know coming in "we're talking about boundaries but we also are talking about creating quality schools options and feeder patterns that make sense with program alignment". I think that absent that discussion it can feel like we're just talking about drawing lines and not just connecting people to resources.

F – Having those conversations together or simultaneously . . .

4. I think people see their school always on the receiving end of the quality option, their assigned school, which is unfortunate. They say "we don't have a quality choice in Ward 7" but I'm pretty sure I'm a choice in Ward 7. I think defining quality . . . I mean, we're under-resourced, we're struggling but we provide a quality education if kids just want to go in there are receive it. We do work at trying to convince [students]

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

that trying to receive a quality education . . . and we can always improve. But when I hear that word, I feel that we're not included in that word and that we're being written off. "This is just terrible." "We don't want to be in Woodson's boundary" we want to be in Eastern's boundary. Well you've just written off a whole bunch of schools. . . . And so that part of it is we do need more resources. We want the kids who want the resources to make their school better. By defining and having people talk through quality - - everyone wants great things for their kids. So it's defining [quality] throughout the discussion. So it may be that Ward 7 and the feeders to Woodson do say "We want STEM" and perhaps by discussing we can begin to advocate for Ward 7 and what the community wants for Ward 7. And yes, they can't be divided - boundaries and what's being offered in schools. Maybe weighing in to the Mayor and DCPS what we're interested in when they begin to draw the lines. So the community can see it not as "I just got written out of Eastern and I have to go to Woodson and now I'm mad" but it's about to happen. We're about to shut the door east of the river. We want to make that a positive thing because I think it can be.

F – But your point about the conversation about quality about what that means and that word can be a divisive word. That's an important point.

3 I would like to see a really strong survey instrument for the parents. A lot of times they cannot attend for whatever reason. Maybe it's a scheduling problem, maybe they don't know, maybe they are not familiar with what's being done. And look at the results based on schools, not just Wards. Look at it based on school performance. And then start working from that. I think a lot of times the voices of parents in Ward 7 are not heard. You have no real way of doing that. Those survey instruments have to be administered at the school to get to the parents. Because if you have a survey to be picked up at the Safeway and then mail it back --- well that's not going to happen. In order to get the best gauge you have to do it that way. A lot of times some of the surveys are great but they are skewed from the very beginning to exclude certain populations. Like Saturdays might be better for parents. But there are no Saturday focus group meetings.

F – Well not in this area - - but I get what you are

3. And it's just like testifying that we need more money in the budget. Well when are the hearings? They are at 10:00 at the Wilson building where there is no parking. So you have to dedicate an enormous part of your day to do that. And parents don't have that luxury. I have yet to see a 6-8:00 hearing and "come on down and it's free to park on the streets."

5. There are Saturday hearings but they are for kids but not for adults.

3. But it is deliberately set up to skew the results so that you can't hear the voices of people but not the voices of the PEOPLE who are affected the most by the decisions that the PEOPLE will make. And that's a critical piece. We have to get to them to . . . they sit here and think "well this should be good for Johnny" but if Johnny's parents is not here to say that Johnny needs another social worker at the school" and Johnny's parents haven't said. . . . Every area needs different resources. You may not need as many social workers in the application schools but you may need more in some of the low performing schools. So you can't give one social worker to each school. That doesn't necessarily work.

F – So this effort to be a community building conversation they've got to be willing to deliberately engage people who aren't able to come to one group on one day. So you're not just talking about the content of the survey but about how it gets to people.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

3. And that you're recording the results appropriately. When they say this is what they did east of the river and this is west of the park - - they are never going to match. So I think we could do a better job of trying to help the parents who don't use their voice.

F – That's a great . . .

5. I think I kind of share that thought as well. So we've given up on a lot of these parents because we've had mayoral control. And even that hasn't been evaluated to see how effective it has been. But I think at the end of the day with this process if you want it to be different than across the country . . . this whole movement towards consumerism, the haves vs. the have-nots, and what's going to be good for the have-nots is going to be controlled - - either charter schools or vouchers. And for people who have assets and who are perceived as being great contributors to the revenue base - - they will have choice or public neighborhood schools. I think DC should break out of that mold first of all. Begin by opening the discussions around this process to the public. There should be no behind closed doors meetings of those 21, 22, 23 or how many it will be when they complete the process - - and have them televised. And have people willing to speak truth to power and state publicly how they feel. Now if anything is going to kill off this initiative and create a kind of divisiveness, and contentiousness it is going to be the perception already that people were sneaked onto the committee or folks who are on it are telling others "I don't know why they asked me" "I don't know". So the process was flawed, people were overlooked, they were not even consulted in certain communities. And I've heard people saying "there are more charter folk on the committee than people who are affiliated with the traditional schools". Open the meetings up. Let's take another look at this thing open it to the whole community like these summits they have and let's bring the whole community to the fore and have a conversation. I suspect that what you said would be the end game. I would agree to some boundary or line being drawn that prevents me from going from here to here when I have everything I want over here. And if I don't have everything I want over here, the hell with you. It's going to create so much . . . and I've had the conversation with Mayor Gray - - and I've said to him "I will not vote for you, I will work against you, I will do everything I can to bring you down in my community if this situation is not rectified." We've done too much damage for too long not to deal with the white elephant in the room - - which is poverty. The choices and options for people here are so little . . . let's create a dynamic where people . . . If I can force somebody to buy health care even when they don't want it, I can create some schools in places where children will go and be completely available to some quality. Whatever it takes: social workers, healthcare specialists, job-training specialists, whatever that community needs to serve those young people who may have been dealt a bad hand from the womb to the tomb.

F – Thank you for that. I want to be respectful of time . . .

5. The fact that you have to ask these questions: "academically", "economically", "culturally" diverse. We know what the problems are.

F – Go ahead . . .

6. I have a question. This is going to be a problem no matter what. I think that most people would agree the right answer is you have quality options available to everyone or . . . and I testified and I sat through all the public witnesses. And the discourse was very divisive at times. People didn't say "I don't want my kids to go to school with those kids" but they said "We have an option and we can move" and it was . . . kids don't get to pick who their parents are. So you have to be able to . . . I think the purpose of public

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

education is to create that foundation because they are kids. It's not like they are adults who have done something wrong and therefore they don't have the right . . . there is something that has to happen in the facilitation of this process that does everything in its power to temper that difference. I don't know how you say to someone who has two jobs and gets to a focus group and then you have 10 other people sitting around and saying but I want to have the option . . . and those are the majority of the people who are going to come out . . . I think that has to be addressed. People don't come back or they don't feel like they are welcome to attend in the first place. I think they need to . . . this boundaries thing. And the fact that . . . I mean those boundaries are first of all older than I am and second of all we've already closed like who knows how many schools? We've been closing schools for 20 years. When I was five the school down the street closed and so we got new kindergarteners and . . . I was five and my testimony was that "I love my school" . . . so we've been doing this for so long that I think it is necessary because of some of the equity issues and the fact that we haven't addressed it has allowed these closures to go on . . . knowing how big a risk this is and how seriously we should take this, if it turns out we need to take longer to do it then why not do that? I think that . . . Not that it goes on for four years, but why would it have to be that the committee delivers that recommendation . . . I don't understand that.

5. In April and May when the primary is in April.

6. I feel that you have to be flexible, you have to meet people where they are, if you have to be intentional about what is allowed in this discussion, like the ground rules . . . but I completely agree with the other things that were said, I just think you have to . . . so do you want to put two check-marks in quality and what she said about parents being able to access [laughter] and just add me too?

F – Thank you for that. And thank you all for participating. Our job is to summarize and lift these comments and voices. And we are going to do it as accurately and as completely as we can so we appreciate your time and your patience and your willingness to engage on the issues.

Logistics reminders: we definitely need a consent form and if you can fill out the ratings we would love that.

Focus Group 5B: Deanwood Recreation Center, December 4, 2013

Participants:

- #1: High school after school staff member, with a PK3 student at Ludlow-Taylor
- #2: ANC Commissioner with a child at a private high school
- #3: Parent with a 4th grader Watkins
- #4: Parent with a child at Ludlow-Taylor, lives in Ward 7
- #5: Parent with children at School Within a School, Watkins, former Ward 7 elementary school staff member
- #6: Parent with children at Ludlow Taylor

Facilitator highlights elements and process

I have a question about the focus groups—are the focus groups representative?

Facilitator: Not trying to make groups representative, but doing outreach to make sure all communities have had opportunity to learn of and participate.

Facilitator: Other ways to become involved

Have they emailed back to work groups?

Facilitator: will be responding back to focus groups; addressed representation at ward 7 meeting; Will be new members soon; other ways to get input;

I am concerned about my constituents; so that those that are interested in our children are able to have a voice—we are still interested in HD Woodson; even though my kid goes to private school; HD Woodson has a proud tradition

I wanted to go to Capitol Hill focus group; this was my third choice even though I live near here.

Was this process driven by School-Within-a-School?

Our ward 7 kids helped those schools [that were under-enrolled, or not doing well]; and now the city wants to send kids back to ward 7 schools, but they are underperforming; I went to Woodson; I would not have a problem sending kids to Kelly miller or Woodson if it was on par with Stuart Hobson

I am a DCPS grad; I look at her children and my neighbors children here.; HD Woodson has a proud condition; HD Woodson is a major concern; it is only 45% capacity; it should be at 100%; 50% go across the river; it has everything that Wilson has, but the good teachers and programs are west of the river; if you are going to do all these boundary changes; the kids there now will not be there; look to the future

Bring STEM program where it should be; bring vocational and STEM; you will have 1% who don't want to do anything; I have my parents who live in Hillcrest, who are afraid to go to Woodson.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

HD Woodson won't be on the block to have a charter move in

Pool is not open at Woodson; we need programs in place; quality instructors; programs beyond the school day; we have students with high ratio of IEPs; we need the attention to those kids as well; this is why Hillcrest parents are afraid; program does not hold the attention of EVERY child; vocational holds the attention, so the focus is school; HD Woodson already has athletic programs to keep the kids; we need to stimulate the brain cells.

Schools are organized so that one size fits all in the classroom; advanced learners, remediation and average kid in one classroom; this is DCPS policy; this does not help anyone; DC had it at one time—Randall implemented aerospace in 1979—engineering; which pushed test scores up instantly.

Out of boundary lottery is not really random; PK3 got into NO school in the District; get the Maryland people out of DC schools; so many MD people in the schools.

Tracking used to be in the schools.

First they select by school; then how close (walking distance); but then I need to go where I work; but the "closest" school was really a problem; I can't go back and forth across the river. I needed the school near work, but preferences are for where you live.

It is about diversity for me; diversity is not possible in my neighborhood schools; I need diversity; it is a shame that we have black only and white only schools; with big differences among these schools.

Out of boundary works because we can choose; I don't want my kids going to segregated schools; schools would be more diverse if they had good programs—good foreign language programs; my kid is at Watkins. She is there because it looks like the schools I went to in CA. Jefferson is not diverse; at least let us try it; don't have the opportunity to try schools; Ellington is way over in Georgetown; if it were here, students would travel to come to here.

People forget about School Without Walls and Ellington; School Without Walls for kids who could not make it in the regular system; but it has changed over; Banneker High School; implementing programs where they drag kids from all over the city; if Ellington or School Without Walls were over here then I would go here.

If we bring good programs to Kelly Miller then it would feed to Woodson and it would be full; do not have substance in our schools.

I agree with one of the other speakers: since the city is transitional; I don't think kids should be put out; do not think kids should lose access to out-of-boundary; we have the chance with boundary; you will have big law suit on your hands if you re-segregate schools; my daughter is at Watkins; no higher achievement programs at Watkins; took out higher achievement programs last year; at the school the teacher has to give children on a higher level more work on the side; has to "sneak a little work in" is this the teaching to the test? We first left DCPS because of teaching to the test; middle child at Beers; took her out of Nannie H. Burroughs (private) and into Beers, three principals at Beers; so put her back into private school; we were told that we needed to hold her back; in the DCPS teachers mind, she thought her test scores were fine and

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

able to be promoted, private schools said she wasn't ready; that she wasn't prepared academically, no matter what the test scores said.

This process is backward: Implement programming, resources, and then look at process; doesn't make sense this way.

DCPS was so behind the charters; she was at DC Prep, but in PreK just got drill; I took her out and put her into DCPS—thought children should have nurturing. DCPS was far behind; but just got drill from DC Prep.

My daughter was at DC Prep teacher; said I ran out of books for your daughter—in Kinder. I took her out (she is at Watkins now).

Facilitator: Move to values . . . Programming is what is most important; tracking is important; and without tracking, programming isn't sufficient.

Don't even have to go past the first one—simple to understand. Look at the report card. The student report cards are too complicated; most parents want to know, are they passing, and are they okay?

What is super important is maximum choice for families.

The reason I didn't put 5 for maximum choice: too many choices in DC; it is only necessary because there is so little good quality; this is like a maze; your reality this is how it should be; your idea is this is how it is.

Diversity is very important; we learn from each other; it enriches our experience as human beings. We live in a diverse world; DC is no longer chocolate city.

I used to work at an application DCPS high school; students are all friends at 14; especially at that school; I had kids that went to Wilson; I don't know that diversity prepares you for ward 7; Howard professor I know was teaching how to deal with African American community, but I know about this, it is working with Non-African Americans that was needed. Not sure what students learn in "diverse" schools—they don't look at you different; so do they really learn about diversity?

I went to diverse schools my life; racial problems every place I've gone; even now I see my daughter negotiating at Watkins; these kids don't want me playing here; these kids don't want me there.

But she is learning to do this and it is good to know.

Look at diversity in ward 7; people stay within their small areas. Our children would pick up on diversity.

Kids live here who went to Wilson; I am not saying I don't believe in diversity; I just think the cultural pieces that are learned are not as tangible as we think.

When Rhee implemented middle school closings and was going to move them to Kelly Miller from Ron Brown - - you will create a war zone.

Working in afterschool atmosphere; youth would tell me what happened – oh my gosh; need a curriculum to support diversity; Latino students tell me of anti-Latino experiences from African American students; lots

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

of cultural stuff—they thought because they were talking in Spanish they were talking about the African American students, caused hostility.

They don't experience these problems at Wilson.

Not true—they have problems too.

Priority value: Equitable access.

I got IMPACTED out from an east of the river DCPS elementary school. It was a magnet school. It was a performing arts school and had performing arts school staff from this area. I had taught 7 years; I found the veteran teachers; got the whole story from other teachers. It made it easier to assimilate into the school because I understood the families from the school. When you bring in programs you need to give them support. Rhee fired good teachers; all they are interested in is TFA teachers being able to repay their loans; did it change with Rhee? Yes. We don't have the quality teachers in our schools.

I don't want to say that TFA are not quality teachers. I want to make it known that they do not have the expertise to manage a classroom and that they needed the veteran teachers in the building. You could take a teacher who was good and they move uptown. Trying to run out teachers in this area, because they scored well; they were trying to run them out of wards 7 and 8. The older teachers understood the students and children . . . Monday breakfast was the first meal all weekend, these teachers; new teachers don't understand.

Efficient use of public funds was a 5; money to go to the right places.

Watkins and the Cluster wanting money from the PTA; the most expensive public school you could go to. Aftercare is expensive. Why do they keep the money even though charters put kids out? Strengthen system of neighborhood schools; if this was the case, you wouldn't be having the focus group that is why we are here.

Before you change the boundaries and feeders...you need to improve the schools. You are going to start a war you don't want. You are putting children before . . . so child can walk to Kenilworth. I would love her to be able to bike to school. I put the bike in my car so she could.

We are nowhere near Ludlow-Taylor; the child is schlepping around rather than playing outside. Not important to have school close to home. I will travel to get good school. Don't want to, but if I have to I will.

Economic growth in the city: fix the area by DC General. Families will be moving to both sides of DC General; if you try to expand, you need to have schools for the families. People are having issues in suburbs. Just give people in ward 7 what they deserve. Let's work through the troubles after we get the tools that we need and deserve. Don't rezone and create a bigger problem. You closed Ron Brown; only Kelly Miller feeds into Woodson.

You are going to give it to a charter school. I have heard that there is a plan that DCPS is underrepresented with students and we will be closing more schools.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

The dropout rate, between ages of 5-19 was over 50%. Teacher doesn't know how to manage the classroom; everyone has a different learning style . . . this is not being implemented in our classrooms; you are not focused on ward 7 schools.

I want choice.

I don't want anything sucked out of this neighborhood. I have worked with kids all over. I was working with Woodson students today, they were out the box smart, but they were considered special education.

This questionnaire, not sure it captures things right. How would we answer based on what we really want, different from how we play the current system - - that would be different. Would you want to go to a neighborhood school . . . yes, if you could, but maybe we rate something different but really feel the same?

Want a safe, good, well-staffed and well-funded school. Why can't DCPS hear that? Why does DCPS think that ward 7 wants something different than what everyone else wants?

I want people to feel great about using ward 7; dad should be able send the kids down the street and take the train to work.

Please inform: when they talked about closing the schools, they got an earful about what to do before closing schools; didn't listen last year - - you keep coming with black marks. There is a lot of animosity; we tried to tell you and you didn't listen; if you move forward. . .

It is already divided. Did you hear what I said to you? There is a loss of trust. There are some in the city that want a Black city and a White city? That is the first thing that went through. I do child protection services; I had never heard of SWS; what is School Within a School? It is a school White parents started because the little Black kids kept getting into Peabody; you can count the few black kids; out of a school of 40, there are 3. It is just another form of segregation. Impress me—open up HD Woodson's pool.

I am native Washingtonian; it is east of the river; give us substance in pool; David Catania said the same thing and I agree. Spaces have to be desired.

My children are not animals, they deserve a good education. Just like Prince Georges County, Virginia; There is long standing academic disparity; I went to school west of the river; I moved east of the river, and I was way advanced compared to other students.

Lots of economic diversity; impossible to find a job; lots of economic disparity.

If you put great programs . . . we still have a 30 year problem from the crack epidemic. Hold parents responsible; must involve the parents; city council to legislate to make a parents do stuff.

Schools have strong parent involvement and do better.

DC Prep; Ludlow-Taylor; Watkins.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

Ludlow-Taylor feeds kids breakfast no matter when they arrive; we need to understand you are dealing with socio-economic pockets. I see it in the households, I don't want my kids in a school over here (in Ward 7), and I want to have a choice.

Black people in this society . . . don't get me started . . . it is easy to say you should;
So many different forces . . .

Focus Group 6A: Turkey Thicket Recreation Center, Saturday, December 14, 2013

Facilitator introduces the process, explains the protocol, reviews student assignment, deals with consent forms, etc.

Q. Is this the first time that this approach has been taken by the DC Board of Education?

F – On this? There was a boundary commission in 1968. The District has not looked at the boundaries in a holistic way in 40 years.

Participants:

Facilitator: Had three children in DCPS (now grown); Director of a DC non-profit; Ward 1

1 –Parent of student at Hardy, Ward 5

2 –Parent of a 2 year old, entering PS in coming year

3 – Parent of children at Houston, Phelps; Ward 7

4 – Parent of small child just entering PK

Question: What of the current process of student assignment and school boundaries is working well and what would you like to keep? What is not working well? What are your issues and concerns with this boundary and student assignment process?

3 – As the mother of a 2 year old who will be entering PS next year, I've found this whole process [selecting a school] overwhelming. I work full time, my husband works full time and it is almost as if you needed an assistant to get your child into a place where you think that they will ultimately succeed.

I come from a time when - - my parents just moved to a neighborhood because they liked the neighborhood and you went to the neighborhood school and you did fine. But now you move to your neighborhood – and though I would love for our son to go to our neighborhood school - - because our neighborhood school doesn't seem to be progressing as we would like it I have to navigate this whole system. So the concern that I have is that - - at least from my research - - there aren't enough quality seats at both public schools and charter schools for the amount of children who are in the District. Also the whole boundary question - - I really don't understand it. People who are nearby might have different boundaries, some people have two options, so that is just confusing.

And if you child does go to a charter, and then they don't have feeder schools, although some of them are starting to have feeder schools such as DCI. And then it's the middle school where it's the biggest issue versus your elementary and pre-school options.

1 - I've been dealing with DCPS for 13 years.

F – Dealing with it in what capacity?

1 - Well, I'll be honest. A lot of parents have issues - - I've had zero issues because whatever I've set out to get, I've gotten. I've heard other parents and their issues and I understand them from their point of view.

F- Do you have children in the system?

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

1 – Yes, a son who goes to Hardy. And that’s not his neighborhood school. Ward 5 just acquired middle schools. We’ve always had K-8 schools and I’m not a fan of the PK-8th grade. Once you get to the 5th grade - - I don’t call it graduation - - I just call it moving on to the middle school. And I believe from there you move on to high school to be prepped for college or whatever your goals are. And I believe in that set-up. Ward 5 has just acquired McKinley Middle School. But the middle school is housed in a high school. They do their best to keep kids separated because in that high school setting it’s all about. . . And that’s a hindrance to the middle school. And so I think this pattern now of the middle schools being located in high schools is following the pattern of Columbia Heights, which is not called Columbia Heights any more, which I don’t like – the 6th – 12th. My main criticism of CHEC is that they have a day-care for mothers . . .

3 - - and young men as well.

1 – Yes, and the fathers as well . . . I’m a conservative person and I’m not a fan of that, never will be. I know at your school – Phelps - -they were trying to put it in as well. I know that my son is going to transition next year to go to high school. My problem now is that his feeder pattern from Hardy would be Wilson. I don’t have a problem with Wilson. My issue is that parents aren’t being parents. I would not have a problem with my son being fed into Wilson, but Wilson is now off the chain. So now I’m looking for a high school. I’m even looking at private schools because of the voucher program.

F – So what is his in-boundary, geographic high school?

1 – It would be Roosevelt or Dunbar.

F – It could be either?

1 – It could be either and neither one is on my top priority list. Even though Dunbar has a brand new facility – you can’t sell me on the buildings.

3 - - Yes

1 - - I do construction and I don’t look at the building. I look at the teachers . . . I look at everything, I look at the curriculum, I look at parent involvement. That’s a critical issue. I’ve noticed that when you have strong parent involvement - - kids will act up - - but when you have strong parent involvement, those kids will get back in line. When you don’t have strong parent involvement you’ve got off the wall issues. And that’s not the fault of the institution and it is not the fault of the teachers. I don’t believe that responsibility is theirs. I think the greatest problem is that of parents. One of my concerns with this is what DC is doing again this year - - different from what we did last year – with the schools they were closing. Now we’re being fed the exact same thing. They are talking about boundaries but we don’t know what those boundaries are. We’re going into these meetings blind – again. When certain people already know what the feeder patterns are. And I think for the parents to be involved . . . then we need to see what those feeder patterns are before we can actually say “well this might work, this might need to be tweaked a little bit, or this won’t work at all”.

F – So we had a chance to talk a little bit about the process before folks came in. [Recaps process]

3 – Who’s making the final decision?

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

F – The mayor. [Continues to re-cap process - - working groups will be looking at specific boundaries . . .]

3 – When is Election Day?

1 – April 1st. That’s the primary.

3 – So we’re choosing the new mayor . . .

1 – April 1st is the primary.

2 – So the web site that you were talking about, will that have information about the feeder system, etc.?

F – Yes. And everything that the Advisory Committee has will be on that web-site as well, including a memo that describes the history and the current policies. There’s a memo going up soon that describes what other cities have been doing

3 – So you say that the mayor is going to be making the decisions, not Kaya Henderson. My biggest concern is #1, is what is really going to be the weight of the parents’ issues, those of us who are taking the time to come and be involved? Are we really going to be listened to?

My other issue is that I continue to see - - and I could be wrong - - that west of the park is viewed as pie-in-the-sky. I’ve testified to this before, that maybe we should do some reverse magnet schools. I mean the areas where people have run from; maybe we need to put the programs not only in those schools but specifically in Ward 7 and Ward 8. I’ve testified that now that they have taken Ron Brown out as our neighborhood middle school, and instated Kelly Miller, now that is the pie in the sky - - but Ron Brown is actually that pie in the sky. It is right next to a train station, it’s huge; it is right next to a library, right next to a swimming pool.

We need to start thinking out-side-of-the-box. And the people who are always the ones who are making the decisions or who have the time during the day and who are from double-income families where one can sit home and write proposals while the other one brings in the income while the children are at school - - maybe we should just start listening to parents whose children are already successful on little to no income or a moderate income. I think it is really ridiculous - - and even though the children do get those little bus passes - - and that is positive; I do applaud the people who came up with that because that is one of the things that people who have been doing this a while have spoken about. We have spoken about the fact that children are not able to get to school - - well now they can get to school.

But why do I have to send my child hours away from my home to get that high quality programming, budgeting, the teachers – everything! Why do I have to search! Why do I have to send my child from Deanwood to Hardy? Yes, Hardy is a wonderful school. We know Hardy is a wonderful school. But there are potentials to build other wonderful schools.

I know traditionally those great neighborhood schools have been in the higher income areas because; number one, if you have the money to buy then you can buy wherever you want. If you don’t have the money to purchase your home, then your child is what? STUCK in what you can afford.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

And the reason I believe in the neighborhood school, especially for the younger ones, is because I as a parent want to be able to go to the meetings or at least send my child to school where they can walk because they are beginning to develop their independence. I have children who go to Phelps --- but I also have a child who has very, very, very special needs. And those feeder patterns don't reflect that. Nobody wants to deal with children who have issues or who need small classrooms. My daughter recently went back to school Thursday, after a hospitalization. She said everybody gave her that look "Oh. She's back!" Why should a child have to go through that because we don't have a school in our system - - our public school system - to deal with that?

The feeder patterns should reflect what we the people want. And with all the cranes in the sky, we should be telling the people with the cranes "well, you know that part of your money is going to go to building up the neighborhood schools that need it the most". I'm looking for high quality no matter what side of the city you live on. That point can't be brought home fast enough. We talked about this in the Cross City Campaign years ago. I don't think that it ever got done but I think that one of the things that the feeder pattern group needs to look at is a Cross-City Campaign or a "Day in the Life of" what some of the children have to go through in order to get to school.

Some people need to come out of their little palaces. I know that sounds rude and I'm not trying to be rude - - but we know that some children aren't even eating every night here. Some children have no homes. Who's advocating for those children. They would love to be anywhere where they are welcome. And they should have just a right to go anywhere and have that school draw them in and out of their poverty for whatever reason they may be in poverty. So I think that's what our feeder patterns need to be doing - - is to be reflecting the city that we would like to see and not just the changing demographics - - where all these schools are popping up for certain populations but it should be for all populations and it should be reflective . . .

I mean at this point I'm almost ready to consider a publicly funded charter school - but not really because I know that publicly funded charter schools don't support parent's rights. I mean, if they don't like you, you are gone! You can forget it! I don't care how brilliant your child is. If they don't like you you're gone - and I have experienced that.

But I think it's a wonder thing that this Advisory group is doing. I hope that it can embrace diverse, out-side-the-box thinking and agitate to the point that we are serving all students. There is absolutely no reason why all of our children should not be computer literate, why every child should not be speaking at least two languages, there is absolutely no reason why all children are not eating every day even if it means that they are eating three meals a day at school.

F - I have some follow-up questions, but let's hear from everyone first.

4 - I'm really concerned with the fact that they are closing so many schools in my neighborhood that I'm going to have to go to . . . I'm applying to Latin American Montessori, and all of these other ones that are supposed to be wonderful - - right?- - but . . . It is a struggle. I have to drop him off in the morning and make arrangements to pick him up. I'm a working mom so I have to make special arrangements for that. Then the fact that my kid will not be able to go to the . . . School that . . . I grew up near Houston and in my neighborhood the parents would . . . the neighbors were classmates at the school . . . and that really makes a difference for the students and for the parents. The kids can . . . and study together. It just builds community. My plan is to buy . . . but the prices . . . That's not possible anymore. And I don't

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

want to drive across to Oyster [Laughter from the group] That's where everybody wants to send their kids.

M1 – Because Oyster . . . if you don't live in Wards 1, 2 and 3, they don't speak that much about Oyster that much.

[General conversation, laughter; unintelligible]

F – So as you are looking at the environment, what would be your in-boundary elementary school?

4 – So I looked on the website and looked at the performances and I saw that some of the elementary schools are full . . .

2 – I'm in the same boat because I have a 2 year old and I'm not . . . and so my in-boundary is Noyes.

3 – My mother went to Noyes. [Laughter] And I already know what you're thinking. [Laughter]

W - I would love to send my son to Noyes and his friends would be there. But no; instead I'm going on 20 plus different open houses. My husband is afraid . . . I keep sending him invitations "we have this open house and this application" - - I mean it is overwhelming. It is overwhelming.

1 – Since she brought that up about the lottery, the last thing that I saw was that all the lotteries . . .

3 – The common apps . . .

1 – So all the charter schools are no into this one application . . . 90% of them are. . .

2 - The Montessori's are not there though. The Chinese language school is not there . . .

1 – Now we've started this one application, one city, whatever, and that's fine but how is that supposed to affect boundaries now?

3 – Good question.

1 - How is that issue going to affect out boundaries? My main concern is about how this will affect Wards 7 and 8. I'm not too concerned about Wards . . . and I know some folk in Ward 5 are going to be upset with me saying this - - but I'm not too concerned about Ward 5. The only concern that I do really have . . . I'll give you a good example. I don't like the feeder pattern to go into McKinley Middle. Its feeder pattern is Langley and Brown. When you have a middle school that is teaching STEM and their feeder pattern is not STEM at all but you want your child to be in a STEM program at an early age, you would not sent your child to Burroughs. Burroughs' feeder pattern would be to - - I think Brown. . . . The only STEM elementary school in Ward 5 is John Burroughs. I brought this up when they had this meeting about the middle schools - - you might have been there – when DCPS had the meeting at McKinley Tech High.

F – On the closings?

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

1 – No, they were talking about the new middle schools for Ward 5. And they showed us the feeder patterns for how your kids would go into the different middle school. And the school being built right next door to us its specialty is to be the arts and language. But the feeder patterns coming from the elementary schools won't complement that at all. So my concern is that if you want your child in a particular middle school or . . . your neighborhood school, Burroughs or Langley, or whatever and you put your child in that particular school but when your child goes on to the middle school, the feeder pattern does not match what they have been taught.

F- I'm curious. Obviously we're talking about eleven-year-olds; 5th grade. So I'm curious how important you really think it is that these be aligned on a program basis?

1 - I think it should be. We have programs that do STEM, we have the IB programs; we have dual language. But if you want to send your child on to the middle school that middle school does not complement what they have learned. So now your child is going into a middle school setting to learn a whole different thinking process . . .

2 – In actuality though, the school might have a focus but they should have the basic program too. .

3 – I understand like what you are saying because my daughter went to a K-6 French immersion school. If they developed in that kind of program you want them to continue on because they are speaking, reading and writing fluently. But how does that address the quality of the program? You can have dual language, STEM, IB – but if the quality is not there, I don't even want it. I want something that everybody wants to run to it.

1 – What I'm saying is that the feeder patterns . . .

3 – I agree totally

2 – I agree with the whole language part but if they're in STEM or arts focus; if they're getting the basic curriculum and they're learning the basic skill sets, then they should be able to adapt and do well in their new middle school even though the focus has changed.

1 – I really do get you, but when you have children who in large numbers aren't grasping . . .

2 – That's what I'm saying. The issue is not so much to me what the elementary focus is it's whether the children are grasping it. If the children are coming from elementary schools at different levels and they are going into a feeder program, and then if the curriculum is set out differently from what they had and they already weren't grasping that sufficiently, then. . .

1 - And that's a large number.

F - Let me step in here because I'm not sure that you had an opportunity to finish as we got side-tracked into . . .

4 – Well I'm basically concerned about the [lottery].

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

F- So what I heard from you is that you were concerned as you are looking forward for your own child about the child being able to have the friends in the neighborhood or the community that are going the same place and also having to navigate the lottery each time when they are moving from one school to another.

4 and under-enrollment. They may just be dismissing the fact that the public schools and the charter schools . . . and whatever options you can find.

F – So I’m curious. As you are looking at schools, what is your sense of your ability to influence [the schools]?

3 – That’s very interesting.

2 – So let me just clarify. You are saying, how I feel when I go into that school, do I have the ability to . . .

F – You are saying that you have a neighborhood school that is accessible it has some good qualities to it.

3 – It doesn’t meet her standards.

F- Right. But do you any sense that you could affect that school so that it would meet your standards, so that it would . . .

2 – I have a sense that, not just myself, but as a community we could – but at what expense? In the time that it would take to make those changes would my son be losing out because he’s not getting a quality education as we are making those changes? Because that’s just how far behind it is already.

3 – So you’re putting him in school at 3. So I understand completely. The time for you is now. That’s because you have to make a choice now. I agree with her. If Noyes is her neighborhood school, they should have everything there. She should be able to check off her list. It is absolutely unacceptable that we should be inviting people to move into our city when we still have pockets in this city that continue to be underserved. But people continue to say “well they’re not”. But they are because they are not meeting our standards.

My children attend Houston. Houston has its challenges but I wanted to have my children embraced in the neighborhood school. We lost our principal; I loved Ms. Watkins, I don’t know why she left but right now we have a bunch of black males who are there for our kids. We have children who have no black males to look up to and maybe no males in the home and I think it is an important role model for them which is why we are still there. Because I know that I can influence the system because . . . I got a call from Ms. ---- the other day because ---- was acting up. It was raining that day so automatically I knew why he was acting up . . . And I knew for a fact that they didn’t let those children do anything for recess. But she knew she could call me and she knew she was going to get a call back. So that’s the kind of relationship that I appreciate at my neighborhood school. So that’s why I think it is really crucial that 50% of us have children in the school and 50% are looking at schools. I think you all have a huge opportunity to influence . . .

1 – You said 50% . . . those who are expecting are already looking at schools too.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

3 – Right, but I meant 50% who are right here in this room. And I think you all have a huge [responsibility?]. You say “Noyes just doesn’t meet my standards”. This is what I need and this is what I’m not seeing. Noyes is a neighborhood in transition. Deanwood is a neighborhood in transition.

F – So this is a good question. What you’re seeing that indicates to you that it doesn’t meet standards. Or for you, as you are looking in the community. What are you not seeing and what is it that you need to see in order to use your neighborhood schools?

1 – Parent involvement. [Laughter]

3 – Less chaos; less chaos.

4 - . . . and one of them is somewhere on Georgia Avenue. And neighborhoods are changing in DC. They’re having some classes in parent involvement . . . and the parent’s income and racial . . . so when parents are, and I want to say from what I read on the list-serves, it is the white parents who tend to get involved with the traditional parents who have been involved for many years. So it is not only the neighbors who address . . . there have to be some conflict resolution skills that need to be put in place. So that in a PTA meeting you have parents together trying to influence . . . at the school, which I think is everybody’s goal. So as you said it is turning into everybody in the PTA fighting . . . gentrification is not an easy thing.

2 – And I understand. It’s not just racism, it is new people versus people who have been here for years and this is the way things have been going and so, sometimes it’s hard when somebody comes in and says “this is the way we’re going to do things”. But - “wait, wait, wait”; “We’ve been here for years, so who are you?” So I agree that there has to be some level of mediation, perhaps so that our voices can be heard. I don’t know how often things like these focus groups take place even on a school level - - District level.

F – That’s a really good point.

1 – That’s a good point. How do you . . . The reason I put my son at Hardy is because I needed a break from being fully for hours involved . . .

3 – Say that again?

1 – I put my son at Hardy because I needed a break. Parent involvement is not just . . .

F – You needed a break from parent involvement.

3 – Just one parent doing everything . . .

1 – I needed a break.

F – And where was he in elementary?

1 – At elementary we were at HD Cooke. At HD Cooke our PTA president did all of it. Got our school remodeled - - did the whole nine yards beyond what . . . at the time it was 60% African American, 40%

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

Latino. Now it's gone a little bit more Latino than African American. But I picked that school [Hardy] because I needed a break . . .

2 – Because Hardy is already doing their thing. . .

1 – Hardy has a well-established PTA and . . . If my son is cutting up we've got technology now so I got phone calls - - you can't miss it. Either way; so Hardy has all of this so it gives me a break. I need a break from dealing with schools and that's what I'm looking for in a high school for my son - - one that's got that good PTA setting. Now Wilson has that. But I also look at the school I look at that, I look at the curriculum, how the school goes through a regular day - - and they always want to do an open-house day but I don't go to regular open house. I go when I want to go because I want to see the real deal. Those are my topics of concern. If I have to put my son in a school where I've got to do parent involvement every day and still work and still have work with phone calls? It's overwhelming.

3 – It's overwhelming. Here we are with two, two-parent households and it is overwhelming for them. And they're not even in the system yet! Think about it.

2 – And that's only just one child. Do we want to do this again? [Laughter]

M – I've got a 13 year-old; I've got two daughters who are five and six. And I've already made my decision . . .

F – And where are they?

1 – HD Cooke. And I also look at the principals, the administrator. Are they . . . do they want any input, communication. I look at all of those qualities to make my decision as to where my children should go.

3 – I have a question. So how is our new and upcoming feeder pattern going to impact the quality of what we see in education across the city?

F – That's a good question. I think part of the problem, as you well know, is that some of it is just as we talked about it earlier - - in 1968 there was a city-wide commission that looked at the boundaries because there was so much crowding at the time and they had to figure out to re-draw boundaries for the high schools in order to address the under-utilization of Wilson and the crowding of everything else.

3 – So what are we addressing now?

F- So now it's a variety of things. Part of it is where schools have been closed they just squished together two boundaries. One example is Savoy and Birney. They stuck Savoy and Birney together but there is a part of Savoy's boundaries that are across the street from Turner. So there are kids who are living across the street from Turner but they are in Savoy's boundary which is up on the other side of MLK Avenue and across . . . so there are things that just don't make sense from any kind of practical . . . even if you say that we are going to try to keep the same system but we are trying to maximize the access that parents have to their neighborhood schools and the walk-ability. You would say, however we are going to do your feeder patterns, these don't make sense.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

The other thing is -- I think you mentioned also -- that in some places people have two options, in some places people have one option. Some places it is not really clear what your options are and actually there are some people with three options. So there is some just administrative neglect that has gone on.

And then there's the opportunity to say: can we use the discussion around the boundaries and feeder patterns to try to push on to quality; to push on the community and school relationships? One of the things that we're looking at with all the student-level data is that we are seeing communities where -- mostly in the affluent communities -- where 98% of the kids are going to their neighborhood school.

1 – That was one thing that I learned from that report last year – that ¾ are in walk-able areas. Out of that whole thick report, that was the only piece that . . . and I like that. But my concern is that at the end of this year Ballou closes and you start construction of a \$138 million dollar school

F – Well it doesn't close. Ballou will continue to operate during construction. They're not going to close Ballou.

3 – So my other question is how will we going to successfully make sure . . . OK. Hardy is thriving and affluent people send their children to neighborhood schools. One way you become affluent is you conserve your resources. But people want to send their children to a program that is thriving and prospering. And you can see clearly east of the river that a lot of the programs are just getting by. I'm not going to send my child to a school to get by. I want to see the big picture on what the mayor is looking at specifically to do with this feeder pattern? How is it supposed to enhance the quality of life in our city?

2 – So again while we would love to send our kids to neighborhood schools but the time that it would take each neighborhood school to meet standards so that all children are getting a quality education -- that's over decades. So my concern is that now -- especially for people east of the river -- what are their options? You have the neighborhood school you can automatically get into and you have the lottery so you can possibly get into a non-neighborhood school. But it seems like there are so few spots for non-neighborhood people to go to some of these schools in affluent communities. So for these children who are already in disadvantaged neighborhoods the gap is just growing and growing.

F – And it is a conundrum. Because if you expand the capacity in the affluent communities you have more enrollments going out and you create the school closing problems that we've had. And you are somehow communicating to people "OK, you're a low-income community so you don't get to go . . . I talk about it as education deserts. You can have education deserts like you can have food deserts where somehow you have to export from your community in order to get what should be basic.

3 – The reverse magnet program . . .

2 – So transport Hardy to . . .

3 – That's what . . . talked about.

F – But what I'm curious about -- and you had a good answer in parent involvement -- what else are you looking for when you are making the choice? You are going to all these fairs and you are looking around and you are trying to figure it out. So what are you looking for?

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

3 – For me, parent involvement but I’m always looking at the administration, the leaders, and the turnover. Just as with a president or a mayor you can’t really make change if you are there only a couple of years. You need people to be there who are committed to that system to making sure it works. So where there is a lot of turnover - - that’s a turn-off for me.

F – And where do you get the information about turnover?

2 – I have some people who I talk to. When I went to the Ward 5 school expo, I specifically, with each principal that I talked to – and some of the schools didn’t even have their principals there which I think is “Why is the principal not here and this is the Ward 5 fair and you are trying to recruit?” - - but the principals who were there I just asked the “Well, how long have you been at the school?” I want to know how are they committed; where do they live?

3; 1 – They only have one year contracts.

2 – Which I know, and which I think is ridiculous. So when that contract is up and if it didn’t work out than now we start from scratch again?

3 – You got it.

2 - So how can you effectively make change if you don’t have an effective team that is working together to make those changes possible?

F - So what are some of the kinds of things that you are contemplating in the future? That you would like to be looking for?

4 - A second language.

F – So any second language?

4 – Yes. My children get Spanish and English at home so Spanish would be good but anything. . . A third language would be great.

[General agreement]

4 – And also the tests [scores].

F – Is there a threshold? Is there a number that you say “Oh, I would never look at anything below this?”

4 - Like a 60-70% maybe I’ll consider it because but like a 30-20% is a big NO. There’s some flexibility.

F- Have you been looking at that also?

2 – Yes. So I would say right now my cut off is between 55 and 60% because I agree. The foundation in me starts to hit home and so . . . I know that at least 55-60% of people are proficient then they do have a baseline curriculum that I can work with and hope to enrich. So I would love her to be in with 99% but

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

realistically I don't see those numbers but I do know that to move forward in the US that to go forward to the next level there are always going to be exams so you have to be proficient in that core curriculum.

F – We have 10 minutes left. It was one to 2:30?

1, 3 – I thought it was one to 3:00.

F – That's interesting but this is the only one. All the others were an hour and a half.

3 – I saw that it was an hour and a half but it did say it was from one to three.

F – So we'll keep going till three, but that is interesting. So you're looking for high school now. So what are you looking for?

1 – Parent involvement, not so much the administration, I think only because I know what it's like being a teacher But I really don't . . . because I know a lot of these principal's hands are tied from downtown - some are and some aren't –

3 – We need to un-tie them. That's part of the problem.

1 – When I was looking at middle schools there was one in southeast and I went to the Book and found the article. The Book, I call it the Book.

F – The School Chooser?

2 – It has all the stats.

1 – Now they've got an app. I can't think of the middle school that is by Anacostia [Kramer] but they had no parent involvement.

F – How could you tell?

1 –Because it was . . .

3 – Who published the book though?

1 – Some organization called But they had no parent involvement and that right there was . . . and the reason I was looking at the school was because I had heard that they had just won a technology grant - - it was almost like it was a middle school but it was self-paced. But the pace was a little too slow. . . Well that right there was the only . . . but I liked it from that standpoint. Because in my household I have two wireless laptops I have a desktop. We have one Kindle Fire, and the reason I bought that is that my son has a disability. He is a little slow on And even when I bought the plan tech stuff . . . I think I've spent over XXXX on learning stuff, and I don't mind that. But I was looking at that school and it turned me off because it had no parent involvement. And a school - - regardless if it is charter or. . . And even high school. I was looking at Banneker and I talked to a lot of parents who were ahead of me . . . and they said that the principal has zero parent involvement . . .

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

3 – Because she likes to run the show.

F – So I got the parent involvement, I got it. But people are clearly looking for other things too.

2 – I know she mentioned diversity. So diversity is important to me but also when we consider not just racial diversity but also cultural and socio-economic diversity as well. I think it is important to have people from every walk of life together. That's how we better understand each other.

3 – I agree.

2 – I come from the Chicago and I went to a school where we had some people who were doing well, we had some people not doing so well, but I think it enriched my understanding. I know it is hard often to get a good mix in schools.

F – And what about in terms of travel distance? You've got a child at Hardy but you were looking at Kramer which is in the opposite direction, so how - - the city's not that big.

3 – No it is not. But it is important because even though it is only 66 square miles, sometimes it might take you an hour and fifteen minutes during rush hour easily to get from one point to another. But for me, my three attend Phelps and that's not bad because it is only one bus line. But right now while the Benning Road entrance is closed so that's not that big of an issue. But the question I have right now is what is the Student Assignment Initiative?

F – Well basically it is the Deputy Mayor's office, working with the Chancellor, trying to address the old boundaries and the fact that we've got high schools with . . . boundaries around them and you've got schools like Woodson and like Roosevelt that are kind of dying on the vine because they don't have feeders into them. So it is how do you address those issues? Also there are some issues for the city in terms of hybrid choice where you have a situation where -- you described it in terms of your communities – where at Aiton, in that little boundary the children are going to 87 different elementary schools.

3 – So that is sinful. Why isn't Aiton a hub for its community? That's my big guiding question. Why aren't these schools hubs for their communities? The neighborhood school issue where they were going to have the school open longer than the regular school day. This is the kind of neighborhood that would benefit from something like that. That's their choice, some parents are not going to want to go but I know that my children love to walk to school. They have music, they have a PE, they have a wonderful program, they have computers . . . it is like a best kept secret.

F – That's an example. You are saying that Houston is a good school but the community that lives in the Houston boundary is not going to Houston. Probably about 50% of the people that live in-boundary are going; so half of them are going someplace else - - of the age-appropriate children.

3 – They are. And we have the children from Kenilworth coming in because Kenilworth is closing. So are you saying that this initiative is the boundary pattern?

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

F – Yes. The student assignment initiative is the policies associated with what your rights are and how the school districts – both DCPS and the charters can allocate their spaces – and it is also the boundaries themselves.

3 – So it sounds like what you are saying is that - - because you made a statement that the people in the affluent communities are attending their neighborhood schools – so it sounds like the direction where this whole conversation is going is that they want to create boundary patterns that will exclude children who are now racing to those schools from going to those schools - - that’s what I’m hearing.

F – That’s not actually what . . .

2 – Well there might be some people who might want to do that . . .

3 – Well not YOU per se . . .

F – I understand that. I think that what you are saying could be right --- there might be some people that might want . . .

1 – Well you can’t say it but I can. It sounds like it is not just this boundary issue. This issue arose when we went into a recession. Everybody took a hit.

3 – People took their children out of private schools and

1 – Those folks up in Ward 3 had to pull their kids out of private school. I’ve got a bunch of friends up there. They had to pull their kids out of private school because they could no longer afford that. So the recession forced our school system because their feeder pattern goes into Deal and into Wilson and they are now overcrowded. And I don’t have a problem with that.

But before we can look at and get to our boundary issue we have to look at and think - - Well our boundary issues are already there. And I don’t like to use the word “quality school” but is this school sufficient for our children? Is this elementary school sufficient? Is that middle school efficient? Is that high school that feeds from that middle school efficient? One of the major problems that Ward 5 has always had with feeder patterns is that while we pull our kids out of elementary to go to private or everywhere else, even before charters we were sending our kids elsewhere or doing home school.

The parents here are not sending our kids to Roosevelt. That’s out. I’ve talked with that principal up there . . . Parents want to get back to their neighborhood school but when you go to Roosevelt and you are being told that the vast majority of your student body are children who have issues - - and I’ll just use that word “issues” - - then a parent who is middle class you wonder? And a lot of middle class parents wouldn’t mind putting their kids there --- honestly. I’m using Roosevelt as an example because I see a lot of the alumni there putting the effort in to turn that school around and they are middle class. . . . But when you have kids, who are coming from disadvantaged families, but when you have just the kids from disadvantaged families and they are bringing issues, you lose the middle class parents that you need in that feeder pattern from Ward 5 to Roosevelt and Dunbar.

F – So what does efficient mean to you exactly?

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

1 – Well I don't . . . the reading and math CAS scores that we all look at . . . for some odd reason we are getting brain-washed to accept those. I don't know why we've been brain-washed to accept those. I don't have a problem with testing and I think kids should be tested. But . . . back to your question. I don't need it to be 60+ or 75+. It could be 50% -- I mean the test scores, proficient -- but I use that word because I don't want to . . .

[Laughter]

F – I got it now – efficient and proficient. OK. So we're going to . . .

2 – I just wanted to answer your question about travel distance. I would love to not have to travel so much but for my child I will. But I am looking for schools that are on the public transportation line, whether that's bus or train. If schools are not on a transportation line they are way down on my list because I would be stuck in a car to get my kids to school. Travel is a big thing but it is further down on the list when it comes to making sure their school is up to my standards.

F – From your perspective, having really maximal choice -- there's 226 schools --

3 – Including the publicly funded charters . . . it's OK for them to expand.

F – So that's a question. How the choice priority . . .

2 – So how many of them are . . . [schools I want my child to go to?]

3 – That's a very good question.

F – And really choice means that you can get into and that you want to go to.

3 – And are going to satisfy the standards that you set for your family. . .

4 – And are . . . going to set for anybody [speaking of DCTAG?] . . . to the University of Maryland or anywhere else . . . are they going to . . . for any public school in the country but are they going to make it there.

2 - Not to mention -- in the world.

3 – We don't go to school long enough anyway. Our school day is too short.

4 – And the private schools and the charter schools can sort of . . . The public schools? It makes no sense.

3 – It is disgraceful.

1 – For me I look at the opposite way. I look at the public. I won't look at charter. I did one year of charter and it was a freaking nightmare; worse than the public schools. So I said no.

F- So what charter school did you . . . ?

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

1 – Perry St. Prep. Right here in the neighborhood. Right here in the neighborhood. And it was a freaking nightmare. Lord it was a freaking nightmare.

F – Why?

1 – One of my things is that I like to see is your budget. With public schools I get to see your budget. I get to break it down. But charter school, they give you a budget that's one sheet. And it doesn't even match up right. But there's no way that little bit of money is going to those kids. Something is not right. So when you ask for the whole budget you get "Well, that's none of your business".

3 – They treat parents wrong.

1 – Oh my gosh! Even at the charter school I was part of a Men's Group. They were OK for a couple for a couple of months but then I ran into problems with the administration. When I start running into problems with administration I will only fight so long to where I just say to "H" with it and move on. So when I look at schools now I look at public, then charter than private. Now I'm looking at private. Only because . . . my son is in eighth grade, he is struggling a little bit and Hardy is a good school but also at the same time I emphasize parenting. One of my things is that when you are outside of my house you represent me. People know me and they call me when you get home if you do anything like cutting up. So my kids don't much cut up.

I don't have a problem traveling. I'll give you a good example. I've . . . if the school is in a bad neighborhood - - and I'm kind of prejudiced like this now - - but there is a top high school that sits at Anacostia - - Thurgood. My gosh! The principal there – their Dean lives in Ward 4. She's done her analysis but she cannot get the community kids to come to that school. She cannot keep the parents who live in the area of that school

F – Well most of those kids come from Ward 8.

1 - Not from Ward 8, no. Their mind-set is that . . . I was thinking about putting my son there. Parents over here don't think about sending their kids over there.

F – There's a few; I have the data.

1 – There's a few. There's a friend of mine. She sent her daughter there. And I asked, how's the Metro? Are there fights, are they cutting up? Because I don't need all that drama; I don't need to get phone calls. She said there's not that much activity down there.

3 – It's right by the train.

1 – But when you say to parents over here that there's an outstanding school over there, they shy away. It's not the school. It is the community around it that your kid has to access. And then the child has to get home from that school.

3 – That's a big issue. But things can go on anywhere. There are more things that are going on at Wilson than area going on at Phelps.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

1 – True that. But the mind-set that Ward 5 has is that they don't want to send their child to a school that is east of the river. So when she told me about it -- and also I was told that when the kids go in it [Thurgood] they have to have their shirts tucked in – the whole nine yards. . . . But I like that.

2 - I ride the train with some of those kids. Those are some of the best, well-behaved kids. When I get on with some of these other schools - - I like to ask kids which school they go to – and those are good kids. They're doing an excellent job over there.

1 – It wasn't the kids, it's the neighborhood. Because you're letting your kid drive all that distance and if with that distance if there's some type of issues. . .

F – We're going to close out. I just have one question for you. Is there any suggestion that you have for on how to make sure as the city has this conversation because it a conversation about race and about class and privilege. It's about not having privilege. It is about neighborhoods. These are things that people hold close their heart and they are very personal. Is there any advice that you have on how to make sure that we all come out at the other end of it as a stronger community? Are there any suggestions that you have?

3 – I have a suggestion that we need to get into the barber shops and into the hair salons and into places where people go. You see four people here. I mean the right people are in the room - - don't get me wrong . . .

F – But there's two other groups.

3 - Oh. I was late. [General laughter]

F - There's another twenty people. But I have to say that I did a focus group in Ward 8 and there was one resident of Ward 8, one from 7 and one from 6.

1 – Now that's bad.

3 – We have to go to where people are because . . . I made this a priority because during the week is not a priority for me. This fit into my schedule. Yes I could be doing something else, but yes, I like to participate in my community. So this is why I'm here. But I do think that it is our duty and obligation as citizens of the District to go where people are who don't necessarily have a voice or think that their voice is important. I'm not doing this for me. I'm doing this for my children and the generation behind them. If we don't put into these upcoming generations we are going to be in for a surprise.

4 – And I believe that for accountability we have to get everybody on board.

2 – I know in my neighborhood we circulated the information. I don't know how many of the people are from . . .

4 – None of my neighbors

3 – I'm not moving to the suburbs. I've got five to get through college. [Laughs].

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

1 – My suggestion is that we transition these boundaries in phases. And not . . . everybody at one time. And that during those phases do an assessment. Not to slam this down everybody's throat. Because whatever is, it is. And that's the position that a lot of parents are taking.

2 – I would like to echo that because I think that in order to get the community to buy in . . . at least we think our voices are being heard. But I think honestly, I'm sure the goal is to make sure that everyone is heard. So with each phase, let's stop, let's re-assess, let's have some more focus groups, let's try to go out in the community and pull people in so we can get more representation and make sure that this is not just about the Chancellor and the mayor and all these people making decisions that don't even have children in the school system and who aren't personally. . .

[Laughter]

3 – I'd like to piggyback on what's been said as well because what I see and what I think one of the council members saw during our testimony is that I see this as having an un-intended consequence as further dividing our city. I can't see where it's going to significantly positively impact children who are coming from lesser affluent neighborhoods because the feeder pattern is going to set . . . Because at one time children who were living in Wilson . . . I mean you can't tell me that 100% of the children who attend Wilson and Hardy live in the Wilson and Hardy zones. They come from all wards in the city.

2 – And I just want to piggy-back on that too. At the Ward 5 fair I was talking to a security guard and he was telling me that he lives in Ward 8. He's originally from New York. His kids are in a charter school over there and they originally were in a public school. Well now he's saying they have to move across the river because they just don't care about us across the river. And I agree that that is the section . . .

3 – That's reality. That's reality.

2 – And essentially if this whole process develops so that it is benefitting a small sub-group in a certain Ward in a way that will further increase the gaps so I think that really needs to be taken into account.

1 – I think this boundary and all this is coming down sort of fast on parents. We haven't had time to digest one and now we are into another and we also have to digest that the Chancellor said two weeks ago at the hearing that pissed everybody off because I remember when she came over to our meeting and I went off on her. . .

3 – What did she say?

1 – She made a statement at the hearing that "we cannot do middle schools". And that just thought, well what are you telling us? Pack up and move to Maryland? So we have our leaders making those statements, and I don't care if you made a mistake at the hearing. Then the next day, you and your boss need to be in front of the camera apologizing and explaining parents what did you really mean? And she told us straight up that she was not going to change her position on what she said. She was advocating unequivocally for getting the ability where she can change a school into a charter. Our public schools already have that ability. When HD Cooke was in swing space for 5 years straight we did flyers out we did open houses we did all of that and we had free food and set up an in house . . . I think it is up to the parent body and the principal whether or not those two entities work together. And downtown stays the hell out of it.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

F – So I want to thank you all. This is the 7th focus group that I’ve done in all parts of the city.

M1 – It was fun [laughter]

M2 – We’re finished?

Focus Group 6B: Turkey Thicket Recreation Center, December 14, 2013

Participants:

- 1: Teacher at charter, mother of 4 year old child, looking for schools
- 2: Parent of Pre-K3, in Capitol Hill Cluster System
- 3: Parent of two, one child at Capitol Hill Cluster, other at Howard U. Middle School
- 4: Native Washingtonian, DCPS grad, small children, lives in Brookland
- 5: Parent, 7 month old child, lives in Ward 6
- 6: Parent at Capitol Hill Montessori
- 7: Parent, 7 month old
- 8: Lives in Brookland, eligible for pre-k 3 next year
- 9: Lives in Brookland, children go to Capitol Hill schools

Question: What aspects of student assignment are not working well?

3: When I started, I started with the lottery. I wanted my daughter to go to school out of the neighborhood, but I live in Ward 7, and the schools are not doing well and they're being closed. The schools in our neighborhood weren't fitting my needs, so I sent her out of the ward.

8: We're embroiled in the common lottery right now. It's been incredibly stressful. I live here in Brookland. I'm mostly concerned with Kindergarten. There's no chance I'm sending my kid to Bunker Hill, which is our inbound school. I'm overwhelmed by the fact that there are a limited number of Pre-K 3 spaces in high quality public or charter schools, and a little bit of a panic about what that means. And he's only 3, so I'm trying to keep some level of sanity. I feel like I don't have a whole lot of options if something doesn't come up from the lottery. And I have to think about our options—we can't afford to move to somewhere else, and don't want to move to the suburbs. So I'm pretty frustrated right now.

2: We moved a few blocks to strategically be in the cluster, but now we're not going to be in the cluster when our youngest child gets there. There may be some grandfathering for younger siblings, and I understand that. But for the younger children in our neighborhood who don't have an older sibling, they can't get in. And our property values are affected going forward. So I'm participating to get my neighborhood school up to par whether my children go there or not. Every child should have an equally good experience. The cluster has been great for us and the lottery worked for us.

4: I'm here with an historical viewpoint; we didn't go to our neighborhood schools (growing up). Our mom struggled to get us into other schools. Now my family is having the same struggles now getting our nephews and nieces into schools, but there is less choice.

3: When my daughter was in ES, the rule is that Pre-Kindergarten is not a mandatory age to be in school, so they didn't let the younger son in. So we had to wait another year, because it's not a mandatory school age and he didn't get in from the lottery.

5: We live on the NE side of Capitol Hill. We live across the street from School Within a School. But we can't go there because it's a city-wide lottery school. That's my concern. There's a systemic discussion that needs to happen, between city-wide lottery schools, and DCPS schools, and what's a neighborhood school, and is that going to proliferate. There's so much chance that happens in the lottery, and everyone across the

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

whole city is subject to the lottery, and that's the way it should be because that's the system that's set up. But DCPS schools, you should be able to go to the school that's near your house. I don't think there should be a DCPS non-charter school across the street from my house that my child doesn't get to go to. In my neighborhood they have city-wide lottery elementary schools. It's fairly frustrating, that they're not charter schools; I would understand otherwise. There's these random schools that don't fit into those two systems. I think the other problem that seems like a big systemic problem is what happens to middle schools and high schools? I wonder what the wisdom is of having people get into a feeder system and then follow that all the way through. There's no way for there to be a stable predictable school population, with all these feeder schools. You could end up with bloated schools, and there's no way to right-size them as you go through. I don't know what the reason is behind the feeder patterns, or why it happened . . . It seems like if you grant a whole bunch of people the right to go to a school for the next 13 years, you have no way of right-sizing it, you will never be able to predict because demographics changes so much. So that's my concern. Why do we have a system in which the school system itself doesn't have a way to right-size schools as they go through?

F: One of the ways is to change boundaries. It's just one way.

4: The feeder concept is that if you become part of a school and you become part of that community, then you should continue with that community. I went to school with the same people for 10 years. So I chose to be part of that school, and my brother went to the same school.

5: That's a valid point. But if you're really are so committed to having your kids go to the same school with the same kids, then go to your neighborhood school, and you have that right. But if you're sending them out of bounds, you might have to give up that right when they go to middle school. It seems like there should be another lottery to right-size the size of middle schools.

4: Historically, if demographics were changing that much . . . but before there was no real pressing reason.

5: But I think there might be now. The kids in elementary school will be in high school, who knows what the school age population will be like when so many parts of the city are changing so much.

6: You brought up the example of sending your kids to the neighborhood school. The assumption may be that your elementary school isn't good, and then you'd expect that your middle school won't be good, so you don't want to have to consistently be in that situation. That's why you join the lottery in the first place, to give your kid that opportunity. I live right on Capitol Hill, and I got very lucky to have my son at the city-wide school that's still in my neighborhood. We have a lot of choices on Capitol Hill, many more choices than other neighborhoods. I think that's great, I'm not knocking that, but other neighborhoods - - it's unfortunate that they don't have any choices. We had 5, now we have 10. Because there's wonderful things happening there, everyone wants to go to school there. The problem I think is not in the neighborhood. The problem is at the city level where they are not equally spreading around the opportunity. There are people who cannot afford to live in our neighborhood, so should they be penalized for that?

4: Or are the children being penalized?

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

5: It creates winners and losers at (age) 3. You get some families, who get lucky and have 13 or 14 years of great education. If you change the lottery at middle school, it might give other people an opportunity as well who lost out on that.

6: I think another thing they need to do create good schools all around, so then people won't feel like, oh gosh, we got this good school for five years, and then what are we going to do again? That becomes the issue, not necessarily everyone getting lucky.

1: I'm very new to the system. When I relocated here, I was very frustrated, all the schools that were very good, I couldn't get my kids into school there, so my kids were just at home. From the inside, when we talk about the feeder patterns, the advantage of a teacher having a steady group, given changing dynamics, is important. While we're trying to wrap our heads around Common Core and all of that, it doesn't work. The consistency is something we need, just to give them a consistent learning environment. Teaching at a school that is low performing, on probation, which may close down, all these kids are facing the possibility that their parents will have to find a place to put them. There really is not many places to put them here. So I feel sort of stuck. We see both sides, and I think the questions become more valid when we go lower on the economic scale and with lower performing students. It's nice when choice is great at the top. I question some parents are not really aware of these issues, so they come in at the last minute. So if the system is not designed to give students an opportunity when parents can't make it. From my school, parents aren't actively engaged at all. So the system needs to narrow the decision, so that the child has an opportunity. It's not because we're going to present information to certain parents and they'll make a decision.

7: I'm new to the process, but I've been here for a number of years. What I know about the system is what I've read. What I hear people talking about is consistent with what I read. If you win the lottery you are set. Every day you stress from the lottery about your kids' future. It's a random sample. They don't test or screen the kids. So we know it has something to do with the way schools are run. So the big questions is: Why aren't they running the public schools the same way that they run the charter schools? That might be a complicated answer. But haven't heard anyone try to answer that. That's the first thing I worry about. I think you really need to get to a spot where you're not trying to win a lottery to get a good education, or even moving several blocks to get to another school.

[Laughter]

7: I think that every school should be equally performing is unrealistic. That's just the nature of having more than one school. There's going to be some schools that outperform others. But there's a huge gap between charters and public schools.

3: DCPS is experimenting with a few different models, you can probably speak about that since you're a parent there...

6: The school has been around for 20 years, so it's not an experiment by any means. Not sure how long School Within a School has been around.... [Overlapping talk]. The other thing I want to say is, I think there are a number of high performing public schools, and high performing charters, and just as many problem charters as well. I get nervous when people say just the charters are good, because I know a number of people have success at both. One concern I do have, because you touched on feeder patterns, I don't

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

understand how my child's feeder pattern works. It is a city-wide school but it has a feeder pattern, so how does it feed into a particular school if it's not a neighborhood school. So it's pretty confusing.

2: Has anyone put out any data about how bad the problem is with overcrowding? And what the issues are? I know they're very concerned about Ward 6 . . .

Facilitator: Data is being collected. It is clear that there are some schools that are overcrowded. Everything the Advisory Committee receives will be made public.

2: It sounds like we are being asked to solve a problem that we haven't fully identified . . .

Facilitator: The data is being put together, it going to be on the website. Everything the advisory committee receives you will have.

2: I went to the DCPS website, and still looks like some of the school profile data is incorrect. It still says that 46% of our school is out of boundary. So my solution would be no more out-of-boundary for a three year school, but I don't know anyone out-of-boundary.

8: That data is all wrong from what I can tell.

2: The last 2 years the lottery had a waitlist for in-boundary. It doesn't add up the last few years.

5: One thing I'd hope the Advisory Committee would consider is magnet programs, not at elementary level, but at middle and high school level. We have some, like Ellington. It seems like they're all fairly small programs. And at the middle school level? Because other big cities have had luck with magnet schools.

F: Magnet schools are growing and taking up quite a few students.

4: On November 15 Catania had a hearing, at the end of the meeting he talked to Kaya Henderson. What came out of that - - he asked about per pupil funding; she said that under-enrolled schools don't get enough funding or resources to attract parents. I think that's why they have all these education campus, K-8 are horrible. Especially in Ward 5. There are not middle schools in Ward 5. Who is going to come to this middle school, no one wants to put their 4 year old in school with an 8th grader. And what 8th grader goes to a school made for elementary school students. I don't know when it became that we need to have 400 student population to be a good school. Instead, schools should have a baseline of funding. Then even the worse school can have a baseline. DCPS creates all these big schools and push kids in there. Then when you close schools it doesn't work out, and schools become under-enrolled. Per pupil funding is not working, so we need to start over with a new model that helps schools that are doing badly and makes them better performing . . . so it puts in schools things that parents want. But if you're in a school where there are no advanced students, they won't be able to do well . . .

7: What initiatives are there to grab the collar of parents who aren't engaged? Does anything like that exist? Like maybe, is there a phone call that goes out to parents to get them to come to school and walk your kid to school?

F: There are some initiatives, charter schools have agreements, and there is other initiatives at individual schools. DCPS has an Office of Family and Public Engagement. I don't know of any city-wide programs.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

7: Maybe that's the right place to start. I can understand how that is a big problem.

1: Attendance was low at my school, and that impacts testing and funding. The entire school suffers because Pre-K is not consistently attending, and they are a fourth of the population. But we know as parents that they are constantly getting sick or missing school and the whole school suffers. But the problem is beyond what we can control in terms of attendance.

7: You're speaking about something slightly different; I was speaking on a more general basis about parents not being engaged in their kids' schools.

1: Well, it's connected because if at an early age kids don't show up to school, that pattern continues. They may end up in another school, I'm not sure what happens, but there's a connection.

Guiding values

9: Predictability for families, so you know where your kids are going to school.

8: One of the things I've talked about for months is the proximity to school. We have neighbors who spend their entire day, they have to drive to Capitol Hill every day, but I want my son to be able to walk to school with the kids in the neighborhood. It's frustrating that we don't have that option. My husband and I both work and our involvement will be affected if we're 40 minute drive from our house.

2: High quality programs and facilities for all kids, it's that simple.

5: A system that isn't based on luck. Everyone should have access to good quality education. You shouldn't have to be lucky to get into a good school.

7: Having maximum choices is important. It incentivizes the system to get better if we see people not choosing something -- that indicates there's a problem.

2: Efficient use of funds. I don't mean it in a way of closing schools that shouldn't be closed. We use the most money on per pupil.

F: We use the same as Arlington; we don't have the same results. [Laughter].

4: A lot of that number is for the court order about special ed., and schools were not meeting special needs and DCPS has to pay for that. It's an inefficient use of public funds.

5: The other thing that as a system, we're stuck with this dual charter/DCPS system, it's not a bad thing, but it does seem like we don't want to have people fleeing to charter schools just because they don't have a good public school. It should be the charters that offer choice, STEM schools, art schools, etc. They shouldn't be "warm body" schools just because oh my gosh, this is the only school. There should be good local neighborhood schools, and then have the charters provide specialized programs. So they should be a complement. We have the chance to do something very interesting. But the charter system then has to be a complement to a neighborhood system that works.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

6: Just to piggy-back, and I completely agree, there should be a cap or limit on the number of charters we have so they're not sprouting up everywhere. What ends up happening is that neighborhood schools get depleted, they get smaller and they get fewer funds. And in terms of charters, maybe have them go to different areas; they don't seem to be in all 8 wards. They seem very concentrated in some wards, so you have the same issues with those who don't have a good neighborhood school. So it's still not an opportunity for them. On paper it's open to any student, but some kids just can't get there.

8: I agree, and I'm torn on the choice issue. I have options fatigue right now. I think there's a danger in how many choices we have. Having too many options dilutes our resources, our parental resources, teaching resources – there's something to be said for quality neighborhood schools everywhere that may not be equal but good enough. If there are parents who are engaged, they can elevate that school for everyone. Right now that energy is diluted across so many charter and public, and city-wide options . . . it feels like we're all scattered to the wind.

5: It's also kind of an illusion of choice. It seems like we have all these options, but you don't really, you might get into one school from the lottery maybe. It goes to the idea that if there aren't enough decent seats for everybody, even if you get into an immersion school and you don't really want to go there, you aren't making a real choice. With more quality, you are making an actual choice, rather than out of desperation.

4: It's a market based system, because the city cannot or will not fix some issues. Every neighborhood doesn't have a good school; most neighborhoods don't have a good school. Then the charter system enters the picture. That's why we have charter schools here, because of all the closed schools and empty buildings. Charters filled the void. They go where there are buildings, they fill the void. The city says, we have a solution here, so you can take your kid to the charter. You go there because it's the only viable option you have. We don't really have choice right now. It should be maximum “effective” choice. I just don't see this happening in 5 or 10 years from now, because of all the things it takes to make a good neighborhood school. We could look at Harlem Children's Zone; we could create a HCZ in places where they need wrap around services. We could create an HCZ in some areas of Ward 7 and Ward 8, and kids would look at their school that is dilapidated and not expect to achieve. If we start early, etc. If someone asked me to put money into that, I would pay more taxes, I don't care how it would come about, I would say let's do it, yes! What I don't want to hear is that you want to outsource kids to charter schools - - that's not a solution. We cannot, all 600,000 of us, fit all our kids into that one school, into charter schools. You have to come to me with more than “let charters do middle schools because they do them well”. You're the Chancellor! And I'm not even in education.

8: I think it's useful to look at other cities and replicate models of what's working. Parent involvement is some of it; it's not all of it. There are parts of this city that are working well, it's not just about living in upper NW and having a multimillion dollar house. . . So how do we replicate that in other parts of the city? I hope that's what goes on during this study; that some corners of the city have figured this out.

2: And it probably correlates with which schools are being ranked high on the lottery.

5: I think anyone of us can tell you which schools are worth replicating. [Laughter].

Question: Do you look at these values differently for different grade levels?

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

5: I think proximity is more important at elementary school. As they get older they can travel on their own. I think if we had a system where high schools are much farther, that would be OK.

8: The only one I marked as different was that I think more academic diversity is important at elementary school; there might be some benefit to less academic diversity as kids get older so that schools can focus on kids who are higher performing or those that need more help.

Question: What's at the bottom? What's the least important?

4: Proximity, because that's not my experience, that's not what I know. Wherever I think is best for him to go, I'll do that because that's my job as a parent.

7: I think that racial/economic diversity are at the bottom, I think that's taking the choice out of parents' hands and it is made by people at the top. I don't think that's as important because you want to make the choice for your own kid.

5: I marked it at the bottom. Because we have a city-wide lottery, there's no way to make it a diverse school when you have a lottery. At least when you're talking about charter schools.

8: What I marked at the bottom was the use of school grounds. I'm unhappy with the school closings, but I think we also need to enough quality schools for everyone, and if that number of buildings doesn't match the need, then we can use those buildings for something else.

4: I marked that on the bottom too.

Facilitator: It doesn't matter to you if the school isn't full?

8: If we can have fewer high quality schools, it's ok to have fewer schools being used.

7: I interpreted that very differently. Are we using those buildings outside of class hours, for community meetings etc? Better to use it than to let it sit idle.

Q: Flexibility for LEAs?

8: If we have uniformly high quality schools, then issues of choice and flexibility become less important. It's not at the top of the list if every child has a high quality school available in their neighborhood.

5: I marked that low. If DCPS creates the rules for who goes where, do they need more flexibility? We created this perception of live and die by the lottery. Are they talking about charters getting proximity preference?

4: Yeah, I marked that high. If you live on the block . . . some flexibility might solve that problem.

5: That question is very vague.

Q: What about strengthening neighborhood schools?

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

4: I marked that low; that would be wonderful because that doesn't exist. I'm for maximum school choice, as long as that's effective choice.

5: I marked that high. I used to travel far to get to school, and I'm not sure if that's a feasible goal. But I think that not having to spend a lot of your day as a kid traveling to school would be great for most kids.

Q: Simple to administer?

7: I put that as important. I think if it's simple to administer then it becomes easy for people to understand and we don't all have to become policy experts.

6: I was kind of indifferent about simple to administer. It's more important that its simple for parents to understand. An administrator should be able to do it. If I understand it as a parent . . . then you can do your smoke and mirrors, whatever behind closed doors . . .

4: I read that policy memo about other cities Boston, New York, I was like I'm not sure what that means, but it sounded like it worked.

Q: What is missing?

7: I don't know how much this is a problem in DC, but teachers don't - - can't be the authority to stand up to students, it seems like teachers have to walk on egg shells. What I'm thinking of, if teachers could be the authority they need to be, you wouldn't get to the point of a suspension, and nobody could come and take a lawsuit against them.

2: For schools to become more competitive [it] seems they have gone to very interesting curriculum innovations at the elementary school level, but there is not alignment on the middle school level. You have Spanish immersion, Emilio Reggio, etc. But I think if they come to 6th grade from every background, I worry what that looks like. I think flexibility strengthens the system in some ways, but a little bit of continuity could be helpful.

4: There is no vertical integration amongst DCPS schools. There is some discussion horizontally. But the people that were supposed to prepare students had no idea what was coming next.

2: Middle school is the weakest link in the system. I know David Catania is looking at it. Obviously this is a big priority, and after the boundary process is resolved that should be the next focus.

5: I wonder if there is a question about size of middle schools. There are catchment areas that are very far from the elementary schools they are assigned to. You are going to have kids coming from a long way around, and you have charters pulling kids out. I wonder if there is an option for more, smaller middle schools . . . Maybe you can have more program alignment from elementary to middle school. But can't do it with huge middle schools that take in large swathes of students.

6: One thing I thought was missing was wraparound services, and the need for that with parents who need extra assistance. If you didn't get a meal at home then you don't really care about school, or you need a doctor to come in once a month. In the past things that weren't the duties of the education system have

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

become the de facto responsibility of the education system; we have to include those. If those things are not taken care of, kids can't be successful.

Q: What about having voices heard?

7: Wraparound resources have good intentions behind them, but you have to realize what the limits are to the resources. The education system's primary responsibility is to be an education system.

5: Discipline issues or wraparound services are relevant to feeders because that's why parents choose certain schools that attract them. If you want a neighborhood school to succeed, then it's definitely involved in how you create system of student attendance.

4: Scarcity is what rules this system. If wraparound services would help ease the scarcity of schools, that is worth it.

6: It's something that on its face doesn't look related to school at all, but it has a multiplier effect of what happens to kids in schools; if you have a pocket of poverty, they won't be successful in school. You'd be surprised what would happen if a doctor came in once in a while to school. Very small things that cost money on the front end save money on the back end.

2: Like you have a community center here, you can build partnerships to provide wraparound services.

6: It doesn't necessarily have to come from the school. It could be coming from the Department of Health Services, etc. I don't think those issues should be completely siloed because they work together.

2: That goes to your issue about utilizing the building; maybe use the school building at night for those services.

7: I think the education system should be focused on education.

Question: Thoughts on how to improve public dialogue?

4: Honestly, this whole situation and this process essentially pits people against each other. When it's theoretical and we can come together and have a good discussion, but it's very hard to divorce your feelings when it's your child. It's very personal. If I have to move, when I chose a house strategically, I don't think people are going to be like: "that's ok; I'll pack up and move".

8: It's all for the greater good

4: I think it's really hard, the school that they chose to go to may not be their school in the future . . . I don't know: maybe grief counselors?

2: It's not going to work everywhere, but I want to know what's going on in the new school. What model can they get; do they break up the grades? What options are open to us with this re-districting that . . . it's a negotiation? I don't want it to just be a new assignment, and that's it.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

4: I need concrete; there's a lot of talk coming out of DCPS, but everyone wants to know what you'll be giving me at my school to make it better. If people knew what they were moving to, they might be OK with the process.

5: I think if you're telling people that they're losing access to the next school up, that's one thing, but I think having sibling preference . . . having to do only one drop off and pick up, is really important to people. Allowing families to finish out at one school is important. If the family's already invested in a single school, not necessarily at middle school, let people not move so that they can finish off at the elementary school. You can't grandfather everyone in, because the system won't change for 15 years, but in a discrete school you can grandfather families that are already part of that community.

1: The framing of all of this is very inaccessible to people that need to be discussing this. Most of us are already very active, and some of us don't even have kids in schools. So that already tells you, whether they changed [boundaries] or not, our kids would basically be OK. I am from D.C., and I went to Catholic school. But when I look at the language - - there are a lot of people - - this is just not how they talk about school. A lot of people don't know what an LEA is. All of this is framed over a lot of people's heads. It's the same people pushing the same decisions. For transparency, we all philosophically believe that everyone should have a good education. But at the end of the day, my child will [have a good education] when it comes down to it. Everything we said confirms the fact that if you have a certain wherewithal, you do the research, your child will get into a good school because we know how to do all the right things. If you're not, this process will pass you by, and you will go to the same school. When we talk about discipline and all that stuff, I can't teach because of the level of disrespect. In terms of taking this dialogue into other communities and eliciting the same response, there's a different way to frame this. It mirrors the long term dysfunctional relationships we have in this city. A lot of the parents feel very disenfranchised. For them, it's like: "now that all of 'you' are moving in, our schools get better". And you know what; we'll just keep doing what we're doing. Even if a school is lower-performing, they still want to hold on to them because it's all they have. The dialogues need to happen in a space where people feel empowered to be honest. I saw this and thought it would be an important place to offer a different voice.

9: So do a focus group at the school?

1: You could do it at a church, or. . .

4: Yeah you could come to a school, but nothing has changed there. But if you come to our church, we know at least that you're going to listen, that's a whole different dynamic

F: I'm taking it's transparency, outreach, it's community education. It's figuring out how to do it . . .

6: On their playing field.

4: They will come to you and tell your their experience and what they want to see . . . The schools have always been the same. I could only imagine people who are 3rd and 4th generation whose entire families, like if you can get out with out-of-bounds, then you do the best you can to get out of that [area].

1: All of us are at an early stage, but you can see, especially when you get to high school . . . But as you get younger certain things are not important to me. But by the time you get to high school and you have nowhere to go, because they feel nothing was really happening, and they are just like: "let me get you an

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

8th grade education". And for some people that really is a goal, because you have to work to support the family.

4: If you can work, you usually do work....

Focus Group 6C: Turkey Thicket Recreation Center, December 14, 2013

The facilitator reviewed the standard introduction, signing consent, reading outline material, etc.

Participants:

1. Lives near Logan Circle (Ward 2) has a child in PK4 at LAMB PCS (Ward 4)
2. Lives near Turkey Thicket, child goes to Hearst ES (Ward 3)
3. Has three children at Hearst; lives in Logan Circle (Ward 2)
4. Child just started at Hearst
5. [inaudible]
6. Has a child in-boundary at Oyster /Adams bilingual (Ward 3)
7. Child is a 3rd grader at Murch (Ward 3) , lives Columbia Heights (Ward 1)
8. Has a 5th grader at Shepherd ES, lives in Shepherd Park (Ward 4)
9. Lives (Ward 5?) child attends Yu Ying (Ward 5)
10. Lives Capitol Hill, has child at Maury (Ward 6)
11. Child at Capitol Hill Montessori, child is special needs, not served by DCPS so they are paying for private school; (Ward 6)
12. Has children at Capitol Hill Montessori (Ward 6), lives Ward 5

F – It is really important for us to be able to hear from as many people as we can in order to get as much information as we can to the Advisory Committee. [Reads excerpt, explains process.] The first question is to ask about your views of what is the current state of affairs regarding assignment and school boundaries. So what aspects of school assignment, boundaries and school choice right now would you want to keep or preserve?

8. Feeder patterns that have a clear path; with so many children going out-of-bounds, the feeder pattern allows them to stay together. It kind of re-creates the community that is lost since we've gotten away from neighborhood schools so that's important to maintain.

F- So the continuity of feeder patterns.

0. We moved our children voluntarily from a charter school that we really did like, and they ended up going to Deal. . . . We've come to know a lot of students from outside of the Hearst boundaries whom who my children are getting to know. I think the hardest thing about leaving the charter school was the community. So if the idea is to separate out-of-boundary kids from in-boundary then that would just be an additional hardship.

10. So if the boundary is split for some reason so that half the kids are headed to one Jr. High and half . . . so that if you are on the east side of Maury you are technically feeding to Stuart-Hobson - - it's insane. Not to say this is unique to DC. [It's the] thing that I like the least - - and I can only speak for the Hill - - the borders are very clear - - the maps are very straightforward with respect to where you live so there's little surprise at least on the elementary school level.

F- And that's a very positive thing?

0 – I think that maintaining the system of blended neighborhood and choice is crucial for two reasons. One, having some people from the neighborhood builds predictability and more importantly there is a real investment in the school. People are involved in our school in a lot of ways; we have parents of older kids who are already gone from the school - - people whose kids are already gone from college already – who maintain an active interest in the school. And that's something that we wouldn't get [if it was all out-of-boundary]. That's something that we often talk about in terms of charters as a laboratory of experiments that work being imported into the District. Is there something that charters can learn . . . Giving parents a choice to have more schools involves a little bit of shrinking of the boundaries so there is space in the good schools

7. I also want to weigh in on out-of-boundary as something that has been pretty successful up until now. We live in Columbia Heights and our boundary school is Tubman. We just didn't feel that it would be a school that would challenge our child so we went charter and then recently just got in out-of-bounds to a school that leads to Deal. We left the charter because we wanted to go to Deal.

I put a little something together that I'll read. "I was actually ambivalent to come to this focus group today because I wasn't sure if my voice would matter in all the decisions that are being made. Taking time out of my Saturday seemed a little daunting and though I'm still not totally sure that being here will make a difference, I do feel compelled to be here because this issue is incredibly important to me. I know it's a hard issue for me and all parents and kids in the DC public school system, and I also know that the individuals involved who are making decisions about boundaries and feeder patterns have a very difficult road ahead. I'm here today because I have a child in a DCPS school that leads to Deal. We are out-of bounds and recently left our beloved charter school for access to Deal. My child was uprooted from the kids he grew up with and it was not an easy transition. Our reasons for moving him was for access to Deal, obviously, and we have played by the rules, took advantage of what we had access to under the current out-of-bounds system. I am asking that whoever is involved in making these decisions considers my child among the hundreds of kids across the city in similar positions. My child will be entering 4th grade next September 2014, when the new boundaries and feeder patterns are announced and he will be in 5th grade when the new boundaries and feeder patterns are implemented. I have told him all about Deal and how he will be attending the school with many of his friends, we have toured with the principal and we have dangled it in front of his eyes for months. So we are hoping that you will take this into consideration when you think about how out-of-boundary kids will be affected."

I also wanted to say that cutting out the feeder patterns for out-of-boundary kids really will fracture some of these peer groups and communities . . . kids going to elementary school making dozens of friends and then saying "some of you have to go to one school and some of you have to go to another school" I don't think is beneficial for any of our children.

F – Great. So I've heard about clarity for boundaries, stability and predictability of feeder patterns. And that the system that allows the possibility of out-of-boundary kids to advance and have access to various schools is something that some of you feel is working well.

10. I was just going to say on that last thing that I respectfully want to disagree a little bit. What happened on the Hill is that - - and I work with hundreds of people and hear [a lot from all over] - - and what happens

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

when people don't have access, to a certain degree, they go in and they bring another school up. And that's what I'm helping to have happen in [the Columbia Heights area] and what's happened on the Hill and what happened with Maury. [Maury was a] school that everyone was fleeing from to the Cluster or was fleeing for upper northwest. We went into Maury before Maury was Maury. And now you can't buy a house in Lincoln Park.

11. We bought our house before Maury was Maury [Laughter].

10. So we went in and literally there were like six of us But then when we looked around and started speaking to other people and we realized that there was this wonderful hotbed of incredibly committed people, they just weren't what we expected that they would look like - - if that makes sense. I don't mean color, but just where they came from and community members. [I moved] my daughter to Brent now - - but Brent is getting a little too white and rich for me - and we were out-of-bounds for Brent and we got into Brent before Brent was Brent. My point is that yes, to a certain degree, as you are pushing people to go out of the community - - everybody just keeps going west. So, Minor is right next to Maury and there are people who live across the street from Minor, and Minor is a gorgeous, gorgeous building and it much better than what we dealt with when we were raising \$75 dollars to get another vacuum cleaner for the custodian.

0. I don't want my kid to go to an up-and-coming school if it's going to take from now to the time he is in college until "well, this school is great now". I want him to have a good education today. So at his old school they were teaching down. So he was at the top of his class and they were like "we can't do anything for you". And now he's like challenged and there are kids smarter than him and he is actually challenged in school and learning.

0. That's a terrific point but one . . . that's not what I was talking about. In an up-and-coming neighborhood with educated parents who take that argument - - and I'm actually an education lawyer - -take that argument another two miles southeast to a neighborhood that is much more distressed. And that's what I'm talking about.

0. I hear you. I'm just saying that in general, that's a thought. Like everybody being able to get in there and then other people getting in there. Because Brent [families] went around trying to help Amidon.

0. That's terrific.

F – I just wanted to jump in here because I wanted everybody to have a chance to . . .

12. One of the things that come up is about predictability. But what are you going to do when there are such a number of people who have a right to Deal that within four years there is going to be a percent of . . . and people are going to have to . . . and the very factor . . . that made [Wilson] a strong school. That is a reality that's happening now. They are already suffering from over-full classrooms. Would you suggest that another building does not get renovated because you want to put another wing on Deal so that school holds half the population of the city when there are kids in very poor neighborhoods that still have rain in their classrooms? So part of it for me is that I say "I support you a hundred percent but how are we possibly going to do this?"

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

0. I'm agreeing with what some of you are saying. I mean the problem isn't the boundaries. Within the city the results of these focus groups have to protect each side. The families that are saying "we're in Deal, we make choices" and other families who are saying "It's not fair that we can't have another Deal". So the fact that there is only one Deal and the fact that the city only has one middle school, and the fact that they haven't done anything around school assignment and boundaries in so long that over time they slowly change things to shift the educated parents to the high quality schools.

Regarding what's working, I think it is good that DC has some great examples so we have some great schools; we have some great communities who paved the way to develop what neighborhoods should be. So now the challenge is to leverage that success with schools and teachers and principals and families and bring success to the rest of the city. It is unfortunate that I think some people are going to be hurt by it, and some people will not. But that's sort of what has to happen.

And I think that to tell you that you have a great education but now you have to change . . . but that is what my recommendation is going to be. I do think they have to [invest in] some of these schools. I think that's the only way forward. But the investment is to make sure we don't have to wait till college for my kid to get a good education. I need the city to invest. Take half of the Deal population into another school - - but then invest in that. So the investment decisions have to be done so we do both: we have to keep Deal and then keep some of the parents and bring it to other neighborhoods. The assignment can't just protect the people who have had the great schools and it can't ignore the other neighborhoods.

3. Let me say a couple of things. I've been involved in a lot of discussions about this over the past couple of years and in past few weeks I've had some nuanced conversations with a lot of parents. So there are a couple of things that one person said and a couple of things that another person said that I would like to highlight. The first thing is I think the elephant in the room that DCPS is not talking about is that all of this discussion is the result of disinvestment and really a lack of urgency in dealing with a lack of quality seats - - especially at the middle school level.

We were at Ross when Ross was being turned around. And now there's a group of 5th grade parents who are saying "put us all together and feed us into Hardy and we'll go work on Hardy". And the system is fighting that. It's an opportunity to create another quality middle school. So I think there really needs to be a focus and an emphasis on that.

And the second thing is - - and I'm hoping that the mayor and the education committee does this - - but there's got to be some urgent collaboration and coordination between DCPS and the charters because I think there are some charters that can step in and provide those neighborhood seats. But they are so silent. And I can't even wrap my brain around it - you've got the Deputy Mayor, you've got OSSE, you've got the Chancellor, you've got the Charter Board and there's no single point of accountability below the Mayor. One of the things that needs to be added to this discussion is that there needs to be a single point of accountability for coordinating not only the decisions but also the implementation of this that is accountable - - making sure they are looking at both pieces. Because if the tough decisions are going to be made - such as some of the ones you are talking about - - and if charters are not brought into the equation as to how they alleviate some of this then it's going to be a disaster.

0. Just piggybacking onto that - and it sounds like they are saying "Oh my god! We should actually have coordination between our public schools and our charter schools!" I don't understand why charters are allowed to start in 5th grade. If DCPS schools are set up for PK-5th but then charters are allowed to start

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

[middle school] at 5, then there's panic. It's like "I'm not comfortable with what's happening in Jr. High and I have an opportunity to get into a charter and I'm gone". Principals are struggling with "I can't plan" because they have no idea what is going to be happening with 5th grade. Why we are allowing schools within the city to poach from each other . . . so why don't charters just start at 6th.

0. The idea is competition.

0. But it's a different thing.

0. She was being sarcastic [about competition]. [Laughter]

0. If there was someone central who was thinking it through . . .

A. Yes. And this is just a side note, and Jr. High is just a terrible age for everything. Regardless of poor neighborhoods or rich neighborhoods, Jr. High is just terrible because of the age. It's a really hard thing to deal with but the city seems to be putting up extra hurdles that don't need to be there. And at least in our neighborhood, when you talk to folks they are feeling good about most of the elementary schools; people are feeling good about what's going on with the high schools and it's just -- what are we going to do for the three years in between all those things that seems to be the biggest thing that I tend to hear from parents.

0. Generally I'm a glass-half-full kind of guy. But when I look at the questions being asked and having to rate them [focus group work-sheet], and thinking that DCPS could use these answers to just claim a mandate to do whatever the hell it's going to do anyway. That just -- gosh! That's just going to make it so much worse. So I have a couple of things that we've danced around a little bit here and that's the problem of middle school because DCPS has recognized that middle schools . . . so to keep students in the public schools they combine the middle schools with the elementary schools because there is plenty of room in the elementary schools. And now . . .

12. But there are parents fleeing [those PS-8s].

8. So now what do we do? In Ward 4 where I live there is no stand-alone middle school. The middle school my daughter would be feeding into if she were not going to Deal -- they would be overcrowded if we sent [Shepherd] into their school. We're betwixt and between because if you don't push north, then you have to push west and if you've gone as far west as you can go then you are still not happy -- because it's all about happy parents -- then you go charter or you go private or you go to the suburbs.

The one thing that maybe no one else has encountered here is that we all have a right to send our kids to our neighborhood schools from Kindergarten. We have universal PK but the difference between universal and mandatory PK is that we don't have the right to send our kids to our neighborhood school in PK. So everybody is in a lottery system for PK, in-boundary and out-of-boundary and in-boundary parents get bumped from the PK4 in their neighborhood school and then what do they want to do? Do they want to take their kids to their neighborhood elementary school and then to someplace that was third choice on their list? That causes disruption and unnecessarily so.

F – What other challenges? I want to make sure we capture all of the different things. Are there still more things that are working well that we haven't talked about?

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

0. I just want to say that it was a travesty that two people in this room had to rent [and move their kid] from a place where they were happy just to secure a middle school. That's really, really, really sad. And I have a 5th grader so . . . I totally understand. I have a middle schooler. I can't send my special needs child to Stuart-Hobson, and that's our in-boundary school.

10. I might not have moved my child if I had known two months before. We would have gone through high school and we would have been done. So I moved him and he's upset.

0. First the idea that you had to do that and I totally hear you because we're looking at Latin for our daughter because – what are we going to do? Eliot-Hine? . . . Because we are probably going to end up at Payne which is . . . I've got my house price on the line here. [Laughter]. And then the idea that you would have to . . . that's just horrible. . .

0. I'll rent my house and go rent in the neighborhood that feeds to where I want him to go and I'll stay there for a couple of years.

12. So DCPS came into a successful program . . . and they decided it was just irrelevant. They were going to abolish it. This was over the objections of the LSAT, the parents, the principal. And I had to move my kids. And there was supposed to be . . . but the LSAT's are ignored. They are followed as an exception to the rule, not as a rule. And as far as the boundaries are concerned . . . and for some parents the most important place for their kids, especially in elementary school, is in their neighborhood because they leave for work too early to use the before care and it is crazy that parents don't have schools where they work. And the other is that choice has been destroying schools. At my school 40% of the . . . Students started the year at a charter school next to our school. And at some schools it is 20%. And a school that might be doing well on its own gets all the charter dumps, and they are often special needs.

0. I don't get the charter dump thing. I don't understand why it is allowed. If you want to be a school - - I'm not nearly as well informed as a lot of you here – but it seems to me that charters should be living by the same rules and starting at the same grades and having to deal with the same students. If they are having trouble - - well they chose to be a school in this neighborhood and they're going to have to deal with it. I'm sure it is more complicated than that. The comment about how choice is killing us but we want to have schools near where we work and not where we live seems like a major choice issue. To me there is such a tension between having the right schools for your kids – which I totally get as I just moved to get into the right school for my kid - - - and having a neighborhood school. I really see the benefit of having neighborhood schools. When we started at Takoma EC I was shocked by the number of children who were within a block or two of where we lived who we had never met. And it was just such a nice feeling. Now I also decided that it wasn't going to be long-term good for my child [at Takoma] so I moved. But I do really love the idea of neighborhood schools and getting to know people. And if you start saying well “you're in boundary for where you work rather than where you live” then it's all a mish-mash again. So I think that's stepping a little too far.

There are enough people playing the game of who their guardian is – at least on the Hill we are starting to get lots of that. It happens in Boston where I grew up. It's like “Oh, that's his guardian” but if we do the work thing then it's just a logistical nightmare, complete chaos. The one thing about the Hill is that they've started to put in things like the IB program at Eastern. But the Hill is very fractured when it comes to the boundaries. So Brent and the western part all feed into Dunbar - - and I don't understand how that ever happened. There is a high school and a Jr. High on the Hill.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

0. Some feed into Wilson . . .

0. Oh. That's true, that's where I might play the boundary game. But if we are going to have community schools then let's make sure everyone is feeding into them.

0. And make sure they do not live in Maryland.

F. – So I want to play traffic cop here for a minute because I want to be mindful of everyone's time. And I also want to be mindful that I want to hear from you about another related topic before we go. This all segues together but we've been talking about what's been happening and how this assignment and choice process is going forward. So one of the purposes of this focus group it to ask parents what principles should guide this process of boundaries and assignment review. [Explanation of guiding principles sheet; examples that could guide but not limited discussion in any way columns for elementary, middle and high school . . . starting with elementary schools what value do you think is most important?

0. Probably for all of these for elementary school but in particular I think proximity is high on the list because the age of the students and their ability to take care of themselves and the ease of the parent being able to have a relationship with that school. As 12 mentioned earlier . . . my son attends school near where I work; quite literally across the street. If they needed assistance in the classroom, I could be there. If he needed to be picked up I could be there in 15 minutes, not in 45 minutes or an hour and 45 minutes depending on which bus lines are working. Imagine now we live 2.2 miles from his current school. But if we walk to Takoma station, ride the red line down to here and walk up the hill it is 2.2 miles plus a train ride. So the access to the kid is really unique for a young child and even more unique for a PK because he can't take himself to the doctor. When I was in high school or middle school [I walked to school] but in DC traffic it would be a very unique thing for that age [elementary].

F – So proximity. . .

3. I think the most important principle for elementary students is predictability, number one -- that's really what got us started. I have twins and in the lottery process they ended up in two different schools and I've got three kids so we had three different schools - - which is just insane. So we then had to start maneuvering to get at least the twins together and then the oldest because we couldn't physically drop off 3 kids all at the same time. So I think that predictability [is most important]. We like living in Logan Circle and we want to move but we've been on hold for a couple of months just waiting to see where the boundary and feeder patterns are going to go because we don't want to move and just change. But I think equitable access is key too because education feeds into economic development and public safety and all those things. So if we lose kids, especially those who are lower served or are in lower income communities and they fall behind and they don't catch up - - then the city doesn't [gain]. I think that there is not enough looking at the total costs. We hear of these investments. It costs more down the road to deal with the problems than in investing in equitable access so I would think those two.

6. This question is dangerously over-simplified and you have to recognize that there's no set answer to it. As long as we have There are completely different answers to this question.

F – What question?

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

6. The question of what's the most important value. I'm lucky enough that when my wife and I got married, my child was four years old – and we were selling two houses to be able to move in together; two salaries, sell two houses, and put every dime we had together to be able to buy one small place in Woody Park so we could go to the one school that we wanted to. There's incredible variation across the city in school quality from awful to transitioning to fantastic. And along with that there is variation in wealth - - people with no chance whatsoever to move into a neighborhood with a good school. And the value as to whether or not choice is everything? In my personal interest I don't need any choice whatsoever except that I want diversity in my school so I want choice personally. As someone who professionally has been trying to get integrated schools for 20 years then choice matters to me but . . . doesn't matter at all. You have to recognize that you can't have just one answer for each number on this form.

3. That's a good point.

0. I would just completely agree. These questions are off-putting because they seem to

6. I agree a little bit with [an earlier speaker]. I mean I think quality is the prime consideration because if parents at each school were satisfied with each of the schools in the neighborhood, they wouldn't have to schlep their kids all the way across town. But bless those parents who do because they are making that choice, they have made the commitment and I know the value that out-of-boundary parents bring to my child's school because they have already made the commitment in advance. They may not have been able to scrape together the dough to buy a house in the neighborhood but they have done the next possible thing by deciding to make that extra 20, 30 minute hop. Of course all that time commuting is probably wasted in not being able to do homework, shortened sleep cycles for the kids, but if we could have a more iron-clad guarantee of quality everywhere then a lot of these conversations would not be happening because it would be a moot subject.

0. And to me the big tension is the long term and the short term. Where I was in Takoma, the people who were in the neighborhood could have made a great school. But because there was so much choice they never even thought about the school. Everyone immediately went out. There were a few of us - - many of whom have already moved on in first grade, they did PK, K, but just like me, moved on - - but we were trying but there just weren't enough people to do it. And it's when you have the choice – and I understand the need for choice and the desire for choice when you want your kids to get an education (because I want the same thing) – but because there was so much choice the world was their oyster, or the lottery was there, and they never even really considered it [Takoma]. My neighbors, right down the street, I could point out five on my block, I'd just say "Are you considering Takoma" - - and it's "Oh no, we got her into duh-duh-duh". It was just very clear that they are not going to consider Takoma at all. So this is the long term for the neighborhood - - which is not a poor neighborhood. I mean there are other neighborhoods where if they don't have that choice, they may never get out. I understand that. There are a lot of these neighborhoods where it is somewhere in between where people just look to other schools automatically and it's a problem. I don't know the answer. Or on the Hill . . . maybe if they all got together they could make their school really good.

1. I agree. I want to just emphasize because I am one of those families where it actually really kills me because I live basically between Ross and Garrison and I chose not to send my kids to Garrison because we won the lottery. I wanted to be that leading example for my neighbors - - to say "take a chance on Garrison, it is up and coming, we can do it". The community just saved it.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

Our block was the epicenter of DC - - the best place to live at about 14th and P. The city is investing so much in turning this into an urban life-style that can attract young families to come and live - - and I was so proud of that for the dollars I spent for my condo - - but there's no school around it. So if people were investing . . . they could almost force me and my neighbors to take a chance on the school. So I love choice because I got into one of the best charters, and I played the lottery. But if I didn't have choice and I had quality and proximity I would be at Garrison. I think more of my neighbors would be at Garrison and maybe we could turn Garrison into the next Ross. And if each of us could do that in our neighborhoods and turn that next school into . . . I wish that's the way it works but it doesn't. We all opted not to even take a chance on our neighborhood schools because quality is the most important thing and until quality changes, we are all going to keep this problem going.

0. What do you do when you live in a neighborhood where half of the parents don't even care about their kids' education? And that's a problem I think that no one even talks about because you have schools to where kids aren't being read to at night, they are not getting bed-time stories.

6. Now hold on, that doesn't mean that people don't care about their kids.

0. But they don't know how to . . .

0. They don't have that capacity . . .

0. Let's say it's at 30% though. Their parents aren't doing anything about their education. There are innovative models, the Harlem Children's Zone . . . which is now the Promise Neighborhood . . . has that model. The Harlem Children's Zone in Harlem is a model for the Department of Education's Promise Neighborhoods where they basically have all the services there [at the school].

3. Because really it's a fallacy. What happens in a lot of low income neighborhoods . . . 50% of kids in low income neighborhoods come malnourished, sleep deprived, so these other issues are not addressed because of parents having to work 2 or 3 jobs or have other issues. When you provide all those services at the school then any kid can learn.

12. We don't really have choice.

0. We have chance.

0. We have choice for charters.

[Voices together no, no]

12. Choice means that parents can apply to 12 schools but they don't win the lottery anywhere. I think there are plenty of charter schools that are as bad as the neighborhood school. The other part of choice is a neighborhood where half of the parents care and are all leaving that school that has parents who don't have the social capital. It's not about school - - they don't have the knowledge base and they are struggling. And then, that school is probably one of the schools whose enrollment goes up 20% after they get their count. There are more kids in DCPS whose parents don't even enroll them on time than in the charter schools. So choice is one of the factors that are ruining the schools.

F – We’ve been talking about elementary and I know that middle school has come up over and over so let’s focus on middle school. What needs to be guiding the process in determining boundaries and assignment at the middle school level?

0. I just wanted to say that I work with a DC welfare-to-work organization and I meet with parents once a month and the parents kind of have to be there at these seminars. But it is unbelievable how much they care about their children’s education. They are by and large products of DC public schools - - as I am, I went to Ellington - - but they cared deeply about their children’s education. I know this is a small sub-group of people out of work- - but they are so invested in their children’s education. At one of the lectures I said “How many of you would be willing to go to your in-bounds neighborhood school?” None. 35 people, not one. So I totally get what you mean.

But for middle school – and most of these parents had middle schoolers and high schoolers - - for middle school it is absolutely ridiculous that we have this situation. I mean, almost throw boundaries out. There’s nothing. We have to get quality middle schools and adding 6th, 7th, and 8th on to an elementary school is not the answer. That is not a middle school. We need algebra, science labs, etc. etc., and we don’t know how to fix it but we’ve got to.

Also there is a problem with special education. I had a choice for my child whose special ed. placement was Hardy or Stuart–Hobson. He could have fed into Eliot-Hine or Jefferson. We got into Deal and Maury; we got into a couple of other schools. Anyway, believe it or not, none of those could serve his needs and we tried really hard to make one of them work. We had all the choice in the world and we still had no choice. And I can’t think that my son with a particular group of needs can’t be served by one end or the other. My point is just that everybody across the city cares deeply about their children and their education and they show it in different ways. Not necessarily the way [I would show it]. He was mentioning that school in Harlem that is doing everything it can do.

F- So what rises to the top?

3. It’s the high quality seats. There are not enough high quality seats and it causes the problems we’ve heard in here. People leaving 5th grade to get into the 6, 7th and 8th feeder and what also happens is that 5th grade students leave and you have a small pool of kids and then it is harder to have good test scores and then the school scores go down which feeds into a self-fulfilling prophesy. So . . . with high quality seats at middle you’ve got this void . . . it’s like you have to get across this moat from elementary to high school.

0. And then everybody thinks that everyone else is leaving. Like with so many 4th and 5th parents this year they would say “Well if I just knew that someone else - - at very popular, very successful schools - - if I just know that someone else was staying - - charters and publics. And we stayed with my child And it was a leap of faith but we did it.

3. One other issue I want to add there, also from the physical space aspect of it - - I think DCPS is making a very bad decision with the half-empty schools of putting the middle schools in there. I know that there are a lot parents in my neighborhood that are - - since they put Shaw in Cardozo and it is not bi-furcated and you’ve got 11 year olds with 20 year olds - - you know what? We talked about going there but we’re not.

0. So Shaw middle is in Cardozo?

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

3. Yes. They mixed them in.

0. We need an ideal, functional middle schools assignment paradigm when we don't actually have a

0. And I think with the [lottery?] at least you are giving the parents a tool to make the decision. Like "we've worked together on this elementary school, are we all feeding into the same school?" Knowing that your kid is not going to get sent randomly to Dunbar even though we live two blocks from [Maury]. That's kind of the craziness. We just had a little winter concert over at Eliot-Hine. They have this IB program which everyone is cautiously optimistic about. So for Jr. High I feel like "we've got to get these kids a safe school". There's a metal detector at a Jr. High! You have got to be kidding me. That's what we're dealing with. Safety is part of that quality seat. There has to be more than one Jr. High in the public system that people would actually be excited to send their kids to. Jr. High is a tough age. And I think that smaller more manageable schools can help alleviate some of these problems because they're not dealing with this stress. With a thousand kids at a school one principal and two assistant principals cannot control the pressure. But if you break that up into three schools of 300, well now you're talking.

0. But maybe you don't have facilities.

0. But we are in an urban environment and I think there's a way. Technology is there and I think we need to start thinking bigger than just the four brick walls. If your kid is at Eliot-Hine and the class that they really need to be in is at Deal, then that takes 15 minutes and five bucks to set up. You put a couple of cameras in the classroom and they're getting a lecture . . . because they want to take that algebra class. And DC has the advantage of being a postage stamp compared to Fairfax or Montgomery County. For distance learning is the technology is there and this is a really low-cost fix. We need to start thinking outside the definition that we have of school.

0. People are identifying all these really good reasons why there's this sort of moat you have to jump across between good or improving elementary schools to middle schools, including one that was brought up earlier that this is developmentally a time when there is a lot going on and kids in that age range And it is also a terrible time to take kids from smaller schools where the teachers and the principal have known them for five years and put them in a place where nobody knows them. And there's a ton of research where people know that the single most powerful thing for whether a kid achieves in high school is whether or not they show up in 9th grade ready. So you've got to get middle school right for kids to have a chance in high school. And yet there is a fairly obvious solution which every one – based on what's just been expressed here will hate.

There's not just one high performing middle school in the city - - there's two. And the second one is Oyster/Adams which is a K-8 school. And there is a good manners solution to the problem of having kids in that age range together. And it's that you manage the building and you separate the older kids from the younger kids. It's actually spread over two buildings and the older kids are in the second building with the 4th and 5th graders. They separate it by floors. It's a great system. You get some continuity with kids staying together and the adults in the building are exposed to the kids for longer years. There is a drain out of the building because of this bizarre set up where kids have access to both the middle school at Adams and to Deal because of the boundary system and that's something that probably needs to be addressed because of the demographic time-bomb at Deal. But K-8 is a system that really can work and does work elsewhere that we should consider. But that's replicable and where we should invest. I mean don't build a new wing

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

onto Deal or Wilson. Invest to the east so that families to the east have easier access -- or try to pull more affluent families from the west to the east to give them an incentive to try to get out of overcrowded schools. There are ways to replicate. Try to take assistant principals and 20% of the staff and pull them into the new schools too so that you start with really professional, well trained people. You can't force teachers to go but give them the financial incentives and the ladders to go. Give them reasons.

0. So you move the school culture . . .

3. Let me say this because I've got to leave in a couple of minutes . . . I agree with what you're saying. We haven't talked a lot about what DCPS does well. And I see a solution to middle school because one thing the system does well is specialty schools. And so I agree with your point. They could start by going east with specialty middle schools. School Without Walls does well, Banneker does well, McKinley does well -- and McKinley proves that it doesn't have to be west of the park. So specialty middle schools I think are a short-term solution to this problem. But you could do a blend. And also they would be feeders. If they had a tech middle school that fed into McKinley, if they had a performing arts school they could give people an advantage to getting into Ellington . . .

0. Start small and do a blend . . .

F – Ok. I'm going to flip us to high schools because we have 15 minutes left. And you can ignore me and come back to middle school if you want but I wanted to lay it on the table that we've had the opportunity to talk about high school.

0. Location is far less important. Fourteen year-olds can navigate the bus system . . .

0. Again, I'm sorry. I'm using Capitol Hill as an example. Our child, if she stuck through, would somehow have to find her way to get up to Dunbar and some kids at Brent would have to figure out how you get up there too. But why are you sending someone across town when there is literally a high school 10 blocks away. Eastern High School's boundary is kind of bizarre; it seems to cut Wards 7 and 8 in half. I don't know the dynamics of Ward 8 but I would think that tends to sever communities over there with this really weird boundary. But predictability makes sense and keeping feeder schools together. So if your school is Deal, then they're going to Wilson. You know that. If you are at this middle school then half of the students should not go one high school and half another.

0. The only neighborhood high school west of the park is Wilson. Where do those kids go? They have to go someplace else. I mean that is by far the District's most populous high school. My daughter has been in Eastern a lot in the past year because of the DC youth orchestra. It's a nice building they did a good job renovating it and I know that if you've got a good building that it's easier for students to learn. I know that they were re-introducing students, one grade at a time so they have a chance to re-direct the culture and climate of the school in a way that the adults running it see fit.

0. They still have 7 or 8 cops there after school to control . . .

0. But you know the fact that there are 9 or 10 different high schools in this strange east/west relationship . . . whoever thought of those boundaries -- well duh! But obviously, there are too many high schools for that small a population or somebody has a broader vision than anyone at this table has. Because if the District's population is still going to grow by a quarter of a million people in the next generation or so, some

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

of those people are going to have kids and those kids are going to have to go to school someplace. I don't think we have enough school facilities with enough capacity right now to house that expected number. Where are they all going to go? You've got to have some facilities for them someplace and I suppose with 250,000 more people - - and some of them have to be parents - - there should be a critical mass to demand change more effectively than we have been able to do so far in our careers as DCPS parents.

0. I will be very unpopular with people who have a seat at Wilson. But I actually am one who is leaning toward the no-boundaries for high schools idea but with specialization. I went to Ellington, we were not rich people, but there was a lot of freedom for a fourteen year-old; more than seems to be the case now. Most of my friends came from Ward 7 or Ward 8 or your neighborhood before it was your neighborhood; single parent households and things like that but we were all brought together because we had a shared passion. And were all headed to college; we were all good kids; there were 425 of us; there were 92 kids in my graduating class; 90 went to college. They by no means had any money or any anything. I was probably one of the best educated, one of the best "back-grounded" kids there (my parents are professors) but we were brought together. We didn't drink, we didn't do drugs; we thought it was fun to do a show so that's what we did. We were given just amazing opportunities, just astounding opportunities. So if there could be something like Wilson's academies but they could be split up around the city so that for instance, if you're in a literary academy, authors are coming to talk with you. I met more famous musicians! I played in jazz clubs, when I was 15 or 16 years old (little white girl in the jazz club). I literally met more famous musicians before I was 18 than I ever met in my life going to conservatory and everything. If there could be just around the city - - take the gorgeous new buildings and take the wonderful old buildings and bring everybody together and provide technical training or a trade. God must bless my daughter but she's never going to take calculus. She's going to get to Ellington, I hope. We need more of a trade network of schools so that everybody who doesn't fit in can learn an actual trade that they can come out of school with a skill - - hairdressing - - car mechanic - my son will do STEM I hope.

0. Well I have one theme that is in some ways a counterpoint to that. I think that having specialty schools around the city are great but there's a lot of kids who are just kids. They don't have this one driving passion. They don't know if they want to go into science and math, they don't know if they want to perform . . . so what I'm looking for is really nice good middle schools and high schools for the vast majority of kids. They haven't made up their mind by 14.

[General agreement]

0. But I think it's having both. I think it is super to have those kinds of schools [Ellington] but I think we need to have good schools that are arts and humanities oriented or like a Washington Latin. No way would my family have sent me to a science school - - they wouldn't have thought of it.

0. It seems to me that something that is coming up across the board is - we talked about elementary school and middle school and high school quality. You're saying that we have these specialty schools. You're not just dreaming but you are saying "also have schools, good schools that our kids, just regular kids, can go to - - and that's why we are sitting here. Because we don't have quality schools and we don't have schools in our neighborhoods we can send our kids to. We've talked a lot about people in their neighborhoods diving into schools and bringing them up - - which is not for everybody. It is great for the people who want to do it and it is a wonderful thing when it can happen. So where does the city come in? And you mentioned the project in Harlem, which I thought was a great example, but how can the city go into some of these schools and make them better?

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

3. That's an opportunity for DCPS.

0. And a responsibility for DCPS.

3. They kept Garrison open but they haven't kept the promises that they made.

0. They haven't done anything to invest further. The community saved the school . . .

0. Like personally I think it is a little bit too much to put on DCPS because I think that most of us agree that there are societal issues going into why a lot of these schools are having troubles like kids showing up hungry and sick . . . I think it's a little bit too much to put on DCPS to ask them to fix society's problems. I think it's a piece of it. But there also has to be that bigger vision that the city has so it's "how are we going to fix those kinds of problems to our schools can succeed?"

3. Don't get me wrong. I'm a big believer that we really have to have community centers with schools in them to get all this done but I'm talking about her point. There have been schools where parents have gotten involved and I've been at three of them. And we've said "we're willing to roll up our sleeves" and rather than getting assistance, we run into opposition. The partnership with the parents is one of the big missing pieces.

0. Not just "parents go bring up your school" but "if you are willing to invest then we're going to help you".

3. Yes.

F – Sorry I don't want to interrupt but we only have about five minutes left and I want to ask one more thing before we go.

12. I just want to turn to a title-one school where kids are doing well . . . where the parents are not affluent. Where at least parents have the initiative to do the homework to find a school. Where are our problem kids? They are where either their parents did not make a choice, or where they have gotten kicked out of schools where parents did make a choice. Or, with high affluence, high application schools, our top high schools, they have to take the kids that are already smart. We are going to take the kids who are already succeeding at something, like at Ellington with kids who are musically adept. Why are they quality? Because they have strong families behind them and they have PTAs that are raising money over and above what they get and if they have a problem they get to kick them back to those "seat" schools. So choice becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy.

F – We've got 4 minutes left. I want to ask you about advice you would give. So you all clearly have incredible motivation to be here on a Saturday afternoon and spend this time. A number of you mentioned that. How do we make sure that this conversation goes forward - - about boundaries and assignment – in a way that's constructively involving the community and not dividing?

0. I don't have any advice because honestly this issue boggles my mind. But I think that grandfathering is something that is extremely important. Because all of us sitting at this table have made choices for our kids, have done things based on what was expected to happen years down the line. So I guess the big thing

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

on my mind is “give us time”. Not a year, not two years -- give us 3 or 4 years so we can keep our kids on track for what we told them what was going to happen.

0, What about people who have not started going into school yet. They have to live with the new reality.

F –So as we talk about moving forward and involving community in the conversation . . .

6. If you don't want to pit parents against parents and divide the community, it can't be about re-shuffling the deck chairs on the Titanic and taking resources from one community and giving it to another. It's got to be about how you replicate what works and create it in another community. Take what works at Wilson, take what works at Oyster/Adams, at Deal and create it in another place. And even charters. There are good charters that are doing great things. There is pent-up demand for the dual language programs but there is only one public one. People want this for a reason. Motivated parents whether they are rich or they are poor or are in the middle. People want this stuff and if you give it to them and give it to them in different neighborhoods, they will go for it.

0. Although I would add that . . . how could DCPS work to build confidence in those of us because we don't have it, many of us? So if you were to say “OK we're going to take this population and send them to this other school” you would have to provide some sort of assurance through telling us in advance who the principal would be . . . because why would we believe?

12. Some schools already have more resources than others. And there's no way

0. It is built on a kind of competitive model. Does it have to be that way?

12. School choice is by definition a competition model. And one of the things schools compete with is to get rid of the problem kids in their schools. So we keep shoving them up. We keep getting applications and we don't keep getting fired under IMPACT. I mean the way everything is set up is to create division.

0. But could that be alleviated?

0. I just wanted to put in my two cents about special Ed. 17% of the DC public schools population is special ed. of the Those who are identified and treated appropriately. It is most likely much higher. There is no sensible way in which kids are placed. Well, first of all there are no programs for kids like my son. But there is no central way. One of the things that I do is to help families figure out how [to navigate the system]. One family who wanted to go to the school across the street, not a popular school but they wanted to go there, but the school wanted to bus their child instead. That took a heck of a lot of money. That's our money. So we went in there and actually made it happen. And that family didn't know how to do that. It just never should have happened that way, anyway. It is something like \$35,000 a year to bus a child. It depends on where they are going. I have an epilepsy client right now and if the kid is bussed it will be that money plus the nurse on the bus for seizures so that will be about \$70,000 a year. So that's huge and they don't necessarily take that into account when they are placing students.

0. My advice is to think bold, think holistically. This is not just about school assignment and boundaries. This is about quality education. It's about education in our city. . . the job is to find the educated, bold, nuanced ideas that have worked in other cities and that have worked in parts of DC and invest in that.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

Don't go through just the boundary issues - - that it is going to be parent vs. parent. That's not what we should be doing. They should get the right leaders and the right, innovative ways to improve education.

3. Clearly communicate that plan with benchmarks where you can see it and implement it

0. Make it clear. Keep communities together where you can. Schools should be feeding together and I think one of the other things that they should be doing is not looking at how do we get everyone to a median, it's how do we keep great schools great, how do we take transitioning schools into great schools and how do we take bad schools into transitioning schools and ultimately into . . . We're all parents here and in the big picture we want to make all the schools great - - but I have my own kid who I want to make sure gets a great education right now, not in ten years.

0. The grandfathering is - - and this is a selfish thing- - but I think if we have enough grandfathering that it would also help inspire confidence. If I was told they just made this radical decision; if something that seems arbitrary is going to be happening, then that wouldn't feel [like good] faith.

0. I'll back you up on the grandfathering. I have no vested interest in grandfathering and I agree they should be grandfathered.

F – I know we could go all afternoon but I REALLY appreciate you all participating . . .

Focus Group 7A: Thurgood Marshall Academy PCS, December 12, 2013

Participants:

W1 – Lives in Ward 8; is not a parent.

M1 - Lives in ward 6; has a child in parochial school

W2 – ANC Commissioner in Ward 7, has also lived in Ward 6 and Ward 4; has no children.

W1: I am very interested in ward 8 community because I feel there is not a voice in this ward as it relates to the children in this area. Because of the socioeconomic problems that some of these parents have, their voices are not heard.

W1: What I see is there are a lot of moving parts in ward 8 and I did a little research about charter and regular schools and that's a disconnect because when you put a child in charter school that child can be kicked out if they don't live up to expectations but the money does not follow the child.

W1: Ward 8 residents' voices need to be emphasized. I think the advisory committee needs to reach out to people in this ward (8).

W2: My chief concern is that they are not talking to constituents in ways that they can understand. Sending out an e-mail is not sufficient. Instead they should be going into the trenches (i.e., door to door) and informing community. Very few people in my ward (7) have Internet access or smart phones. How did you communicate back in 1985, that's how you need to do it because otherwise you're going to get low turn-out.

W1: No way would any child want to go to Hart Middle School because of test scores and safety. As far as ward 8 is concerned, there is no representation (in the Advisory Committee).

What do you think the impact of the boundaries or the access to schools in your community how are you seeing that affecting your community?

W2: Well I represent ward 7, a section of it, and you have a lower income demographic, a lower educated demographic, these are all statistics that are public, and with that the schools are underperforming. My concern is that children and families should have choice. They should be able to go to a school that is a DCPS or Charter that meets their families' needs that is program specific. That the child would benefit from going to a school not in their attendance zone or feeder. And if they are in an area with underperforming schools, they can go to another school that will get them into higher education if they so choose without having to go through more remedial performance standards.

So if I'm hearing you right your concern is that parents continue to have maximal choice? That they not be limited to neighborhood schools?

W2: Yes I definitely think so. I also think this affects school where there is attrition. This may help them become more competitive. Whether that's in getting more trained teachers, curriculum that's more demographically attuned; whatever it is.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

M1: I have a very similar perspective. I hope the Advisory Committee will think really broadly about the boundary issue. Not just drawing new boundaries but even whether there should be boundaries at all because all of the public schools belong to all of the people. It doesn't make sense to draw boundaries around the good schools, which just prevents some people from going to that school. There are winners and losers when you do that. We are all equal tax payers and every child should have an equal opportunity to go to any school in the city. I hope the committee will consider moving to a pure choice system. At least consider it. There are some systems which have done this – San Francisco has moved to something like a pure choice system as well as Boston. Where you get a preference based on a radius drawn around your home, but you can apply to any school in the city. And then New Orleans has a slightly modified version of a pure choice where the city is divided into districts and you have a right to attend school in that district and a preference within that district.

Did you interact at all with the public system?

M1: Yes and we applied out of boundary. We were wait listed at School Within School, we were waitlisted at Two Rivers charter, and then we were waitlisted as out-of-boundary at Brent and never really received an offer from those schools. Our school-of-right was Maury but in 2006 when we were arriving we didn't feel like that school was ready for what we wanted and so we also applied to the two private schools on Capitol Hill and frankly couldn't see spending what Capital Day wanted for Pre-K so we exercised choice that we could exercise because we both work and can afford a private school and I think that our economic circumstances allows us to exercise choice but that's not true for others in this community and that's unconscionable. Every person should be able to exercise choice like we did. The more choice the better.

W1: I understand and agree with you to a certain extent. But coming from this end of the quadrant as far as ward 8 is concerned, that is not an option because if you do not do a boundary every child that has a parent that is concerned that wants a choice will move that child to wherever you get the best education and then you leave the others behind. We are not talking about the parents, just the children. I would have a problem that you leave someone behind to try and fight the system to try and get the best education for my children. We have to be realistic that some parents are not concerned about the education of their children.

Are you concerned when people who have choice don't stay with their neighborhood school and are leaving children behind or that all children should be able to go . . .

W1: All children because if you take his child and put his child in an underperforming school that's not helping anyone and to give that parent a choice to go somewhere else that is not helping either because the children left behind will never ever advance. The Advisory Committee, I don't know where they live, but I am saying I am being an advocate for the children in ward 8 and I am saying whatever you have – they need to rethink these boundaries because it's not helping anyone. Some parents in ward 8 are not concerned so there have to be advocates to be concerned for the children that are falling through the cracks because they do not have the wherewithal because of the economics. Real estate moves; that's why you have ward 3 and the different wards.

So I'm curious, you had comments about how you thought the system might be changed so it's basically universal lottery for all families (M1), do you have some thoughts about how the current system might be changed?

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

W2: Well I think the common lottery in the next year is a start to try and equalize the playing field because as my colleague here was stating it is a no brainer that the higher income the family has the more exposure that family will have. A household with a combined income of 100k will have children with more opportunities than a household with a combined income of 30k. I think all of these values are important because I know that those children in low-income environments do not know what they do not know so they are destined to go through life destined to not know what they don't know because they aren't exposed to those other people. It's always interesting to me meeting Washingtonians who have never ventured across the river – and it is alarming how much they do not know. As an employer you can always tell which students came from DCPS in ward 7 and 8 and which were from the charter students. Those were always from higher income families from west of the river. It was always very evident which kids were from public schools.

W1: It's just like me I'm not from Washington and we lived in Philadelphia in the suburban area and when [my son] was coming through they had problems with drugs so I had to decide what I was going to do which was put him in private school. We were fortunate to be able to send him to that school. We moved here to ward 8 and looking at where I lived it seemed ok but then I realized this is where I'm supposed to be because I'm going to be a voice. You know.

So what are the kinds of things that you feel for your community that you need to see to really . . . ?

W1: When I say there are a lot of moving parts that have to be taken into consideration and you cannot just lump all these different wards together and just throw it up in the air; you cannot do that because you have the parents who can afford vs. the parents who cannot. We are talking about a ward that is underperforming – it's just not about the education. You have to connect a lot of dots. So if I were to have a child, I would think the elementary school is OK because of the parents involved but when it comes to the middle school I wouldn't go there. They need to find out how are we going to make this work. Parents that have their children in a certain area, and every parent wants the best for their child, but you can't imagine they would want to send their children to an underperforming school. We have to think about how we can help these children because they need a voice.

So let's look at, and the way you're framing it right; let's think about the children. What are the values that we think should guide the decision-makers?

W1: What I would say to this Committee is that I'm in ward 8 and Leckie is probably one of the at least half way decent schools but most of the schools are underperforming so if you're in ward 8 you don't have a chance even if you did the boundaries. So my concern is how are you going to improve the underperforming schools? What are you proposing as far as safety? Boundaries are not my concern because I'm east of the river. Whatever school I look at is underperforming. So what do you say to that parent? This is not advantageous to me in ward 8 because the boundary - - whatever - - it doesn't matter. I'm saying they need to look at this a little closer than how they're looking at it particularly with ward 8. If I had a child, I think I probably would put my child in Leckie but I'd be monitoring Leckie. But if it comes to middle school and high school there is no choice for my child.

W1: What happens with charter schools is I put my child in charter school and that's fine but what is happening? You've got problem kids in the charter school, they're out, they move to public school. Their money is not following them to this public school. So the principals and teachers have to deal with troubled

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

children. I mean it's a big mess. Now if they want to do that, charter schools should keep the children. If they don't want the children, let the money go with them.

What are the kinds of things that you're thinking might enhance the schools in your community?

W2: I think it's essential for the parents to be involved in the schools like they are in charters. That seems to be an incentive. You seem to see more of the charter school students performing better because the parents are involved in the schools. There is an agreement when you go into the charter. In the charter school you can put that child out if they don't adhere to certain policies whereas in the regular public school you have a much more difficult time. I would like to see that because from what I've seen, it seems to help. From discussion I'm privy to of friends with children in charter schools; they are terrified of that agreement that requires them to be involved in the school. There is a difference when parents are involved. Unfortunately we see in lower income environments parents are not as involved, they are not advocating for their children the way higher income and better informed parents are. That is ground zero to maybe model some of the public schools the way that charters are run. Why are charter schools out performing public schools? What are they doing? Why are they getting better academic outcomes? That concerns me as a tax payer. There should be some investigation there and modeling after the better performing institutions. I think it benefits all of the students of our city when parents of higher income become afraid that their child may have to go to an underperforming school. That makes them more interested in equalizing schools. It becomes more of a vested interest of all of the population. Those parents that are really more vocal and know how to ask for things will then want things to be good for all schools in case their child gets put in underperforming schools in a lottery.

M1: While I appreciate this effort, I think that if we put a similar effort into increasing the number of high quality seats instead of moving the lines around in some ways that is what the discussion really is all about. It's allocating a scarce resource and what is the best way to do that. There is more demand for high quality schools than there is supply so we are faced with this King Solomon's task of splitting the baby. There are more people that want to send their kids to high quality schools than there are schools available. And we know the demand is increasing because the population has stabilized and people are going back to public schools and want to stay in DC so there really is only one thing we should be focusing on and that is increasing the supply of high quality educational opportunities especially in neighborhoods that have a lack of high quality educational opportunities. I realize that my perspective on pure choice might be seen as hyperbole but I don't think that a kid has more of a right to go to Wilson because they live next to Wilson than someone who lives in ward 8. We are all equal tax payers and we should all have a right to every school. The real issue here again is the lack of high quality education. If we focus on that problem the boundary issue becomes less and less pressing. If there were enough high quality seats for every family that wants one right now we wouldn't be clamoring for changes to the system.

There is still an allocation issue even if there were high quality. So how important is proximity, how important is it that your neighborhood and school are connected, etc.?

M1: For some families it will be very important that they can send their kid to the school across the street but some families are going to say: I don't care where the school is located I want my child to have dual language immersion education so that's more important to that family. For some families proximity does matter and then as a general rule I think proximity matters more for families with young children and then as kids get older proximity can drop off relative to the desirability of the educational opportunity. For families that don't have quality educational opportunities, it's a trick question.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

W1: Transportation would not be an issue because elementary school would be close but the feeder schools would not be particularly close. But my concern is the underperforming schools. Why are they underperforming? Don't give me "because you're in a certain area". Maybe I'm in the minority but I want to know I'm moving into this area and I'm a homeowner paying taxes, what are you doing about bringing these schools up to par. I just want to know what is the problem? If you're doing boundaries, boundaries are not going to help me. These are all under-performing schools. The only choice at this particular time is private school. We know if I'm in this particular ward, private school is out.

So have you identified high performing charter schools that you would consider as options?

W1: No because I'm not looking at it that way. I want to know why this public school, getting the same funds, is underperforming. What is the problem? What I'm reading is because if you're going to do the math, you're getting a lot of students that are underperforming that charter schools have put out so naturally it's going to make charter schools do better. I also find charter schools not up to par in this ward.

So how important is it that there is economic diversity.

W2: Very important to have economic diversity.

W1: VERY, because you have to have that mix because you have to have the parents who are going to be concerned.

W2: these children are going to go out into the world and be faced with people from different backgrounds. So when you have a group of individuals all from the same ghettoized backgrounds, you aren't exposed to anything else and don't know anything else. So in this global society, it's important that you have interactions with children from other races, abilities, disabilities, so they are sensitized to other people's lifestyles. It's important you know economics, racial, disabilities, everything, gender expression whatever it is. It's definitely important at young ages and definitely [important to be] exposed to children who are ESL [English as a Second Language].

M1: I would say it's desirable but not essential in a really bare bones sense of the word. I visited a high quality charter school and it's a new program called Ingenuity Prep and I'm pretty sure it was close to 100% free and reduced lunch. This was not a diverse student body but the thing that I noticed when I walked into those classrooms was the quality of the program. I didn't really notice race and economic status because the structure of the program was just so overwhelmingly powerful. I've seen a lot of different classrooms and . . .

So what could you see that was quality program?

M1: Well so what they did was they designed this curriculum; they design the classroom itself to have three workstations with 8 kids at each station. Each classroom has three teachers who sit at the workstations. The curriculum goes from 7:30 a.m. - 6 p.m. with an aftercare program. It wasn't rigid, the kids seemed to be having fun, but at each station the kids were engaged in what they were doing. In every work station there was a structured learning activity and the kids appeared to be learning and enjoying themselves. I had no complaints about lack of diversity there. It didn't seem relevant there. So while yes it's desirable, I don't think it's essential to a quality education.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

We've heard a lot of talk about is the notion of strengthening the system of neighborhood schools and I'm curious how important you think having a system of neighborhood schools is.

W1: To me it's very important. I would say for instance if I had a Deal school in Ward 8, how many parents would want to travel across town to put their child in Deal. So instead of moving, create within this environment that type of school. You build it, they will come and then you have diversity and then you have the children that are not performing but if they don't want to perform they do not go to this Deal -- there are other options for them.

W2: I think it's important to have community and a sense of community and a sense of ownership and pride in a neighborhood school but my experience is with getting up at 5 in the morning and go to school using two buses.

M1: Right and it's not a big city. My child's parochial school is a neighborhood school . . . so what I'm saying is all of these schools lay claim to being neighborhood schools. . .

W2: Yeah but they aren't in the neighborhood the children live in. It's a difference in living in an area but you don't know in the lottery system if your child is going across town or not. My thing is a different perspective, for me having to travel a very long distance to get to a school with no mass transit system . . . in DC you can get anywhere you need to by rail or bus and car-sharing and bike sharing. There is infrastructure to get buses for these children, there is metro fare cards, there is funding for these children to travel. To me that's not a concern. To me is that there is a community school for parents to readily be involved in. My perspective is there is nothing in Washington that is far away!

M1: I totally agree with her. And Boston did this thing with the 1 mile radius such that you will get a school within a 1-mile radius, it might not be your first choice but you're guaranteed to get into at least one of the schools. And the lottery really sets the stage for us to move to a choice type city because more families . . . the lottery is going to be very user friendly and it's going to get people thinking about choices in a new way and make people more comfortable with a new choice. I think the lottery coming online is an opportune time to consider moving and getting out of this stupid political process of setting arbitrary lines.

Well that's why the values are so important because what happens in these lottery cities because the fighting isn't over the lines it's over preferences . . .

M1: That's true, there are political lines. Fair enough.

M1: I have to say this because of my job. Feeder patterns definitely should not be imposed on charter schools. That would really violate the charter school movement. There is a new thinking about feeder. I think as long as the Committee recognizes that this needs to be voluntary and you can't impose cross-sector feeder patterns on the charter sector. You legally can't.

W1: Is the Committee considering the schools, these underperforming schools, and how to address what is going on because the problem they have and they're trying to do these boundaries What's on the table about these underperforming schools?

That is the most important issue that comes up in every discussion about the schools.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

W1: Right where the performing school is, is where I will send my child. If Deal was in Ward 8, parents would send their child to that school in Ward 8.

Focus Group 8A: Capitol Hill Montessori, Thursday, December 19, 2013

Participants:

1. Parent of 3 young children, lives near Maury, children in PK and K at LAMB PCS (Ward 6)
2. Parent of children at Watkins, lives on Capitol Hill (Ward 6)
3. Resident of Capitol Hill, no children, lives in-boundary for Brent (Ward 6)
4. Parent of two children at Key ES (Ward 3)
5. Parent of a child at School-Within-A-School, lives on Capitol Hill (Ward 6)
6. Parent of two young children who attend Stoddert, lives in Burleith
7. Parent children at Watkins and Stuart-Hobson, lives on Capitol Hill (Ward 6)
8. Mother of children at Watkins, School Within a School and Stuart-Hobson, lives on Capitol Hill
9. Resident, lives near Ludlow-Taylor; no children; would want them to attend School Within a School (Ward 6)
10. Parent of children at Maury, 3rd and 1st grades (Ward 6)
11. Parent of two children, one at JO Wilson, one at Stuart-Hobson (Ward 6)

Q. What's working?

1: The reason I'm here is that we worry about this every day - -this is the defining factor in our lives; it determines whether we stay in DC. We live in-boundary for Maury but the children were accepted to LAMB. There is so much constant uncertainty at LAMB and it's new building - - will the students all stay in the old building, will they be split between two buildings? They are supposed to be starting a middle school in the fall but it is not clear about the construction at Walter Reed.

We are fortunate to be in the LAMB program but it is unfortunate that there are not enough good school opportunities [for everyone]. It is so much left to happenstance and luck! I hope the city will communicate better and allow schools to decide how to differentiate their paths.

There are extreme disparities in quality. Here [on Capitol Hill] there are strong and weak schools. There are LOTS of opportunities but will they continue to be available? At high school students are competing to get into one high school. That's an onerous situation for logistics and transportation.

Q. One high school?

1: Wilson. Sure there are others but Wilson seems the most solid. There are application schools too. It's far out for us to consider at this point [high school].

Q. Quality schools?

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

2: One thing that has changed for the better since 2008 is the lottery. In 2008 all the systems were different. With our second child at least DCPS had all the lotteries on the same page. Now there's the unified lottery. Why did it take so long [to fix this]?

2: If you don't like the in-boundary school and go into the lottery there is a huge potential that your children will end up in two different schools. Maury out-of-boundary families are pulling their children out so they can go to the same school.

For DCPS, if they lose students, they don't come back. So you don't have any enrollment if you lose students in middle school.

With my kids not in elementary school I don't have much confidence in middle school options. With the lottery we won't all get in. Resources are all spread out thinly so it will be hard to bring ALL schools up [to the necessary level of quality].

Hopefully, everyone won't have to go to Wilson.

3: I don't have any kids but I have been assured that the public schools aren't good. But Brent seems to be a great school. But they lose everyone at 5th grade. There's a great opportunity to develop strong feeder patterns.

4: I really like Key; my children can walk to school. But it is incredibly crowded with lots of kids in trailers. But to change, you would have to take your luck with the lottery. Most 2nd graders plan to move to Montgomery County or go to parochial schools or go to the private schools but to get in you have to leave early.

The middle school is not a good one [Hardy].

Q: What's the problem?

4: Hardy is not really a neighborhood school. Hardy was an art-focused school. It is not attended by a majority of neighborhood families. It is not an option for my kids.

5: We like School Within a School and we can walk to school. It's a strong program but we struggle with DCPS because of the uncertainty. There are clear paths [feeder patterns] but they are not those people want to follow.

We appreciate all the choice - - formerly there were not many quality offerings. But there is TOO much choice now and no coordination of options with all the charters opening. There is a dispersal [of programs and students]; there is no critical mass because everyone is changing [schools].

When charters first were created it was all a great unknown; now there is a definite reality. We need to intertwine the two systems - [doing] this should help the September shuffle. Charters need to be brought into the feeder system.

6: My main concern is middle school. I'm part of a Stoddert committee that includes Hyde, Key, Mann, Eaton and Stoddert PTAs. Hardy is a great location, there's a great principal in Trish Pride but Hardy's test

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

scores are borderline failing. There are only 12-15% in-boundary students at Hardy. Anyone who pushes about Hardy is considered a racist - - I'm tired of that! What is the disconnect with in-boundary and out-of-boundary [students]? I've talked with John Davis and Mark King and Amanda Alexander [DCPS Chief of Schools and Asst. Superintendents] - - but I would never send my kids to Hardy.

Key parents are parents who care. Only two or three parents went to the Hardy PTA meeting; it is not a true neighborhood school; the meeting was 6:30-8:30 pm but no parents but neighborhood parents showed up.

7: Looking at the Guiding Principles as jumping off point puts the cart before the horse because we haven't articulated what we as a city really want for our schools. We don't have common city-wide goals. We can't talk about principles until we know what we want. What are the objectives - - this process can look at that better, i.e. what does "high quality programs" mean?

Facilitator: Clearly there are lots of different people who would love to get their children into Hardy.

7: As long as there are a few quality schools, then it's OK? Or we should get the funding to support ALL schools to bring them all up. If we want fairness then we should randomly assign everybody. That's the most fair. Until there are common goals the rest will not follow.

Facilitator: Could you share a notion of that overriding vision . . .

7: Opportunities for academic diversity? Academic diversity within a school - - or a tiered system of schools? Unfortunately in DC that's economic stratification.

What do we really want public education to be? Within a single school you have some common classes and some tracked classes - - if the school is big enough. Our goals reflect the intrinsic scarcity in our city [of quality schools]. We need bigger, broader values.

As to performance at Hardy, you could pick out common demographic groups. Do this [look at demographic data] first before engaging in trench warfare on the block.

8: I agree. This process is futile if planning isn't ahead of implementation. The Chancellor said there would be a DCPS Office of Planning to do alignment . . . so why are we doing this process now? Families can have huge gains depending on what side of the street they are on. We need to step back [to develop] good schools, quality schools. The Chancellor doesn't think DCPS needs more money but my kid's school bathroom is a mess! People won't walk out if there were a properly resourced middle school.

(No. 7) is right - - this is looking at objectives - - not a plan. Tomorrow the Public Charter School Board could start 30 more schools. There is no planning or coordination if one branch of government can cut the legs off another. New boundaries without larger more comprehensive planning won't work.

9: My house faces School-within-a-School but my children would not be able to attend [unless they won the lottery]. We need more community influence over the schools. I've been counseled not to send my children to [the neighborhood school (Ludlow-Taylor) [because of the] principal. If the principal is exceptional, OK. Everyone knows it's the principal's [that matter].

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

10: I agree [with 9. and 7.] In many ways this boundary process ignores the bigger issues such as the need to integrate charters and DCPS. The Chancellor is not moving forward with *her* middle school plans in either Ward 6 or Ward 5.

People are looking for a good school - - if you had more good schools we wouldn't be here. Ultimately, if the DME and the Advisory Committee don't come out with an open and fair map of capacity and enrollment and the number of students in the boundaries This needs to be an open and transparent process. Otherwise it is just gerrymandering.

My children are in-boundary for Maury. Eight years ago it nearly was closed – now it is one of the top five schools for applications. It doesn't take long with committed parents and a visionary leader. Now we are struggling with the openness of DCPS and how to get to middle school – the plan for which was developed in 2010. That's five years with no implementation. Zero boxes checked. Last year Stuart- Hobson had to cut ALL foreign languages - - not ADD a second foreign language as promised in the middle-school planning. This undermines the middle schools. Parents had to organize a community meeting in order to get the promised IB training for middle school. DCPS managed to find \$10 million that was unspent to buy needed library books. I'm concerned about DCPS's ability to budget, the transparency. Without that, you can't get anywhere.

8: Can DCPs even answer how many students are filling the feeder patterns?

11: These are great comments and I agree. There is a territorial reaction that has racial and class overtones. There are lines on Capitol Hill and perceptions of better and less strong schools but we want great schools and we will work [to make them great] so we do not have to go across the city.

We want to be part of a process that brings everyone up. There are so many decisions; so many that have and others that have not – but we need to figure out how to raise the bar for everyone. I'm an advertisement for walking to school but I want my children to go to a school that's great.

Facilitator: I'd like to linger on some of the comments - - your comments really resonate with what we've been hearing: concerns about middle school, getting the cart before the horse, quality schools needed for everyone. The Advisory Committee asked about the need for a vision for the city. The same questions have come up. Can you impact your schools and how do you make this happen?

Our job is to report to the Advisory Committee. We are trying to take these comments and conflate them so the city can hear. We are working with Georgetown University to provide a narrative so these conversations can be seen differently. We are recording, coding and an analysis will be made available.

We need to know about your experiences with boundary assignment and administrative problems too - - things you want to keep and things you want to throw out. What should be standing at the end? What's worth hanging on to?

5: I like walkable, neighborhood-based schools. I would like the middle school to have an established feeder pattern. I wish the geographic boundaries aligned better; Stuart-Hobson doesn't work with its surrounding elementary schools.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

11: If you want vertical integration of programs you need congruent boundaries that feed from elementary to middle to high school. Eastern's boundaries are not congruent with its feeder schools.

1: I didn't expect to have my children to go to a charter. I wanted them to walk to Maury but we were drawn by the diversity at LAMB and the number of non-native English speakers. Spanish was really an exciting option. I hope DCPS can produce such options - - Montessori too.

It surprised me at LAMB that the teachers are really invested in the school. At the Hill schools principals have trouble with struggling teachers. I hope we don't lose [talented teachers?]. Parents should not have to leave the system to get their children into a good school. There are not enough good choices for all. We are all working full time. We don't have time to drive all over town. The process should improve schools all across the city.

7: Why not try Tyler or Oyster (both DCPS schools) for Spanish language?

1: You can't get into Oyster. We [applied for, visited] Tyler but the principal was very discouraging. It was not a priority for her to have Spanish there. LAMB has a really special curriculum - - they even have a peace curriculum.

2: We looked at Tyler and LAMB too. They need to have magnets but KEEP ON supporting them. People will get really frustrated otherwise. Magnets are limited to IB but then there's no funding for training. Tyler's Spanish program does not get much support.

8: There's an on-going budget battle with DCPS every year. The Chancellor has the funding to invest if she wanted to support IB (Eliot-Hine), the museum magnet (Stuart-Hobson) - - but they chose not to.

Q. So it's a leadership issue?

8: DCPS is pervaded with a cookie-cutter, lowest-common-denominator attitude. "They (charters) know how to do middle school".

11: JO Wilson has a high out-of-boundary population. Students can get into JO Wilson and follow the middle school feeders into high school. That's a benefit for the middle school. It creates community. Out-of-boundary students may not be close to home but they have a community at JO Wilson. They go on to Stuart-Hobson and Eastern High School and it builds community. We love being in-boundary and being able to walk but we also have the joy of the geographic diversity at JO Wilson. These families should be grandfathered into middle school and high school feeders.

8: We need to address the problem of charters starting middle school at 5th grade and DCPS starts middle school at 6th grade. This drains Brent at 4th grade now. It undermines the success of the school and really tears the school community apart. DCPS needs to coordinate with the charters.

Q: What if charters had neighborhood geographical connections?

2: That could potentially be a political bomb. There are so many charters they will cannibalize new charters. They are sending a message that DCPS is not good enough. DCPS has to address the quality

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

problems. Families would like to send their kids to middle school and high school at DCPs but they have no confidence in the system.

1: Families would like the option to get to Two Rivers too. They drive past it but they can't get in. At LAMB there is a unique benefit in NOT having in-boundary and out-of-boundary students because you can't tell where people live. There is more diversity.

8: [If they had boundaries] charters would then become essentially public schools which would defeat the purpose of charters. The problem with DCPS is marketing.

This process is set up to divide Capitol Hill – intentionally or not. We exclude the non-white and non-wealthy [in this process]. It defeats the purpose.

5: I have a different take on that question. If there were boundaries for charters it would help better serve ill-served students. If there were better facility integration - - give the buildings to charters - - then you could establish stable boundaries. We would be well served if we re-defined charters. Someone mentioned that Maury was to be closed and now it is over-subscribed. But the opposite could happen.

7: With charters there is an ebb and flow.

5: The more uncertainty that you take out of the process the less you have just the early grades in schools.

7: Charters were instituted to provide models that work but we haven't asked "why"? Instead of useful model schools, we have two separate and unequal systems. We failed as a city to examine the models and look at growth at some schools. We have not studied them to look at the quality of teachers or how to take advantage of what charters can offer. We're not there yet. It's the quality of teachers.

Facilitator: Brown vs. the Board of Education was a student assignment case; assignment 50 years ago was by your address and your race - - but after that ruling, people just left the city.

9: Now we're back again.

Facilitator: It's still all bound up in race and class. How can the city address these issues? Are we post-class and post-race: should we just draw the boundaries? Are we hearing a sub-text around Hardy? How do we deal with that? Hardy is a microcosm of the issues in the city. What are your thoughts?

6: People from the feeders to Hardy look at test scores. Stoddert almost closed 20 years ago. Now there is a brand new building in 2010 but it is a diverse community. There are 21 languages spoken at the school. Hardy is in Georgetown but Hardy's test scores are borderline failure - - it is not race or class. We all want what's best for our kids. If parents fight and are squeaky wheels, they'll get what they want.

2: I want to play devil's advocate for a minute and ask what would happen if all the feeders who do well on test scores, if all those families sent their kids to Hardy?

6: There was a principal problem at Hardy. And the school went into swing space across town; people [from Hardy's neighborhood] didn't send their kids to swing space. Now the principal is on the top if it at

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

Hardy. She has a son at Landon [private school] who is a freshman in high school and just got a commitment from the University of Virginia as a lacrosse player. She gets it. But people care about the test scores. Only 10-15% of the feeder school students go to Hardy.

7: Maury was 100% out-of-boundary ten years ago. If all the kids from the Hardy feeders went to Hardy it would change.

10: The Maury test scores aren't particularly good -- they are not that good at a lot of the popular schools.

2: Parents may have a greater tolerance for not so great test scores in elementary school. But middle school is a ramp up to college. I need a testimonial from people I know who have kids there before I would send my children . . . "I believe in this school".

5: Test scores at Hardy -- is it a concern about teaching or a reflection of the current students?

6: There are 1285 students in Deal this year. We're three miles from Deal.

7: Hardy and Deal go back to figure in Hobson vs. Hanson -- Deal is a monster up there.

2: If half of those kids went to another school . . .

6: Fifth graders in the feeder schools are leaving. That's a red flag. People are bailing at 4th grade. Everyone is going to BASIS or Latin. They are bailing out.

7: That's happening on the Hill too.

9: I'm a product of New Jersey schools, it was very diverse. It didn't matter what part of the boundary we came from. We were tracked for some classes and together for some classes.

7: Hardy is tracked. Hardy got wacked in the budget process -- there was a . . . switch in the budget.

1: There are underlying racial and economic areas of the city . . . this [Capitol Hill] is a desirable neighborhood. But education is a pressing concern. Safety has not even come up. In DC there is incredible disparity. In some areas there are no good educational options and it is not SAFE. The magnitude of this problem . . . there are extreme cases on the other end of the city. This conversation is so important.

?: This conversation is talking about how to divide people up.

?: That's an opportunity lost. Maybe just the division of revenue . . . Maybe that's what is changing this -- better opportunities but also access for those less well-served.

9: Ten elementary schools feed into a middle school. Why not evenly try to distribute the schools?

8: But the DCPS administrative structure [makes no sense]. There are 15 schools that feed into Eastern but they report to seven different Assistant Superintendents. How can they do any continuity of planning or develop any common culture? Classroom behavior brings down successful students.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

7: This points to the need for more data. Each individual child . . .

8: We took an in-depth look at the test scores of the 3rd grade at Watkins. That class has maybe the largest achievement gap in the city. Watkins is a 70% Title One school; out-of-boundary students present a great disparity of where kids are coming in from. So I feel for teachers who have to deal with that - - kids reading at a high school level in the same class with kids who are not literate in 3rd grade. Those kid's parents played the lottery every year [and the kids went to different schools] and now the kids are way behind.

Facilitator: We've heard that diversity of academics is one thing that parents are most concerned about - - academic diversity. There's a notion that kids don't get quality supports because of the range in any one classroom. We're hearing concerns about the extent of differences of what kids are coming in with. This seems to be less of an issue at the elementary school level but families are looking forward to middle school.

8: Rather than look just at feeder patterns, DCPS has to put supports and interventions into Kindergarten to 3rd grades so every child is up to [the required standard].

7: The Chancellor's 40 lowest performing schools . . . but how do we distribute the funds? Watkins is a model but middle school has to have a tiered system of 5 tracks of students. We don't understand . . .

Facilitator: tracking or differentiation? Is that a reasonable expectation?

8: Parents are tracking through school choice. Why do you have to go across town to find a school that fits? Watkins tracked in 2nd grade with team teaching. Parents need that and they had confidence . . .

9: What about the 1st grader who doesn't make the cut. Kids feel badly. Humans will strive to fit in - - or they shut down. At elementary a smaller reading group is appropriate - - it's not tracking - - it's learning groups.

2: The fact is that DCPS budgets don't cover classroom aides. People look at class size and you need aides to team teach. DCPS isn't resources to support teaming. Watkins lost all its math and reading resource teachers.

5: Our taxes go up -- but school budgets don't go up.

Facilitator: In reality the school budget as a whole does go up.

8: Maury has 40 more kids this year than last but less money.

9: Where's the transparency? This school is really hurting but there is no dialogue on the budget.

11: We need to equalize budgets depending on neighborhoods - - it is about making public education available for all.

Facilitator: We want to heard advice on this process; your recommendations on how to take better and clearer input to the Advisory Committee. How do we NOT pit community against community and come

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

out a stronger city? [The facilitator introduces Denise Forte, one of the Advisory Committee members who just arrived to listen.]

8: The mayor and the DME need to show real leadership in the relationship between DCPS and the charters -- but first in staffing and budgeting.

5: We need a really explicit explanation of what are the goals and what the decisions are. Very explicit explanation of what's happening and data that supports it transparently.

4: I feel badly -- a lot more negative than when I came in. The issues boil down to socio-economics and disparity and we are on the edge of a cliff. This is an impossible task. DCPS can't do this well. I applaud a lot of you -- years ago people would not have sent their children to DCPS schools. But there is a new set of such dedicated parents. That's what it takes! DCPS can't do this alone; it does take a village.

11: In the end it is DCPS whose job is to educate ALL of the children. We should not forget that we have the time and childcare to make it to this meeting tonight -- we should also try to expand this conversation to different kinds of parents -- not just the involved folks -- not just the new folks.

How do we hold DCPS accountable? I want my kids to have the BEST experience -- we can't solve all of it.

7: How to reach out? True focus groups would not get the entirety of the conversation. We need to define the goals for public education. That's the only way to help it [improvement] happen. There's a mayoral election coming. How do we get to the bigger question of planning and how to get to common planning?

What's the right size for schools? The 400 model at Hardy and Stuart-Hobson got them whacked in the budgets. Only four middle schools are big enough to be functional? There is no central planning or thinking. [After planning] THEN we can go back to figure out boundaries and feeders.

Focus Group 8B: Capitol Hill Montessori, Thursday, December 19, 2013

Participants:

- 8: Has a year and half old, will be entering lottery
- 7: Child at Tyler, older child graduated from Stuart Hobson
- 6: In bounds for Brent, has 3.5 year old on preschool waitlist, another younger child
- 5: Two children at Peabody
- 4: Has 2.5 year old, planning to enter lottery
- 3: Lives near Navy Yard, 2.5 year old, advocating for Van Ness
- 2: Child at Peabody, another child will get in queue for preschool
- 1: SW neighborhood, no children as yet
- Observer: Advisory Committee member

During introductory remarks:

- A few participants remark that the process seems kind of quick.
- Discussion relating to a potential scenario that highlights how zones and feeder patterns are not aligned.

Question: What is working with the current system? What should be preserved?

7: I do think it's good when you get in bounds for the cluster school, that you don't have to re-apply when you go to Watkins. I think that's good because you get that continuity with the school.

5: I think that can be said too for, not just cluster, but with the feeder patterns in general, it adds some comfort in knowing where you are going for middle school and high school. It takes away that uncertainty.

2: I would say the lottery process in general. I was shocked at the educational options. We put 6 down, and we found 5 that we immediately liked, including Capitol Hill Montessori. We got waitlisted at some, but got in. This past year's process . . . I have a number of coworkers with kids in VA/MD, and it was fascinating discussing the process with them and how foreign it was to them. It was just really interesting how many options there were, whether we wanted to stay in the system or some other option. It seemed limitless . . . We got into the Cluster [at Pre-K], and we ended up going there, but you know there were a lot of schools that weren't close. I found it a great process.

1: I think the sibling and proximity preferences are good. So if the older sibling gets in and it makes it more likely you won't have to separate the two kids. And the proximity preference also gives you more of a chance to get in if you live close to a school and you may not be in-boundary for it.

4: One thing I like, and we hope it proves true for Van Ness, is that parents are able to be involved with the school and build the school community. I see other schools, and hope it proves true for us as well. It's very encouraging that you can contribute to supporting the school and all the children that attend.

8: I totally agree, and I think the proximity where the whole neighborhood can support the same school if you and your neighbor's kids are going there. Capitol Hill is a tight knit community and we have some great schools, and being able to attend a school close to your house is really important.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

6: I'll triple down on that. I think the neighborhood school is really important to maintain. I know there are some rumors about having application only, city-wide high schools. Growing up in the suburbs, I think knowing that you have that you have a neighborhood is good.

2: Regarding the locality piece, I want to see the local element expanded. I was shocked, I live near 3 elementary schools, and I'm not in the locality bounds for any of the 3. What is locality proximity if it's not 3 blocks or 4 blocks or whatever?

1: I want to clarify something, when I say proximity preference, I don't just mean the school you're zoned to, but the 1500 meter preference that you're close to a school you're not zoned to.

2: I was just surprised how small that 1500 meters is and it's how it's measured, it's a small box from the center.

F: So you're saying it's kind of arbitrary.

2: Well it's not arbitrary, but I am so close to 3 schools, but technically I'm not close for 'proximity' for any of the 3. So what does that really mean?

8: And you were lucky enough to get in to a neighborhood school, but imagine how frustrating it would be to live close by and unable to attend.

3: And just to piggyback on that, I have closer proximities for multiple schools than the one that I'm in bounds for. But we have no proximity preference to any of them. [In bounds for] Amidon Bowen, which is much further than Brent, Tyler and a bunch I can easily walk to. So when they drew that . . . it's just a very interesting . . . also deciding that we didn't get any preference.

6: IS it 1500 meters?

8: It's like 3000 feet, right?

[Overlapping talk]

6: Roughly half a mile.

3: I was thrilled to find out that preschool 3 and 4 year olds, is part of the city wide plan. I don't have to go and search for something . . . In a lot of neighborhoods . . . our three year old can be with the same kids forever if you stay in the same school, the same feeder. They grow up together, and it really enhances the community and really roots the neighborhood so well.

5: The streamlining of the lottery process, to include charters, I think is a huge step for parents. It was crazy trying to figure out the 3 or 4 you wanted to apply to and the timeline. I think that really helps parents.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

1: I think the availability of data is really useful ways to compare the schools. Whether it's . . . fair that people can go to or go online to get data, not just test scores but other data. DCPS' profiles or charter schools profiles, now on the lottery website some information; OSSE's data.

Question: What aspects should change? What's not working well?

1: I know that people disagree, but I don't like how the feeder pattern rule works. Where if you get into a school at 3 or 6, you know which high school you're going to. It's challenging for parents who move into the city later on. I think it drains kids from schools that maybe don't feed into better middle and high schools in the upper grades because parents are trying to get their kids into the feeder schools. I think that it creates an inability for DCPS to adapt to demographic changes. It started in 2009-10 school year I believe, and it overcrowds the more desirable middle and high schools and makes it difficult for other out-of-boundary kids that went to other elementary schools.

6: I don't like the residency oversight. I don't think it's enough. I think DCPS does enough for the out of state residency violators, but I think that there's -- especially in good schools -- there's a lot of people who cheat to get the in-bound preference. I'm not sure it's illegal to do that. But, you call the hotline and they only care about out of state, but there's no real process. And if you call the school, they will only ask them to reapply for out-of-bounds. I know that has directly impacted me. I think that oversight; people don't take that aspect of it really seriously especially in better school districts like upper NW and Capitol Hill.

4: To have a quality education for your three year old until high school, it would be helpful for DCPS to identify these are the five or six factors for success. So that you knew what you were on track for and what feeder pattern you were in, you could invest in specific things to make them more successful. But instead it's a bit amorphous and no one really seems knows what they're supposed to be doing. So you're hopping from here to here from this charter school, to that school to get me through 8th grade. And it's all savvy parents doing that, so those with less resources and less time are being left behind. So it's this overlay of movement because we can't figure out how we ensure that all schools are giving quality education to our children.

F: What's the policy that's contributing to that?

4: There's no magic formula for a successful school, but we know the major criteria for success. So you need like a stable budget, a good principal, engaged parents. But if you can say, ok these schools are missing this piece, and then we can build up each school piece by piece. And similarly if it becomes clear to parents what your track is, they can invest in that. But if I know that I'm going to be hopping around, because this school isn't working for my kids, then I don't know where to focus my time. Because at the end of the day, you have to expect that parents are going to try and get the best education for their children.

3: It's probably better for the child to have the same continuity of the same school. To have a child jump around every year, regardless of academics, they are losing friends, and they are losing something familiar.

F: What's the policy problem?

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

3: Just to piggyback, if the school were strengthened so parents would stay, then from the child's side, they don't have to jump around either. So pinpoint how to strengthen the school.

4: And let us know where you need help, and we'll help. But if you can't get clarity on what the school needs to serve all their children, then we don't know how to help then we end up jumping around.

6: This is a direct example; we see this at our local school. Some of the charter schools start to recruit at 5th grade, so you see people start to leave at 4th grade. They become less invested so they can get their kids into that charter in 5th grade, and then it causes a disruption back in the elementary school where no one is invested in the next step. I would not support forcing charters to start at 6th grade, I wouldn't support DCPS going back to stop at 4th grade, but some way to encourage these schools that start at 5th grade to work their way backwards, so that people that want that as an option can start there early. So if there is some mechanism where charters can grow to pick up earlier grades, and prevents people losing interest in next steps.

2: Something that is anxiety producing is this process. Right now we're in bounds for the Capitol Hill cluster and for us it's great. We're set from pre-K to 8th grade. We're comfortable in all three schools; we have friends and neighbors in all three schools; it's part of where we are. And now all that is going to get shaken up. It complicates our situation quite a bit. Not every school and zone is like that, but it's a challenge for us.

8: I think the unpredictability of it is a real challenge; the lottery process. . . I live close to a great school but right now my child doesn't have a chance of getting because it's a city wide school, School Within a School. My neighbors are looking elsewhere, across the city, looking at private schools, moving out. So quality schools in every neighborhood is something I feel strongly about, and that keeping kids in into 6th or 8th grade, or into high school, it's something that communities can really build.

7: I don't like that we have charter schools in the city. I think it's sad for our city. It makes it look like we didn't invest in our public schools. Fairfax and Montgomery County do not have charters. They have good school systems. I wish we had that. I think charters are creating a lot of problems, with people leaving in the 4th grade or 5th grade or whatever. I think it's very expensive for a system to run 2 systems like this. I think if we weren't doing that we could invest in neighborhood schools. I think it's a huge problem. The other thing I don't like is that parents also have the perception about schools - - that they're not good. They get that perception not by going into schools, but by talking to people and not giving the schools a chance. So I find that troubling.

3: It might be more of a wish list item, but in the future it would be great: the biggest scramble that parents have is that you're not guaranteed your inbound school until kindergarten. So with my three year old, there is only so much I can do at home and it's too expensive to send them to private school. At the root of it it's not fair that my three year old won't get a preschool education, just because I'm still not guaranteed a spot. By the time he gets into kindergarten he's now 2 years behind everyone else. There are a lot of studies showing that kindergarten is too late. If he gets behind, he won't catch up. Some people may have more resources or knowhow. From the beginning these kids are already behind, and these kids can never catch up. It's a loss that is out of their control, because it's just a lottery.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

1: Can I ask a question? Are there too many three year olds applying, or is there a mismatch between where the spots are and where people want them to be?

F: This is debated. Not all early childhood programs have a waiting list, some do but many don't. It is often said that there is universal Pre-K at this point. That's not to say there's a waiting list.

7: I thought you had to be guaranteed a place for Prek-4?

[Overlapping talk] F: No. Kindergarten is mandatory.

2: But there are still a lot of opportunities out there. What surprised me is there is an amazing amount of choices out there for our three or four year olds. One negative that pops out to me: I would like to see some flexibility regarding ages. I'm cursed with two October babies, it works out for us, but I would like to see some flexibility with that. If one of them were more mature and able to handle that . . . I understand that's a regulation, not a law.

6: You see a lot of people who have September birthdays and they want the option of holding their kids back as well. My son, who has a June birthday, is in private preschool because we got shut out of the lottery. There is a difference between him in June and his peers who turned 4 in October, November, and December. But one thing I'd like to say about the negative side, I would like to see more DCPS oversight over the individual school programs as it relates to enrollment issues. I feel like the principals have been given a lot of autonomy to build their programs, I think that's great, but this becomes problematic when principals are very focused on who do I have in-house now in their own school. The community could benefit from more DCPS oversight so that they can understand where the demand is and what the enrollment need is. So they can know this isn't going to work for the community or for the system as a whole. I'll give you the example of my school. We had a situation where we had five early education classes. We had a waitlist of 31 in-boundary kids, because the population was growing, there was a need for additional kindergarten classes. So they decided to cut some early childhood classes. But then they went with four mixed classes, which automatically shut out the people on the waitlist for next year. They're not going to be able to go to their in-bound school because there are fewer seats. So the program is changed in such a way that it created that sort of problem. I think if DCPS has more oversight and can say, hey look at where your demand is, and this could create a demand problem. DCPS can come in with more, bigger-picture oversight.

2: Are principals held accountable for their enrollment?

F: Yes, their budgets are tied to their enrollment.

1: I think it would be good if there was more outreach to families that weren't matched in the lottery. It will be interesting to see how many of them there are this year with the unified lottery. I get the sense from those involved in it, that everyone is applying for the same group of schools and there's not enough room for all of them and some people won't match. I think DCPS should do a lot of outreach to the families that didn't match, because a lot of them are going to apply to the same 6 DCPS and charter schools and not get in. But there are some really good schools out there. And especially at the early childhood level, DCPS could do some more personalized outreach, so you are like: 'Oh you didn't get into Peabody, but here's Savoy,

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

which is across the river . . . but don't freak out, here's the bus, here's your arts focus.' There are too many DCPS seats available at this point for those who are applying and there's a real mismatch in terms of where people are applying. DCPS hasn't done enough to sell people on their schools.

3: I think they also need to strengthen those schools. But I personally have not heard of that school. I think we all live in bubbles, and that is outside of my bubble. And if I get shut out of everywhere else, I'd like to know about other schools.

1: It's an art focused school, it's near a metro. DCPS needs to tell people it's in Anacostia and it's a great school.

8: DCPS should not just direct people to those schools, but make sure they stay. My inbound school is Ludlow Taylor, but virtually all in bound kids leave by 1st grade and aren't getting into the upper levels that could really help strengthen the school. So if people start going to these other schools they can try to get them to stick around.

F: Principles and values discussion

[There are some questions about definitions: academically diverse, fully utilize facilities, LEAs, flexibility]

2: Bureaucracy is not mentioned here [in the values], it could be a negative.

[Some questions surrounding flexibility for LEAs and how the rating process works].

F: What did you give a 5?

3: I felt I gave a lot of things 5's. But with the high quality programs, staff and facilities was the most important and stood out.

1: But a lot of these are in contrast with each other. That says equitable access to them, I put that on high priority, but that cuts down on neighborhood proximity preference. But a lot of people don't live near a high quality school. So I put equitable access as a high priority, but that cuts down on neighborhood preference. So that's a definite tradeoff.

3: If there was equity, to allow more focus on those schools that need to be brought up. It was the most important to make them equitable.

F: So there are two things, what your hope and dreams are, and the situation as it is. So both are true, frankly.

8: I ranked proximity the highest. Proximity is something really important to me. I find it really frustrating that I would have to walk my child by a quality DCPS school, and I want to send my kids to a DCPS school, but I can't because I'm not in-boundary for it. I've done lots of volunteer work in the park and advocated for a playground, but we have very, very little chance of getting our child into that school through the lottery.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

7: One thing that may not be down here is the concept of city-wide schools. I think they do introduce some choice into the DC public schools. You may not want as a neighborhood school a Montessori or Spanish immersion program, because not everyone wants to send their kids to those programs. It seems that it's good to have some diversity in programs in city-wide schools.

8: I don't agree, I think you can have citywide schools that still have a proximity preference. It doesn't have to be your in-boundary school, but if you live across the street you'd have a preference -- not above siblings. But you'd have more of a preference other than someone living in upper NW. There's a value to having your school be a community. I know I will invest more time than someone who has to travel long distances to get their kids there. If you want parental involvement, it's going to be the neighbors. I'm not saying that city-wide schools need to be in-boundary. I think some people don't want those programs, but I think there could be a citywide school that can have a proximity preference. Logan for example, but School Within a School is a little different when it moved. I understand the value of having more choice and access to schools, but you shouldn't shut out neighbors.

7: It's hard on Capitol Hill because we're so concentrated. You're like two or three blocks. In any other place, a four block school would be your neighborhood school. So it's a little hard.

8: I agree, I don't think the proximity has to be 3000 feet, I think it could be a narrower one.

6: Could you have some flexibility based on population density? If you have that on Capitol Hill where it's very dense, could you do 1000 or 1500 feet?

1: Some council members had suggested this, but I think neighborhood preferences for charters is dumb. Charters usually have very specialized things, and just because you live across the street from a Chinese immersion school, doesn't mean you have an interest in it.

8: I'll tell you, I'd be more involved if it was in my neighborhood than if I had to send my kid across the river or anywhere else.

1: I think people who wouldn't ordinarily choose a Chinese immersion school; they would just choose it because it's better than a neighborhood school. But they may not be totally [able to] do the work to support their kids in those schools just a good school, not because they chose to be there.

7: We're out of bounds for...

F: Let's not try to convince each other, we can do 1's too.

2: Generally, I found the sheet really hard to navigate. There were a lot of contradictions.

5: It's hard because I come from an elementary school perspective, but how would I think about middle school and high school perspective.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

F: Give me an example.

7: I didn't think school proximity is all that important for high school. You have fewer high schools and they're big.

3: They can go out on their own.

2: You have bigger issues for high school.

5: I gave a 5 to the predictability. I can appreciate your perspective, but having gone through raising two kids in this city, the angst of daycare, the angst of not getting into a 3 year old program, we got into a 4 year old program. Knowing where my kids are going to go, unless things get scrambled up, gives me great comfort. And also more investment because I'm going to see these families for the next several years. I'm going to middle school meetings, because I know where they're going. The unpredictability that the feeders could be shifted is a great deal of stress for my family.

2: Likewise.

1: There's different ways to be predictable. At this point if the feeders stay the same, then my concern is that the boundaries will shift. If the feeder pattern was abolished, they wouldn't have to change the Wilson or Deal boundaries. So it's a different kind of predictability. I don't know if one is better than the other. I also think that the predictability goes against maximum choice. So if I adopt a 15 year old, I don't have a choice about what high school that kid goes to other than the in-boundary one, because people have got their kids into the 3 year old program. So for someone who gets in, they're set for the next 20 years for their next 3 kids, that's awesome for them, but it's rough to move into that system. Unless all schools are equally good, that's not going to end.

2: My only concern, when you get into make your home choice - - when we went into buy our house, we knew what the lay of the land is. That's a sunk cost at this point.

5: We bought our house based on school boundaries.

[Several agree]

6: We did too.

1: Keeping the Wilson boundary is important to me. That's something that's not going to happen if the feeder system continues because there's a lot of people who dump their kids into schools in upper NW out of boundary and try to get them into Deal and Wilson. So southwest and southeast are going to be cut out of that. So my self-serving perspective, as someone who would like to send my kid to Wilson at some point, is that if we keep the feeder patterns then change the school boundaries that would keep my kid from going to Wilson.

F: Other 5's or other 1's?

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

2: Anything that made the administrators life easier, I kept as 1. That's their job, it's tough, but that's their job. My biggest concern is taking care of my child.

6: Most of my 5's were around predictability, proximity, and then I added one for safety and commute is 5. Most of those 5's are at the elementary level. If your school is not a good one, you can seek to go elsewhere. But I think this whole concept of building the community, especially at elementary school level, I think it's a critical time to really build the schools and community associated with it. At middle or high school people will start to shift over time and people will go into different directions, but at the elementary school is important. The selling, or making people aware of other schools is great, but if you have both parents working, or you can't necessarily drive to upper northwest or cross the river is not feasible logistically. Especially at that young age, at the elementary level it's tough. I put a lot of 5's at that elementary level... This goes for us personally, as far as safety and commute, when CSX digs a big hole in the ground, or for Van Ness families, I don't think they should be walking across South Capitol Street. If there are some boundary shifts, DCPS should look at major commuter routes. Let's assume this boundary process should happen more often, like every 10 years. I think in addition to major commuter routes, you can look at major infrastructural projects. There's going to be major projects in South Capitol streets and other parts of the city. I think the idea of putting elementary school children across that, you have to look at safety of commute.

1: I would add looking at public transit to that. A school may not seem close, but it would be different if it has a bus or metro next to it.

4: I think there should be basic equitable resources across the board. I know we have one of the lowest graduation rates in the country. My opinion is that we should spend the extra money for struggling kids, because I don't care of equity for the sake of equity if we can't get more of our kids to graduate with real skills. I don't think that's where you're going with efficiency, but we have to get the job done because it isn't working.

3: I added one that was not on the sheet, that's engagement of the community. Other than geographic community, you have to bring in the community, community. Parents are great advocates, they're very loud, and they can get things done. But if the school doesn't engage them, then, the community is a big part of the process, but if they're not being involved, then they're losing.

5: Are you talking about neighborhood or parent community?

3: I think both. Nowhere on the sheet does it talk about the parents and neighbors being involved. The school is not in a bubble. I understand there is a PTA, but not every PTA is engaged.

6: I think that's true. The schools are very focused on what they have within them. They care about families in the school; they don't care about waitlisted or prospective families or people that don't have kids. The schools and the principals and even the PTAs focus on who do we have here now, let's take care of that.

8: I agree.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

Question: How do we make this a process that builds community?

4: The process has been great so far. But there's a big gap between principles and the mechanics of budgets, lottery, and drawing lines. We're all sitting around here nervous. We don't know what the mechanical principles are for the advisory council. How do you go from this [the values sheet] to making feeder patterns and boundary lines?

F: I can describe how this is going to go for a second. It's not a straightforward process, not based just on population trends or commuter lines. It's more looking at what factors people think should be a priority. Can't move forward on the process without first articulating what the guiding values are. The policy memos talk about experiences in other cities where people are grappling with the same issues. We haven't got into the mechanics, because we don't know what the values are.

5: Which of those cities you mentioned mirrors DC that has the population explosion?

F: A lot of cities have had the same population explosion. But how not to make this divisive?

8: I think it's good to remember that this is a tremendous place to be. We're all talking about how to ensure that kids get a great education in DCPS. Not long ago that was not a choice for parents.

1: I think if there were more reassurances from charters and DCPS that they are trying to raise all boats as opposed to everybody fighting for the scraps. There aren't that many, what people would perceive to be good schools in the district. So if there were a way to make people feel that more schools were good schools, people would not be as panicked about what schools they get into.

4: I don't think the city gains anything by making the good schools less good by distributing the kids. You just want all schools to get better.

1: There are things that go beyond what the schools know how to do. It would be great if DCPS made a plan where they said, there are no kids in poverty. The schools would get a lot better I think. But that might be beyond this process. Some of it might be too much to ask for, but some reassurances would be great.

2: One thing that would be helpful is if we pull out high school because it's a separate issue because it's easier to get your kid into a high school than your two year old. . . . It's almost a region wide issue. Kids go to a lot of public and private choice at the high school level. A lot of us are elementary focused, but at the high school level you have big issues to tackle. I don't see one solution for all three levels; I see solutions in different buckets. I hope that from this process the outcome is dynamic and not one size fits all because you have different issues.

6: It's been mentioned here a bunch, as far as this boundary process is concerned, I think the advisory group should think creatively about reducing the anxiety level of parents. If this goes into effect in 2015-16, give people like three years of grandfathering for everyone, not just siblings. People bought their homes in neighborhoods because of certain schools. It might create a little chaos, but for a relatively small amount of time, it will telegraph that there is some transition and reduce the anxiety. I'm assuming that siblings will get grandfathering. It just makes sense to keep siblings together. Two/three years down the road it

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

telegraphs to those buying into the area, they can explore the new school or gives them choice, and reduce the anxiety level.

3: Especially for kids going into the lottery now, like maybe get shut out in the 3's, they could continue in Kindergarten.

6: Some people would say that by the time you make the change, people would have already participated in the lottery. It's important when people move in, that's fine, as long as they know the timeline.

2: It's got to be multi-year, can't just be one year.

6: It doesn't have to be 5 years, but 1, 2, 3.

4: To make a broad assumption, we're going to try to get into the perceived best school, bounded by some geographic locale. But other parents will have different priorities. When you think a system that works for everyone, how do you account for the fact that parents have different layers of priorities and still have a successful school? People who come to focus groups may not represent the diversity of the school population, and may have a different level of education and time to come to the focus groups. How do you represent the diversity of the schools and make other parts of the community feel like they haven't been pushed around by people they aren't familiar with.

5: How do you address the issue of single parents who wouldn't be able to have the freedom to come to something like this?

F: Trying multiple things, and want to get more representation of the entire District.

1: I think another thing that may increase some anxiety or reduce it, is more school clusters. So, where I live, in the Amidon zone, there's a concern that a lot of the more informed parents are going to try and get into Van Ness. But if other elementary schools became a cluster like Capitol Hill, then there'd be a bigger neighborhood pushing for all 3 of the schools. That may be a way of reducing anxieties. It wouldn't be pitting the families against each other. But parents are going to hate that. Parents don't want to take their kids to each-others' schools. There's a lot of tension that may come from that, but it would bring in more neighborhood feeling instead of pitting people against each other as much.

[Questions about working groups, timelines, etc.]

Focus Group 8C: Capitol Hill Montessori, Thursday, December 19, 2013

Participants:

1. Parent of a 5 year old at School Within a School and a 2 year old
2. Parent of a 5 year old at JO Wilson
3. (Spouse of Participant 2) 5 year old at JO Wilson and a soon to be baby girl
4. Parent of a 5 month old; lives a block away from School Within a School (Ward 6)
5. Parent of a second grader at Capitol Hill Montessori and 5th grader at BASIS
6. Parent of a 2 year old; lives near Eastern Market and near Brent (Ward 6)
7. Resident without children; college professor and very interested in making schools better
8. Parent of a 5 year old at Peabody, and 2 year-old itching to get there
9. Parent of a third grader at Watkins and a three-year old at School Within a School
10. Parent of a 5 year old at Peabody, and a 2 year old itching to get there as well
11. Parent of 2-half year old twins, and a 2 month old; lives in the Navy Yard area (Ward 6)

My name is Cecilia Kaltz and I work at the DME's office. Scheherazade will be coming over later to help take notes.

Q. Could you tell me a little bit about the process and to what extent DCPS has any influence in this process, it seems like they are entirely separate?

Answer: It's not entirely separate. DCPS has a member on the advisory committee so there is a lot of back-and-forth. And we wanted to understand what their strategy is so we can leverage program alignment – so that we make sure that all the program decisions are in alignment with the student assignment recommendations. We want to make sure we understand that upfront. So we are partnering with DCPS but the DME's office is leading it.

Q – And the mayor has the final authority? There is not a city council vote either?

Answer: Correct. It is the mayor's decision, however only for DCPS recommendations. If there is a recommendation to change school choice policies then legislation will be needed for charters, and then it is up to the council to legislatively approve it. But anything with DCPS recommendation, the mayor can approve.

So we're having focus groups early up front [Explanation of process and engagement] So the mayor would make the final decision and changes would go into effect in school year 2015-16 – and there is expected to be grandfathering.

Q. You said it was a different decision process as far as the public charter schools [are concerned] with respect to the purview of this advisory committee?

Answer: It's a slightly different process. The Advisory Committee may or may not incorporate recommendations for the charter schools, but if the advisory committee does incorporate

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

recommendations for Charters then those policy changes would have to be approved by council. But DCPS is under the mayor's authority. . . .

Facilitator: What are your experiences and concerns with the current policies around school choice and student assignment, thus far? What are your thoughts or your concerns . . . what would you like to see changed, what would you like to see preserved in the revision of the current student assignment policies? So currently what do you like and what don't you like about how your child . . . will be assigned to schools.

Participant 5:

I think there are two different ways to think about it, since there is policy and how that policy plays out. It's because of this that maybe why we are having this revision process. I don't know if I know the policies enough to say what is working or not working with them, but in terms of what is playing [out, it] may be different from what the policy intended and so that may be why we are going through this revision process - - which is more than just change in demographics and population growth. I would say a lack of predictability is an issue, and even if we have a feeder pattern system in place you cannot predict how a cohort of students are going to move through the system. For example, my children go here [Capitol Hill Montessori] but their options for Middle School are in flux; thus it isn't a given that the kids are going to flow through in predictable numbers all the way through high school. So any policy that can help influence a cohort of students sticking together and parents knowing their school options all the way through high schools would be a good thing. Having predictability all the way through high school decreases the amount of time you have to enter the lottery every X amount of years and having to "win" the lottery to go to a good school.

Participant 7:

She does not have children yet, but her friends do and from what she understands from them is that as soon as kids turn two their parents have to scramble to get their student into Pre-K and it causes a lot of stress for them just to get a decent basic education. "So I wish the system could change to reduce the amount of competition and remove the stress of placing your child in a school. It is public education; it shouldn't be this stressful to get your child placed into a school."

Participant 3:

"I have two observations." The first - - which he doesn't know if it is unique to his school - - but for Brent, he knows that many parents are starting to see it as a school that is on the up and up. And many parents will rent an apartment nearby or commit fraud in order to get their child into the school and then leave afterwards. This is even well-respected lawyers etc. that are utilizing these loopholes. It doesn't seem like DCPS cares that much if they are Maryland residents. So this is problem they are overlooking, especially at PK3 grade level. They have minimal spots for PK3 at Brent and it is now a 50/50 shot you will get in if you live in the neighborhood and people who are abusing the system to get in are taking spots from people who actually live and invest there.

Participant 11:

I am in a different but somewhat relatable situation. I am working with a group of neighborhood parents to get Van Ness opened, and we live three blocks away from some fantastic schools - - in fact a couple fantastic schools - - on Capitol Hill but the likelihood in getting into them is a 0 to negative 12 chance. That is frustrating as a parent living in the neighborhood and knowing that there are these really strong parent groups advocating for the schools around you, but also knowing that your chances of getting into the

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

nearby schools are slim. And the schools that are struggling sometimes don't have those strong community parent groups or voices speaking for them. And the amount of work that is required in order to navigate the system; having to do tons of research, and sometime go beyond the legal limits and use loopholes to get your child into the best school option seems to further divide the city into the "haves and the have nots". It is frustrating and I am not sure we can fix it, but at the same time I am going to do what is best for child. There are no answers, but this is where I am coming from.

Participant 10:

Two thoughts: there is a difference between a PK3 lottery where there are not enough slots and a lottery process for later grades. I kind of like the lottery process for the later grades (past PK3) since it gives parents flexibility, especially at the high school level, which is a valuable thing for parents. So the problem with the PK3 is not the lottery - - just that there literally aren't enough slots everywhere. So the one thing that I think DCPS has going for it in terms of improving the long-term quality of schools and getting a more socio-economic diverse population into the DCPS system is the PK3 program. So to have slots for everyone would be a great way for achieving that.

The other comment is one of the things I love about Capitol Hill and going to schools in Capitol Hill [and that] is diversity. But at the same time this neighborhood diversity isn't necessarily reflected in the Capitol Hill schools in terms of race and socio-economic status (SES) and this is deeply troubling to me. So you have a handful of schools relatively well-integrated and then a bunch of schools that are racially isolated and majority of students are low-income. So looking at the statistics of DCPS schools in terms of diversity of race and SES is really troubling. This may be controversial but I would like to see policies that think of neighborhoods as a little bit bigger area, and incorporate or think about diversity of the schools. And not that there is school over here that is bad in one neighborhood and . . .

So my two cents: PK3 for everyone and make sure schools are integrated across all DCPS schools from race and SES. Since I have seen the statistics this probably cannot be done on broad level across the city, but there are pockets where diverse schools can happen, such as Capitol Hill. Capitol Hill has the opportunity to have diverse schools and I am really optimistic we can achieve that.

Participant:

I am skeptical that can happen because I don't think we have a whole lot of diversity. We don't have a lot of other nationalities mixed in besides black and white and have really rich areas and really poor areas. And the population has a huge African American population, and I am not sure why Capitol Hill is so unique that could help create diverse schools?

Participant:

So I think it is tough to say adding PK3 for everyone will solve it since parents are always going to know where the good and bad schools are, and always going to shoot for the best schools. In my school, JO Wilson you have parents going to the PK3 programs but leave after 1st grade to go somewhere else and this happens a lot. And this is negative for parents who didn't get in the PK3 JO Wilson program and would have stayed on through Middle School. Or maybe they stay on to 3rd grade to get their sibling in the door and then leave. So even if the schools are diverse in the PK3 or young grade levels they don't stay that way as children age through the system. You can't force people to stay in a certain school for a period of time, but you can think about how you want your community to be and if they can provide predictability for a cohort. That isn't a necessarily a function of DCPS but parents thinking the school is a good option for their child.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

Participant:

I'll provide another example; Capitol Hill Montessori is a 100% out-of-boundary school, so our kids come from everywhere. So I live on the Hill but parents are all over, mostly from Wards 6, 7 and 8. So as kids get older, the class size gets smaller and smaller for the reasons you just stated previously. So my son is at BASIS with 5 other kids who came from Capitol Hill Montessori so we created our own little cohort. But at the same time I would much rather my son had stayed together with all of his kids in his cohort at Capitol Hill Montessori and continued on as a cohort. So when I say cohort I don't necessarily mean my neighborhood kids, I mean just students who come together as a community and attend . . . but they could live throughout the city.

Participant:

So going back to the original focus group question, the positive things about student assignment are actually directly in conflict with the concerns I have about the system. So the positives are that the city has a good amount of choice and parents could find a fairly good quality middle school and didn't have to leave the city when you thought you didn't have good options nearby. So your neighborhood school wasn't your only option. However this contributes to students leaving after 1st grade since there are other options for them to exercise and causes some unpredictability for parents too. So maybe predictability is the issue, but the lottery has winners and losers and parents leave before 5th grade since they are being strategic and want more chances to get into a good middle school. And I would prefer my child to stay all the way thru 5th grade but I can see why they leave earlier in order to be strategic about the lottery for other schools. So choice is both a positive and negative thing for the system.

Participant:

So two issues I have are: knowing the K-12th choice sets my child has rights to and knowing where the middle school and high school will be. I realize the schools are in flux and budget changes, but when school budgets change drastically it affects the school - - which DCPS has done in the best . . . So for example we don't know what Stuart Hobson will look like when my child eventually gets there. So I know my feeder patterns. However the bigger question is the predictability of the program quality and whether Stuart Hobson's budget will be supportive of the school and a quality option for my child. And that degree of unpredictability is concerning for me, and I'm not sure if funding will be cut or if it will be a viable option for my child.

Participant:

So that is a good point and I think before we start re-drawing boundaries we need to address quality. So there is disparity among the schools in terms of quality. So for example, Watkins is really diverse, we have kids all over the city (except Ward 3) and have a lot of students from Wards 7 and Ward 8 come to the school since to be frank those students are coming to Watkins do not have as good as quality options in their neighborhoods. So I would argue you need to talk about quality across the city before re-drawing boundaries. So we created this system where students are flocking from East to West because there is such disparity in the quality of schools in those areas. So that has to do with funding of schools and flexibility of how the schools can operate. So Stuart Hobson was supposed to and promised by DCPS that it would be a museum magnet school about 2-3 years ago but they have not followed through with it. I think having those magnet schools would be attractive for parents who would know that they will have stable funding for a while. I think DCPS schools don't have as much flexibility with their budget as Charters do. So it is the system of constrained DCPS schools and a niche level of Charter schools. So middle school and high school niche schools are very visible for parents, which is why they are leaving at 4th grade to go to charters and leave DCPS. And this causes unpredictability at the middle school and high school levels.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

Participant:

For the feeder thing, why parents choose to leave DCPS schools at 4th grade is because the grade alignment between charters and DCPS does not line up. Thus I think this misalignment is a concern. Because fixing this would do a lot, and cause less people to leave DCPS schools early. I am a fan of having grade alignments across sectors and schools for the purpose of an overall stability goal, and realize this is a council issue since they need to pass legislation to get this to happen. This seems to be important, especially since charters have just been taking a huge amount of kids from DCPS. And this could help stop that.

Participant:

I have a question. Has DCPS done better with growing programs that are already established and going well versus bringing low-performing programs up to high quality? If there is demand at certain schools or programs at DCPS maybe they could expand or replicate these programs and acknowledge that they are working and grow them. But of course taking into consideration facility space, etc. versus trying to carve out boundaries that will lift up underperforming schools. . . . I don't know the answer to that and am not sure if others have a reaction to that. But I think growing high performing schools makes more sense than reviewing boundaries to bring up low-performing schools. I would rather trek further to go to a high-performing school.

Participant:

On that topic I think it is a shame that School Within a School and Logan - - high performing schools - - are not located east of the river and out of Capitol Hill where there is potential to attract a more diverse community of students.

Participant:

My perspective is that I live a block from School Within a School, and it doesn't make sense that people living near the school don't have the right to go there. Especially since parents have invested in the school since we walk by it all the time, planted bushes, etc. So it is a shame where cohorts of students are dispersed who are living that neighborhood. So if you live two blocks from the school you should have the right [to attend there] and that will help increase sense of the community and predictability.

Participant:

So even more predictability when you have a separate value of a neighborhood school. I have seen the transition from my kids who were in a daycare with kids all across the city to then [went to] elementary school with cohort who live mostly near the school and I see the value of getting to know kids, parents, they care more, create more peer pressure. And there really is value to the kids - - have neighborhood proximity preference is an important value.

Participant:

What concerns me as a non-parent is the amount of work that parents have to do for student's education. Why can't we trust that students are learning? I think the US is very different in this manner compared to other countries.

Participant:

But some parents like to be involved. And schools are stronger when they are involved. And here in DC parents have to be involved in DC, and this isn't a rural education system such as Nebraska. And there is definitely real variability in the parent involvement between schools.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

Participant:

But involvement doesn't mean its quality. And I think parents would feel they can be less involved if their schools were high quality.

Participant:

But even if the school is high quality I still want to be involved. And I think a part of a school's quality is an involved parent community. And my 5-year old isn't the best recorder of information so I would like to be involved.

Question: Do your values shift at all at the different grade levels (ES, MS and HS)?

Participant:

I will say when I dropped my kids off at ES; it really helped having a "community feel" to the school and having it close to the home. I used to go there a lot. I could even trust a parent to help out and pick up my kid if I could not get there. But with my 5th grader I don't think I need to visit as much, and since it is a charter and citywide I don't see as much community involvement as I do at the ES level. I trust he is learning, and don't need to be involved as much. So regardless of programming, high quality education is a very important thing. I realize for the Arts school (Duke Ellington) it would be a shame for students interested in arts not to go there, but high quality programs are even more important to me.

Participant:

Speaking as a former DCPS teacher, and now a Montgomery County teacher for last 5 years, they have a lot of academies (theater, engineering), etc. So at the high school level these programmatic schools are really great for them. But at the elementary level, having a strong community and a neighborhood school is really important. You can trust that your kids go over to another kids' house since you have met the parents. And the sense of community at the early ages I value a lot. But as kids age they develop certain interests and it makes sense for them to go to different programmatic high schools. And they are older and don't need as strong as cohort. Montgomery County has this model and I would love to see more of this in DC. I know we have McKinley Tech and some others, but I would like to see more of that here in DC.

Participant:

I would like to echo what he just said, but maybe a little stronger. At the elementary school level you have to have a proximity preference. Whether it is DCPS or Charter, you need to have a strong community and embrace it.

Participant:

For academic diversity, I think at the elementary school level it is okay to have diversity but at the high school level you should not have academic diversity.

Participant:

I would like to add a comment about neighborhoods schools. I agree with that idea but I think we need to expand our definition of what is a neighborhood and make the boundaries a little bit broader than a couple of blocks around us. So think of the Hill has an entire neighborhood. We just need to be careful since neighborhood schools can be code for some really yucky things. Neighborhood schools can be a code for problematic things. Neighborhood schools are a good thing but we have to be careful about how we draw the boundaries so we don't promote lack of diversity.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

Question: What values should be guiding or not guiding the student assignment review process?

Participant:

Equitable access to schools is what I feel most strongly about. It appears to me that there currently isn't equitable access to schools and there is opportunity to change that a bit. And I like the idea of creating a definition of neighborhood schools to be a little broader. I think there is value in neighborhood schools and proximity, but I agree with others that we don't want it to be exclusive and can include more areas of the city to create a neighborhood.

Participant:

There isn't equitable access to quality in the current system. This is a high priority for me. Access to a neighborhood schools is great, but the neighborhood should be inclusive of all of the positive aspects of why you would use neighborhood schools.

Participant:

I value diversity above most other things. We should be taking into account racial and economic diversity in boundaries. Access to high program quality follows from this, so I pair these things together. Funding shouldn't be allocated across staff lines they should be allocated across buildings.

Participant:

Equitable access to high quality programs, etc. is number one and should drive the conversation.

Participant:

Predictability is most important -- knowing what options are going to be later on, not only which school but what they will look like. This requires stable investment. Second value is proximity.

Participant:

Academic diversity is important for elementary school, but there should not be academic diversity in higher grades. There should be true vocational training and other rigorous options. Math, science, reading is not for everyone. Some people are really good with their hands and they should be given opportunities too.

Participant:

Proximity is the most important thing for me. Near term predictability is important as well.

Participant:

Predictability is the number one value for me. That will strengthen schools. Alignment of grades between DCPS and charters is really important. Second value is equitable access.

Participant:

Proximity is first for elementary school, less for middle schools and high schools.

Participant:

Strengthening system of neighborhood schools and equitable accesses are two sides of the same coin. But I agree that it's more important in elementary school than in higher grades.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

Participant:

Equitable access to high quality programs is important - but going along with this is having more high quality programs. Also integrated in this is diversity. Second value is predictability.

Question: Values you don't think are important?

Participant:

Economic and racial diversity would be great in a perfect world. In reality you always find a way to group yourself with the people who you want to be grouped with. In terms of focus for policy decisions that DCPS can control; this is what DCPS should focus on. If people are going to group together anyway, how do we use our resources to ensure that we make every school high quality?

Participant:

Full utilization may mask destructive things -- i.e. that DCPS would have charters on one floor, DCPS on another floor. I am also concerned about efficiency. We should spend our money wisely, but in service of quality and equity, we can't cut corners.

Participant:

I am aware of a lot of schools that are under-performing and have lots of space, and others that are high quality and have little space. We can't dump kids into a school that is under-performing.

Participant:

What about pairing with Metro to make sure there is free bus and Metro access. We need to make systems work for families (maybe parents should get subsidy too).

Participant:

This would be a lot easier to get opinions on if we had data. A big missing piece of this process is that we don't know what the data shows. Where are kids going, are there natural feeder patterns already established that we just don't see. What is happening and how does that influence this process.

Participant:

Parsing of out of boundary and in-bounds data leaves a lot to be desired. That would tell us a lot about whether there are natural cohorts. My opinion is worth a lot more if it's informed.

Participant:

We need data to be disaggregated and it should include funding streams.

Participant:

It should also include data on projections.

Participant:

Maximum choice for families is not a high priority. It's in conflict with all of the other values which are more important to me. Maximum choice throughout the system undermines equity because it means you have winners and losers - - unless you have high quality everywhere. Then maximum choice means you are choosing among similar level of quality. In high school it's different because there are specialized programs that appeal to kids.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

Participant:

Choice also undermines strengthening of local schools.

Question: Are there thoughts about citywide high schools?

Participant:

I would like to see data on what it looks like today -- maybe it's already de facto the case.

Participant:

I like the idea of an all lottery high school because it would solve some of the problems in terms of quality.

Participant:

It comes back to quality. If I'm forced to go into a lottery for high school, there better be good options. It's a self-selecting process. One of the reason people leave Watkins in 4th grade is because they're not sure if Eastern is going to be ready for them.

Participant:

But it's a chicken and egg problem. Question is what is the driver? My instinct is that moving to lottery for whole system would be a driver of quality.

Participant:

Good education, safe school, they can get into a good college, low teacher turnover -- these are the things we would look for in terms of quality. If you just look at the qualities of schools that people are going to you'll develop a definition of what school quality is.

Participant:

You would need to have different kinds of academies.

Participant:

For me, quality means no grade inflation. There should be high standards for achievement.

Participant:

Scrapping the idea of neighborhood high school would be a bad one [idea]; (1) I at least know which high school my child is going to and can make decisions accordingly. Whereas lottery is too much chance for me to plan on and for me to stake my child's future on; (2) I've got my focus on Eastern and I will ensure that they are building towards quality. If I don't have any high school that I am headed towards at this stage (before my kid is high school age) then I'm not doing all of these things to invest in its quality.

Question: How to make sure this process is not divisive?

Participant:

Give us data and ask us the same information.

Participant:

How diverse have the focus groups been economically, racially, ages of kids? You need to look at this in order to determine whether you have to go back out to the community.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

Participant:

Take into account different advocacy organizations. Engage with the groups behind the school closure lawsuit. The Mayor's office reaching out will not do it; you have to work through community groups to make sure they are holding an open process on this. I am 100% sure that this will go into litigation so you need to mitigate the risk for that.

Participant:

I echo that sharing data is really important. As transparent as the process can be would be really important. So everyone can see the input that you are getting, and on balance, does this represent everybody fairly?

Focus Group 9A: Lockridge/Bellevue Library, February 19, 2014

Facilitator: Mary Filardo, Note Taker: Nancy Huvendick

Participants:

1. Resident of Ward 8, volunteers at DCPS Ward 8 Elementary School, former Board of Ed staffer
2. Parent, grew up in Ward 8 lives in Ward 4
3. Resident of Ward 8, graduated from DCPS, children attended DCPS, grandchildren attend DCPS
4. Resident of Ward 7, active in education focused civic groups, no children as yet
5. Resident of Ward 7, active participant in public school civic efforts, no children in school
6. Parent, DCPS elementary school student, active participant in public schools civic efforts, Ward 8
7. Resident Ward 8, active in DCPS high school PTA, education related civic groups

Facilitator introduces the focus group outline for the evening; participants introduce themselves.

3. My children went to Ballou when it had specialized Math and Science programs. They went to Stuart-Hobson too. Grandchildren are now at Stanton.
4. We've been talking for 35 years about how to improve middle schools and we are still talking.
1. How many people showed up at the Ward 7 focus group?

Facilitator: Almost 20. However, there were only 3 at the first Ward 8 focus group that was held at Thurgood Marshall Academy.

1. Who is on the Advisory Committee?

Facilitator: Members were selected by the Deputy Mayor for Education. There are members from each ward. Sharona Robinson, president of the Ballou PTA is one member from Ward 8; the other from Ward 8 is Kamili Kiros who is a charter school parent. There was a little bit of controversy over the Ward 7 representatives who are now Eboni-Rose Thompson and Rev. Donald Isaac.

Facilitator describes the process and different ways for the public to take part.

5. When will the new regulations start?

Facilitator: The 2015-2016 school year. It is important for people to be at the table for the Working Groups, we especially need more participants from East of the River.

[Facilitator proceeds with outline of current situation with regard to boundaries.]

3. If charters are not full, do they have to take you if you apply?

Facilitator: Yes. There is lots of transfer policy involved with student assignment as well as involuntary transfers between schools. Transfer policy is part of student assignment policy.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

1. Currently there is an early childhood education bill that has been proposed that would make it mandatory for three and four year-olds to go to school. How can the schools accommodate that?
2. Also, with the number of schools closed east of the river, especially with DCPS, how does that work?
3. The middle school situation east of the river needs to be addressed too.
6. Because of the closures and other issues such as the development near Turner Elementary the boundaries are so confused that students across the street from Turner have to apply out-of-boundary. We talked with the Chancellor about this at a meeting at Turner.

Safety at high schools is a problem too because of neighborhood conflicts. A number of black males have not graduated because of concerns around neighborhood conflicts (Woodland Terrace area). Two girls were recently arrested around Anacostia. As a result students are dropping out. Involuntary transfers are not sufficient. We need more parents involved.

Parents have a lot of trouble walking students to different schools especially with charters. It is hard to get them there (example of a parent with children in three different schools). How will the boundary process be implemented?

Facilitator: We'll be talking about the process a little later.

4. There is real concern just about the shape of the boundaries - - there are families just five blocks away from Anne Beers Elementary who are out-of-boundary for that school. One family near Beers found they were out-of-boundary and were directed to Winston (now closed) which is a school for PS-8th grade. They did not want anything to do with sending three year olds to school with 17 year olds. They used the lottery and got into Maury (Ward 6) - - but their first choice was Beers which is only five blocks away.

6. I've sent all of my children to DCPS schools and now have grandchildren in DCPS. I went to my neighborhood school, which was Stanton Elementary and from there went to Hobson (which at that time was in the Watkins building) before it was consolidated as Stuart-Hobson. My grandchildren at DCPS are now facing the middle school dilemma. Their in-boundary school was Davis elementary - - which is now closed; one is in day-care across the street from Davis. One grandchild is at Beers and they love Beers – but then what? Their neighborhood elementary schools closed (Davis); Winston is closed (PS-8th). There are no schools within walking distance now. Davis was consolidated with Plummer but Plummer is quite a way. Sousa is the assumed middle school but to get there you have to walk through the woods. Once you start closing so many schools how are students to get to school? Ridge Road is really a busy thoroughfare in the mornings [and is not safe to cross]. There are few options. The walking patterns the children are forced to use don't work. My kids didn't use their neighborhood middle schools and high schools AND my grandchildren can't use their neighborhood middle schools and high schools. Thirty-five years of closing schools . . . ?

1. I have a grandchild near Webb which is now a charter; she thinks there are three-year olds at that school. Where is the information? It's a problem. The mayor talked about sending six month old babies to schools.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

I tutor at a Ward 8 elementary school. Does every school have a social worker, a psychologist, reading specialists? This is an open-space school and people there have their hands full. I don't know how the teachers do it full time because there are so many problems – monumental problems. I can't believe it. It's not just a few kids - - it's like 60 in the first grade. Are they directing these [problem] kids to this school? One child had to transfer on two busses to get to the school but this school does not reach even one benchmark. Is Garfield worse?

2. As a kid I grew up in the Highlands and went to Catholic elementary school, went to Jr. High School at Jefferson. My mother worked at Amidon and we went on the bus. Hart middle school and Ballou were not options for us. With my two older children we drove them to Hyde and then they went to Deal; I drove them. There is a lack of options east of the river. The whole system seems to be somewhat rigged; I found it statistically improbable that both of my children got their out-of-boundary slots. If you move in the right circles or are connected . . . I don't want other folks to have to do what my mother had to do and what I have had to do.

4. Winston was not an option for people; Kramer is not an option. We need better programming. The low test scores are not acceptable.

6. Boundaries will not address quality. They will only give each child a school by right down the street. The greater question is if quality were addressed then the boundaries would not be much of an issue. Boundary is a wholly separate discussion when we really need to talk about quality.

Facilitator: City-wide only 25% of our kids attend their neighborhood school - - except that it is 80% in Ward 3 who attend their neighborhood school and . . .

5. Only two Wards out of 8 - - why is that?

Facilitator: Community support? If low income people supported their schools at a high rate wouldn't they be better schools?

5. If resources for parents to organize and supports for students were there [communities would better support neighborhood schools]. You can't just change principals every other year - - there is no consistency. You can't start from scratch every year and achieve quality.

2. Consistency is needed not just with teachers and principals but with the families too. Until you address neighborhood problems . . . let's improve the quality of life in neighborhoods. DCPS, the DME, or the mayor can't [address these problems]. We have to work with the people in the neighborhoods - - that's where it starts.

6. Both are important. We need parental all-hands-on-deck. It has to be both sides.

2. Kelly Miller Middle School is fully renovated, there is lots of support but that was not enough by themselves – it takes a lot of work.

5. Parental involvement makes a difference but it takes parental education too. Most parents have had negative experiences with school themselves.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

3. You don't know what you don't know: parents still want better for their children. There are communities that would not accept the nonsense that goes on around here. New teachers - - they are scared of me! How can they connect with my child? If they could just treat all students equally they would do a boat-load better than they are doing.

Facilitator: What about values in Ward 8 – what is the lens we should be looking through? Equitable access to quality schools but if there's a real shortage of supply? Is it fair to limit choice if the supply is not good? Are there complaints about too many charters or . . .

5. We don't have schools we want to have our students assigned to. A choice of school A, school B, school C?

4. People may use their elementary schools but then . . .

5. There is no viable choice.

3. If you do boundaries and everyone has a school to attend. . . . I want you to stop shutting down schools. Elementary school babies have to be able to walk to school. Yes it is a circular argument.

5. School can get better. Every month we celebrate schools of distinction. Schools have turned around. People know how to do this; there is a formula that works. Why not do that instead of shutting down schools?

4. There should be one DCPS school and one charter in each area.

5. But you don't have the right to go to the charters.

Facilitator: But that could change.

2. Would you swing more to choice now?

5. For elementary school we need walkable schools - - many in the same area. I want a quality school - - if charter is better OK. We are fighting against each other. Make DCPS compete with high performing charters. It is them vs. us now but our children suffer. Charters were supposed to be innovative programs.

3. We are so far from the original intent with charters which was supposed to be 1) local control 2) innovation. But now we have two systems doing the same thing. We had a dual system back in the 1950s. Every block on Capitol Hill had a school - - we have that system again now.

Facilitator: The issues around race and socio-economic status and diversity - - how they . . .

3. There are not enough White or Hispanic children in the entire city [to achieve diversity]. Boundary zones will reflect the neighborhoods. The simplest way is to draw boundaries. Charters will die . . .

6. I've heard that charters are well represented on the Advisory Committee.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

Facilitator: The mayor has the power to. . . But Achievement Prep for instance could feed into Woodson without the charter's permission. If charters were to have a neighborhood preference, that would take a change in the law.

5. Could DCPS schools feed into charters?

Facilitator: That would take a change in the law too. Or where there is no DCPS school you could for instance have a charter be the by-right school.

6. How could you have a community without a school?

Facilitator: As with River Terrace or Kenilworth.

6. That's the Promise Neighborhood area but still they closed the school.

5. One reason the city is not diverse is that people move into areas with great schools. If you want people moving in you need quality schools. Ward 7 has a couple of decent elementary schools but people move in . . . We can transform neighborhoods. You as a prospective parent, you have to work on the schools.

4. We are trying to support the schools.

5. If you improve circumstances and get parents involved we wouldn't be sitting here having this discussion. You can draw lines but you have to have something inside the lines.

Facilitator: Safety did not come up in some of the focus groups at all. But students in Wards 7 and 8 travel farther [and are at greater risk because of the travel]. What about offering transportation for middle school students?

1. Busses at 3:00 in the afternoon?

Facilitator: Kids are travelling from home to school . . .

1. I'm astounded by the little kids I see on the busses by themselves.

2. Safety is an issue between kids - - primarily a problem from the other kids at school.

6. Parents often would prefer students went further from home.

Facilitator: What if middle schools had public school transportation to school?

5. But what happens when they get dropped off?

Facilitator: What are the issues around walk-ability and middle school?

6. It is an issue of walking through neighborhoods to school?

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

3. My granddaughter in Prince Georges County gets the bus from the corner bus stop and gets transported from there to school.

4. The problem [for instance] is parents who live near Sousa and will not want to go to Johnson . . .

3. Boundaries can't address more viciousness at the high schools. Looking only at high schools . . . everybody has to go somewhere. Neighborhoods don't get along. Isolating neighborhoods isn't a reasonable approach. It amazes me that teenagers are fighting over new property they don't own. It is deeper than boundaries especially since we keep shutting schools - - it seems that we have thrown up our hands.

Facilitator: With so many closings in Wards 7 and 8 – boundaries will change. Is there a way that changing boundaries could strengthen people's understanding, build connections? Could the Advisory Committee in moving boundaries support transition in a way that stops neighborhood conflicts?

3. Bowen was closed. There needed to be a buffer; a division between Amidon and Bowen [which were consolidated]. A local church and the neighborhood association partnered. They used the summer to have a huge carnival event to introduce people. There are things that can be done. It is easier at the elementary school level. I can't believe everyone at Ballou hates everyone at Anacostia . . . Garfield vs. Barry Farms!

Facilitator: we talked with the Savoy principal. There are 1100 elementary school age students in Savoy's boundary. He did not know that there were that many students. Principals don't know. The process of line drawing could get communities involved and re-connected with the neighborhood school.

6. School closures. How do we know there won't be more closures? There is a lack of community trust. There is confusion and there isn't a comprehensive plan.

4. There are 1200 people moving here every month. Hopefully closures are done for a while. For Woodson will boundaries change the percentage of the students who are staying [to graduate]?

Facilitator: With Woodson, probably [there will be a change] because its boundaries are so small now.

4. But that won't help the quality of programs.

Facilitator: If the K-8 charters got feeder rights into Woodson then the charter families can decide.

5. It goes back to making the school attractive.

1. Maria Tukeva [principal at Bell Multicultural High School] opened a Latino Development school and then it became 90% black -- it was a good program and people went there.

5. It doesn't matter where you draw the lines the schools have to be worth going to.

4. Kids have to have a school of right.

5. We have to make our children excited about education.

Community Input on Student Assignment: Focus Groups Report and Analysis

Facilitator: It takes the families and communities to support the schools.

6. Could there be a moratorium on charters?

7. I can't imagine charters ending.

Facilitator: Expanding supply is a problem. We need to plan . . . it is one of the things that people will look at.

2. I agree that we need quality schools. If that were fixed we still have to address boundaries and feeders. It is still a broken system.

3. The quality piece will take much longer.

2. If people are close and would attend . . .

3. I lived two blocks from Garfield but Stanton was the white school [until Brown vs. the Board]. I went to Kindergarten at Stanton with my sister to integrate it. It would be an easy fix with fewer and fewer schools.

Facilitator: It depends on how the charters are included - - there are 100 charters. Either we have an infrastructure of walkable elementary schools or give parents the right to go to charters?

7. Did you consider the educational impact on those who were moved several times in the recent closings? What if those students get moved again?

Facilitator: With grandfathering, possibly one consideration would be to make efforts so that no child who had been affected by closings would be further affected by boundary changes. I can't envision that any child would have to move out [of their current school].

7. If a child is in the third grade, for instance, they should not have to change schools? Transitions are hard for children.

Facilitator: I couldn't imagine moving students [from one school to another]. But the Advisory Committee will have to consider their position on policy . . .

2. What about feeder rights extending to the next school?

Facilitator: We would like your advice on how to conduct this public dialogue so it does not divide people but helps build community. How can we do a better job so that we come out with D.C. as great a city as is possible?

4. Transparency: notification and notice about the length of time before the mayor decides. Communication is really important.

2. I don't honestly see how this can roll out because we always start with the quality issues. There has to be a political promise. People will see the record and . . . need to promise quality and how to get there. We won't get to feeders and boundaries until . . .

7. Include more funding - - that's the bottom line.

Facilitator: The mayor could announce funding . . .

2. The mayor would have to go in with a laundry list of how to fix [quality]. It has to be acknowledged and addressed in the roll out: "We know we have this issue and that issue, but. . ."

5. Just moving children exacerbates things. What we haven't been effective at is putting together a whole plan. High quality really does not take that much money.

Facilitator: What about Promise Neighborhoods?

5. They closed the school [Kenilworth]; didn't give the school a chance before it could really get better. It doesn't take a rocket scientist - - or a Rocketship. [Laughter]

Facilitator: How do we get some benefit from this process?

6. We have to bring back a campaign; sending out e-mails to principals [isn't effective]. Use social media. I don't remember hearing about the focus group in Ward 8. Get people out. It can be done; I just put this focus group on Facebook and got three hits already!

1. I used to watch the school board try. There were lots of people only looking out for themselves. It was very divisive. School Board members gave up and moved. The school administration was un-responsive.

Facilitator: Where are the active PTAs? [All answering] Stanton, Orr . . .

2. Reach out to churches? We need to engage people with a different messenger, someone more trusted. Maybe talk with the clergy who are part of the Advisory Committee. Go to places parents are going to be - - sporting events.

7. Use the schools to make robo-calls. All options are good. We used robo-calls at Anacostia. Strategies can work. Word of mouth works.