

Arlington has a significant new opportunity over the next year to make a decisive step forward in equalizing educational opportunity, in closing shameful and persistent Achievement Gaps, by finally re-drawing public school boundaries, designed originally to maintain segregation, into new boundaries designed to integrate our still-segregated schools. Arlington is building two new APS schools and adding to four more in the near future. So beginning this month the School Board will hold many community-wide boundary change discussions and decide boundaries in February 2013.

The opportunity is to inject into those public discussions the need for APS to draw boundaries designed for school integration, which 50 years of social science research says is what really works to close the Gap. As we have learned nationwide, deploying federally-funded compensatory "programs" to try to close the Gaps means still "Living with Segregation", and does not work, say civil rights leaders. What works is for minority and poor kids to be blended in with larger numbers of middle class classmates, eminently possible in Arlington, the smallest county in Virginia and one of the richest in the nation. As Arlington home-buyers who chose Arlington "for the schools" know well, it matters who your classmates are.

The isolation of minority and poor students in many APS schools is striking. Three North Arlington Schools have 0.7 % black students, and 5 more have less than 5%, but between 79-85% Whites. Three South Arlington schools [2011 stats] have between 51 and 72% Hispanics. --- South Arlington schools have 53% to 85% Free and Reduced Meals students, while three North Arlington schools have FRMs at 1.9 to 8.7%.

The latest APS data shows corresponding test score achievement gaps also are unacceptably large, and often virtually "holding steady" in poor and minority students' attainment of Advanced Diplomas, enrollment in rigorous courses, and standardized test scores. Gaps of roughly 35% in 2004 were reduced about 1% per year, to roughly 30-35% in 2011. Besides gaps between White and minority and Free and Reduced Meals students, gaps are also large for Students with Disabilities and Limited English Proficiency sub-groups reported.

Arlington's own School Board "Policy 30-2.2 Boundaries" has for many years piously asserted as one of their 7 key Criteria: "Promoting geographical diversity." We need to ensure this commitment is honored, from now on. The US civil rights community has identified educational justice as the key civil rights struggle of our era, and has identified socio-economic integration of schools as having significant promise in working towards eliminating the race and poverty Gaps.

Given that the US Supreme Court has in recent years prohibited school districts from using racial identification of individual students for school assignment purposes, the Court nonetheless also took pains amply to point out several methods [using race as only one of many decision criteria] of achieving some racial and economic balance among schools, acceptable as "compelling government interest". School districts are free to use

socio-economic classifications and clustering neighborhoods into school assignment boundary zones, each balanced as well as possible within a range of parental income and education and racial characteristics.

Arlington leaders realize that "zip code is not destiny, and should not be the primary predictor of a child's educational achievement", so APS student assignment/attendance zone decisions clearly are shaped by underlying policy goals. APS itself has already used boundary-drawing for achieving limited "diversity", but in only one case: the North/South boundary zones for assigning students for the two Spanish Immersion programs, at Key and Claremont Elementary Schools. Each program draws from a designed cluster of "North Arlington" and "South Arlington" school attendance zones. Cynics say that is because white parents who want their children to learn Spanish fluently have arranged for them to have access to classmates who are native Spanish-speakers. APS's HB Woodlawn HS now has no longer an open county-wide lottery, but a more focused "neighborhood" lottery for admissions, which has helped in decreasing racial isolation there.

A national report on the potentials for school economic integration in various states and localities has identified Virginia, and Northern Virginia in particular, as having the very top demographic potentials in the nation for significantly reducing the economic isolation of poor [Free and Reduced Lunch] students in majority-poverty schools. Other school jurisdictions, among some 40 in the US using various criteria in their school boundary decisions for socio-economic and racial integration balancing, include small urban-suburban districts similar to APS such as Eden Prairie MN, which is a sister jurisdiction with APS in the Minority Student Achievement Network, and districts with similarly highly-educated populations such as Jefferson County (Louisville) KY and Wake County (Raleigh) NC.

Many Arlingtonians think their few APS county-wide "choice" schools will eventually end segregation; national researchers report the evidence says that parental choice simply does not result in significant integration. The most important obstacle to moving forward in this area is defeatism: the segregated status quo seems entrenched, school integration seems impossible. But others are integrating their schools; surely Arlington citizens can also.

Twenty years ago a vigorous citizens movement tried mightily. The 1992-1993 Futures movement of 150 citizens including 50 teachers, mounted a "diversity"-seeking campaign to integrate Arlington's schools, to ensure that all schools shared in some part of the blessings and the "burden" of new immigration flows. Supported at first by Superintendent and School Board, met frequently and held spirited public discussions. They drew up new boundary maps ["the Gray Maps"] and proposed a "controlled choice" boundary/school attendance zone policy. They were eventually crushed, however, by the uprising of the Save Our Neighborhood Schools movement, which the media characterized as mainly North Arlington white parents.

The new plan APS adopted preserved segregated schools:

"In 1993, during the [Arlington] county's fractious Futures debate, [disappointed Futures parent activist Libby] Garvey criticized as "segregationist" a restructuring plan recommended by Superintendent Arthur W. Gosling, which she said favored North Arlington schools over those in South Arlington. 'There is an old magic line of segregation running across Arlington that is called Route 50,' Garvey told the School Board. 'The status quo is rotten. It should have been burned long ago.' " ["Two Vie in School Primary", Washington Post, 3 9 95]

Many Arlington Democrats no doubt recently agreed with former President Bill Clinton's eloquent and sharp distinctions between the two major parties: "We [Democrats] believe that 'We're all in this together' is a far better philosophy than 'You're on your own.'" What do obviously segregated APS schools [and segregated tracks for students in rigorous classes within the schools] tell poor and minority students and families?

Twenty years of civic and media silence in Arlington on this issue is long enough.

See my previous Sun Gazette op ed

<file:///C:/Users/Fred/Documents/APS%20issues%202011/Sun%20Gazette%20CC%20op%20ed%20Millar%205%2016%2012.htm>