

# Boundary Process Offers Chance to Right Previous Wrongs

**Posted: Monday, September 24, 2012 11:45 am**

Editor: Arlington has a significant 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 elementary schools, and adding to four more, in the near future. Beginning this month, the School Board will hold many community-wide boundary-change discussions.

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. What works is for minority and poor kids to be blended in with larger numbers of middle-class classmates, eminently possible in Arlington.

The isolation of minority and poor students in many APS schools is striking. Three North Arlington schools have less than 1 percent black students, and five more have less than 5 percent, but between 79 and 85 percent whites. Three South Arlington schools have between 51 percent and 72 percent Hispanics. South Arlington schools have 53 percent to 85 percent free- and reduced-price-meals students, while three North Arlington schools have 1.9 percent to 8.7 percent.

Arlington's own School Board policy has for many years piously asserted, as one of its key criteria, "promoting geographical diversity." We need to ensure this commitment is honored, from now on.

Given that the U.S. 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 to point out several methods, using race as only one of many decision criteria, of achieving some racial and economic balance among schools. 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.

APS itself already has 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.

The H-B Woodlawn Secondary Program 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 students in majority-poverty schools. 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, too.

Twenty years ago, a vigorous citizens' movement tried mightily. The 1992-93 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, members 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.

Many Arlington Democrats no doubt agreed with former President Clinton's recent 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.

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