

**SLIGO CREEK ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
PARENT TEACHER ASSOCIATION
500 Schuyler Road
Silver Spring, MD 20910**

Position Paper on Boundary Study Options

June 3, 2009

The Parent-Teacher Association of the Sligo Creek Elementary School (SCES) welcomes the opportunity to provide input on the Board of Education's boundary study to review the boundaries for East Silver Spring, Piney Branch, Sligo Creek and Takoma Park Elementary Schools. We understand that the purpose of the study is to address space deficits at SCES, and that the study also includes the question of whether students from reassigned areas should articulate to Silver Spring International or Takoma Park Middle School. The community was disappointed that MCPS decided to make all enrollment reductions in the neighborhood school portion of SCES (the Academy), especially as SCES is the only elementary school in MCPS to host two special programs (the French Immersion and High-Functioning Autism programs). The community understands that making changes to special programs is difficult, but targeting the Academy program for such large reductions contradicts MCPS' pledge that all SCES programs would be "of equal stature and importance." However, given the scope of this study and the options presented, the PTA of the Sligo Creek Elementary School conditionally supports Options 4B and 5B, with no preference for one over the other. Of the options presented, Options 4B and 5B most closely meet the criteria established under the Board's regulation on Long-Range Educational Facilities Planning (hereinafter FAA-RA) and also the criteria established by the Boundary Advisory Committee (hereinafter BAC). Options 1, 2, 3 and 6 meet some criteria, but fail to meet several other criteria.

In forming the views expressed in this paper, the SCES PTA took a number of steps to ensure it had access to a full range of views from the communities currently served by the school. Specifically, the PTA provided detailed information about the boundary study to all parents in multiple weekly newsletters, disseminated handouts in Spanish and English to all parents describing the various boundary options provided by MCPS, posted information about the study on its listserv and neighborhood listservs that serve the communities that feed into SCES at regular intervals (with links to the boundary study materials on the MCPS website), provided information concerning meeting dates/times (including recorded phone messages in Spanish and English to every SCES home), and held multiple meetings (with Spanish translation and babysitter services) to solicit community feedback (including a meeting at the Takoma Park Recreation Center, located in zone SC5) to promote involvement by all affected communities.

The starting point in our analysis is to stress the importance of examining separately the data relating to the SCES Academy Program. Although SCES houses the French Immersion Program at the same facility, only enrollment in the Academy Program is affected by this boundary study. The French Immersion Program draws students from all over lower Montgomery County, with no preference for in-boundary students. This process is not affected by the boundary study. The BAC established a criterion that the Board should consider the

impact of the boundary study on the Academy Program without conflating the data from the French Immersion Program. We appreciate the willingness of MCPS staff to provide the disaggregated data. This data plainly illustrates that the two programs serve largely different demographic populations with different needs. For example, while 22.6% of the school's current aggregate enrollment is eligible for FARMs, only 5% of the French Immersion students are eligible and 37.5% of the Academy students are eligible. Similarly, while the school's current aggregate enrollment in ESOL is 9.3%, none of these students are in the French Immersion program and all of them are in the Academy Program (17.1% of the Academy students). The same pattern holds for racial and ethnic demographic data. Aggregating the data would mask the degree of poverty, the degree of English language skills, and the degree of racial/ethnic diversity in the Academy Program. For these reasons, our analysis of the three options presented by MCPS is based on data relating to the SCES Academy program rather than on aggregated data for the entire school.¹

Our discussion is in three parts. First, we compare the options to the criteria in the Board's regulation governing Long-Range Educational Facilities Planning (FAA-RA). Next, we compare the options to the criteria established by the BAC. Last, we present an explanation of the resources we believe the Academy program needs to remain a healthy and strong program after the boundary change.

1. MCPS Criteria for Long-Range Educational Facilities Planning

All of the options presented meet at least some of the criteria in the Board's regulation governing Long-Range Educational Facilities Planning (FAA-RA), but Options 4B and 5B meet the criteria to the greatest extent. We address each of the Board's criteria below.

- **Efficient Utilization at Elementary Schools:** Options 1 through 5 operate in an efficient utilization range (80-100% of program capacity) for all affected elementary schools. (See FAA-RA IV.E.2., V.B.1.a.). We note, however, that Option 1 would bring PBES close to capacity (95% in 2014-15), a problem of particular concern to that school since there is no space on the property for portables. Option 6 does not operate in an efficient utilization range because it would result in over-utilization at SCES (107% in 2014-15), the very problem that prompted this boundary study, and under-utilization at ESSES (77% in 2014-15).
- **Efficient Utilization at Middle Schools:** The split articulation variant (the "A" variant) for all six options will operate in an efficient utilization range at both SSIMS and TPMS. The straight articulation variant (the "B" variant) for Options 1 through 5 will result in a slight underutilization at SSIMS (78-79% in 2014-15). Because the ultimate projected underutilization at SSIMS is so small (and likely within the statistical margin of error),

¹ Unfortunately, the information provided in the study conflated data relating to students in the SCES Academy and High-Functioning Autism (HFA) programs. We have been told that because there are so few HFA students at SCES (i.e. 12), inclusion of data relating to these students has no real significance. However, given that some of the options presented would make the SCES Academy program among the smallest elementary school programs in the county, inclusion of the HFA students in the analysis masks just how small the program ultimately will become under any option.

utilization at SSIMS should be considered as efficient under the straight articulation variant for those options. With regard to Option 6, the straight articulation variant will operate within the efficient range at SSIMS. All straight articulation options for TPMS are in the efficient utilization range, but utilization at TPMS will be very near capacity under Option 1B (99% in 2014-15). The straight articulation variants for Options 2 through 6 offer more of a buffer against overcrowding at TPMS.

- **Preference for Straight Articulation:** The Board has a policy preference for creating, where possible, straight articulation from one school to the next level school. (See FAA C.). The Board makes exceptions in cases where a split articulation is the most feasible facility plan. All six options provide a variant for straight articulation to the same middle school (the “B” variants), and these options all appear to be a feasible facility plan. It should be noted, however, that the “B” variant under all options (except Option 1B) will result in small numbers of students from a middle school going to a different base high school.
- **Guidelines for Split Articulation:** None of the split articulation variants (the “A” variants) meet the criterion that at least 25% of articulating enrollment moves on to each of those middle schools. (See FAA-RA V.B.d.). Likewise, none of the split articulation variants meet the criterion that at least 25% of articulating enrollment moves on to the same high school.
- **Diversity:** All six options generally promote the retention of a diverse student body within each of the affected schools and reflect the diversity of the larger Silver Spring and Takoma Park communities, in terms of socioeconomic background, level of English language learners, and racial/ethnic composition. (No data was provided concerning the mix of single family and multiple family dwellings). The Board’s criterion regarding diverse student bodies does not require that affected schools have comparable demographics, but demographic balance at the affected schools is one of the BAC criteria. Focusing on the FARMS rate alone, none of the options provide balance among the elementary schools. Under any option, ESSES will have a much higher FARMS rate than the other three elementary schools. We note that Options 4 through 6 provide comparable FARMS rates at SCES and TPES, while Option 1 would result in SCES having a significantly lower FARMS rate than all of the other elementary schools.
- **Contiguous Communities/Community Involvement:** Options 1, 4 and 5 support the Board’s emphasis on fostering community involvement by establishing school service areas that are, as much as practical, made up of contiguous communities surrounding the school and that maximize walking access and minimize transportation distances. (See FAA-RA V.B.3.b.). Options 2, 3, and 6 do not support this emphasis at all, but rather will fractionalize communities close to both schools, discourage walking to school, discourage community involvement from the SC3, SC4 or SC5 areas, undermine a shared sense of community at some or all affected elementary schools, and require students from the SC3, SC4 or SC5 areas to travel greater distances. Based on responses to feedback forms distributed at community meetings, there was consensus among residents in SC3, SC4, and SC5 that students residing in these areas should attend schools located within

their own communities.² Because Options 2, 3 and 6 violate this criterion in such an extreme manner, we believe that these options should be rejected on this ground alone.

- **Minimize Costs:** Options 1, 4 and 5 support the Board’s desire to minimize operating costs because they minimize transportation costs in terms of busing distances and, most likely, the number of students requiring busing. (See FAA-RA IV.B.1.b.). Conversely, Options 2, 3 and 6 require greater transportation costs. Options 2, 3, and 6 also cost more to our society in the sense of exacerbating rush hour traffic and increasing carbon emissions. In addition, all of the split articulation variants are likely to result in greater use of busing than the straight articulation variants.
- **Stability:** The Board recognizes that plans should result in as long a period as possible of stable assignment. (See FAA-RA IV.B.4.a.). Options 4B and 5B create the most stability in terms of school assignments. The history of the current boundary study illustrates this point. SCES was created, in part, to serve students from the SC4 and SC5 areas, even though this assignment does not meet several of the criteria in the Board’s regulation (i.e. contiguous community boundaries, minimizing travel distances). A decade later, the boundaries are being changed. Options 2, 3 and 6 all seem to invite a future review of boundaries, since all three fail to meet these same criteria. With respect to Option 1B, there is a concern that this option will ultimately result in overcrowding at PBES and TPMS that will need to be addressed in several years. Finally, because all of the split articulation variants, by definition, separate student cohorts who attend the same elementary school, these variants pose a risk of future boundary reassessment.

In sum, Options 4B and 5B meet the Board’s criteria to the greatest extent. Option 1B meets the Board’s criteria to a lesser extent, because this option reduces the diversity of SCES (especially as compared to the other elementary schools) and creates a real possibility of over-utilization at PBES and TPMS thus compromising the long-term stability of boundaries. Options 2, 3, and 6 violate the criteria of fostering community involvement through contiguous boundaries, minimizing costs and ensuring stability of boundaries. With regard to articulation to middle school, none of the “A” variants meet the 25% guideline while the “B” variant is feasible under all options. Therefore, the SCES PTA believes that Options 4B and 5B best meet the Board’s criteria.

2. Boundary Advisory Committee Criteria

The Boundary Advisory Committee developed 15 criteria for consideration, most of which overlap with or are very similar to the Board’s criteria. Overlapping criteria include: preference for straight articulation from elementary to middle school; avoid over- and under-utilization at all affected schools; respect community boundaries; balance demographics at elementary and middle school levels; maximize walking access and minimize busing; provide stable boundaries that will have longevity; provide contiguous boundaries; respect natural,

² A few residents in SC4 or SC5 verbally expressed concern about reassignment to TPES, but they indicated that their concerns were based on the change and disruption entailed with a school reassignment for their children. Otherwise, the feedback from the community was overwhelmingly in support of the notion that reassignment to TPES, and eventually to TPMS, would finally bring about a truer unification with the rest of Takoma Park.

geographic boundaries; consider fiscal impact; consider balance between owner occupied and rental housing; and, if split articulation occurs, ensure at least 25 percent of students are split. Since these criteria were addressed above, we limit our discussion here to those additional criteria that do not overlap with the Board’s criteria:

- **Maintain Healthy, Strong Academy Program at Sligo Creek E.S.:** We recognize that the point of this boundary study is to reduce over-utilization at SCES. We are concerned, however, that the new school boundaries will cause such a drastic reduction in enrollment at SCES as to threaten the health and strength of the Academy program. The table below illustrates the enrollment in the Academy Program under each option.

Projected Enrollment at SCES Academy Program in 2014-15

	Total Enrollment	Average Enrollment per Grade ³
Option 1	180	30
Option 2	210	35
Option 3	220	37
Option 4	220	37
Option 5	210	35
Option 6	225	38

Under all options, enrollment in the Academy Program will be considerably smaller than enrollment in the French Immersion program (which has around 300 students). Moreover, under all options, the Academy is at significant risk of losing its status as a focus school. These changes will have profound impacts on the Academy program and raise serious concerns about how to preserve the health and strength of the Academy program. We are particularly concerned about Option 1. Option 1 would make the SCES Academy program the smallest neighborhood elementary school program in Montgomery County. Option 1 presents by far the largest cut to the program -- nearly 50% of current enrollment. This means, on average, only around 30 students per grade by 2014. SCES parents are concerned that an overly large reduction to Academy enrollment resulting from Option 1 will have the following adverse effects:

- This very small size (180 students) could create problems when MCPS applies student-teacher or student-staff ratios designed for larger student bodies to allocating resources for SCES. Parents are particularly concerned that application of these formulas to a very small student body will result in one class per grade as early as first grade or “combination classes” in which students from different grades receive instruction in the same classroom from the same teacher.

³ As noted earlier, the enrollment projections for the Academy program includes the 12 students in the school’s HFA program. The average enrollment per grade figures in this table should be adjusted downward by 1-2 students, depending on the extent to which these 12 students are mainstreamed.

- Option 1 would preclude differentiation by student skill level that multiple classrooms allow. For example, many grade levels currently have three different math classes. In upper grades, more than a dozen students are accelerated two years, something that could not happen if the school does not have enough math teachers to handle that acceleration.
- The small enrollment figures under Option 1 would create significant instability in staffing needs from year to year, which could make planning very difficult, hurt teacher morale and negatively impact teacher retention. Teachers would no longer be able to work in teams, thus losing the support structure currently in place.
- Option 1 poses the biggest risk of loss of focus school status, since it would result in the largest reduction in the FARMs rate in the SCES Academy program (from 37.5% to 21.6%). The loss of focus school status would create much larger class sizes in the lower grades under any option. However, the size increase would be most dramatic under Option 1. If SCES loses focus school status, Option 1 would cause lower grade class sizes to double, going from around 15-16 to 28-30 students.
- A small Academy program under Option 1 could result in the loss of academic support positions, especially in math, science and reading. This concern is far from speculative, as the Academy program has suffered a steady decline in academic support positions since the inception of the program. This loss of support positions could also harm students in the French Immersion program, who share some staffing resources with the Academy program.
- A very small-sized Academy program relative to the school's French Immersion program could discourage community participation among Academy parents, create a sense of second-class citizenship among Academy parents, and result in a loss of equality vis-à-vis the French immersion program in terms of the ability to lobby for needed positions in the Academy program.
- MCPS has no model for meeting the needs of such a small elementary school program and for dealing with potential problems that cannot be foreseen at this time.

For all these reasons, Option 1 poses a grave threat to the quality of the SCES Academy program and its ability to provide for the educational needs of its students. Options 4 and 5 largely alleviate the concerns of the SCES parents regarding the health and strength of the SCES Academy program.

- **Minimize Number of Students Impacted:** Under all options, students in grades 2 and 5 in August 2010 will not be reassigned, which will minimize the number of changes in elementary school facility for these students. The table below depicts the inter-elementary school reassignment figures under each option.

Number of Anticipated Reassignments Among Elementary Schools in 2010

	Number of Reassignments ⁴	Explanation
Option 1	115	reassigns 115 children residing in SC4 & SC5 from SCES to TPES; no other reassignments
Option 2	100	reassigns 100 children residing in SC3 & SC4 from SCES to TPES; no other reassignments
Option 3	105	reassigns 105 children residing in SC3 & SC5 from SCES to TPES; no other reassignments
Option 4	160	reassigns 115 children residing in SC4 & SC5 from SCES to TPES; reassigns 25 children residing in ESS5b from ESSES to SCES; reassigns 10 children residing in ESS3 & TP/PB1b from TPES to ESSES and 10 children residing in ESS3 & TP/PB1b from PBES to ESSES
Option 5	155	reassigns 115 children residing in SC4 & SC5 from SCES to TPES; reassigns 20 children residing in ESS4 from ESSES to SCES; reassigns 10 children residing in ESS3 & TP/PB1b from TPES to ESSES and 10 children residing in ESS3 & TP/PB1b from PBES to ESSES
Option 6	N/A	data not available, but this option reassigns students from SCES to TPES & PBES, from SCES to ESSES and from ESSES to SCES

The available data shows that the possible range of reassigned students is between 105 and 160. We think the actual difference may be even smaller. For example, ESS5b consists largely of condominiums and apartment buildings, several of which are new construction and have high vacancy rates. The projected data from this zone is necessarily speculative. Moreover, some of the projected 25 students from ESS5b will undoubtedly be students entering Kindergarten, who therefore will not experience a transfer from one facility to another. Thus, Option 4 will probably impact very few, if any, children actually enrolled at ESSES this year or next year. We also note that, under Options 4 and 5, only 20 students from ESS3 and TP/PB1b (combined) would be reassigned from TPES and PBES to ESSES. To the extent that TPES wants to preserve the sense of a Takoma Park “cultural community” at TPES, we note that students from ESS3 reside in Silver Spring, not the City of Takoma Park (just as students from SC4 and

⁴ While MCPS did not provide data on the number of projected students from each zone, we were able to extrapolate these figures by comparing aggregated data provided with respect to each option. For example, projected enrollment in the SCES Academy program for 2010-11 under current boundaries is 328, while the projected enrollment under Option 1 is 213. The only difference between the two is the reassignment of SC4 and SC5. Thus, we have determined that these two areas combined have 115 projected students. As another example, the projected enrollment in TPES for 2010-11 under Option 1 is 479, while the projected enrollment under Options 4 and 5 is 469. The only difference between these options is the reassignment of ESS3 and TP/PB1b. Thus, we have determined that these two areas combined have 10 projected students.

SC5 reside in the City of Takoma Park, not Silver Spring). In sum, while there will be some differences in the number of students reassigned under each option, the data does not show that these differences are significant enough to drive a decision to select any one option over another. More importantly, putting aside the data on expected reassignments, we firmly believe that Option 1 would negatively impact more students than all other options, since all 180 remaining children at SCES would suffer a palpable decrease in the quality of their education (for the reasons described above). With respect to middle school articulation, we strongly believe that the “A” variants under all options will have a negative impact on all reassigned students without any justification. Parents from SC4 and SC5 overwhelmingly support articulation of students from their community into TPMS not only to reduce the impact on these students, but also to bring about a truer unification with the City of Takoma Park.

We think the impact of Options 4 and 5 can be further reduced by modifying those options to allow students from ESS3 and TP/PB1b to remain at TPES/PBES rather than reassign them to ESSES. Since the number of students in these two zones is so small (i.e. 20 in 2010), we do not understand why Options 4 and 5 reassign students from those areas. In particular, we note that zone TP/PB1b, which is in the City of Takoma Park and is a very short walk to TPES and PBES, is only several blocks in size. We do not see how the assignment of this zone could be statistically significant. We therefore recommend that you explore modifying Options 4 and 5 to assign ESS3 and TP/PB1b to TPES/PBES. If our recommended modification is not feasible, we recommend that you select Option 4 or 5 but allow students from those areas who are already enrolled in TPES/PBES in 2010 to choose which school they prefer to attend.

- **Impact on Title I of No Child Left Behind Act:** All six options appear to meet this criterion. SCES, TPES and PBES are not currently eligible for Title I resources, nor would they be under any of the options presented. We also understand that ESSES currently qualifies for Title I resources and would continue to do so under all six options.

3. Resources Needed for SCES Academy to Remain Healthy and Strong

Simply put, the SCES Academy program is currently at risk of disintegrating. The wrong choice with respect to establishing new boundaries could well result in its demise. A brief history of the program illustrates the point. When SCES was becoming reality a little more than a decade ago, the county requested that the school house a countywide French Immersion program. The neighborhood was concerned that, in housing this program, the neighborhood school would become less desirable. At the time, the neighborhood requested – and received – full-time math and science positions to make the neighborhood school a “math and science” academy, hence the neighborhood school name of “Academy.” SCES is now one of just a few elementary schools in the county to provide students with extra science outside of the main classroom teachers.

By all accounts, the Academy program has been a success. In the county’s first year of Science MSA testing (which coincided with the school’s last year of a full-time science teacher), 12% of SCES fifth graders achieved advanced scores on the Science MSA, and 63% were rated

as proficient, for a combined advanced plus proficient percentage (A+P) score of 75%. This was the first hard evidence of the success of SCES' science program, as the school was the highest-scoring school in the Down County Consortium and outscored three of the county's eight schools with centers for highly gifted students. In addition, the school outscored nearly all other schools with language immersion programs. The school's science program, which has led such projects as cultivating and releasing fish for the Anacostia Watershed Project, family science nights and a fifth grade science fair, is a model for science education.

The success of the Academy program is at risk of being seriously compromised. The math and science positions were originally funded through the Department of Foreign Languages from 1999 to 2006, when the funding was switched to come from Academic Intervention (AI) positions. Since then, budgetary cuts to AI positions have trimmed the math and science positions so much that these programs have severely suffered. The Academy program once had several full-time math positions. These teachers were able to build math curricula in all grades for students of varying math levels from below grade to far above grade, teach math to some of those students and give classroom teachers additional math support so they could enhance their own math teaching skills and sort through what teaching methods work best in a differentiated math learning environment. As of now, the school has one-half of an Academic Intervention position for math, giving the school few resources to deal with the varied math needs of its population. Until the 2008-09 school year, SCES had a consistent full-time science teacher. When the position was trimmed to half-time, the teacher chose to retire. Last year, the principal had a difficult time finding a qualified science teacher for the half-time position, but finally did so, only to lose that teacher for the next school year to a full-time position at a different school. With a full-time science position, the Academy program was able to pull all children in all grades into the science lab weekly. With a half-time position, only students in grades 3 through 5 have been able to attend science on a weekly basis. In addition, parents have had to pick up more work to carry out the 5th grade science fair, as the half-time science teacher was already too overwhelmed with her workload to be able to prepare students properly for the science fair. Given the critical thinking that science teaches, Academy parents feel strongly that these cuts have watered down the Academy's curriculum and threaten the quality of education that the Academy program provides.

In community meetings, some parents have referred to these cuts as a "bait and switch" that they would like to see rectified. At this point, the program is on the verge of being a science and math Academy in name only. Our community feels strongly that, with the large projected reduction of the number of students in the Academy program and the shrinkage in enrollment as compared to the French immersion program, it is more important than ever that MCPS devote the resources needed to make the Academy program live up to its name.

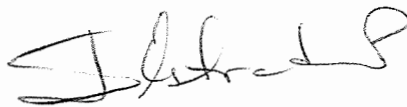
We therefore support Options 4B or 5B, conditioned on the assurance that MCPS will restore full-time math and science positions at SCES, to be funded as teaching positions rather than Academic Intervention positions.⁵ We do not support Option 1 because we believe it would seriously threaten the health and strength of the Academy program due to the small resulting

⁵ While we express no preference between Options 4B and 5B, we note that Option 5B may make sense for students in ESS4, who live along Sligo Creek, because of the SCES focus on helping to restore Sligo Creek through the Watershed Project.

enrollment. If MCPS opts for Option 1 over our objection, we feel strongly that the school should receive the resources needed to preserve the science and math focus (as described above). In addition, we would ask for a guarantee of at least two classrooms per grade, especially in the upper grades, where the school will be most at risk for one classroom per grade under MCPS staffing ratios. Under any option, the school community feels it is important to retain the small class size currently in place for grades K-2. We believe that these implementation conditions are essential to address the legitimate concerns outlined in this paper. Should these implementation conditions not be met, MCPS should be prepared to handle a large group of disaffected parents as well as increased tensions between the programs at the school. We are strongly opposed to Options 2, 3 and 6, all of which violate several fundamental criteria for a boundary change.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input on this important study. We recognize that any boundary change is difficult and unlikely to please all. While it is important to respect the emotional connections that families have developed with their schools, we feel strongly that long-term planning decisions should be based on data indicating what is best for all affected students, now and in the future, in accordance with established criteria. We believe Options 4B and 5B are the best options of those offered because the data shows that these options best meet the Board's and the BAC's criteria, and we support both options subject to the conditions described above. We hope and trust that you will give serious consideration to the points and requests made in this paper.

On behalf of the PTA of Sligo Creek Elementary School,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Isabel M. Estrada-Portales', written in a cursive style.

Isabel M. Estrada-Portales