



Lexington Public Schools

146 Maple Street, Lexington, Massachusetts 02420

Maureen Kavanaugh
Director of Planning and Assessment

(781) 861-2580 x68022
email: mkavanaugh@sch.ci.lexington.ma.us

To: Dr. Mary Czajkowski, Superintendent of Schools

From: Maureen Kavanaugh, Director of Planning and Assessment

Re: Summary of Community Feedback Concerning Student Assignment Scenarios

Date: April 1, 2016

The Lexington Public Schools and School Committee are exploring student assignment changes as one approach to over crowding occurring in some elementary schools. Our district's enrollments are rapidly increasing and consequently, many of our schools and classrooms have reached or exceeded their student capacities. As a result of this rapid growth in enrollment and, most importantly, to ensure that every child continues to have equal access to a high quality educational experience, there is a compelling need for our district to consider the reassignment of some students to elementary schools where space is available. Student assignment changes would be used to compliment other efforts to expand district capacity through planned building projects.

Potential student assignment scenarios were presented at the March 8 School Committee meeting and two parent forums held on March 12 and 16.¹ The purpose of these presentations was to collect community feedback concerning potential student assignment changes. Feedback was also collected via Google Doc, with a link posted to the district website, circulated through email and shared during presentations.² Emails, meetings and phone calls with administrators, school committee members and parent representatives from the Student Assignment Committee were also considered. Finally, publically accessible message boards including the Lexington List Yahoo Group³ and LexTMMA Google Group⁴ were reviewed.

Feedback was closely examined for the following information:

- *Scenario selection or refinement suggestions:* Feedback we might use in the selection or refinement of assignment scenarios;
- *Implementation questions:* Implementation details that would need to be addressed regardless of scenario selected;
- *How we might improve our communication.*

¹http://lps.lexingtonma.org/cms/lib2/MA01001631/Centricity/Domain/1191/StudentAssignmentParentForum_031116.pdf

² <https://goo.gl/dzNHfl>

³ <https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/lexington/conversations/messages>

⁴ <https://groups.google.com/forum/#!forum/lexmma>

Subsequent sections of this memo will outline major findings for each of these areas.

Concerning Scenario Selection or Refinement

- **Opposition to school assignment changes that would impact any current students:** During the design process, initially we attempted to limit student assignment change only to students and families who were new to this district. This put the focus largely on the location of incoming kindergarten families. Feedback from parents on the Student Advisory Committee suggested that we further exclude incoming students who have older elementary siblings in the system to avoid splitting families. The location of this specific population (i.e. incoming kindergarten students without older elementary siblings) proved an early challenge to the main goal of moving enough students to make immediate use of 2 classrooms at Estabrook and 1 at Hastings, providing some relief to overcrowded schools. With some hesitation, we expanded the population of students eligible for assignment change in 2016-17 to include a relatively small group of existing students (current kindergarteners/rising 1st graders) to create larger scale scenarios. In response to these designs, many community members expressed strong opposition for any assignment change that would impact existing students. They observed this would cause another transition and possible negative effects for students and families who had just settled into their school community. They suggest we limit immediate impacts to only new, incoming families (including those in the upper elementary grades). This approach would phase-in new assignment areas. Over time, as new families arrive, a neighborhood would change over to the newly assigned school. The downside of this approach is that it may not provide immediate relief to overcrowded schools.
- **Geographic proximity is a very important factor for families:** A related challenge is the location of the student population, particularly when limited to incoming kindergarteners without siblings, and in some cases, current kindergarteners/rising first graders. When a sufficient number of these students could not be located within areas of relatively close proximity to the target schools, we had to consider components further away. Many community members feel geographic proximity should be the “core” principal driving the design of student assignment boundaries. Expansion beyond areas of close proximity to target schools means that families in distant components would face **longer commuting times**. Using these components could also mean **permanent increased bus costs** (approximately \$85,000 for each bus), as additional busses are needed to service these new areas. Some indicated that if given the choice, they would prefer closer proximity and shorter commutes to the option of attending a school with more space. Another trade-off to the selection of closer components is delaying relief to overcrowded schools. Closer components could be designed, but may not immediately contain the target student population (i.e. incoming kindergarteners and other new families). If we want to provide more immediate relief using closer components, we need to expand the student population eligible for immediate assignment change in 2016-17. This population might include existing students in upper grades and/or those with siblings. Expanding the population would mean more disruption and an added transition for these families.
- **“Acceptable” Compromises and Trade Offs:** At Fiske, previous parent surveys and more recent feedback indicate that a number of families would prefer use of program space (i.e. Art/Music rooms) to create additional classrooms and/or increase class size rather than change schools. However, feedback indicates that a trade-off acceptable to one family may be unacceptable to another. Further, though family preference is an important consideration, other factors that must be weighed include the limits of other “core” building spaces (e.g. cafeteria, gym), instructional impacts (e.g. modified delivery of art and/or music and impact of increased class size), contract requirements, fiscal impacts (e.g. over max aids), and future community

impacts. It is be critical that we not lose sight of our central goal and the purpose of schools – to maintain a high quality educational experience for all students and ensure parity across schools while managing rapid enrollment growth.

- **“Lowell/Fulton/Douglas” Fiske component to Estabrook (larger scale variations only):** This proposed component garnered the most community feedback. Specifically, community members noted:
 - This would increase travel time for families (both parents driving and students taking a bus). This would also eliminate the possibility of walking to school, which families reported they are currently able to do. It may also require an additional bus to transport students;
 - Families commuting to Estabrook from this component may also increase traffic on already congested area roads (i.e. East St. & Adams St.);
 - Concern about the impact on home values (both for families with and without children);
 - Concern about potential disproportionate impact on one neighborhood;
 - Elimination of the benefits of a neighborhood school, and;
 - If the neighborhood had to be re-assigned, many expressed an interest in being moved to Harrington instead.
- **Hastings “Reed St.” components to Estabrook (larger Scale variations only):** Community members throughout Lexington felt this move would not be strategic in the long term. Given current school committee policies (i.e. individual address may only be re-assigned once every 5 years), if addresses within this component are re-assigned to Estabrook in 2016-17, they would not eligible for assignment back to a new, larger Hastings in 2019-20 when building will be complete. They also note that such moves could result in later over crowding at Estabrook.
- **Bridge to Hastings Components South of Route 2 (both modest and larger scale scenarios):** In the modest scenario, only one portion of this area is re-assigned to Hastings. In larger scale scenarios, the entire neighborhood south of Route 2 would be re-assigned. At least one community member felt, if implemented, it would be best to keep the neighborhood south of Route 2 in tact and assigned to the same school.
- **Long-term overcrowding at Estabrook:** Although moves to Estabrook, Hastings and Harrington might provide some immediate relief to overcrowded schools, many community members noted these were not long term, strategic solutions and/or do not address system-wide capacity issues. One community member felt that larger scale scenarios “seem to simply transfer the concerns of Fiske to Estabrook.” Another noted that although Estabrook has available rooms, it already has parking and traffic problems “that may never be fixed, but will certainly worsen with aggressive redistricting.” Despite the prospect of long-term overcrowding at Estabrook, other community members pointed out some schools already face overcrowding (i.e. Bridge, Bowman and Fiske). They also felt newer schools and/or those with the largest classrooms would bear this burden better than older facilities or those with smaller rooms.
- **Consideration of Volunteers:** Several community members suggested the district consider using volunteers as an alternative to changing assignment boundaries. In response, an online survey was sent to Bridge, Bowman, Fiske and Harrington families (current Pre-K – 4) to gage community interest. Responses will be accepted until April 15. To date, 502 families have responded. Fifteen families (with a total of 24 children) have volunteered to change schools. Locations and grades of volunteers have not yet been considered, but must be part of any final determination. Even with volunteers for 2016-17, this would likely delay, not eliminate, the need for more permanent and systemic school assignment changes.

Concerning General Implementation Questions

In addition to comments, questions and ideas about the design of potential school assignment changes, community members also had a number of general implementation questions and concerns. These include:

- **Buffer Zones:** Although “buffer zones” are not incorporated in any of the specific scenarios proposed for 2016-17, the idea of “buffer zones” was raised during public presentations. In general, many members of the community seem open to the idea and further discussion. One favorable view was “this approach ends the periodic fear of ‘being redistributed.’” However, community members also raised many questions, including:
 - When would we seek to implement buffer zone(s), if at all?
 - How many buffer zones would be designed? Community members recommend multiple zones spread throughout the community to shoulder the burden of overcrowding more equally
 - Are all new students (regardless of grade) eligible for flexible assignment within buffer zones?
 - Does being located within a buffer zone affect home value?
 - What role would parent choice play? If a family is in a buffer zone, will they be able to choose, or express a “preference” among schools designated to the buffer zone?
 - The School Committee has a policy of trying not to redistrict an address more than once every 5 years. What does this mean if the address is in a buffer zone?
 - How will this decision be communicated to non-school families?
- **Impact of student assignment decision timeline on after-school care registration.** The target date for student assignment decisions is late-April. It is expected that those decisions will be communicated in May. Registration for Lextended Day begins April 1. The Director of Lextended Day has advised that a few seats will be set aside at each school to accommodate those families who thought they had an afterschool care seat at their present school but were subsequently re-assigned. Families should contact Lextended Day directly for more details.
- **Impact on middle schools:** In some cases, children who could potentially walk or face a short journey to Clarke will may instead need to be bussed across the middle of town to Diamond if the current feeder patterns are maintained and some of the proposed elementary assignment changes are implemented. Community members would like to know whether the current feeder patterns will be maintained and/or what alternatives have been considered. One community member suggested we offer families the choice to go to the more convenient middle school, regardless of elementary feeder. Community members also questioned when decisions about middle school assignment and feeder patterns will be made, and when those decisions will be implemented.
- Finally, community members were interested in **the supports that will be provided to children and families being asked to attend new schools.**

Concerning Communication

The recent exchange of information, ideas and questions indicate that members of the community come to the discussion with varying levels of background knowledge on enrollment growth, strategies already used in response to growth, student assignment plans and building plans to increase capacity. Increased communication and clarity are needed especially in the following areas:

- **Specific impacts of increased enrollment in each school**

- **Capacity for each school: How capacity is determined and space defined**
- **How district-wide special education programs and METCO have been considered during planning**
- **Planned building projects:** These include modular additions at Fiske, Bridge and Bowman (December 2016) and a new Hastings School (2019-20). Several community members were also interested in an update on the potential purchase of the Armenian School on Pelham Rd.
- **When and how will families be notified about student assignment change**
- **Where community members can receive information and how they can continue to share their views and ideas**

The Lexington Public Schools will continue to collect community feedback and share information through a variety of means. That being said, feedback indicates that we must continue to find ways to communicate more effectively and frequently with our community.

- **A third public forum will be held at 7:00 PM on April 12 at Estabook.**
- Most public meetings and forums are recorded and archived. These can be viewed online via LexMedia.⁵
- We continue to welcome additional feedback via the Google Doc⁶ posted on the district website.
- We also continue to look for opportunities to publish and share information through multiple means, including emails, flyers, and other communications from school leadership, PTO/PTAs, LexFun, and Blackboard Connect.
- Nearly all published information related to enrollment growth, student assignment changes and building projects can be found on the district website on the “Expanding Capacity and Student Assignment Analysis” page (<http://lps.lexingtonma.org/domain/1191>).

⁵ <http://www.lexmedia.org/lgtv-livestreaming.html>

⁶ <https://goo.gl/dzNHfl>