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The Porch Light

Students, communities worry as recommendation puts schools in limbo

By Colin Campbell, The Baltimore Sun, December 8, 2014

Angelica McKnight was sitting in her sixth-period Advanced Placement government class at Heritage High School one afternoon last month when she got the news. Under a proposal before the city school board, she and her classmates could lose their senior prom and their graduation at Heritage. Their school would close in June.

"Everybody was angry, some people were crying," McKnight said. Teachers hugged the students and told them they’d be missed, she said. "They love us.

Students, parents, faculty and neighbors will have a final opportunity Tuesday to urge board members to reconsider. The meeting is scheduled for 4:30 p.m. at the district’s North Avenue headquarters.

The board is reviewing a plan to close six schools. The plan, developed by school officials, is aimed at using city school space more efficiently amid low enrollment and spreading $980 million in construction money as widely as possible.

The schools recommended for closure are Heritage, W.E.B. DuBois High, Abbottston Elementary, Dr. Rayner Browne Elementary/Middle, Langston Hughes Elementary and Northeast Middle.

Those who oppose the plan describe the schools as beacons of hope to children in low-income, crime-ridden areas of the city, and say they are sources of pride for their neighborhoods and alumni. They question the wisdom of closing schools to save money, and several warn of devastating consequences for the students caught in the transition.

McKnight, 17, says Heritage has transformed her. Before she enrolled in the high school, she said, she was a "bad and very disrespectful" middle-schooler who "stayed in trouble." Joining the Student Government Association, two basketball teams and the JROTC taught her discipline that she channels into her work on an SGA panel that decides punishments for members who break rules. "I'm more mature," she said. "It's helped me a lot. I've come a long way.

Kyle Dawe, a history teacher at Heritage, says he often hears that "kids will adapt." For 95 percent of my students, that's true," he said. "But for the other 5 percent of them, closing this school will be the end of their education. For them, this school is the first stable, meaningful thing in their life.

Richard McCoy, president of the Heritage alumni association, says the school serves as an anchor to the Clifton Park neighborhood.

The high school's four-court gym hosts three citywide recreational basketball tournaments a year. Local churches hold regular services, and troupes have performed theater projects in the auditorium. Real Food Farm operates six greenhouses on the Lake Clifton campus, teaching students how to garden and delivering fruits and vegetables to neighbors in its Mobile Farmers' Market truck.

The high school has long offered a Head Start day care program to neighborhood preschoolers. "A big concern is what will happen to that program," McCoy said. "Every school’s not set up to have a day care program.

CHM Hosts Toy Giveaway

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The city school board is expected to vote on the closure plan Dec. 17. “People are attached to those schools, and every school in our district has students doing great things,” she said. Better “stewards of our resources.” But she said it will require “tough conversations” about closures.

“Leadership is crucial. “What we really need to focus on in every building is that they’re in a place that has a great experience with adults who are committed to them, while having the efficiencies needed?” he said. Botel said an emphasis on quality programming is necessary, but the school system needs to put students in a place to succeed. “How do we give them intimate relationships to graduate?”

She came to Baltimore and enrolled at Heritage for her junior year. “Being here, the friends that I have in this community and the quality of programming.”

“Part of being a professional is understanding the money we have, and how much of it we can use wisely,” he added, noting that the Algebra Project, an educational advocacy group, still has testimony to give and will be attending the December 17 meeting where the school board votes on school closings.

The message from many who testified last night: don’t overlook the positive impact that even poorer performing schools have on students and communities. Some talked about how transportation will become an obstacle for families faced with the loss of their neighborhood school, while others spoke about how schools provide health care and other social supports that many Baltimore students can’t get elsewhere.

Lillian Hunt said she is frustrated at the speed with which the school system is making decisions about her and her family’s life. Her son attends Maritime Industries Academy High School, now located on Sinclair Lane in Northeast Baltimore, which is recommended for relocation in Cherry Hill to far South Baltimore to be closer to the waterfront. “My son has been here for three years. We want to go into the nation’s capital. He’s a maritime school.” She said. At a single meeting held about the relocation, the continued, school officials provided one-sentence answers to parents’ questions about the move. She acknowledged that she is worried about her child’s safety in Cherry Hill.

Councilwoman Sharon Green Middleton, who represents Northwest’s 6th District, pleaded for Langston Hughes Elementary not to be closed. “The former teacher reiterated her concerns about safety, and said the schools that Langston Hughes students would be forced to attend would be more than a mile away. “The students are safe there, free from serious problems in the community,” she said.

Langston Hughes has experienced significant drops in enrollment since the announcement of its pending closure. (The closure was originally planned for 2017, but recently moved up.) Middleton said chronic homelessness affects the surrounding community and argued closing the school will only make matters worse for at-times homeless students.

The board asked few questions last night. Instead they yielded the floor to the dozens of parents, community leaders and students who signed up to speak. Taking in the often critical testimony, David Stone, board vice president, at one point responded to Farmer put the issue another way:

“We feel displaced”

Opponents of school closures pack a city school board meeting. “It's not just academic,” says one about the impact of shuttered schools on students and communities. Danielle Sweeney: December 10, 2014 4:3:20 pm

More than a hundred people came to Baltimore school headquarters last night to tell the board the decisions they are making about school closures and relocations will impact students’ lives in ways more severe than they know. Jameal Jones, a leader of the Baltimore Algebra Project, came to protest the closure of Heritage High School in Northeast Baltimore.

The facility, located in the Lake Clifton Complex, is being closed primarily for poor performance. Some speakers said board was losing more than a nearby source of classroom instruction. “It’s not just academic,” said Jones, a graduate of city schools. “The Heritage program provides social and emotional supports.”

Cohen, the system's new initiatives director, said she is confident the plan will help the school system be sustainable this summer: including five school relocations, five grade reconfigurations, one non-renewal of an operator contract, and one expansion of a special-ed program.

The school system needs a way to sustainably phase out students from six of the 21st Century Schools plan, but is now recommended for building closure and its program to be relocated to Northeast Middle School, whose academic program is set to shut down.

Vanguard student Solomon Williams said taking away a school takes away part of a kid's identity. “Vanguard is a big part of who I am,” he said. Farmer believes closing the Vanguard building will impact student lives in ways the School Board doesn’t understand. “I was unaware of.” Jamal Jones, a leader of the Baltimore Algebra Project, came to protest the closure of Heritage High School in Northeast Baltimore.

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