

Redistricting Public Hearing 12-8-16
Benjamin Kennedy

To the Members of the ACPS School Board:

Our son, Sam Kennedy, is a kindergartener at Jefferson Houston Elementary, our assigned school. Of the 11-12 children on our block, Sam is the only one attending his assigned ACPS school. The other elementary school students on the block either attend private school or have received a transfer in past years. In short, Sam goes to school by himself and his school is not, in any way, his neighborhood school.

From the redistricting option maps we've seen so far, we don't see anything that will change this situation. Jefferson Houston is quite inaccessible to our neighborhood (past the railroad, past the metro) and is the farthest away of 3 elementary schools from us. Because of these natural boundaries between us and JH, few residents of our neighborhood consider JH as an option. Jefferson Houston/ACPS considers our area walk-able to Jefferson Houston, despite the lack of contiguous neighborhood streets from our block to the school. Two other schools, Mt. Vernon and Maury, are on contiguous neighborhood streets from where we live.

As you know, our area was gerrymandered in 1999 to bring more socioeconomic diversity to Jefferson Houston, a goal which we all applaud and support. In theory this would work, except that ACPS granted transfers out of Jefferson Houston to everyone in our neighborhood (it would seem) for years. Moreover, it's simply hard to convince people in our neighborhood that Old Town is our home base. Our streets are contiguous with Del Ray and Rosemont, home to Mt. Vernon and Maury. Our neighbors three blocks away go to these schools. Our favorite local stores and restaurants are next to these schools. In short, the strategy to force our neighborhood, which is set apart from Old Town by several natural boundaries--mostly the train tracks--is one that cannot succeed.

We would suspect that, even if you keep our neighborhood in the Jefferson Houston zone, you would struggle to get more than 10 to 15% of the elementary-age students to attend JH. There are just too many other options for residents here in terms of private schools. Asking these residents to go outside of their own neighborhood (where two other ACPS elementary schools exist) to go to a school that does not enjoy the same reputation is a tough sell, even though I can attest that Jefferson Houston has great teachers, staff, and facilities. You're asking residents in our area to go and rally around a school that's simply not a part of our neighborhood and, at the same time, you have a large number of areas in planning blocks 112, 115, and 97 that are within 1-2 blocks of Jefferson Houston and have median housing prices, according to Zillow, in the mid-\$600,000 range. In short, old town and the neighborhood around Jefferson Houston have changed a lot since 1999 and our current options aren't thinking about new ways to improve Jefferson Houston's socioeconomic diversity.

This perception of a lack of fairness, which stems from the gerrymandered look-and-feel of our zone, further exacerbates the issue. However, I hypothesize that higher socio-economic status residents that live closer to Jefferson Houston will be more likely to attend a school in their neighborhood than similarly situated residents that live farther away. I'm not asking you to agree with that hypothesis, but I would propose that we examine what other options exist that could improve socio-economic diversity at Jefferson, as measured by FARMs %. The options presented thus far predict that Jefferson Houston's future FARMs percentage

will drop from 75% to 56% under the options under consideration, because the live-in percentage for JH has a FARMS percentage of 56%. You are hypothesizing that every ACPS student in JH's current zone will start attending JH, now that you have cracked down on administrative transfers. However, you have collected no evidence to this point to confirm that continued gerrymandering will work to achieve this affect. In fact, given that I have yet to find another Kindergartener, other than my son, who attends Jefferson Houston from my neighborhood, I have evidence to believe the numbers underlying your analysis of current options may well have serious errors. Given that no more administrative transfers were accepted this year, you should have seen a rise in Kindergarteners from these Planning Blocks, but you didn't.

Thus far, we have heard feedback only on an idea regarding a swapping of the gerrymandered zones to the north of Jefferson Houston. I fear that this rhetoric is presenting a false choice—that the 1999 map or the “swapping” idea are the only two ideas to be considered. I would like for ACPS, the redistricting committee, and consultants to analyze a number of new options that do the following:

- Analyze the effect of bringing planning blocks 112 and 115 into Jefferson Houston
- Analyze bringing planning block 95 into Jefferson Houston, especially with projections for new development that is currently underway
- Re-forecast the demand from populations in Potomac Yard, which ACPS currently projects to produce few if any ACPS students, despite the addition of 500+ units in that area in the past 2 years. There are a fair number of 2-4 years olds living there now—I've seen them—and ACPS has now surveyed to see what the population of these units is like, as of mid-October
- Analyze the effect of splitting planning block 97 up into smaller pieces and shifting some area of this to Jefferson Houston—notably those directly south of the Metro.
- Re-analyze the forecasted
- Confirm the current percentage of ACPS students in PBs 100 and 109 that attend Jefferson Houston versus all other ACPS elementary schools.

We have heard from one school board member—where have the folks from planning blocks 100 and 109 been this whole time? Why haven't we spoken up before? In short, these zones have no central coordinating body. There's no PTA that will speak up for us. Very few from these planning blocks go to Jefferson Houston. Our neighbors attend Maury, MVCS, or private school and expect to have their children grandfathered in to those schools. We are not represented, as a planning block, on the committee. As one neighbor told me, he has, “no dog in this fight.” The newest voices in our planning block are parents with children that are ages 2 through 4. Many just moved to the area and live in the newer developments south of Monroe.

I feel that a better solution for planning blocks 100 and 109 AND Jefferson Houston is possible, but we simply haven't examined the right data yet. My goal is very simple. I want my son to go to the same school as our neighbors, wherever that may be. I want a school with balance and diversity, and I'd really prefer a school in our neighborhood. Our current option achieves none of those. Surely we can do better. The current options on the table, Options 7, 8, and 9, will not accomplish this. I doubt they will accomplish this for my 1-old-son either.

Thank you for your consideration and please consider analysis of 6 or more additional “sub-options” that will be more likely to improve socio-economic diversity at Jefferson Houston

and reduce the number of students that go to elementary school outside of the natural boundaries of their neighborhood. I've placed maps of six different options in the packets you received and feel that, while none are perfect, at least 4 are likely to outperform any option yet proposed, in terms of adherence to all of the criteria set forth as critical to the redistricting process.

Sincerely,

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Parents of Samuel Kennedy, Kindergarten student at Jefferson Houston