

Public Comments to the School Board
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Introduction

I'm an organizational consultant and coach and ACPS parent and volunteer. Like many in this city, I am struck by James Libresco's recent reporting on the High School Project describing a rushed and reckless transition. It seems that amidst designing and implementing a new program, new building, new schedule, new procedures, etc. ACPS created a new structure that blocks the current Deans and Assistant Principals from continuing their jobs. These vital problem-solvers and keepers of relationships and institutional memory are now feeling debased and distraught.

The headline of the piece is "Emotion, Upheaval and Reckoning: Inside the High School Project." Yes, emotion and upheaval are in full swing, but reckoning is needed, which is why I request the School Board's urgent attention before our city's one and only high school comes off the rails.

How to get it on track? The answers lie in three areas:

- Vision setting
- External stakeholders
- Organizational culture

Vision Setting

For vision, we might start by asking, what is the "High School Project"? The word "project" is deceptively minor and transitory. It conceals the effort's huge scope. ACPS has shared little about any overarching aim beyond describing a "cut and paste" of Nashville and Hampton Academies, making it seem that again ACPS is chasing the latest shiny new trend in education, like how they de-accelerated math, but I digress.

A collective conversation on the vision is needed to build groundwork and goodwill because the school is meant to be porous and have a heavy reliance on outside partnerships. We need wide participation and buzz to draw in as many champions to the endeavor as possible.

Some possible questions to explore:

What is possible? What values matter? How do students gain ongoing success and wellbeing inside and after high school? What does the market need? What do companies, neighbors, property owners, employers stand to gain? What makes our students special and unique? What makes our city and region special? What talent and qualities inside and outside the school will foster our collective future? What is our city's brand promise? What are our public schools' brand promise?

Sometimes vision setting is less about what you say at the table and even more about *who* is at the table and *how* you set the table. It's also the "when" – you don't just deliver one PowerPoint and move on. Look at the city's Planning Department's frequent engagement on Small Area Plans. Alexandria has expertise with iterative consultative planning.

This flows to my next point, stakeholder engagement.

Stakeholder Engagement

There is a lot to say on this, but in the interest of time let me just make three points.

1. Map the stakeholders who matter, who are many, given the concept of the school.
2. Consider the dual hats stakeholders wear, like
 - a. parents as owners of companies that might host internships or
 - b. teachers as champions who might recruit fellow teachers from other districts to join them
3. And, specifically on families, welcome their feedback and create high-functioning avenues for it that include transparent and accountable follow up. Build credibility by handling problems well and by respecting and empowering school-based staff. Our school district has no ombudsman, and, let's be honest that Facebook Groups, ACHS PTA meetings, and School Board Public Comment periods are not adequate or appropriate fora to handle what we can anticipate will be an onslaught of requests for help related to the high school transition. Do handle these requests better than the spreadsheet described in James' article.

Organizational Culture

Here are some approaches related to organizational culture that ACPS might take into consideration:

- The Superintendent needs to commit to fixing the poisonous dynamic in James’s article between Central Office and the school-based staff.
- Think about communications with a lower case “C.”
- Our high school is an exercise in educational innovation. For teams to innovate they need to be vulnerable, and to be vulnerable there needs to be psychological safety.
- As the high school becomes more porous with the “real world,” let’s see ACPS absorb and model HR best practices that can make it an attractive, modern workplace.
- Develop values of the organization through a grassroots process. “One Team One Journey” is just a branding tagline whose origin and intent have nothing to do with what I am talking about. Some guesses of values that might bubble up:
 - Integrity
 - Student-centeredness and respect for front-line staff
 - Collaboration
 - Openness for divergent views
- Write the priority of making ACPS a stellar workplace into the next strategic plan for the district.

To Recap

There are big problems brewing with the High School Project.

A reckoning is needed to address them and get the effort on track.

The project can succeed if ACPS makes changes in three areas:

1. Vision setting
2. Engagement with stakeholders
3. Organizational culture