

January 18, 2019

Executive Summary to the School Board

The High School Project

Nationally, our education community and supporting institutions have been crystal clear since the start of the 21st century around a glaring particular drumbeat - the idea that redefining the American high school is the key towards ensuring that school systems produce highly effective young people with the tools and abilities they need to succeed in our changing and increasingly complex society.

The gist of The High School Project's online survey and engagement discussions was 'what skills students need to succeed after high school and how can we best deliver these instructional needs?'

Also, ACPS' guiding studies and experiences (2004 T.C. Williams building design to support academy learning communities; 2017 Long Range Educational Facilities Plan process) actually reflect much of the very same far-reaching and well established research found in 'The Common Principles' developed by the highly respected educational thought leader TheodoreSizer and the [Coalition of Essential Schools](#), including his seminal research and writings about the dilemma of the American High School entitled, 'Horace's Compromise'.

[Linda Darling-Hammond](#) echoed similar studies about lessons learned from educational reform ideas around school design. And current projects such as XQ Super School (see [here](#) and [here](#)), [The Gates Foundation sponsorships](#) and many others, point to important proof that school systems must move carefully, but indeed move to be innovative and challenge the status quo of traditional thinking about how programs have been structured for years so that students and teachers are optimally engaged every minute of the day in the business of teaching and learning.

As much of the research in this area is about redesigning American high school programs, there are schools of thought that address 50 year old approaches to school buildings and environments that say, "...children are often stymied by outmoded institutional structures, most notably the large, impersonal, factory-model schools." (School Redesign Network, Stanford University, 2002, Why Factory Model Schools Don't Work – today)

Compare that description with a first-hand look from students and teachers at the [Denver School of Innovation and Sustainable Design](#) for an honest reflection about evolving into a different kind of school environment.

ACPS is at an intersection in time – a decision point, an opportunity in the city and school division's history – to make deliberate commitment for further study and engagement around the Connected High School Network model (CHSN).

A vote for the CHSN strategy would entail maintaining a single high school entity (T.C. Williams) in Alexandria and allowing staff to explore capital planning options that include one or more additional buildings (locations to be determined). Students could move between the building campuses depending upon their course needs and with operating protections and logistics in place.

The new high school program, which would emanate from T.C. Williams' current 400-course Program of Studies – will undergo continued study and design development at the same time. Program design work will center around the proposed educational vision (Community Connected, Diversity as Strength and Experiential Learning) and the operational aspects needed to address the strategy.

These two efforts will come together for the Board when the site configuration options are presented.

The recommended Connected High School Network model will provide teaching and learning environments that excite and inspire and through which ACPS can tackle common themes evidenced in pedagogical research and schools of thought (noted above) including:

- Dismantling the 'factory-model' school (Darling-Hammond)
- Better attendance rates
- Stronger academic achievement (especially for low income students and students of color)
- Lower dropout rates
- Personalization
- Continuous relationships
- Small Learning communities
- Hands on teaching and learning

In summary, we urge the Board to positively consider the Connected High School Network model for the expansion of T.C. Williams High School, the educational outcomes we can achieve by using our current instructional platform to build upon, and taking this time of opportunity to pursue innovation and good business practices - future thinking for our Alexandria City public high school that will work.

The High School Project's next steps include defining and eliminating site options and opportunities, assessing student populations and programs to develop the specific educational space assumptions, conducting more community engagement, and bringing costs to the table that relate to any and all alternatives.

The objective for completing that work and preparing for Board consideration - various options upon which the actual approvals for executing the project will take place – is by the beginning of next school year (2019-20) in order to remain in sync with the next budget cycle intentions.

From the publication *Redesigning High Schools: What Matters, What Works*: The process of creating better schools is hard work. There is no progress without struggle. As we undertake this struggle together, we should remember the words that Langston Hughes used to describe our collective quest to build a better world: "Keep your hand on the plow. Hold on."

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