

Hammond Elementary School PTA
8110 Aladdin Drive
Laurel, MD 20723

June 21, 2023

Via email

Ms. Antonia Watts, Chair
Board of Education of Howard County
10910 Clarksville Pike
Ellicott City, MD 21042

Re: Transportation Changes for School Year 2023-2024

Dear Chair Watts:

I am reaching out on behalf of the Hammond Elementary School (“HES”) PTA to address some deeply troubling developments with regard to the County’s plans for school transportation beginning with the 2023-24 school year. In particular, it has recently come to our attention that the County intends to combine students from HES and Hammond Middle School on common bus routes. As you will note from the enclosed Position Statement - approved by our PTA at an emergency meeting held on June 20, 2023 - the PTA opposes this sea change in policy, and requests that the Board of Education (“BOE”) direct the Transportation Department to develop plans that do not include combination bussing .

By way of background, I would like to share with you that our community **first** learned of the plan for combined bussing at our May 9, 2023, PTA meeting, when that information was shared by school Administration. While we have since learned that combined bussing was a policy change proposed by the County’s consultant as early as January 2022, this information has not been widely disseminated to key stakeholders, such as parents and teachers. It is unclear why the decision to pursue combined bussing has been less than transparent.

In any event, our community immediately began reaching out to the Transportation Board and BOE with our questions and concerns. (See attached sample of community emails and testimony before BOE.) We even invited the Director of Transportation, Brian Nevin, to attend our June 6th PTA meeting to address our concerns. While Mr. Nevin did attend our meeting on June 6th, via Zoom, our community left that meeting with more questions than answers and an emerging picture of a Transportation Department tasked with delivering efficiency and cost savings above all other concerns.

As I am sure you can appreciate, we, as parents, hold the safety of our children as paramount over all other factors that may go into designing a transportation plan. Moreover, “safety” is not

limited to bodily integrity, but includes maintaining an environment that is appropriate mentally and emotionally for the developmental stages of our children.

Policy 5200, which governs school transportation in Howard County, requires that County staff similarly make safety *their* foremost priority when implementing bus service:

Section III Standards

. . .

E. When considering the need for and/or implementing school bus service, the staff will consider:

1. Reasonable levels of safety.
2. Program efficiency.
3. Economy of operations.
4. Equity of service.
5. IEP or Section 504 plan requirements.
6. Homeless children and youth.

Providing a reasonable level of safety will be the major staff consideration.

(emphasis added.)¹

Combination bussing poses unacceptable risks to our children's safety.

As a threshold matter, having children as young as 5 ride a bus with 14 year olds without the mediating influence of an adult to keep order comes at great risk of physical and sexual assaults between developmentally disparate students.² In addition, our community is concerned about exposing young children to the language, conversation topics and conflicts that may be typical of middle schoolers, but not of elementary-aged children (eg., profanity, sex, violence, bullying).³

¹ Further, Policy 1040 - Safe and Supportive Schools states that all employees are responsible for the "health, safety, and general welfare of students . . . and for establishing and sustaining a safe and supportive school climate."

² See, e.g., 3rd grader being physically assaulted by an adult-sized older student on a bus serving K-8 grade students. Available at <https://www.nbcmiami.com/news/local/student-arrested-after-video-shows-brutal-beating-of-3rd-grader-on-miami-dade-school-bus/2964748/>

³ See, e.g., A 2017 study of school bus riders in New Orleans found that 87 percent of respondents had witnessed bullying on the bus, 84 percent had witnessed fighting, and 37 percent had witnessed sexual activity. Available at https://www.nola.com/news/education/article_23bd48f5-bcf9-5852-ab53-2727357aa116.html. See also, Bullying Fast Facts, nationwide studies of bullying by the National Center for Education Statistics shows that the percentages of students who reported being bullied at school during the school year in 2019 were higher for 6th-, 7th-, and 8th-graders (ranging from 27 to 28 percent) than for 9th-, 10th-, and 12th-graders (ranging from 16 to 19 percent). Available at <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=719> See also, Bullying, Harassment, or Intimidation in

Moreover, even if the older students themselves do not engage in behavior too adult for our elementary students, many middle schoolers have phones with easy access to such content.

We also understand that the County is likely to have elementary students wait 15 or more minutes on the buses at the end of the day for the middle school (whose day is 15 minutes longer) to dismiss and board. Leaving aside, for the moment, the question of who will supervise the children during this period, this extra time sitting on idling buses unnecessarily and avoidably increases their exposure to diesel fuel exhaust. It is well documented that “children exposed to diesel exhaust from idling school buses are at increased risk for asthma exacerbation, decreased lung function, immunologic reactions, leukemia, and increased susceptibility to infections.”⁴ Our children will also lack access to basic necessities such as restrooms during this period, which is especially difficult for our youngest students.

Increased safety risks posed by combination busing are also of concern to families who reside within the non-transportation zone. First, the increased amount of both vehicular and pedestrian traffic at arrival and dismissal times (to accommodate the simultaneous movement of over 1,250 students) will overwhelm the community. Hammond is situated in a small residential area of a few blocks, bounded by busy roads (Gorman and Leishear) that lack shoulders. The current level of traffic, with the schools having staggered start and end times, already pushes the limits of the community’s capacity. No plan has been articulated for dealing with the traffic increase.

Moreover, if combination bussing is implemented, many families have shared that they will seek to avoid the potential dangers by choosing to drive their elementary students to school, despite their eligibility for bus transportation. This will increase the traffic even further.

The fact that families with the resources to opt out of the transportation provided by the school will do so also raises the issue of equity. Implementation of combination bussing will create a new institutional barrier to be faced by families without the time and economic resources to circumvent the bussing issue. This is in contravention of Policy 1080 which states “The Board of Education of Howard County believes that educational equity is an inherent human right and must shape all school system policies, procedures, and practices. The Board prioritizes educational equity by identifying and removing institutional barriers and other factors that obstruct access and opportunity to a high quality education for all students.”

The BOE is the appropriate entity to intervene at this juncture and ensure that the implementation of next year’s transportation plans are safe and equitable for all students, as required by its own policies. Accordingly, the HES PTA requests that BOE direct the Transportation Department to develop plans that do not include combination bussing.

Maryland Public Schools School Year 2021-2022, finding that statewide bullying peaks in middle school. Available at <https://marylandpublicschools.org/about/Documents/DSFSS/SSSP/Bullying/Bullying-Legislative-Report-2021-22.pdf>

⁴ See <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/23850988/>

Thank you for your consideration.

Very truly yours,

/s/ Melissa A. Zawadzki

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