

14 Dorset Road,
Berkeley Heights, NJ

April 28, 2021

Dear Board Members:

You have a recommendation for FDK and for redistricting at the same time.

I am a former board member for Union County Regional High School District No. 1 and helped in the dissolution of the district so that Berkeley Heights residents could have local control of their schools.

I have lived in Berkeley Heights for 45 years and have one son that graduated from GLHS. Partly as a result of the education he received in the Berkeley Heights schools he is now successfully employed at a small company doing software development.

He was in the last class to attend Hughes school for Kindergarten, so he attended what we now call a neighborhood school.

With the opening of MKM the district moved to what is known as mixture of one grade level school (MKM) and 3 neighborhood schools (TPH,, MP and WW). One can also refer to CMS and GL as grade level schools too.

This letter is to help you in your deliberations concerning Dr. Varley's recommendations.

First, the recommendations affect the entire community, not just one subpopulation. Effects include increased traffic, increased costs, relocation of workplace for teachers, transition to a new school for students, and probably others. As a result the views of many residents need to be sought and that takes time and effort.

I am attaching a report dated April 2018 from Hanover Research which assisted Attleboro, MA in a reconfiguration project. You can review how they did it and what they learned from the process. Perhaps you can follow that if you decide to learn more about community wishes.

It is truly unfortunate that no town wide survey has been done yet, and even more unfortunate that the only survey done was limited to a choice of 2 scenarios and a narrow subset of the community.

Second, I have to comment on the recommendations. Dr. Varley's analysis was essentially an attempt to narrow the choices by claiming that one choice is "developmentally appropriate" and all others are not.

She relies on a non-peer reviewed study from 2002 of an Alaskan school district. I looked at that study and it relies on a sample of 2 K-2 schools, 2 3-5 schools and 12 elementary schools offering K-6, K-8, K-12. It seeks to identify variables that affected 4 and 5th grade test scores for one year.

It has not been replicated in other districts and deals with a district having poverty levels ranging from 27% to 47% in the schools. I would ask if it really can be applied to Berkeley Heights and if it is conclusive why so few districts have adopted that configuration. In any case one non-peer reviewed study can hardly be conclusive on this question of configuration.

I am attaching a report from Hanover Research which was done for Attleboro, MA in a their consideration of a school reconfiguration.

The Hanover Research paper addressed the question of whether school configuration makes much difference. I quote one of their key findings (page 3):

“Current research does not identify or support one grade configuration as the most effective. Research into the potential impact of grade configurations is generally inconclusive, with results that are difficult to generalize to other districts. However, some studies suggest that students perform better at schools with a larger number of grade levels. Another frequent finding is that the most effective grade configuration will vary by district, based on internal factors such as projected enrollment, transportation costs, school facilities, and community support.

The decision to reconfigure the early grades is typically driven by practical needs such as budget, space, and school accreditation. While schools may see additional benefits as a result of reconfiguration, these are not cited as a driver in the decision to implement the change.”

Further literature on the subject of school configuration is School Administrator journal, March 2002.

“School Administrator is AASA's award-winning monthly magazine. It is delivered to every public school superintendent in the United States who is an AASA member and others at the cabinet-level. It provides big-picture perspectives and collegial advice on a broad range of topics specific to K-12 education and the leadership of public school districts. “

An article by Don W. Hooper, President of AASA entitled “Configurations Along Don't Breed Success” has the following statement:

“Many different configurations exist for grade-level offerings. Each school can cite research to support its chosen configuration. Educators will argue long and hard that their configuration is the best. “

I am attaching that article too and have highlighted key passages for your consideration.

I am also attaching a report entitled “Beal Early Childhood Feasibility Study” from 2017 prepared for Shrewsbury Public Schools. I quote for you (Page 3);

“More recent studies cited on this topic suggest that the link between grade level configuration and achievement is specious even for our youngest learners. A report commissioned by the Scituate Public Schools in anticipation of an elementary building project in 2013 reads:

The research reveals that grade level configurations have little impact on student achievement (Hooper, 2002; Howley, 2002; Klump, 2006; Renchler, 2000). In other words, it does not matter

which grades are grouped together in a building. More important than the physical or structural set up is the appropriate selection and sequencing of curriculum, effective teaching practices and alignment of the written, taught and tested curriculum (Hooper, 2002) When these are done well throughout the district, it does not matter which grades are housed in which building; students will achieve.”

Dr. Varley also relies on unnamed experts. That is essentially an “appeal to authority argument.” Experts can only make claims when there are facts and evidence to support the claims, otherwise we have what is known in law as a “net opinion” and not admissible as evidence in a court of law.

So we come to the first question to raise as a board member:

Q1. What peer reviewed published studies is she relying on for her claims that a) the proposed plan is developmentally appropriate and b) all other plans, are not developmentally appropriate? Without that information we cannot evaluate that what she says is correct. How can she make such a definitive statements about school configuration in light of the reports that I have attached?

The next question is “what does it mean to be developmentally appropriate”? Here I consulted the standards for Early Childhood Education from NAEYC.

Here is a statement from their website:

“ NAEYC has set 10 standards for early childhood programs that can help families make the right choice when they are looking for a child care center, preschool, or **kindergarten**. The standards and criteria are also the foundation of the NAEYC Accreditation system for early childhood programs. To earn accreditation, programs must meet all 10 standards.”

There is absolutely no mention in their standards of one school configuration being preferred over another. I am attaching a copy of the 10 standards.

The next question has to do with the plan itself. I relied on the April 8 presentation to recast it into a more understandable format. I also added some tables to show average class size, building utilizations and capacity.

Here I ran into difficulty. There was a 2017 study in this district to determine the impact of new housing on the school enrollment. That study has building capacities for each school. I copied capacity of each school into my spreadsheet. The capacities have changed but there has no explanation for these changes. Capacity does not change without a reason. Capacity is derived from physical room size and assumed maximum class size. If it changes there must be a change in assumptions about maximum class size or there might be actual physical changes. Class size policy is 2312 and has not changed since March 2006. I would assume therefore that the

capacity for the 2017 study and the April 8, 2021 presentation would have the same capacity unless there was a physical change to the buildings.

So my second question is:

Q2. What has been done to the buildings since 2017 to change the capacity? Were they altered?

Essentially I am asking “how was the capacity computed? “ I noticed that the April 8 report shows an increase of in capacity of 72 students relative to the 2017 study. Some explanation of this increase is needed.

Q3. For each of the 5 scenarios was the same capacity used? If not, then the actual capacity needs to be shown for each scenario.

Q4. Note that scenario 1 was a no change case, so no new bathrooms at MKM or WW. Therefore its capacity must not be the same as the other scenarios and should be stated.

Next I reviewed the enrollment numbers and noticed that the total for each scenario was not equal to that used in the proposed 2021-2022 budget since there are 9 more students in the April 8th presentation. I raised this at the April 14 meeting and got an unsatisfactory response.

Q5. What is assumed for the enrollment at each school for each scenario and if the totals do not match the budget submission, why not?

Q6. There has been no discussion of special education students. There has been a claim of inequity in the provision of services across buildings and that redistricting and reconfiguration is needed to solve the problem. Therefore, whatever plan is proposed needs to show staffing and enrollment at each school. So far we have not seen any details on staffing plans.

As a board you have to consider also the cost implications of any proposal.

The scenarios evidently will have different costs. Some of those costs have been shown such as busing and we also see differences in number of sections. The stated sections are either 52 or 53 so really just a difference of 1 section. That might imply a difference of 1 teacher or it might not.

Q7. What is the incremental cost of each scenario relative to the baseline?

It has been claimed that the cost differences are not material, but we don't know what material is in a \$53M budget.

Fourth grade students at Woodruff are supposed to make a decision about where to go for 5th grade. But that can depend on where their preferred 5th grade teacher will be along with other factors. And where you assign 5th grade teachers will depend on how many students elect Woodruff or Hughes. So we have kind of chicken and egg problem.

Q8. When do teachers have to be told their assignment for next year and when do students have to make an election?

Each scenario must make clear where students will attend school, depending on where they live and their grade. For some scenarios the assignment may also depend on the year of implementation.

**Q9. When can we see a clear statement of where students will attend school under each scenario?
The parents will certainly want to have this information.**

I prefer a matrix format and have previously provided an example to the board president.

One of the changes with all scenarios seems to be that only mandatory busing will be provided. This is actually a 3rd independent proposal. To merge it with the other two is to distort the cost estimates of the various scenarios.

Q10. Can we have a separate statement of the cost effect of this 3rd proposal, independent of other changes?

Q11. Has there been any assessment of how many cars will be arriving at each school carrying students?

With more students walking there may be a need for additional crossing guards.

Q12. Has there been an assessment of how many crossing guards may be needed for each scenario?

While the redistricting plan has a dividing line of Snyder avenue for an the elementary schools there are apparently exceptions for the Spring Ridge, Sutton drive, and CMS areas attending Hughes school.

Q13. How many students are part of the exceptions and are they all properly included in the enrollment estimates?

It has been claimed that class sizes are inequitable between Hughes and Woodruff. I don't understand this so-called inequity. You have a class size policy and from what I can see it is being adhered to.

Q14. Is the class size policy itself incorrect?

Q15. What are the proposed class sizes at each school under each scenario?

Presumably there is a curriculum for the PILOT FDK program used this year.

Q16. Will the same curriculum for FDK be used? If not, who will prepare a new one and when will this work take place? Who will train the new hires for it and when?

There seems to be community interest and support of Scenario 3. It was summarily dismissed by the Dr. Varley and the Board President as "not developmentally appropriate." That has not been established but serves to block any consideration of it. Given that there a many other districts that face the same sort of school configuration problem and have adopted a solution of K-5 in a single building,with success, it is highly unlikely that a K-5 or 1-5 solution could be dismissed as developmentally inappropriate. Indeed, reports I have attached show, the literature on the subject of school configurations supports a conclusion that you can use a variety of configurations get good results.

Sincerely,

Dr. Thomas H. Foregger

Attachments:

Early Grades Reconfiguration Analysis prepared for Attleboro Public Schools, Hanover Research,
April 2018

Hooper, Don W. "Configurations Alone Don't Breed Success", School Administrator, v 59, no. 2, March 2002, 44-46

Amy Clouter, "Grade Level Configuration Report: Educational Considerations", Shrewsbury Public Schools, October 2017.

Howley, Craig B., "Grad -Span Configurations", School Administrator, v. 59, no. 2, March 2002, 24-29

The 10 NAEYC Program Standards , <https://www.naeyc.org/our-work/families/10-naeyc-program-standards>