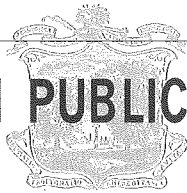


# ARLINGTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS



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To: School Committee

From: Kathleen Bodie, Ed.D.

Re: Recommendation Regarding Gibbs or OMS Addition

While recognizing there are other issues (including fiscal concerns) that must be considered in a decision to either renovate the Gibbs School or build an addition to the Ottoson Middle School, my recommendation based on the educational effect of a large middle school on student well-being and learning is to bring the Gibbs building back into service for the Arlington Public Schools.

While the research on the effect of school size on student achievement is fairly inconclusive, in part because few studies have been conducted, research has shown, however, that there is a relationship between feeling connected to school and academic performance, behavior and health. In smaller schools students are more likely to feel part of the school culture and develop strong relationships both with teachers and peers. While I am confident that we will maintain a strong academic program for our middle school students regardless of whether they attend a larger Ottoson Middle School or a smaller Gibbs and Ottoson, I think that a smaller school environment will help support feelings of connectivity and help mitigate the stress many students feel presently, evidenced by more students reporting anxiety, increased student visits to the nurse, and more hospitalizations for anxiety.

The increase in student anxiety we are seeing at all levels K-12 is a phenomena that is being reported in many school districts. When students feel generalized anxiety, this feeling can and does interfere with learning. One study shows that "emotions can facilitate or impede children's academic engagement, work ethic, commitment, and ultimate school success. Because relationships and emotional processes affect how and what we learn, schools and families must effectively address these aspects of the educational process for the benefit of all students." (Elias et al., 1997) There is ample evidence in many studies over the last decade that show that students learn best in classrooms and schools where the environment provides a good academic-social-emotional balance. While achieving this important balance is possible in large schools, it is easier to achieve in smaller schools.

In the Arlington Public Schools, our focus to support the social-emotional well-being of students motivated the decision to have a social worker in every school. We have developed advisory

programs at both the middle and high schools and we provide, for example, responsive classroom training for elementary teachers, the "Helping Traumatized Students" course, and training for teachers in crisis care. We chose the Tools of the Mind program for Kindergarten to help our young students develop the self-management, decision-making, and social skills needed as a foundation for learning and, ultimately, success in life. Our goal for Kindergarten students is the same for all students no matter their age.

Yet, even with these efforts we still are seeing too many students exhibiting anxiety. While there is no certainty we will see a decrease in student anxiety with the choice for two smaller middle school environments, our experience as educators and research in this area suggests that we will.

Given the expected enrollment growth in our middle school over the next five to ten years, we must find additional space to meet the educational needs of this growing population of students. We have a choice between two options. The choice for an addition to the existing middle school creates an even more labyrinthine building that may affect students' feeling of connection to and comfort in their school environment. Difficulty with navigating an even larger building will likely cause some students increased stress. We know that many sixth grade students now feel stress navigating the building for several months of their first year at OMS.

Choosing smaller schools for our middle school students rather than one large school does have program implications that are described in the accompanying chart. However, on balance, I still think that the benefits of having smaller, more scaled learning environments offset programmatic changes or losses that would occur.

Additionally, the recommendation to choose Gibbs rather than an addition to OMS is based on my assessment that Gibbs provides the school system and community with a more flexible alternative for future educational decisions.



Footnote:

Elias, M. J., Zins, J. E., Weissberg, R. P., Frey, K. S., Greenberg, M. T., Haynes, N. M., Kessler, R., SchwabStone, M. E., & Shriver, T. P. (1997). Promoting social and emotional learning: Guidelines for educators. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development