

801 Douglas St.  
Clifton Forge, VA 24422

September 18, 2019

Dear Committee Members:

Thank you for the opportunity to share my concerns about the potential consolidation of our school systems. Consolidation of schools is an emotional issue that affects all citizens, whether they have children currently in our school systems or not. While I think we all agree that a school system is a reflection of its community, I do not feel we agree on what that reflection currently is or should be. Although this is a long letter, I hope that you will read it thoroughly because many other people have the same questions and concerns that I have.

I am a life-long resident of the area, so I can identify with several concerns that you and others have voiced about consolidation. I grew up on Iron Gate Hill in Botetourt County, one block from the Alleghany line. The distance of one block determined where I attended school. I certainly understand what a long bus ride means because I attended Eagle Rock Elementary, Botetourt Intermediate, and James River. I know what it means to ride the activity bus home for nearly an hour in the dark or not get to participate in extracurricular activities. In my senior year, I changed schools and graduated from Clifton Forge High School. From this experience, I can certainly understand how difficult it is to change schools in grades nine through twelve and even see one's high school closed due to consolidation. While my children were in school, I lived near Sharon Elementary, so I also understand the love that community has for its elementary school and why it fought to keep it open.

I taught at AHS for six of the seven years I was employed by ACPS, beginning in 1994. I had my own room for only one year while teaching at AHS, due to a lack of classroom space. My life was on a cart that I moved from room to room. I then took a job at Lord Botetourt, where I taught for ten years. LBHS had nearly 1150 students when I left, and the halls and classrooms were crowded. I experienced the conflicts and rivalries that occur when two high schools are located in one large district. This August marked the

beginning of my eighth year of teaching at Covington High School, a system to which I applied three times because of its quality and pay.

Finally, as the grandparent of a child whom I am raising, I was committed to having her attend Alleghany Schools with other neighborhood children, but moved her to Jeter Watson last year as a sixth grader because I do not want her to be educated through New Tech.

I say all of this to show that I have insight as a student, parent, employee, and taxpayer into the issue of consolidation. I am concerned about my students who are accustomed to small classes in which they find success and my colleagues who have built their lives around their current incomes. I am concerned about students at Alleghany High School who have recently had to adjust to a new curriculum. I am concerned about teachers in that system who are concerned about their jobs and pay. I am also concerned about the economic impact that consolidation brings, both positive and negative, on all parties involved.

My concerns are wide and deep, as are those of most community members. We have heard comments that suggest uncertainty about the plan to consolidate and comments about the December deadline to request money from the state. While I understand that this is the time to request the funds because of a state surplus, I and others would prefer knowing more details about what a consolidated district would look like before money is requested. Until I have more answers, I stand against consolidation.

My questions and concerns about consolidation follow. Thank you for your time and attention.

Sincerely,

Sara Zeek

### **Committee Composition and Preparation**

1. I am most concerned that the committee has no current teacher, parent, or student sitting at the table with county and city leaders. While I believe each committee member has a sincere interest in bettering our community, I want to see more groups represented on the committee.
2. The committee is not allowing any public comment at its meetings. Silence creates fear and fears spark rumors. It is most important that the public is allowed to speak at every meeting. You have lost time to consider valuable input from those whose lives are directly impacted by the change: parents, students, and employees.
3. After working in a system with two high schools, I cannot imagine the red tape involved in working in a school system with two governments in control. Should we be looking at consolidation of governments, not schools?
4. In the last few years, ACPS has withdrawn from our regional alternative program and a joint technology services program, among others. Is there a desire in that district to consolidate, or is this the wish of a few people?
5. What is the overarching motivation for consolidation in this instance? Is it money? (Typically, that is the reason.) Do you have real hopes that a consolidated school system will bring new employers to the area? Keep our young people here? Increase population? I don't think any of those points is realistic. People typically move to an area either for employment or family, not because of a school system.
6. Have committee members read the reports by the Southern Regional Education Board on School District Consolidation (2018), the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission on Local Government and School Division Consolidation (2014), The Southern Regional Education Board on School District Consolidation (2018), The National Education Policy Research center (2011), or the brief on School Consolidation Research by Hanover Research (2012)?

### **School Board Composition/Superintendent**

1. The new school board should be equal in representatives and require a majority vote for a proposal to pass. Acreage, money, and student numbers should not be the determining factor in the composition of the new school board.
2. Two years ago, ACPS lost around 30 teachers. That is a huge turn over in a small district. Last year, they lost additional teachers. Teachers are leaving ACPS during the year. Has anyone inquired about the reasons for this exodus? Shouldn't the committee be aware of and honest about any problems in the inner workings of a system with which Covington is being asked to merge?
3. One of the best features of CCPS is that Superintendent Melinda Snead-Johnson and Dr. Shannon Fuhrman are approachable. They will explain anything to any employee at any level. That kind of openness and accessibility is a rare gift in education. They trust their employees to be experts in their fields and they treat us that way. Having worked in three systems, I can tell you that Covington City Schools is the most people-centered system of the three. School *is* a business, but it is a business built on people and cannot be effectively managed if it is run like a factory.
4. School systems in general are notorious for making "older" teachers and those they deem "troublemakers" unhappy so they will leave. Teachers are now afraid to speak out

on consolidation because they fear that if it occurs, they will be labeled as difficult and then be harrassed. Will you be proactive about those types of issues?

### **Pay/Jobs/Insurance**

1. I think it is naive to say no employee will lose his or her job. Let's be honest. People will lose jobs. There will be no need for two superintendents, two directors of instruction, two financial officers, a multitude of building principals, guidance counselors, teacher aides, cafeteria workers, or secretaries. Someone will lose a job; all staffing cannot be managed through attrition, and if you are going to keep all buildings open and not make efforts to cut expenses, why are we doing this? .
2. Is there a plan to "unload" your payroll? Are you going to buy out experienced teachers who are close to retirement to reduce your payroll expenses? Have you considered calling VASS to request the help of a payroll expert to help you level the scales and estimate costs?
3. Will we all have to re-apply for our positions? Is the committee aware of how many ACPS teachers have applied for jobs in CCPS in the last five years? We have little turnover in Covington, but when someone leaves, the majority of our applications are ACPS teachers. Do you know why?
4. Have you investigated the benefits of each system's health insurance policies to determine which offers the best coverage for the best price? There are differences in the two plans now.
5. Salary equalization is not a one time shot. How long will you hope to run your payroll on state funds? What is the plan for taxation and funding after state money runs out? What is the estimated cost of salary equalization for Year One, Year Two, and so on? Shouldn't taxpayers know these figures before you go to the General Assembly?

### **Enrollment**

1. Is the committee aware that CCPS currently has over 200 kids from the ACPS system? They have around 80 of our students. Do you know why that many students have abandoned their own district?
2. Have you considered where district boundaries will be drawn and how you will handle requests to attend a school in a different attendance area? How will that impact transportation costs and teacher assignments? How will you balance numbers so that you can run efficiently?
3. I have heard over and over that students from the western end of the county should not have to ride a bus past a city school to a county school. Why did Allegheny County not foresee the drop in enrollment that resulted from parents in those western districts who moved their children to CCPS? Are we now going to make a large-scale change like consolidation to right the wrongs of previous Allegheny representatives who refused to close Sharon, and instead closed Falling Springs and Boiling Springs? Wasn't this

mismanagement on their part? It's not the responsibility of the City of Covington to cover these errors in judgment.

4. Why did Boys' Home withdraw their students from ACPS after so many years?
5. What options are on the table for alignment of grades for each level of education? Are you aware that SOL scores and accreditation are impacted by the grade levels included in each building?

### **Curriculum**

1. Class sizes are a concern. Our student teacher ratio at CHS is 20-1 in core classes for the most part. It is a ratio that works. Have you done the math to determine class sizes and teachers needed for core courses the next five years in a consolidated system?
2. New Tech classes are large. Students who have left AHS to attend CHS report 40-50 kids in a classroom. Has New Tech been implemented correctly or with fidelity? What is the effect on instruction and SOL scores of New Tech? How long is the county under contract with New Tech? Are there penalties if they break that contract early to consolidate? If we keep the New Tech curriculum, how much will it cost when the current contract expires and is that figure included in the funds you are requesting from the General Assembly?
3. Is the committee aware that AHS students come to CHS as juniors and seniors to avoid New Tech and the chaos they feel has come with the program? It is hard to change schools in 11th or 12th grade. Typically, that is not a choice a student will make without good reason. Have you interviewed students to determine what it is about New Tech that does not meet their needs? If you continue the New Tech curriculum, will all students be placed in New Tech classes or will placements be made by application as the program advertises?
4. We need more offerings at JRTC. Will consolidation bring more diversity there? Job-ready students will attract new businesses.
5. It was pointed out to me that CHS has had to drop classes due to low enrollment. All schools have a minimum number of students who must register for a course for that course to be offered. I worked at LBHS for 10 years. There were courses that had to be dropped due to low enrollment. I worked at DSLCC and classes were dropped there due to enrollment. A bigger school does not insure that all courses that are offered can continue. More faculty may mean more electives and advanced courses can be offered, but does not insure those courses will have sufficient enrollment.

### **Facilities, Use, and Districts**

1. Where will the new high school be housed? Has anyone considered the danger of being near a river in one case and railroad tracks in another? Will we build a new school? Will we use CHS and CMS differently?
2. Will ACPS close Sharon School as they should have five years ago and reopen Falling Springs or Boiling Springs?
3. Transportation is an issue. How many new buses, vans, and cars will we need?

4. Will the county pay the city to maintain the field for football and baseball if we use Casey Field? Is that cost being considered as part of the adjustment costs?

### **Student Life**

1. The integration of two student bodies into one community cannot be left to work out on its own. It cannot be put on teachers and administrators. They will have enough to do for the first two years. You need time for student workshops that address this type of life change, student leaders in place to help with integration of population, and maybe some day-long retreats to build relationships. Adults will sincerely need to listen to students for consolidation to work.
2. A consolidated high school will most likely become Triple A in athletics. While some people see that change as a great opportunity to have state title teams, it's just not that simple. There will be a bigger pool of players, but fewer students overall will play.
3. Will we advertise and rehire coaches? How will you guarantee fairness among coaches? I have heard the argument that in a larger system coaches specialize in an aspect of a sport, but is that true in each sport?