

Oakridge Elementary School PTA

Feedback for Capacity Planning Process

1. APS is considering building permanent additions (approx. 8-10 classrooms) at a limited number of elementary or middle schools around the County. If we were to consider your school as a potential site for an addition, please tell us what you see to be the pros and cons of additional permanent space. How might it affect your school's operation and/or infrastructure?

After careful consideration, the Oakridge community does not want our elementary school to be considered a potential site for a permanent addition. The community strongly believes it is not in the best interest of students, teachers, immediate neighbors and the community at large to become a “mega school” in Arlington County. Oakridge has a capacity between 550 and 581 (this range represents Oakridge capacity changes since 2006 as space has been converted to classrooms); just below the county’s preferred school size of 600 and currently has 624 students; permanent additions that result in an even larger student population will strain our current infrastructure and have detrimental, long-term effects on our neighborhood community.

Unfortunately, we do not see many pros associated with permanent additions to our school at this time. While we would welcome improvements to our current infrastructure, especially common areas such as our gymnasium, cafeteria, and library, and to our shared classrooms for art, music and computer science, such improvements would merely be addressing our *current* inadequacies, not future growth.

We believe the County should consider other alternatives that would more equitably distribute the student population among smaller or underutilized schools. Additions should be made first on smaller schools, such as the seven elementary schools with capacity below 500, where the addition of 8-10 classrooms would bring them on par with Oakridge’s current size. In addition to building capacity through permanent additions at smaller schools, the county needs to consider how best to attract students from the current Oakridge boundary area to our neighboring schools where there is already abundant capacity. The County should redouble its effort (and funding) to have those schools become viable, desirable options for some parts of the future student populations that is currently slated to come to Oakridge

In short, a solution should be developed for Oakridge that is timelier than construction, and based on capping Oakridge enrollment at a level that is consistent across the County and can be accommodated in the current school building and with our infrastructure.

2. Do you feel your school’s class sizes could manageably increase by 1-2 students? (APS’ current class sizes are below state requirements and are lower than our neighboring jurisdictions. For example, state maximums for K-5 range from 29 to 35 students per class. APS’ current class size recommended maximums for K-5 are between 24 and 27 students, depending on grade level.)

The overwhelming majority of Oakridge parents and staff feel that class sizes could not manageably increase, even by 1-2 students. The combination of an already overcrowded school and increased class sizes is untenable and we are strongly opposed to this idea.

Adding even one or two students per class would increase the overall student population at our already overcrowded school. So while adding to class sizes may help increase the countywide capacity on paper, and may have less of an impact on smaller schools or schools with available capacity, it is simply amplifying the problems at schools like Oakridge that are already overcrowded.

Oakridge is already using non-traditional space for classrooms. Storage rooms, offices and windowless interior spaces have been converted to classrooms. While we continue to creatively use, and re-use what we have, they are not ideal under our current class sizes, and it is a disservice to the teachers and the students to have them become even more crowded.

Another consideration most strongly voiced by the teachers is that the Oakridge population is particularly diverse (Esol/Hilt services cover more languages at Oakridge than any other elementary school in Arlington County) teachers are already stretched given the large percentage of students in need of special assistance.

Lastly, there was a strong concern that increased class sizes would degrade the perceived or actual quality of education received by students in Arlington County schools in general. Relatively small class sizes attract faculty and staff, promote strong family involvement and have long been a source of pride for Arlington communities. But with 26 or more children in an elementary school classroom, it is hard to characterize our class sizes as small. Large overcrowded schools with large overcrowded classes could very well cause a rejection of public schools by some, undermining support for our schools within our neighborhoods and communities, and make Arlington a less desirable place to live.

In short, Oakridge strongly opposes the idea of adding 1-2 more students to the class.

3. Are there ways your school could more efficiently make use of space to accommodate growth?

Our school is well beyond capacity with many classrooms now in former offices and storage space. This year we are converting the computer lab, combining small rooms and reconfiguring library space. Some rooms currently are shared by several teachers in scheduled time blocks and instrumental music already meets behind a partition on the gymnasium stage, there is very little additional space in which to accommodate growth.

Oakridge already has been forced to use all space as efficiently and creatively as possible, even as we await a more equitable solution to overcrowding from the County.

4. Do you have other suggestions for increasing the capacity of your school?

When this question was posed to the Oakridge community two suggestions constituted the majority reply: (1) Move countywide programs such as Interlude and VPI to other facilities to free up some classroom space for Oakridge. (2) Change boundaries or admissions processes to direct new students coming from new development in Crystal City to a school with capacity. We believe the County has not adequately considered the impact on schools of its redevelopment efforts in Crystal City. It is a disservice to all students to continue open enrollment in a school that does not have the space to accommodate them.

When boundary changes are discussed, the community most supports changes that allow existing students and families to be grandfathered in and have the changes affect new, future, development rather than the current Oakridge community.

The Oakridge community also feels the county needs to make sure that all schools are desirable and that one way to alleviate overcrowding at Oakridge is to make Hoffman Boston a more desirable and a more fully utilized facility. Several suggestions involved bringing a magnet program like Science Focus or possibly moving an existing program like Arlington Traditional School to Hoffman Boston site.

5. APS will analyze the option of building a new elementary school(s) if funding and space can be found. Do you have other suggestions for increasing the capacity of the APS system?

While engaged in the process of completing this survey, the Oakridge Community has offered several suggestions for how the County might expand overall capacity. These suggestions were not put to the community for a vote, so they do not necessarily represent consensus opinion, but we felt they may add to the overall discussion at the County level and have included them (in no particular order) for your consideration:

- Some teachers have recommended operating the system on a year round calendar
- Parents and teachers have suggested using non-traditional buildings for schools, particularly for Pre-K and kindergarten programs, similar to private Pre-K schools that often run out of standalone facilities or even in commercial spaces.
- Several have suggested building additions for Music and Art (as in, establishing a “Fine Arts Wing”) rather than having those spaces sacrificed for classrooms. Or similarly, building additions for office and administrative uses, and converting existing offices to classrooms.
- Several parents have recommended engaging the County Board and developers in the conversation regarding capacity. Future development plans should be tied to the cost and building of new schools and developers should have a shared responsibility in funding those schools or providing space when they develop or redevelop in the Pentagon City/Crystal City Area.
- Again both Oakridge parents and teachers have suggested making Hoffman Boston a desirable alternative to future students currently slated to come to Oakridge.