

As submitted to the *Times-News*:

Commentary in the *Times-News* on the high school consolidation/new construction issue breaks down along two irreconcilable positions. On the one side are those who argue that facilities spending displaces spending on other educational needs. On the other side are those that argue that only a new facility can possibly improve education. I'd like to advocate a "middle approach" which recognizes that proper facilities planning is an important part of a sound educational plan, and that planning should embody (1) good information, (2) efficiency, (3) equity, (4) democracy, and (5) a strategic perspective. In this letter, I will attempt to show that these elements are missing from the rationale for a new school provided by its proponents. Therefore, a new school would not be the best use of county and state resources.

Information. Since the very beginning, support for the "build" option has relied on bad data. A classic example was provided in a Saturday, January 25th letter to the *Times-News* editor in which the Frostburg Mayor and City Council wrote that: "It is well known that Frostburg is the only growth community in Western Maryland, and our schools are already filled to capacity."

Although this statement may have been taken at face value by many readers, it belongs to the category of "urban myth." Frostburg is not the only growth community in Western Maryland. Western Maryland, encompassing the counties of Frederick, Washington, Allegany, and Garrett, contains many growth centers (primarily outside of Allegany County). More importantly, Frostburg isn't even a 'growth community.' According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Frostburg lost 3% of its population during the 1990s (despite an expansion in municipal boundaries) which plunges to -9% when college-age residents are removed. Lastly, according to state capacity standards, all three Frostburg schools (Beall High, Beall Elementary, and Frost Elementary) are significantly below capacity.

Efficiency. The cost of a typical educational renovation is \$85 per square foot. New construction costs \$145 per square foot. But, high schools are more expensive because of greater square footage needs per student and more specialized equipment needs. In the current situation, funds spent on elementary/middle school renovations would yield greater facility enhancements to more students at a much lower cost. Furthermore, research shows that expenditures on primary education and facilities enhancements have a greater developmental impact than dollars spent on secondary education. The County contains several elementary and middle school buildings that are in dire need of immediate renovations—the money spent on these deferred projects would yield a much higher educational 'bang for the buck.'

Equity. Education is mostly a publically provided good and an important goal of county and state policy is to promote equality of opportunity and uniform standards. Therefore, when Western District representatives say that consolidation will result in a degraded facilities experience for students, it is worthy of further investigation. However, on closer inspection, the contrary is shown to be true: the consolidation actually results in improved facilities for the average student. While high school students moving from Westmar High experience poorer facilities, the much larger improvement for students who move from Westmar Middle results in a net improvement in facilities quality for Western District students.

This situation should be contrasted with the previous Eastern District consolidation of Oldtown with Cumberland schools which likely resulted in a net decrease in facility quality (and overcrowding) for District students. This would occur because Cumberland schools rank much lower than County schools in terms of educational adequacy and condition. These disparities are significant and suggest a long-term, systematic disinvestment in Cumberland-based facilities. This inequity will be aggravated and made permanent by a new Western District high school.

Democracy. Democratic decision-making improves the quality of public policy by increasing the amount of information available, improving accountability, and fostering greater ownership of policy decisions. Almost from the beginning, however, new construction decision-making has been exclusionary and autocratic. The Western Maryland Delegation ignored the decisions of the elected school board and threatened them with dissolution. Furthermore, recommendations that impact the entire County school system were mediated in a manner which excluded representatives from the Eastern and Central districts. Lastly, decision-making has repeatedly occurred in closed meetings so as to decrease transparency and cause considerable confusion over the rationale for new construction.

Strategy. Three years after a performance audit of the school system by MGT of America, it still lacks an administrative capacity to conduct modern strategic planning. The school system has no vision, mission, goals, strategic priorities, assessment plan or accountability performance standards that demonstrate to the public and funding agencies the need for additional resources. Instead, the superintendent has adopted a ‘crisis management’ style which has tracked the desultory pattern of local politics but neglected the long-term educational needs of students. Without a clear educational road-map created by active community participation, it would be foolhardy for funding agencies to ante out new money for an enormous expenditure such as a new Western District high school.

Build proponents begin and end their arguments with the slogan that “The County has not built a new high school in 50 years.” It is instructive that they do not argue that a new high school is indicated by county citizen preferences, is motivated by a proper strategic plan, would enhance interdistrict equity, or that it will produce more student learning than alternative uses of the funds. Quite the contrary. The truly remarkable aspect of this affair is that it has paralyzed progress on overall educational reform, degraded democratic decision-making and transparency, disrupted the normal facilities renewal cycle in a manner which relegates the much greater needs of existing facilities to oblivion, and risks ghettoizing many of our most educationally underserved children. That’s a huge price to pay for ‘politics as usual.’