

# As Arlington rezones schools, communities fight to stay together

Truong, Debbie . The Washington Post (Online) , Washington, D.C.: WP Company LLC d/b/a The Washington Post. Dec 6, 2018.

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## FULL TEXT

In third grade, Natalia Otel Belan's daughter was in a class at Patrick Henry Elementary School that encouraged students to befriend and work alongside classmates of different races and ethnicities.

It's that appreciation for diversity and the school's success with students of different backgrounds that Otel Belan and other parents say helped catapult the Northern Virginia school to national recognition. And it's what they say would be lost if the Arlington School Board proceeds with a rezoning plan Thursday that would split Henry students between two schools when Henry closes.

"This school managed to be inclusive and also high-achieving," Otel Belan said, arguing that the plan endorsed by Superintendent Patrick K. Murphy "fundamentally decreases the diversity" that helped Henry achieve National Blue Ribbon School recognition three years ago.

Henry students are not the only ones who could be uprooted —the rezoning process involves eight elementary schools and is expected to affect nearly 700 students.

The months-long process, prompted by crowding and the opening of a new school, has awakened familiar complaints about separating young children from friends and increasing travel times to schools. Neighborhoods have clashed in public meetings and circulated competing- petitions as parents lobby to keep their communities together.

Among Henry parents, the process has provoked claims of racial and economic segregation, underscoring the complicated dynamics that often factor into redrawing school boundaries throughout the nation.

Murphy acknowledged the allegiances that schools foster. But he stood behind the rezoning process and said the school district has "tried to be transparent as possible" —despite parents' accusations to the contrary.

"Everyone is very compassionate about boundaries," he said, adding that rezoning is "just part of how school systems have to operate."

Most Henry students are expected to attend Alice West Fleet Elementary School when it opens next year. About 29 percent of students at the new school would qualify for free or reduced-price meals, an indicator of financial need.

But roughly 150 students from Henry would shift to another school: Drew Model Elementary. There, about 55 percent of students would qualify for free or reduced-price meals, according to school system estimates.

It's that move —shifting some students to Drew —that highlights concerns about race and economics.

The students who would be reassigned to Drew live south of Columbia Pike, a thoroughfare that cuts west to east across Arlington.

Gissele Gajate, the parent of a kindergarten student at Henry Elementary, said the artery would constitute a dividing line between students because families who live south of Columbia Pike tend to have lower incomes than residents north of it.

"They're basically trying to separate the poorest kids from the most affluent kids," Gajate said. "It serves absolutely no educational policy [but to] make sure our children are going to grow up divided by income and race."

Instead, many Henry parents supported an earlier proposal that would have kept all the Henry students together.

But the response to that plan from parents whose children attend yet another school further demonstrates in stark relief the complexity of school zoning –and the passions it provokes.

That plan, which was not endorsed by the superintendent, would have reassigned students who attend Abingdon Elementary School. The Abingdon parents argued that students' travel times would increase and that families would be separated from a community they helped build.

Children of nearly all of Abingdon's PTA leaders and families who advocated for Abingdon's school expansion would have been rezoned under that plan, said Jennifer Davies, past president of the parent-teacher group. School board member Tannia Talento appeared sympathetic to Abingdon parents' concerns about transportation during a Tuesday meeting.

"I am not a strong supporter of taking kids and putting them on a bus and driving them past a school to get to another school," Talento said.

But Brittany Knutson, whose daughter will probably attend Drew, said having a mix of students from different economic backgrounds would better ensure success at the school.

That, she said, should matter more than briefly extending some students' bus commutes.

"The interests of having a balanced demographic school body should carry more weight than what students see out of the bus window," she said.

As they devised rezoning plans, school officials took into account criteria that included students' proximity to schools and demographic diversity. Another rezoning involving 15 schools is expected to take place in 2020. School board Chairman Reid Goldstein said Tuesday the 27,000-student school system must move forward with boundaries that "create the greatest educational opportunities possible for the most number of students."

"While individuals and existing school communities understandably advocate in their own self interest, board members have to look across multiple concerns," he said.

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Credit: By Debbie Truong

## DETAILS

<b>Subject:</b>	Students; Elementary schools; School boards; School districts
<b>Location:</b>	Virginia
<b>People:</b>	Murphy, Patrick K
<b>Publication title:</b>	The Washington Post (Online); Washington, D.C.
<b>Publication year:</b>	2018
<b>Publication date:</b>	Dec 6, 2018
<b>Dateline:</b>	2018120600203300
<b>Section:</b>	EDUCATION
<b>Publisher:</b>	WP Company LLC d/b/a The Washington Post
<b>Place of publication:</b>	Washington, D.C.
<b>Country of publication:</b>	United States, Washington, D.C.

<b>Publication subject:</b>	General Interest Periodicals--United States
<b>ISSN:</b>	26419599
<b>Source type:</b>	Blog, Podcast, or Website
<b>Language of publication:</b>	English
<b>Document type:</b>	News
<b>ProQuest document ID:</b>	2150320852
<b>Document URL:</b>	<a href="https://library.access.arlingtonva.us/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/blogs-podcasts-websites/as-arlington-rezones-schools-communities-fight/docview/2150320852/se-2?accountid=57895">https://library.access.arlingtonva.us/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/blogs-podcasts-websites/as-arlington-rezones-schools-communities-fight/docview/2150320852/se-2?accountid=57895</a>
<b>Copyright:</b>	Copyright WP Company LLC d/b/a The Washington Post Dec 6, 2018
<b>Last updated:</b>	2018-12-12
<b>Database:</b>	U.S. Major Dailies

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