

Middle School Reform Proceeds

Hill Families Future Rests On the Creation of Top-Notch Middle Schools

BY ALEXANDER KRUGHOFF

Ellen Shaw and her husband, Pranav Badhwar, love living and raising their two children, Annika, 6, and Aidan, 3, on Capitol Hill.

“We can’t imagine living any place else,” said Shaw. “We are total urbanites and thinking of leaving is painful.”

But leaving is something Shaw said is in the back of their minds. Three years ago they took a risk when deciding to enroll Annika in Brent Elementary School’s pre-kindergarten program. Ward 6 parents had a history of moving out of the area or turning to private school rather risk their children’s education in poor performing schools, and Shaw was nervous because Brent Elementary was struggling.

“We took a long look at the school, meeting with teachers, administrators and other parents in the neighborhood who were planning on sending their children to Brent,” recalled Shaw. “What we saw were committed teachers and a good principal. That gave us enough confidence that Brent was going to be a good place for our children.”

Today, Shaw is happy with the decision, so much so she enrolled Aidan in Brent in the 2009. But it’s the next step that has Shaw, Badhwar and numerous other parents worried and at least pondering the idea of moving to a better school district or investing in the private option.

While Ward 6 elementary schools are flourishing and a new Eastern High School with its new curriculum and facilities is being planned, it’s the lack of middle school options that is the focus of many parents’ concerns.

New Middle School Plan

“There is no parallel in what has happened with Ward 6 elementary

schools anywhere else in the country,” said City Council Member Tommy Wells (Ward 6), referring to the rapid influx of enrollment. “But, there is no clear path on how we will deal with the middle school issue. This is a tough challenge for the city.”

At Well’s urging, the Capitol Hill Public School Parent Organization, a collection of parents and stakeholders from Ward 6 schools, drafted a proposal detailing what they think needs to happen with the ward’s middle schools. The proposal was presented to D.C. Public Schools Chancellor Michelle Rhee earlier this year.

After reviewing the plan and meeting with stakeholders across Ward 6, Rhee released her own Ward 6 middle school reform plan on May 19, based in large part on the CHP-SPO plan. But with three different Ward 6 middle schools and close to a dozen elementary schools feeding into them, some parents are not sure Rhee’s plan will actually deliver new and viable options.

“We will continue to evaluate the [middle] schools from year to year and see how they progress,” said Shaw. “When Annika gets to fourth grade we will have to evaluate if we are comfortable enough to stay in the city or move to a place with a strong middle school program.”

IB Curriculum for Middle Schools

Rhee has made it clear she intends to drastically overhaul the curriculums in the ward’s three middle



On Eve’s last day at Peabody Elementary this year, her mother, Cara Spencer wonders if middle school reform plans will actually deliver better secondary education options for Ward 6 parents.

schools with the implementation of the popular International Baccalaureate Middle Years Programme starting in 2011.

The IB Middle Years Programme is based on bridging the gap between traditional subjects and the real world, allowing students to become critical and reflective thinkers. The IB Middle Years Programme is designed to prepare students for the IB Diploma Programme, which Rhee announced will be included in the Eastern High School curriculum when the school reopens. While the IB program would start in 2011, it would not be eligible to receive accreditation until 2014.

Under Rhee’s plan, the the majority of Ward 6 elementary school feeder patterns will remain the same. Minor, Payne, Tyler and Maury Elementary Schools would continue to feed into Elliot Hine Middle School. Brent, Amidon Bowen

and Thompson Elementary Schools would continue to feed into Jefferson Middle School.

Stuart Hobson would see significant changes in its feeder pattern with the addition of students from Ludlow Taylor and J.O. Wilson Elementary Schools. To make room for the additional students, Rhee has proposed that Watkins expand to include fifth grade in its current facility and the Montessori program housed in Watkins, which goes through 5th grade, would be relocated and extended through 8th grade.

To help implement the IB Middle Years Programme at Jefferson, Rhee has proposed the creation of a “sixth grade academy,” which would have its own administration and teachers and expand with each new enrolling class until comprising the entire school.

“On the face of it, it looks great,” said Greg Herrick, who has two chil-



Greg Herrick is hoping that middle school reform will result in a Jefferson Middle School where he will feel comfortable sending his children.

dren in kindergarten at Brent. “Problem is if you are at Elliot Hine or Jefferson there is a lot of heavy lifting that has to be done. And if that doesn’t happen the only option we have left is the lottery [for out-of-boundary schools], which isn’t a great option.”

Cara Spencer and Daniel Kolker, whose daughter Eve will start first grade at Watkins in the fall, are also unsure about what lies ahead.

“We have been very happy with Peabody and are optimistic about Watkins,” said Spencer. “While middle school is a ways off, I am very concerned. We can’t afford private school, don’t even want to think about moving and counting on getting into a charter or the lottery is not a great position to be in.”

But given the proposed curriculum changes and the appeal of sending their children to neighborhood schools, some parents are not turned off by the challenges that lie ahead.

“We took some risk when we decided to send our children to Maury in a way; test scores were a lot lower than they are now,” said Sonia Waltee, a parent of two children at Maury. “If I was placed in a situation of deciding to continue on to Elliot Hine, say I had a fifth grader, I would take the risk. I feel confident my child will feel comfortable with, and can excel in, the IB and accelerated

math programs.”

While some parents are very apprehensive with what lies ahead, there are those who have been working for years to just get the basics for their children’s schools, basics that are taken for granted by many elementary school parents today. Bradley Pine and Cathy Townsend, never even considered private school for their four children.

“Public schools are about everybody and that is what we are about,” said Pine, who has seen two sons graduate from Stuart Hobson and will send one son there next year. “But what we found was that the facilities and resources were a mess. Those two issues were a real deterrent for us and a real detriment to learning. We had to defend our decision to send our children there all the time, to family and friends. But overall, the experience has been great.”

Next Steps

Suzanne Wells, a parent at Tyler Elementary and leader of CHPSP0, said she was very pleased with the plan presented by Rhee.

“I think they were very responsive to a lot of the ideas that we presented,” said Wells. “Our proposal was focused on Capitol Hill and I think it was smart of DCPS to put out a Ward 6 proposal. This is a turnaround for DCPS. They have not always done that and I give them credit for doing that. I am quite hopeful for the proposal. This is a very unique opportunity. Chances like this don’t come around too often.”

In the meantime, parents across the Hill are pondering the details, flooding school list serves, running student test score and enrollment data models to see if they agree with Rhee’s proposal or can suggest ways to tweak it. At the same time, Rhee’s office is also looking for more input, sending home a middle school reform questionnaire with every Ward 6 elementary student.

Rhee is expected to release a final plan within the next month, with the hopes that planning for the curriculum overhaul can start with the new school year in late August. ★

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