

The Howard County Public Schools (HCPS) declares that, in its schools,

Each child, regardless of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, disability or gender, will meet or exceed rigorous performance standards.

More than a mere policy statement, this laudable goal conforms with both the law of the land and the principles on which this Nation was founded.

Today, public officials often view this goal in terms of the performance of a school's students on standardized tests. As studies have consistently shown, there is also a connection between a school's test scores and the real estate prices in the school's attendance area. Thus, even property owners without children have a substantial interest in the success of their local school.

In Howard County, parents of school-age children have the added fear that changes to a school's attendance area will disrupt their children's lives. Adjusting school boundaries, according to this Board, produces what the Board calls "enrollment balance".

The Board defines this balance as the relationship between a school's enrollment and the school's design capacity. When a school's enrollment falls outside a range of design capacity, the Board moves children. The underlying assumption for this process must be that a school's design capacity is relevant to an educational goal.

The County's own standards and statistics however prove that this assumption has no factual basis. Test results are no different in overcrowded schools than in other schools. If a trend exists, children in overcrowded schools score better than their counterparts in other schools in the County. Thus the HCPS rationale and method for re-defining attendance areas amount to an extraordinary waste of time, money, and community resources.

Far more troubling is a different set of statistics pertaining to enrollment and education. There are thirty-eight schools serving elementary-age children in the Howard County Public Schools. Ten of these schools have fewer than two poor children in one hundred. In ten other schools, about thirty children in one hundred are poor.

More than challenging the notion of "enrollment balance", this disparity has a direct impact on the educational benefit delivered to Howard County school children. The data reveal that a school's test scores follow the school's poverty rate. Specifically, as the percentage of children receiving Free and Reduced Meals in a school increases, test scores decrease. In schools with the highest poverty rates, students are far more likely to attain the lowest level of achievement.

Thus a school's test scores - the measure of whether children are meeting the County's standards - are determined not by the school's design capacity but by the poverty rate.

This relationship is not unique to Howard County Public Schools. The same results were found in a study commissioned by the Urban Institute and the Carnegie Foundation. The same impact was found in a similar, detailed study I conducted in Montgomery County.

These studies showed that both poor and non-poor children succeed in schools with lower poverty rates, and both poor and non-poor suffer in schools with higher poverty rates.

The redistricting process must therefore be changed. There is no longer any justification for the current method. There is never honor in relegating those in need to less opportunity.

Instead of disrupting communities rich in resources, HCPS can leverage these communities. In this County, all residents can and will benefit when all schools and all students have an equal opportunity to succeed. To meet its own declared goal, HCPS must inform its redistricting process with its published data and its declared values.