

Superintendent’s Recommendation
for Alternative Education Programs at
the Blair G. Ewing Center

October 13, 2016

Executive Summary

In order to ensure that academic performance is not predictable by race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status, a redesigned Alternative Education Programs model needs to provide specific supports and interventions to meet the needs of a unique student population so that each student may achieve success. A new Alternative Education Programs model was redesigned in 2014 to provide students with personalized learning plans, innovative pathways for learning, and expanded social emotional services.

To support the redesigned program, the Board of Education directed staff to explore several studies for Alternative Education Programs at the Blair G. Ewing Center. These studies included:

- A feasibility study for the redesigned Alternative Education Programs at the Blair G. Ewing Center;
- A conceptual review of several other possible locations for the Alternative Education Programs including the English Manor Elementary School site, other closed schools and Board of Education property, and the current site of Rock Terrace School; and
- Commercial locations.

Based on the review of these studies, I recommend that Alternative Education Programs at the Blair G. Ewing Center be relocated to the Rock Terrace School site beginning January 2022. In order for this project to be completed on schedule, a feasibility study will be conducted during the 2017–2018 school year to determine the scope for the project, and planning and design funds will be requested in Fiscal Year (FY) 2019 as part of the *Superintendent’s Recommended FY 2019–2024 Capital Improvements Program (CIP)*.

Background

The Blair G. Ewing Center facility, which was constructed in the early 1970s with a classroom pod organization, does not have an ideal building configuration to support the Alternative Education Programs in MCPS. In addition, with the implementation of the redesigned vision for Alternative Education Programs, the building remains less than ideal to support the redesigned program for secondary school students and makes it difficult to supervise the students due to the classroom pod organization.

In order to address the condition of the facility, a feasibility study was conducted for the Blair G. Ewing Center during the 2012–2013 school year to make improvements to the facility. At the time of the feasibility study, there were three separate high school Alternative Education Programs located in the current Blair G. Ewing Center as well as three middle school Alternative Education Programs

located in three different locations, including one program located at the Blair G. Ewing Center. Therefore, the architect was charged with developing options to accommodate all the high school Alternative Education Programs and the one middle school Alternative Education Program within the existing footprint and building structure of the Blair G. Ewing Center. The options progressed from the least amount of interior renovations to the greatest amount of renovations in the building to address the supervision and circulation challenges in the facility. Due to the pod configuration and split levels of the building, none of the options were able to provide clear supervision and a clear circulation path.

Based on this initial feasibility study, the Montgomery County Council adopted \$16.6 million as part of the adopted FY 2015–2022 CIP for the Blair G. Ewing Center to make improvements to the facility. The majority of these funds were intended to be spent on building systems replacement in the facility and would not address all of the building configuration concerns.

Following the completion of the feasibility study in 2013, a project team of central services and school-based staff members developed and implemented a strategic redesign, vision, and mission for Alternative Education Programs. After researching best practices for alternative education and visiting model schools, the project team recommended that all the middle and high school programs be consolidated at the Blair G. Ewing Center with one middle and one high school program. The program redesign emphasized three key factors—innovative pathways for learning, personalized learning plans for all students, and expanded social emotional services. The Board of Education approved the new vision and beginning in the 2014–2015 school year, consolidated all the programs at the Blair G. Ewing Center and began implementing the new vision for Alternative Education Programs.

Given the timing of the two studies, the consolidation of the programs, increase in the student population, and the new vision for the program were not considered in the first feasibility study. In particular, the pod configuration and layout of the facility makes it difficult to separate the middle and high school Alternative Education Programs which is desired for the delivery of the two programs. Therefore, based on this conclusion, staff from the Department of Facilities Management (DFM) evaluated other facilities that may be better suited to support the new vision for Alternative Education Programs.

Staff considered several facilities to relocate the Blair G. Ewing Center programs. As the Alternative Education Programs serve students countywide, the school needs to be centrally located. Therefore staff considered the following sites—the former Edwin W. Broome Junior High School site, the former English Manor Elementary School site, and the current Carl Sandburg Learning Center site. Given the small number of students in Alternative Education Programs, the Edwin W. Broome Junior High School facility was considered too large and therefore inefficient for the Alternative Education Programs. Although the Carl Sandburg Learning Center facility and site could support the Alternative Education Programs, the facility would not be vacated until August 2019, at the earliest, when the Carl Sandburg Learning Center will be collocated with Maryvale Elementary School. The former English Manor Elementary School was identified as an ideal site to relocate the Blair G. Ewing Center programs. English Manor was a former elementary school that was surplused to the county in 1993, and the county was looking to repurpose the property. As the building would be vacant after the current lease (to a private school) expired in June 2015, there would be significant cost avoidance in not having to relocate any program in the English Manor property. It is important to note that at the time of this review, the Rock Terrace School collocation with Tilden Middle School had not been approved by the Board of Education and therefore was not considered by staff.

Based on the staff review, on November 17, 2014, the Board of Education approved an amendment to the adopted FY 2015–2020 CIP to change the scope of the Blair G. Ewing Center improvements project from improvements to the current facility to improvements to the former English Manor Elementary School site in order for the Alternative Education Programs to relocate to the English Manor site. The Board of Education also requested that the English Manor Elementary School site be reverted back to the Board of Education for educational purposes. These requests were transmitted to the county executive and County Council.

Once this decision was made by the Board of Education, strong opposition from the English Manor community was presented to the Board of Education and County Council about the recommendation to relocate the Alternative Education Programs to the English Manor Elementary School site. Based on the feedback from the community and the County Council, the Board of Education amended its November 17, 2014, action and on April 14, 2015, approved the following actions to study alternative sites for the location of the Alternative Education Programs:

- Conduct a feasibility study for the redesigned Alternative Education Programs at the Blair G. Ewing Center.
- Conduct a conceptual review of several other possible locations for the Alternative Education Programs, including the English Manor Elementary School site, other closed schools and Board property, the current site of Rock Terrace School (should it become available), and commercial locations.
- The Board of Education requested that the conceptual review include (among other things staff deems as relevant): lease expiration and termination conditions and dates; any costs associated with terminating leases and relocating occupants; and any other associated costs. It should be noted that the Rock Terrace site was of particular interest to Board of Education members.

Review of Studies

Based on the Board of Education action, staff retained the services of the same architect that conducted the first feasibility study, Hord Coplan Macht, to conduct the second feasibility study at the current Blair G. Ewing Center as well as conceptual studies of 12 closed schools. In addition, DFM staff conducted an internal review of commercial properties.

Since the Alternative Education Programs serves students countywide, the location of a site, the building layout, and the site configuration need to be considered to ensure that the programmatic needs for the Alternative Education Programs are met. Therefore, the following criteria should be used to evaluate options for the program:

- Central location within the county
- Size of building and site to meet the program needs
- Layout of building to support program
- Availability and ownership of property
- Access to public transportation
- Scope of work needed to improve the building

Approximately 75,000 gross square feet (GSF) and seven to eight acres are needed to support the redesigned Alternative Education Programs. The proposed building size will accommodate the current enrollment as well as allow future enrollment growth. The redesigned Alternative Education Programs plans to provide students with nontraditional high school opportunities in the future. As staff reviewed options, a building significantly smaller than 75,000 GSF would require a much larger

addition at a higher cost per square foot, and a building significantly larger than 75,000 GSF would be an inefficient use of MCPS facilities and resources. Ideally, a building of 50,000-75,000 GSF provides the school system an opportunity to make the facility renovations and improvements needed to meet the program requirements efficiently.

Although the students are provided transportation by MCPS, the redesigned Alternative Education Programs allows students flexibility in their course schedule to accommodate work and family obligations. In order to support the needs of the students, easy access to public transportation is another important criterion to identify a suitable location for the Alternative Education Programs.

Availability of the property is a key criterion for identifying candidate sites to relocate the Alternative Education Programs from its current site at Avery Road. Although there are several closed schools centrally located in the county, many of the sites are not readily available because the facilities are leased to long-term tenants or are utilized by MCPS. Reusing one of these properties would require the relocation of the current tenant or MCPS functions. In addition, some of these sites are significantly smaller or larger than what would be required to support the Alternative Education Programs.

Current Blair G. Ewing Center

For the second feasibility study at the Blair G. Ewing Center, the architects were provided a revised educational specification based on the new vision for the school. Due to the challenges with the existing pod configuration and layout of the building, the following goals were established for the feasibility study:

- Provide a comforting and safe environment
- Improve visibility and circulation
- Support the notion of the school as a choice—not a punishment
- Make students feel valued and in turn value the building
- Provide a new image with an identifiable main entrance
- Provide separation of middle school and high school students while allowing for flexibility of enrollment changes
- Provide access and security after hours to certain parts of the school
- Establish a connection with nature/outdoors

Three options were developed to meet the program and vision for the school. The options ranged in scope of work from maintaining most of the building with small additions to meet the space allocations to razing a large portion of the building to address some of the circulation issues in the building.

While the Blair G. Ewing Center is centrally located in the county, the access to public transportation is not easily accessible from the school as the school is located on Avery Road and the public bus stop is located on Norbeck Road. In addition, without major demolition and renovations, the facility would still lack the flexibility to adjust for enrollment changes between middle school and high school or improve the visibility and circulation in order to improve supervision. Although the modifications could be made in a timely manner, exploration of other facilities is warranted.

Closed Schools

Twelve closed schools that are centrally located in the county were identified to study for the possible relocation of the Alternative Education Programs. The same architectural firm, Hord Coplan Macht, familiar with the educational requirements for the program, conducted the conceptual studies for the 12 sites. The table that follows lists the closed schools in the designated geographic area with the current owner, current tenant/user, approximate GSF, and site size.

Closed Schools

Closed School	Owner	Current Use	GSF	Site Size
Aspen Hill ES	Montgomery County	Leased to a private school and health center	50,000	6.00
Edwin W. Broome JHS	Montgomery County	Various county users	135,210	19.49
English Manor ES	MCPS Board	Several MCPS central offices	51,253	8.25
Holiday Park ES	Montgomery County	Leased to a private school	48,595	5.62
Lone Oak ES	Montgomery County	CHI Centers, Inc./elderly day care	40,000	7.09
Montrose ES	MCPS Board	Leased to two private schools	34,243	7.50
North Lake ES	MCPS Board	Used as a holding facility	40,378	9.66
Randolph JHS	Montgomery County	Leased to a private school	110,000	8.07
Rocking Horse Road ES	MCPS Board	Several MCPS central offices	57,639	18.70
Rock Terrace School	MCPS Board	MCPS special education center	48,872	10.3
Carl Sandburg LC	MCPS Board	MCPS special education school	31,252	7.60
Woodley Gardens ES	City of Rockville	Senior center	31,767	9.64

Availability of the property is a key criterion for identifying an ideal candidate site to relocate the Alternative Education Programs from its current site at the Blair G. Ewing Center. Many of these sites are not readily available because the facilities are not owned by the Board of Education or are leased to long-term tenants. Of the 12 closed schools in this area, six are owned by the Board of Education: English Manor, Montrose, North Lake, Rocking Horse Road, Rock Terrace School, and Carl Sandburg Learning Center. Montrose is leased to long-term tenants, and North Lake's use as a holding facility during construction is not feasible to relocate. As a result, the analysis of relocating the Alternative Education Programs focused on four schools: English Manor, Rocking Horse Road, Rock Terrace School, and Carl Sandburg Learning Center.

The former English Manor Elementary School, located in the Rockville Cluster, was originally identified as the ideal site to relocate the Alternative Education Programs. Although the property was previously owned by Montgomery County, it recently changed ownership and is now titled to the Board of Education. Since changing ownership, MCPS identified a new use for the English Manor Elementary School site. With the future opening of the Richard Montgomery Elementary School #5 at the former Hungerford Park site, the Infants and Toddler program staff needs to be relocated.

Plans are underway to relocate the Infants and Toddler program staff from the Hungerford Park site to the English Manor site in winter 2016. Due to the need to relocate this central office function, the facility is no longer available for Alternative Education Programs.

Rocking Horse Road Center, located in the Wheaton Cluster, houses several MCPS central office functions, including American Indian Education Program, Child Find, Department of Health and Human Services Clinic, Division of School Counseling, Residency, and International Admissions, Division of Title 1 and Early Childhood Programs and Services, and ESOL/Bilingual Programs Unit. There are approximately 160 staff members housed in this facility. The facility also is located on a site that is much larger than is required for Alternative Education Programs. As MCPS does not have sufficient vacant space in other MCPS facilities, high operating costs would need to be incurred to relocate these central office functions to a commercial property. These costs would compete with funds for teaching staff in the operating budget. Therefore, it is not prudent to relocate the staff from the Rocking Horse Road Center.

Rock Terrace School is scheduled to be collocated with Tilden Middle School in August 2020. This facility is centrally located in the Richard Montgomery Cluster, sits on a 10.3 acres site, and is 48,872 GSF. Both the building and site meet the ideal requirements identified for Alternative Education Programs. In addition, the school is located within easy access to public transportation, adjacent to Carver Educational Services Center, and across the street from Montgomery College. Career and Postsecondary Partnerships currently is exploring opportunities to create a partnership between Alternative Education Programs and Montgomery College. Since the building will be vacant after the school collocates with Tilden Middle School, there will be significant cost avoidance due to no relocation or acquisition costs.

The Carl Sandburg Learning Center is scheduled to be collocated with Maryvale Elementary School in August 2019. This facility is centrally located in the Rockville Cluster, sits on a 7.6-acre site, but it is only 31,252 GSF. The building is significantly smaller than the required 75,000 GSF which would require a larger addition at a greater capital cost. Since the building will be vacant after the school collocates with Maryvale Elementary School, there will be significant cost avoidance due to no relocation or acquisition costs.

DFM staff searched for vacant commercial properties in an identified geographic area to determine if properties would be suitable to meet the needs of the Alternative Education Programs. Several Class A and B properties of varying sizes and configurations are available in the identified area. Although commercial property could be a viable option for the short-term, long-term it presents a high operating cost impact to the school system which would compete with valuable resources for teaching staff. In addition, many of the properties are not fully vacant so the school would need to be shared by other tenants. In addition, certain functions such as a gymnasium could not be fully accommodated in a commercial property. For these reasons, commercial property is not deemed a desirable option for the Alternative Education Programs.

Superintendent's Recommendation

I have carefully reviewed the educational needs of Alternative Education Programs in conjunction with the studies performed by the architectural team and DFM staff. Based on this review, I recommend that Alternative Education Programs be relocated to the Rock Terrace School site beginning in August 2022. Currently, Rock Terrace School is scheduled to be collocated with Tilden Middle School in August 2020. Once Rock Terrace School relocates to the new school, renovations

and additions as identified in the conceptual study can commence and allow Alternative Education Programs to relocate in August 2022. In order for this project to be completed on schedule, planning and design would need to be requested in FY 2019 as part of the FY 2019–2024 CIP.

The Rock Terrace School site provides an ideal location for the program to flourish with its new vision. Not only is the site centrally located in Rockville, it has easy access to public transportation to provide students with a flexible schedule—a goal for the vision of Alternative Education Programs. In addition, the location of Rock Terrace School which is adjacent to Montgomery College will help strengthen the partnership that is underway. This partnership will help provide students opportunities that no other location could, such as career technology and college classes, both of which are goals of Alternative Education Programs to enhance student engagement. I will ask the Career and Postsecondary Partnerships staff to continue to work on this partnership as well as to work with the Division of Long-range Planning staff to identify the ideal career technology program for Alternative Education Programs prior to planning for the renovations and additions for the relocation of the program. I believe that the Rock Terrace School provides a unique opportunity to provide specific supports and interventions to meet the needs of a unique student population so that they may achieve success. In the interim, central services staff will continue to work with the administration and staff of Alternative Education Programs at the Blair G. Ewing Center to ensure that the resources are provided to implement the redesigned vision for the program.