



SHREWSBURY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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February 24, 2021

To: School Committee
From: Joe Sawyer
Re: Recommendation for Elementary Redistricting Plan

As superintendent, I have been involved with the planning process for redistricting from the outset, and I was pleased and proud to serve on the Redistricting Committee, which I thought was among the most thoughtful and thorough committees on which I have served during my two-plus decades as a Shrewsbury Public Schools administrator. The district's geographic information systems consultant, AppGeo, was an excellent partner in this process and provided exceptional data on which to base recommendations for a solution to this complex issue.

Since the Redistricting Committee made its formal recommendation to the School Committee on January 20 for either of two options (known as Scenario 18 and Scenario 19), I have carefully reviewed the feedback provided both at the School Committee's public hearing on January 27 and through email correspondence. After consideration of this feedback, examination of the legal analysis provided by our school district's counsel, and application of my own professional judgment, I recommend that the School Committee vote to adopt Scenario 19 as the redistricting plan for Shrewsbury Public Schools elementary attendance zones when the new Beal School opens.

The reasons for my recommendation are as follows:

- 1) Scenario 19 represents the best balance of the [School Committee's Guiding Principles for Redistricting](#).
- 2) Scenario 19 was recommended by the Redistricting Committee after a careful review of many options, and the Redistricting Committee represented the perspectives of a diverse group of parents, elementary principals and district administrators, and

School Committee members, who as a committee followed a detail-oriented process that included consideration of substantive public input.

- 3) Scenario 19 represents reasonable adjustments made in response to parent feedback regarding the assignment of some neighborhoods on the edges of attendance zones.
- 4) Scenario 19 represents a holistic approach to determining where students in grades Kindergarten through Grade 4 will attend schools that a) provide equitable instructional spaces, b) emphasize neighborhood cohesion, c) include a diverse population of students, d) will maintain the same boundaries over time; and e) minimize changes of student school assignments compared with other options.

I commend the Redistricting Committee for also presenting another scenario (Scenario 16) that emphasized a greater balance of socioeconomic diversity than the two recommended scenarios. While this scenario was not recommended by the Redistricting Committee, I believe it highlighted the consideration of various types of demographic diversity in the Committee's review of potential options. I concur with the decision not to recommend this or any other scenario that focuses so heavily on one guiding principle and therefore compromises others, and I believe such scenarios would pose a variety of obstacles to implementation, including a lack of family support because of the degree of change required, the length of bus rides/car rides to get to school, and lack of resources for the amount of bus transportation necessary to move so many students across town. The Redistricting Committee also noted during its deliberations that an unintended consequence of creating parity focused on socioeconomic status could be the loss of resources that are provided to schools that have a greater proportion of students of low-income status, such as free breakfast programming (provided now at Coolidge) and supplemental support for reading or math instruction funded by federal Title I funds (provided historically at Coolidge, Floral Street, and sometimes at the current Beal).

Additionally, during the public feedback, a claim was made that the recommended redistricting options conflict with Massachusetts state law, namely M.G.L. c. 71, § 37D (known as the Racial Imbalance Act) with regard to the assignment of students according to race. In response to this claim, the district procured a legal analysis from its attorney (which is included with this memo), and also performed an even more detailed look at the racial and ethnic breakdown of the recommended options comparing the racial makeup of the student population projected for each school attendance zone. When broken down into the components that result in a determination of "White" and "non-White" students, it is clear that in the recommended options no schools would be defined under the law as "racially

isolated" ($\leq 30\%$ non-White), two out of five schools would be considered "racially balanced" ($>30\%$ but $\leq 50\%$ non-White) and three out of five schools would be defined as "racially imbalanced" ($>50\%$ non-White). The legal analysis of cases related to the Racial Imbalance Act makes it clear that the statute and the courts encourage school districts to pursue a holistic and multi-faceted approach to establishing attendance zones, which is what our school district has done through the redistricting process.

It is clear that demographic trends in enrollment point to continued increases in non-White students across all Shrewsbury schools. This year is the first where the entire district's student enrollment is more than 50% non-White (50.6%), and this percentage is slightly greater at the K-4 level (53.4%). The greatest shift across racial demographics over time has been a significant increase in the percentage of Asian students (from 5.7% to 36.6% of K-4 students since the last redistricting occurred upon the opening of Floral Street School in 1997) and a significant decrease in the percentage of White students (from 90.8% to 46.6% in grades K-4 over that same time). There has been an increase in Hispanic students in grades K-4 over this period (2.0% to 9.0%), and a slight increase in African American students in these grades (1.4% to 2.8%).

As one can see from the enclosed materials, the schools that are considered "racially imbalanced" under Scenario 19 are in this category primarily because of the percentage of Asian students. This trend, while more dramatic in these schools, is present in all five schools, and if the trend continues all five K-4 schools will be greater than 50% non-White at a point in the future.

Coolidge school also has a higher percentage of Hispanic students compared to the other schools, and under Scenario 19 that percentage would increase. It is important to note, however, that under Scenario 19 Coolidge actually will have a smaller total number of Hispanic students than it currently has, even though the percentage will be higher. This is because, like the other existing schools, Coolidge's overall student population will be reduced when redistricting happens. Coolidge enrollment currently is 14.65% Hispanic with 63 total Hispanic students, while under Scenario 19 it is estimated that enrollment will be 18.31% Hispanic with 52 Hispanic students.

As is the case currently, projections show that African American students are distributed in similar proportions across the five K-4 schools under Scenario 19. It is important to take into account that because the number of African American students is relatively small (2.84% of K-4 students this year, with an average of 1.75% over the past five years), historically the percentage of African American students in a particular school can move up or down one to two percentage points from year to year based on how many African

American students may have moved on to fifth grade, moved into kindergarten, or moved in or out of a residence in that school zone.

The issues of socioeconomic status, race, and ethnicity are part of a larger issue related to the district's core value of equity. We continue to examine how we can best ensure that all Shrewsbury students, regardless of what school they attend, are provided with an educational experience that is both excellent and equitable. We can always improve at this, but the evidence indicates that all of our elementary schools have provided an outstanding education to their students, and there is no reason to believe that this would change if this redistricting plan is adopted. It is very important to remember that, as noted in the Redistricting Committee's first guiding principle, all Shrewsbury Public Schools elementary schools utilize the same approach to ensure that we hire and support high quality educators, who teach the same curriculum aligned with the Massachusetts State Curriculum Frameworks.

I think it is important to also note that comparisons among Shrewsbury schools based upon standardized test scores and various online third-party "rankings" based upon those test scores should be made with great caution. State standardized tests, although a useful tool in many ways educationally, are sensitive to many other factors other than the quality of the curriculum, instruction, and support provided by a school, and educator quality and curriculum are consistent across all of our elementary schools. While the district continues to examine how to best ensure equitable experiences across its elementary schools, it is interesting to note that all of the district's elementary schools perform very favorably when compared to schools with similar demographics in other districts across the state. The key question is whether Shrewsbury students will receive an excellent and equitable education regardless of which elementary school they attend, so that their specific academic, social, and emotional needs will be met. The evidence indicates that the answer is "Yes."

For the reasons stated above, my recommendation is that the School Committee vote to adopt Scenario 19, as recommended by the Redistricting Committee, as the redistricting plan for Shrewsbury Public Schools elementary attendance zones when the new Beal School fully opens.

