

From: Gwen Wisler AVL City Council <gwenwisler@avlcouncil.com>
Sent: 12/14/2021 7:33:53 PM
To: George Sieburg <george.sieburg@acsgmail.net>
Cc:
Bcc: gwenwisler@avlcouncil.com
Subject: Re: Explanation of vote

Thank you for this.
Best,
Gwen
Coffee soon?

On Dec 14, 2021, at 6:12 PM, George Sieburg <george.sieburg@acsgmail.net> wrote:

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Good evening members of ACS board, City Council, and County Commissioners:

Recognizing that many of you may be inundated with messages today following the board's meeting last night, I want to clarify for you all my reasoning behind my motion and vote to close Asheville Montessori Primary School. While I said some of what I wanted to say when making my motion, there is more I wish I had said (admittedly, it was at the end of a long night and, frankly, a long couple weeks).

From a financial standpoint, I believe the numbers speak for themselves: on the facilities side, to bring 441 Haywood up to code will cost close to \$54K per AMPS student. This is a vastly more expensive cost per student, given the enrollment numbers at the school. (One other facilities point that gets lost in the conversation is that a major highway expansion project is coming alongside the building at 441 Haywood. As anyone who has driven I-26 in the last two years can attest, highway construction is noisy, dirty and disruptive. I wouldn't want my children playing alongside any stretch of highway between the Outlets and Hendersonville right now, and I can't imagine we would want that for our children on Haywood Road when the backhoes and jackhammers get started up. It's worth considering this when deciding how many capital dollars to pour into that building). From an operating standpoint, the school is extremely costly to run: \$620/student based on salaries (only one other school is even above \$500/student, and that's Hall Fletcher at \$506). These numbers, by the way, are taken from the study that the board approved last night. In that study, Section E shows that enrollment at the school has stayed stagnant - in the loosest interpretation. In fact, in each year of the school's existence, we have seen students leave the program after 2nd grade. Even were the district not facing some hard fiscal choices, I would be hard-pressed to defend expenditures for such a low enrollment and predominantly white school.

But although I mentioned the financial ramifications in a previous board meeting, I have started to see the question of the Montessori school not as a financial one but as a moral one, and the other data bear out a school that feels more like a charter or a private school. This school year, AMPS has a 7:1 student to teacher ratio, while the other elementary schools in our district have a ratio between 9.5 and 10 to one. This discrepancy wouldn't be as stark if the primary school's demographics didn't skew so white. Since the 2017-18, when enrollment of Black students was 30% of AMPS's population, enrollment of Black children has steadily declined to 12% of the AMPS school population this year. This makes AMPS the only school out of compliance with the district's desegregation order. The district cannot accept any more white families into that school.

It would be another matter if Black families were enrolling in the primary school, but they are not. Quite a few of the APS parents advocating for their school mentioned that if we only gave it a chance, if we only marketed the school better, Black families would choose it. As a current North Carolina Education Fellow through the Center for Racial Equity in Education (CREED), I am learning in my monthly meetings how to listen to what's not being said in what is being said, to hear the quiet message behind the shouting. Artists call this "negative space," that is, the space around the image defines what the image is. The image that I see, when APS advocates shout that we just need to market to Black families, is that Black people are unformed. I disagree: just as these white families made a choice to send their children to APS, Black families made a choice to send their children to other schools. The image I saw when families said that the Montessori school is the reason they are in Asheville City Schools is that they are going to private and charter schools once their children are in middle school. When families signed up for multiple spots so that each family member had their own three minutes to speak, the quiet message I heard was white resourced people continuing to use a system to their white advantage.

Furthermore, I could not ignore what Black and brown people said at that lectern last night. While I'm sure it was difficult for everyone to get up in front of that room, I imagine the bravery it took for Black and brown folks was extra: to stand up and speak into such a white space (and here I speak not just to the fact that it was a majority white audience but also that pretty much every board situation is a traditional white space) was especially brave. I heard them say that we cannot as a community afford (and not just fiscally) a school like AMPS, that their voices matter in the conversation. That the speakers following the likes of Tanya and Marta ignored their pleas spoke volumes to me. This is the moral issue that I felt compelled to hold as I weighed my decision.

I have heard from some of the parents of AMPS students directly, and if you tuned in last night you heard some of them say this publicly: that they are committed to equity in our district. While they feel that the Montessori program was a means toward eliminating the racial gap, I feel the opposite, which is why I voted the way I did. Regardless, we have all received communication from these parents. I hope that when the next issue affecting Black and brown families comes before the school board, or city council, or county commissioners, we can ask those parents to show up for equity (as they say they support) in the same way they have shown up for their school.

Finally, I believe the closing of the Asheville Montessori school is not the panacea for eliminating racial inequities in our district (just as keeping it open was not the panacea); as a district and as community, we have many issues to address that all orbit how we have failed Black and brown families. I could not second Peyton O'Connor's motion last night because I did not feel it was in anyone's interest to push out the decision on the primary school, but I am fully behind her motion for a comprehensive strategic plan for our district: and for including an array of voices in that process. I feel the district needs council and commissioner support in this endeavor, and it needs community voices - voices of parents, community organizers, business leaders, and (especially) students. We are at an inflection point, and the racial inequities across our district - and indeed across our city and county - require real vision and commitment

to address. I recognize that other stakeholders disagree with my belief that the Montessori program was and is not addressing the deep racial injustices of our district and our community; in fact, the image I was seeing was a school that exacerbated those inequities. Regardless of where you land on this decision, I trust we can as public servants work together, and I look forward to continued conversations about how we can uplift voices that need to be heard, and how we can engage with communities most impacted by our work.

Yours in community,

--

George Sieburg

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