Don’t Lump Poor Students Together

BY MARY KIMM

Boundary changes should not create schools with high concentrations of poverty.

Under one proposal, one new elementary school in Fairfax County, Coppermine in Herndon, would open next fall with almost 60 percent of its students poor enough to qualify subsidized meals. Meanwhile at Oak Hill, the most affluent of the six elementary schools in this boundary change decision, the percentage of poor students would drop from 4.4 to 3.4 percent.

At the other end of the county, the opening of another new school, Laurel Hill, will bring a boundary change there as well. In one proposal, Lorton Station would see its percentage of poor students double, from 35, while another school in that boundary study, Silverbrook, would see its percentage of poor students drop to 3 percent from 11 percent.

Students achieve more in schools that do not have high concentrations of poor students, and the county should use boundary change opportunities to improve these ratios.

There is no easy way to change school boundaries, as members of the Fairfax school board can no doubt attest. They are in the midst of another round of redrawing school boundaries, this time because of the imminent opening of two new elementary schools.

Some of these families have been through multiple boundary studies and changes. In the last decade, homes in the northeastern Floris district have undergone six major school boundary changes. But some of the proposals on the table both in the north and south part of the county should never have made it to the drawing board, because they would cluster poor students in schools at a much higher rate than the county average.

Overall, about 20 percent of students in Fairfax County are poor enough to receive subsidized or free meals. These are students from families who are poor by any reasonable measure.

Research shows that performance lags in schools with high concentrations of poor students, and one set of guidelines suggests that school populations should be no more than 40 percent students who are poor.

There are places where this is nearly impossible, whole school districts that have high concentrations of poverty. Not so here in Fairfax where the average household income is more than $100,000, the wealthiest county in the country by recent measures.

Yet in 31 elementary schools in Fairfax County, more than 40 percent of the students are poor. That’s 31 out of 137 schools, or more than 22 percent of the county’s elementary schools with a student body with a very high poverty rate, defined as 40 percent or more students receiving subsidized lunch.

Seventeen elementary schools in Fairfax County have a poverty rate of more than 50 percent, with some much higher. It’s one more reason for the school board to consider a county-wide boundary study. (Another big reason: some schools are overcrowded while others have many open seats.)

— Mary Kimm

Embrace All Beauty

TO THE EDITOR

It is so sad to read of the misguided Restonians who can’t see beyond the immediate present and on to the long term. How can they miss the excitement that the rest of us feel at seeing the progressive restoration of our streambeds? Admittedly, the scene is tough just after demolition has taken place. But how long is it — weeks? — until the ugliness of eroded stream banks is erased by thoughtful landscaping?

Under the circumstances, it seems necessary to point out the obvious. Woods are not just natural areas. Open fields have their beauty. I strongly recommend comparing the finished areas of restored stream beds with any of the areas designated for restoration. Thereafter, apologies for the unnecessary hysteria would be in order.

Bob Simon

Reston