

4th District School Board Member Jonathan Young's Rezoning and Open Enrollment Plan

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Rethinking Everything; Big, Bold, Transformative

Prioritize Parental Choice NOT Parent Zip-code Plan

I have long critiqued Richmond Public Schools (RPS) for being broken, a place that has done a disservice to our amazing teachers and our incredible students. Often using the analogy of a patient, yours truly has claimed that surgery was not sufficient but rather amputation may be warranted. Most of us long knew it; in fact, it is why we lose 21% of our teachers year over year. Or, it is **why for every 100 babies born in the city solely 73 enroll in RPS**. Juxtapose that figure with the 135 students in Hanover schools for every 100 babies born there. Still, some folks didn't know how broken RPS was until my colleagues and I along with Superintendent Jason Kamras started turning everything upside down. What has materialized has been big cuts to downtown and bigger investments in the classroom, personnel changes, adoption of entirely new programs and policies like e.g. attendance, communications, textbooks, facilities, etc.

All of the preceding is to say that **tinkering around the edges and/or tweaking this or that doesn't work**. Wholesale change is requisite. The same is true for rezoning.

Rezoning was sold by some of my colleagues as the first comprehensive effort in decades aimed at addressing a lot of our deficiencies and because of the scale had to be done right and therefore it was argued that despite some of our efforts to start sooner delay was prudent. I disagreed but that is water under the bridge. And, what has materialized to date has been more like a lamb than a lion. Nothing to see here folks.

Instead, **I have introduced a big, bold, transformative rezoning plan that changes everything**. My plan allows for open enrollment K-12 across the City no longer prioritizing zip codes. Students would identify their preferred school(s) and be selected by lottery. If a child's family resides in Gilpin Court and wants to attend Mary Munford said child would have the same equal access to enrolling in the school as a child in Windsor Farms. If we are serious about "equity", then let's do something about it, eliminate zip codes as a variable, and start prioritizing kids.

Now, you know that I am a fiscal hawk and fight for cuts so I pray that I have earned your trust to not break the bank. It is why I need to acknowledge that this plan will more than double our annual \$6.4 million transportation budget. To pay for big, bold, transformation I am proposing 1) closure of John Marshall High, Henderson Middle, and Swansboro + Southampton + Bellevue Elementary(s) and 2) outsourcing high school transportation to GRTC. Together, **savings will amount to more than \$2.5 million a year to invest in open enrollment**. Each of the aforementioned schools is significantly under enrolled and GRTC is biting at the bit to collaborate.

So, how does it work and what are the pros and cons? Let's get to that but first what we do call this rezoning plan? This is the *Prioritize Parental Choice NOT Parent Zip-code Plan*. That is right, **this is a school choice plan** that finally if adopted would take another step towards achieving the goals articulated in 1954 by the Supreme Court. Yours truly knows better than to think that this solves our deficiencies; let me be clear, it will not. Yet, I believe it does get us closer. To do it will necessitate big, bold, and transformative change.

For generations here and across American communities the expectation has been that a child's school is tied to a zip-code. Candidly, in some ways it made sense for logistics purposes among others but my contention is that IF Richmond is **serious about education equity than it is time to rethink everything we know**. Though, the truth is that my *Prioritize Parental Choice NOT Parent Zip-code Plan* leverages processes that already exist within RPS but just scales them up.

How does it work? Every student's parent or guardian would have an opportunity to **enroll their child in an Open Enrollment lottery that neither accounts for place of residence, test scores, demographics, etc.** A student would enroll in the lottery for kindergarten, again for sixth grade, and finally for ninth grade. Students and their families could select up to ten elementary schools and up to six middle and six high schools. Not unlike the current RPS Open Enrollment process families would prioritize their preferred school.

Now, it is important to note that obviously because of capacity limitations not everyone would secure a spot in their preferred school. Also, it is incumbent on us at RPS to do a much much much better job communicating with our families and because of new policies along with approaches we are beginning to do that but too frequently for example I have a conversation with a parent who didn't know about Open Enrollment until too late. That is why this process would open in August and not close until April for the following school year. All staff would prioritize these conversations with families and kiosks would be installed in every school as would they in communities allowing for families to select their preferred schools. Of course, this could be done remotely too from the convenience of an electronic device. School tours would need to materialize with the same frequency colleges offer them. Faculty/staff along with parent liaisons and PTAs would have to scale up information dissemination and done in all relevant languages. **Choice in contingent on RPS doing its job to inform** our families relative to their options. This is but one more reason why we are building an interactive dashboard online relative to schools.

An obvious critique of the *Prioritize Parental Choice NOT Parent Zip-code Plan* is the cost. The aforementioned transportation costs is projected to more than double. I already addressed how to make up for some of the cost but let me be clear that **this will require additional expenditures**. I am okay with that because 1) providing all kids access to educational excellence is worth it and 2) we haven't even begun to cut costs. Regarding the latter, if you think that what we did to cut downtown was great as I do than you should be encouraged to know that there can be more to come!

Related to transportation is travel time. The good news is that this is Richmond and not a city with a larger geographic footprint. Granted, we historically have experienced long delays related to travel time but they have not regarded geography but rather problems like e.g. too few bus drivers. I would point to this deficiency as but one of many reasons why it makes sense to collaborate with GRTC for getting our high school students to and from school. Costs and climate and culture on buses are but two more.

Now, let me address what is obviously a shortcoming in this approach to no longer prioritize a zip-code. Yes, yes; **we all love neighborhood schools**. I am among them! However, at what cost? Is it more important for one child to attend a neighborhood school than for another to be required to attend even when for whatever reason said school doesn't work for that particular child? It's a worthy debate but let me address what I believe the numbers will look like in a *Prioritize Parental Choice NOT Parent Zip-code Plan*. Altogether, I anticipate about 5,000 students would select a school that doesn't currently constitute their neighborhood school. That is equivalent to approximately 20% of our student body. In

other words, I fully expect that perhaps of the 1,500 + students at Huguenot High School approximately 1,000 would reside in parts of the city not currently zoned for Huguenot but because it is the newest of our buildings we would have a lot of preferred Huguenot selections. However, my guess is that a lot of families would select as their number 2/3 choice the school currently zoned to attend.

My point is that I would be naive to think that just because of an opportunity to choose that everyone will all of a sudden select what may look like the grass is greener on the other side of the fence. **Neighborhood schools would still exist;** they would just be a little less of a neighborhood school.

So, is anyone doing this? The short answer is yes. For additional information, click here: <https://www.ecs.org/open-enrollment-policies/> One city that adopted a *Prioritize Parental Choice NOT Parent Zip-code Plan* was San Francisco. Some have lauded it and others have called it a failure but what is true is that very few of the students were afforded transportation. Absent transportation, this plan is less than "an opportunity to address equity" and will not work.

Oh, here is the beauty of the *Prioritize Parental Choice NOT Parent Zip-code Plan*. **If you read our new strategic plan, Dreams4RPS, we are already committed to it.** Well, sort of. All of our secondary schools are planned to provide for specific career pathways. The idea is that students will select a specific school contingent on their preferred career pathway. Both Chesterfield and Henrico do this very well. Now, there is no way to achieve this Dreams4RPS goal absent the *Prioritize Parental Choice NOT Parent Zip-code Plan*. There just isn't. So, what better time to launch our career pathways plan than now to coincide with our rezoning timeline.

Finally, let me share that *Prioritize Parental Choice NOT Parent Zip-code Plan* does precisely what our consultant's plans do not! First, the **consultant's options are timid and do little more than move the deck chairs around.** What is worse, said options do not address the fact that we have buildings with thousands of vacant seats. We need to consolidate. Even worse, the aforementioned options further limit families' choices by creating e.g. pairing. Conversation has even included reducing or even eliminating open enrollment; though I understand the impetus for some of the conversations I need to point out that limiting families' choices is anathema to this School Board member's values and in my opinion is antithetical to our collective objective to increase equity.

Instead, let's agree that it is time to rethink everything and adopt big, bold, transformative change; adopt the *Prioritize Parental Choice NOT Parent Zip-code Plan*.