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May 10, 2010

Mr. Don Calder

Dear Mr. Calder:

Thank you for meeting with me on May 6, 2010. I hope that the time you spent with me helped you to understand the complexities of this issue and my perspective on a number of the items you raised in your letter which was circulated to the community. As always, my door is open to you or any other member of the community. I much prefer speaking with you in person rather than having to respond in writing as a reaction to a letter which is posted to a variety of people hearing only one side of the issue.

Since you chose that method of communication, I will respond in kind. I must also share with you that as you represent a group of Decatur parents who do not want a trailer placed at Clairemont for the one year period to house Pre-Kindergarten children, I have heard from other residents who have shared their support for having Pre-Kindergarten children on the campus. As you can imagine, I must balance my final decision with an eye toward what will be best for the children in the system as a whole.

Yes, City Schools of Decatur did apply for and was awarded a 3.1 million dollar grant to renovate the career technical area of the high school into a Career Technical Academy. The students at DHS, the faculty and staff, are very excited about this award. Our residents will also be encouraged to use the Career Academy for new or additional technical training after hours. The Career Technical Academy will be completed sometime around December of 2010.

In order to prepare for the construction, the classes of Pre-Kindergarten children, which were housed at the high school, will need to be relocated for next year. Over the last few years, because our Pre-Kindergarten Program has done an excellent job preparing students and because of the commitment of the Board to Pre-Kindergarten and Early Childhood Education, City Schools of Decatur has been offered additional funding to operate more Pre-Kindergarten classes. While initially all (6) of the Pre-K classes CSD offered were consolidated to the ECLC at College Heights, when additional funding became available from the state and in response to the increased demand for

Mr. Don Calder
May 10, 2010
Page 2

Pre-K from residents of Decatur, we added two classes and placed them at DHS to complement the Frasier Center's long standing early childhood education offering; and we subsequently added yet another class to respond to demand and the state's continued funding with the additional Oakhurst Pre-K last year. Just as adding the Pre-K at Oakhurst last year was a balanced choice between demand, opportunity and logistical trade-offs, so too is next year's plans for facility usage on an interim basis.

I wholeheartedly believe that providing a quality early childhood education for as many of our residents' children as possible, will provide benefits for our students as they enter the regular years of educational programming from K-12. In the past, not as many of our residents took advantage of this program. Now, every slot that we can offer is filled by residents of the City of Decatur. Even with the additional three classes, there are residents on the waiting list.

To be clear, the Pre-k's were placed at the high school initially because there was some space for them and because we could also dovetail it with the ongoing Frasier Center Program which was there at DHS. Naturally, it is not a perfect fit for a high school.

The plan for the Career Technical Academy will include two classrooms for the Frasier Center and classrooms for instruction of high school students in the area of Child Development. I do not envision the additional Pre-Kindergarten classes returning to the high school after the renovation.

You mentioned in your letter that the new 4/5 Academy will not address the enrollment situation at the existing K-3's. I disagree with that statement. We will be reopening Glennwood as a K-3 thus providing four school sites for K-3 children rather than three. Certainly, it will have the most impact on Clairemont and Winnona Park.

Over the summer, we will be working with Georgia State University to develop three options for redrawing the zoning lines. This is in preparation for presenting options to the community, the SLTs, and the School Board. I hope to have the plans available in the fall so a decision can be made early in the year and families will know which school their child is zoned for in the 2011-2012 school year and beyond. At that time, we can predict with greater accuracy, what the enrollment size of each of the K-3 schools will be going forward. It is certainly conceivable that within the first two years, there will be additional classroom space at the four K-3's.

Let's address what I believe to be a key issue underlying these concerns. The key question is whether Westchester should be reopened and in what capacity? I am happy to begin this discussion, with the Board's direction. Again, taking a careful approach when you have a small school system where enrollment at one site or another can fluctuate drastically and also within a

Mr. Don Calder
May 10, 2010
Page 3

rather tenuous economy, is certainly warranted. I am happy to discuss this with the School Board to determine when such a discussion can be started and would certainly convene a group of parents and staff to begin an investigation. Certainly we need to include our Pre-Kindergarten Advisory Group in any discussion of future use or -buildings. And you may recall that in some of the discussions of the reconfiguration committee and the Board, the ability to use Westchester as another elementary school if enrollment requires (such as in the event of a significant annexation) was acknowledged. In fact the ease of reopening Westchester as an elementary school (e.g. K-3) was one of the factors in choosing 5th Avenue for the 4-5 Academy.

Another continued source of concern from some individuals is the K-5, K-3/4/5 configuration. You also say that a Band-Aid approach has been used by me in planning forward. The decision of the Reconfiguration Committee was made by a full committee. The planning for any change was spread out over a two year period to accommodate input and a full and open process. To me this was anything but a top-down decision. The narrower, short term and interim operational decision for next year regarding the location of several Pre-K's was a decision similar in scope and impact as I made last year in placing a Pre-K at Oakhurst.

My actions, in educational delivery, as well as facility usage over these last seven years, have been very deliberate and measured. When I arrived at CSD, I was asked to review and make recommendations for the school system going forward. The recommendations and actions taken in 2004 allowed the system to get a stable financial bearing but also placed many more resources of an academic and instructional nature back into the school sites.

I have focused on the necessary changes to the high school in the Master Plan which had not been addressed before my arrival. The Early Childhood Learning Center was not in existence in 2003 and now is sought after by residents for their youngest children. Our K-3's are all recognized as top EL schools and our IB program at Glennwood is officially sanctioned as we prepare to do the same at 6-10. We have instructional coaches at all the schools and they have made a huge difference for our teachers.

Our enrollment has turned around and now we are faced with the wonderful challenge of accommodating more children. I think this is a better problem to have rather than the initial discussion I heard when I arrived which centered on whether the CSD system could remain viable as an independent system.

In answer to your point 1, when my staff returned from the Clairemont meeting; I heard the tenor of the meeting was quite negative. I was asked by the SLT Chair to send specific individuals to

Mr. Don Calder
May 10, 2010
Page 4

the meeting and I did. I was never asked to attend the meeting. They went to explain the thinking and direction; as we have been asked to do in the past.

I must say that when my staff shared with me the way they were treated, I was extremely disappointed that the meeting wasn't more productive or respectful in tone. When my staff shared with me initially that 44 of the 60 Pre-Kindergarten children were zoned for Clairemont in the following school year, it made sense to place the children at Clairemont. The Pre-Kindergarten teachers also expressed their desire to remain together as did our Director of the Early Childhood Center.

Since my staff returned to me with the outcome of the sentiments at the meeting, I have again been out to every site. I have reviewed space at Westchester, which I did before, as well as Renfroe Middle School, Clairemont and the Early Childhood Learning Center. Let me be very clear, the trailer option never represented a permanent solution.

At the Early Childhood Center, the area you reference as a possible site cannot be used. We must already use that area to expand and upgrade the playground. We will do this over the summer to ensure that we can meet licensing standards. We are looking at an area behind the ECLC. However, it is not actually all within the school property parameters. My staff has already contacted the city to see how we can meet various requirements before any portables are placed. No matter which direction I move in, it is necessary to get permits for portables or in order to meet any other requirements necessary.

I did not agree that a member of the community should walk the property with a board member. I have already done this with Mr. Andy Cannon, long-time Director of Maintenance and Facilities, who has returned to assist CSD in the transition time until a new Facilities Director is on board. He has been in contact with the city and the portable company. While installing a portable at Clairemont is definitely less involved and therefore, less expensive; my first priority and concern is for the children's, teachers' and staff's needs.

The class size issue which has been raised at Clairemont is a separate issue. The entire state is experiencing budget cuts and has been granted flexibility on class size in order to meet their budgets. Almost every school system is laying people off; we are not doing this. Our class sizes over the years have remained relatively constant and are not considered high by most standards. I have asked the principals months ago to be conservative when planning for the upcoming school year. As a normal course of action, I review class sizes and enrollment numbers throughout the spring and summer. I have added staff when needed.

Mr. Don Calder
May 10, 2010
Page 5

I have responded to the parents of the 2nd graders under a separate memo; which should go out today. Therefore it is important for understanding the decision and underlying factors, that the connection that has been created in the minds of some be eliminated from the portable placement discussion.

Your last point is a source of concern to me as Superintendent of Schools. Throughout my time as Superintendent, I have strived to be open and respectful of input when making decisions. I supported the decision to become a charter system. Nowhere in the charter does it say that the superintendent will report to the School Leadership Teams. It is important to recognize, as was made clear in the Charter, that I report to the five members of the School Board.

I believe I have been respectful of the various SLT members and the System Charter Leadership Team. Just a few examples of the ways in which SLT's have been involved in crucial decision-making processes, which before would have been left to me alone, include but are not limited to:

- The selection process of the hiring of the Clairemont principal.
- The change from block scheduling to a modified block by the DHS leadership team.
- The receipt of input regarding principals' effectiveness at the various sites.
- The Renfroe SLT assisting in the decision-making to name Mr. Thomas as the new RMS principal.
- The inclusion of the SLT's in several budgeting decisions and discussion.
- The System Charter Leadership Team's changes to the Charter for the upcoming school year.
- RMS' work related to their Gifted Program.

I have asked the School Board attorneys to review the authority question and to give me an opinion. I have done this because I take this issue very seriously. I respectfully submit to you and other members of the community that the Superintendent must be allowed to do his/her job. Whether interacting with the Georgia School Boards Association, the Georgia School Superintendents Association or meeting the requirements of the Southern Association for Colleges and Schools; the separation of policy and direction setting by the board is balanced by the hiring of a CEO for the school system to have the authority to make operational decisions.

I do take into consideration community feedback but I respectfully request that I be allowed to do my job. I think as we approach the end of yet another successful school year; even in a bad economy, we should be celebrating the successes of our teachers and students. We have again managed to have much to celebrate and we have been able to keep our teachers and staff intact and keep the millage rate constant.

Mr. Don Calder
May 10, 2010
Page 6

I will certainly commit to continuing to work on the decision related to placement of the Pre-Kindergarten classes over the course of the next few weeks.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Phyllis A. Edwards". The signature is written in black ink and includes a long, sweeping horizontal line at the end.

Dr. Phyllis A. Edwards, Superintendent