



COUNCIL OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
JOHN A. WILSON BUILDING
1350 PENNSYLVANIA AVENUE NW
WASHINGTON, DC 20004

JANESE LEWIS GEORGE

Ward 4 Councilmember
Chair of the Committee on
Facilities and Family Services

COMMITTEE MEMBER

Committee on Transportation and the Environment
Committee on Executive Administration and Labor
Committee on Public Works and Operations

February 29, 2024

Dr. Lewis D. Ferebee
Chancellor, District of Columbia Public Schools
1200 First Street, NE
Washington, DC 20002

Dear Chancellor Ferebee:

I am writing to request that you reconsider the current swing space plans for Whittier Elementary School and develop plans to address imminent overcrowding at Ida B. Wells Middle School and Coolidge High School. Whittier is scheduled to begin construction for its full modernization in fall 2025 and the current swing space plan is for them to relocate to the former Sharpe Health campus (2.2 miles away) for two schoolyears through spring 2027. Simultaneously, Ida B. Wells and Coolidge, which share a building across the street from Whittier, are experiencing dramatic overcrowding and are projected for even further growth in the future. **We should build a modular campus on District-owned property or obtain additional space nearby to resolve these issues.**

All three schools are strong, neighborhood schools that draw heavily from their surrounding areas. Most Whittier families walk to school and chose to live here because of the convenience and community provided by a neighborhood elementary school. Wells and Coolidge also draw heavily from the community: 68% and 43% of students, respectively, enrolled last year lived in-boundary. Both schools have also become attractive schools of choice for many other students across the city. We must do everything in our power to preserve these schools' neighborhood accessibility by providing them with a swing space and relief from overcrowding close to home.

According to DME's own planning data¹ Ida B. Wells and Coolidge are already above capacity. For schoolyear 2022-23, Wells MS was at 119% utilization (539 students in a building built for 452 students) and Coolidge HS was at 125% utilization (1,015 students in a building built for 809). Both schools are in the "Very High" utilization category and among the top five most crowded schools in all DCPS. Both schools are projected to continue their growth this fall, 513 students projected at Ida B. Wells (113% utilization) and 1,018 projected for Coolidge (126% utilization). Long-term, there is even further growth on the horizon. The current FY24-29 Capital Improvements Plan includes funding for a second cafeteria for Wells and Coolidge, but nothing for additional classroom space. Students already utilize the school's auditorium for classes and

¹ DME Boundary and Student Assignment Study 2023 Supporting Datasheet: <https://dme.dc.gov/node/1694811>.

have limited science lab access because of crowding. We must develop a plan, both short-term and long-term, to address their urgent overcrowding issues.

Parents at Whittier are concerned about the risks of relocating their school even temporarily. Forcing them to swing at the former Sharpe Health campus will likely cause teachers to quit, families to relocate (potentially forever), and hard-earned academic gains to falter. The burden of these issues will fall heaviest on our low-income and students of color – most of Whittier’s students. DCPS-provided school buses will not serve families well, especially those with students at multiple campuses or siblings responsible for their little brothers and sisters.

Whittier, Wells and Coolidge are great neighborhood schools worthy of our support. Below are three proposed solutions. Each was developed with all three school communities and enjoys their full support, as evidenced by their joint letter sent earlier this week. The goal of each proposal is to accommodate in-boundary enrollment in our neighborhood schools while minimizing disruptions to other residents. I believe each proposal would fulfill DCPS’ goal of using modular or temporary space for no less than six years: first as swing space for Whittier Elementary and then later as temporary space for Wells and/or Coolidge while a more permanent capital expansion is added to their main campus.

Proposal 1: Build Modular Swing Space at the Corner of 5th and Van Buren Streets NW

A modular swing space complex, built near the Northwest corner of the superbblock containing Ida B. Wells Middle School, Coolidge High School, the Takoma Aquatic Center and other Takoma Recreational Center fields, would allow the District to add capacity without disrupting any permitted DPR field users. The space is approximately 1.25 acres or 1,000 square feet, focusing exclusively on the area closest to 5th Street NW and to the west of existing mature trees. This space could be connected directly to Wells and Coolidge via covered walkway to the south, potentially leading to cost savings as their second cafeteria will be coming online nearby in Fall 2025 and could even be partially shared with Whittier students if necessary for space or budgetary reasons.

Proposal 2: Build Modular Swing Space on a DPR Field at Takoma Recreation Center

There are four DPR-permitted fields along 3rd Street NW, between Aspen Street and Sheridan Street, each of which could be taken offline for the site of a modular complex. DPR has shared with my office that Field 1 (the northern most field, next to the playground) is permitted the least of the four fields. Field 4 (the southernmost field, near 3rd and Sheridan Street) is the next best candidate because it has already been offline for several years to be used as a staging area for construction work in the area. All four fields are closed for the winter season. We should thoughtfully evaluate the pros and cons of this approach because we know it could be disruptive to area recreational sports leagues.

Proposal 3: Lease Property Nearby like the Christian Post building at 6200 2nd Street NW

There are multiple properties nearby that could serve as more proximate swing space and help relieve overcrowding, including the former Christian Post building or the Albright United Methodist Church (409 Rittenhouse St NW) which shares a block with Whittier ES. My office is attempting to engage the owners of these facilities. We believe neither is in use and the owners

might be amenable to opening them up for such a worthy local cause. The Christian Post property (6200 2nd St NW) is two blocks away from all three schools. After Whittier's use of the space through spring 2027, the space could serve as an auxiliary sixth grade campus or a dedicated space for an academic specialty like STEM, music, or art. The property could become a permanent part of DCPS' portfolio or serve as a temporary space while a more permanent expansion is designed and constructed adjacent to Wells and Coolidge.

I wrote to you on this topic in May 2021 and April 2022, and would not be writing to you again if not for tireless advocacy and organization around these issues from the Whittier PTO, Wells PTO, and ANC 4B, which approved several resolutions in recent years supporting these same requests². There is widespread support for investing in these schools and allowing them to continue their growth here in the Manor Park community. It is for the betterment of our Ward 4 community and its neighborhood public schools that I humbly request your partnership in this matter.

Sincerely,



Janeese Lewis George
Ward 4 Councilmember
Chairperson, Committee on Facilities and Family Services

CC:

Phil Mendelson, Chairman, Council of the District of Columbia
Kevin Donahue, City Administrator

² See attached past letters and resolutions from parents, ANC 4B, and my office.