

Public Hearing Testimony of Cory Peña

Esteemed members of the Alexandria City Council, fellow parents, and educators,

I am here to express my serious concern for the proposed Pre-K center, where more than 400 at-risk children will be sent, removing from their neighborhoods in order to alleviate overcrowding in their local school settings.

As a parent, I am proud to send my son to the Helen Day School, part of the Hopkins House school group. The school is conveniently-located, with a diverse and dynamic staff and student body. We are fortunate that this option exists for us in our neighborhood, and one of our favorite parts of bringing Sammy to school each day is the walk we take along the streets where our neighbors live.

Diversity is an important part of a well-rounded education. Exposure to various cultures, religions, music, languages, and even socio-economic statuses gives children a full-world view. Children who grow up with limited socioemotional spheres often tend to have trouble transitioning into a setting outside of that sphere.

As an educator, it is my firm belief that requiring at-risk children to be sent to a Pre-K center outside of their neighborhoods is detrimental to their early childhood development. Parents of the children you identify as at-risk, typically, are of a lower socioeconomic status than their non-risk counterparts. How do you propose the parents of these at-risk children transport their children across town? It is an unnecessary burden, particularly when there is an education center within their neighborhood. Stress surrounding getting a child to school will not set a child up for a productive school day, and it increases the risk that parents will simply give up on the effort. Because Pre-K is not a requirement in Virginia, it is our job as a community to make early education impossibly easy for children to obtain, rather than setting up roadblocks.

Children also need to be surrounded by people with different skill sets and resources. A child who might not have access to books at home, for example, should be in a classroom with students who **are** surrounded with books at home. Children talk to each other about things they enjoy, and exposure to new ideas and experiences is critical for full development.

Rather than pre-identify at-risk youth to leave their neighborhoods, the community should simply open new centers in other parts of Alexandria. If the Pre-K building was part of a pilot program for a new center, rather than a “short term” solution, I would feel much better about the idea. Hopkins House has an excellent, child-centric business model – my husband and I pay a little more in tuition for our son than some of our counterparts in the neighborhood. We are happy to do this, because it means that another child has an opportunity to receive quality education. While this model might not be popular with more fiscally conservative members of the community, I believe that it is our responsibility to make sure we aren’t making things harder for children around us.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.