



# Hopkins House

- A Learning Center for Children, Youth, and Families -

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## **PUBLIC HEARING STATEMENT TO THE ALEXANDRIA CITY COUNCIL**

**Delivered On April 16, 2016**

Madam Mayor, Mr. Vice Mayor, City Council Members, and Mr. City Manager, my name is Julie Jakopic. On behalf of Hopkins House, I would like to speak to two issues.

First, as Chair of the board of directors of Hopkins House, I am proud of our deep commitment to lifelong learning and to the dedication of our team and our students. We take this learning of youngsters seriously, whether or not they attend Hopkins House. That's part of why we invest and thank the council for their investment in helping to build a well-trained and highly experienced workforce through the Early Childhood Learning Institute.

You just heard from some of the students enrolled in the Hopkins House Early Childhood Learning Institute. Through the Alexandria Fund for Human Services, and our donors, Hopkins House is helping 30 Alexandria residents yearly to earn professional credentials and a college degree, and begin careers as early care and educational professionals. These hardworking individuals, most of whom are single, working mothers, are helping to prepare our community's young scholars for success in school and life.

Second, as part of its proposed remedy to address classroom overcrowding, the Alexandria City Public Schools has requested funding from City Council to create a "Pre-K Center" with the intention of relocating its 4-year old preschoolers from neighborhood school buildings into a single building.

Over the past several weeks since this proposal was made public, I and many other members of our community have engaged in many conversations with members of the School Board and the City Council about this proposal. Based on these conversations, there is one thing about which we all agree: *Our schools and our students need us to invest in them.*

Where we continue to disagree is the plan to use a single, leased building in the short-term (and two in the long term) to house classrooms for 360 or more at-risk 4-year olds.

We appreciate the time that Chair Karen Graf, Vice Chair Chris Lewis, and the other members of the School Board have spent sharing their vision and the challenges they face regarding classroom and school building overcrowding. There is little doubt that there is already a classroom capacity challenge that, without action, will quickly grow into a crisis. We clearly need at least one new elementary school building, especially on the West End. It is understandable why short-term leased space is proposed as a temporary solution to accommodate the 500 additional students expected to enroll in ACPS each year, as it will take time to locate a site and construct a new school building.

However, removing preschoolers to a single building, away from their neighborhoods, other children and familiar environments, creates new problems in the quest to solve these problems.

There is no developmental evidence that a site this large can be an effective and appropriate learning environment for young children. Ample, authoritative research, conducted by well-respected educators, indicates that that inclusion rather than separation of children of mixed abilities and socio-economic status benefits all children. Rather the proposed plan puts at-risk students in a separate facility, away from the diverse student environments present today in our neighborhood schools.

We understand that the school system already transports 4-year olds across the city outside their neighborhoods for school but at least they are still attending neighborhood schools. But it is not ideal. The proposed plan doubles the number of students being transported not only out of their neighborhoods, but now out of a neighborhood school setting. The proposed solution to the elementary capacity issue should not exacerbate other problems.

We applaud the wrap-around services. We know they provide a crucial element for at-risk students and do so with excellence. We know this because they are the services that are already provided to our Pre-K students, in part as a requirement of the funds that support their education.

It is still not clear what models the School Board considered before proposing this particular plan, or why this particular model was chosen. What is clear is that the School Board is relying on the ACT/Early Childhood Education Workgroup to vet ideas and provide guidance. While the School Board certainly has discretion in choosing who it wishes to consult for advice, it is sad that the board has not seen fit to reach out to the broader base of child care providers in our city who can, as well, provide expert advice on serving at-risk children in our community.

We also understand the School Board is just now conducting research into other models. None of the ten proposed for this research have sites of this size. The list also fails to include nearby models such as the successful public private partnership model in DC.

Our schools and our students need us to invest in them. They undoubtedly need at least what the School Board has asked for and then some. But we should be planning for the best option for all our children. We should not be pitting four year olds against the big kids. The 4-year olds are only four for a year. What we do early to help them makes a huge difference in their life course and sets the path they will follow as they become 5-year olds and ultimately our high schoolers.

Our littlest citizens need the investment of our city's leaders. They need a plan that sets them up for success in school and in life. A plan that does not separate them from neighborhoods and other children into a large, distant building, away from the very environments that help them to grow and excel.

We urge Council to move cautiously on this Pre-K Center proposal and, if necessary, to delay action until a clear and thoughtful plan is put forth by the School Board.

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