



June 12, 2023

Dear School Committee,

We are writing with respect to the Ward/Underwood Task Force. We are the City Councilors who represent Wards 1 and 7, in which the Underwood and Ward Schools are located, and their respective communities reside.

Over the course of the last week, we have become aware of concerning new information regarding the scope of the Task Force that compels us to write to you today. We write with two initial requests: 1) that you delay or amend your vote on the Task Force Mission Statement tonight, and 2) that you expand the makeup of the Task Force to include additional community representatives.

Previous to this week, we believed the Task Force had been convened to generate recommendations for the long-term, equitable home(s) for these school populations, also understanding that the Task Force may need to brainstorm creative solutions to short-term challenges in the meantime.

It has been made plain to us this week that a very serious and drastic short-term option of closing either Ward or Underwood and combining both schools as soon as the Fall of 2024 is now on the table. While this information is new to us, it is clear that it is not new to the NPS administration. This information only became understood publicly in responses to questions by parents at recent PTO meetings; it was not clearly identified at any of the three initial Task Force meetings.

Given this, we are not comfortable with the Mission Statement before you tonight. The Mission Statement is very vague as to the range of short-term options being considered. We feel strongly the Mission Statement should state clearly that the Task Force will NOT consider closing Ward or Underwood before ground is broken on their renovated or new home(s). If you will not agree to that, we ask you to amend the Mission Statement to state clearly that this option IS being considered to put the community on notice. Notably, neither building in its current form has the capacity to hold the combined population of students.

Further, given that we now know this option is in the minds of some, we urge you to reconsider the makeup of the Task Force. While the Task Force is made up of good, kind people, it is dominated by employees and paid consultants of NPS and the Mayor's administration. If the end result is that this Task Force makes a recommendation that one or both of these schools is closed next Fall, or shortly thereafter, there is no way a Task Force of this makeup can be perceived to have arrived at that recommendation fairly and with adequate representation. We urge you to add at least two additional parent representatives from each school to the Task Force who are not employed by the City or NPS, and to consider whether there are other changes you can make to balance the voices and representation on the Task Force.

Please also note that we are concerned about the methodology that has been used to craft the narrative over the last few years that "we are facing declining enrollment at both schools." The Task Force has been presented with compelling evidence that disputes this claim, as well as information about the impact of thousands of new units of housing that stand to be built in Newton due to the MBTA Communities Act and Village Center rezoning, and we urge you to consider this evidence seriously before basing the work of the Task Force on the idea of declining enrollment.

The idea of closing one of these schools next Fall and moving the Ward and Underwood children from one dilapidated, inadequate building to another while we are at least 6-10 years from building them a new building is shocking, deeply upsetting, and highly inequitable. This Task Force is quickly earning the perception of serving as cover to achieve that end. We urge you to take corrective action now to make this a fair, open, and truly contemplative process for all involved.

Respectfully,

Becky Grossman, Councilor-at-Large, Ward 7
Marc C. Laredo, Councilor-at-Large, Ward 7
R. Lisle Baker, Ward Councilor, Ward 7

Alison M. Leary, Councilor-at-Large, Ward 1
John Oliver, Councilor-at-Large, Ward 1
Maria Scibelli Greenberg, Ward Councilor, Ward 1