

*SRT 3 Focus Group Meeting Notes  
October 20, 2011  
Inman Middle School*

Strength-Weaknesses-Opportunities-Threats Analysis (SWOT Analysis) is a tool for investigation and decision making. SWOT analysis is used for a variety of purposes in business and by different kinds of organizations - including school districts. SWOT analysis promotes brainstorming. Rather than relying on ingrained or instinctive reactions, SWOT Analysis promotes proactive thinking. On October 20 the SRT 3 Focus Group conducted a SWOT analysis for elementary schools, followed by a similar discussion of middle/high schools. The SWOT was conducted around the following general subject areas:

- a. Communities and schools
- b. Redistricting, consolidation, expansion
- c. Alternative grade configurations/center concepts

Discussion results are summarized below. "Identified issues" summarize findings reported by the consultant team or observations made by focus group participants which do not easily fall into the SWOT framework. Issues are followed by the SWOT results. Where points apply specifically to middle or high schools they are noted as such. Otherwise the statements either refer to elementary schools or are applicable to all grade levels. Observations marked in **red** were identified as priorities by 3 or more focus group participants.

**IDENTIFIED ISSUES:**

- Enrollment at SRT 3 elementary schools currently ranges from some of the City's most crowded to least utilized schools. Schools are currently occupied from 32% to 130% of their design capacity.
- Some under-enrolled schools are also actively being used for other community purposes (i.e. clinics). "Excess" space does not necessarily equate to vacant space.
- Virtually all attendance zones in SRT 3 have larger pre-school aged cohorts which are likely to cause enrollment to increase over the next several years.

**STRENGTHS**

- Neighborhood support and strong parental involvement are strengths in most parts of the SRT. Some schools with less support are working on building more active PTAs.
- Strong community and institutional partnerships benefit some schools in the SRT. Centennial benefits from supportive institutional and corporate partners. Neighborhood associations tend to support the schools.

- The SRT's culturally and socially diverse student population is considered a strength.
- SRT has cohesive neighborhoods and several schools are walkable for many students.
- Coen, Toomer, ML King and Maynard Jackson have excess land to support future expansion or accommodate other compatible community uses.
- Several school buildings are historic and have architectural features that enhance their surrounding neighborhoods and merit preservation.
- Whitefoord ES and Coen MS house full-service clinics operating within the schools to serve their surrounding communities.
- Heightened "anxiety" concerning APS' potential response to overcrowding and redistricting has increased parental participation in the schools.
- Center Concept: Implementing a center concept would result in a more diverse student population in schools and could relieve over-crowding in some areas.
- Center Concept: Concerns were expressed about children changing schools too many times, more difficult for parents to communicate with administrators and teachers, added transportation costs and time constraints on families with more than one child in school. Primary centers make it more difficult for children to be taught above grade level. The homeless shelter is located near an elementary school. Implementing a center concept would create a hardship on those students.
- Older schools in the SRT were originally designed for lower/different utilization patterns than exists today. As a result, some under-enrolled schools actually have less "excess" space and some crowded schools are more over-crowded than the numbers suggest.
- APS has been moving programming resources to larger schools to compensate for overcrowding, while smaller schools have been allocated fewer staffing resources.
- The progression from elementary to middle schools is a problem in some areas. Some individual neighborhoods send students to three different middle schools.
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- Educational resources are not uniformly distributed throughout the SRT, even among facilities that are located near each other.
- further. Some schools lack playgrounds due to their constrained sites.

#### WEAKNESSES

- Levels of parental involvement and support are not uniform and are a weakness in some parts of the SRT.
- Some school sites are constrained and difficult to access, with inadequate parking and limited capacity to expand

- While cohesive neighborhoods are strengths, they can also be a weakness because residents of different neighborhoods have little contact with each other. Parental perceptions of schools located in areas they are not familiar with may be inaccurate.
- APS has in the past made decisions based on “chasing” Federal funds. Those kinds of decisions have not always improved the quality of education.
- More vocational education options are needed in area high Schools.
- Charter schools are drawing students away from traditional APS schools in some neighborhoods.

#### OPPORTUNITIES

- Balancing enrollment and/or consolidating schools through redistricting have the potential to increase student diversity in a positive way, **keep kids together longer**, combine resources of PTA groups, etc.
- Redistricting could potentially “correct” some split feeder zones and in some cases assign children closer to where they live.
- Redistricting could correct the situation of over-crowded schools near under-enrolled schools, better allocate resources, reduce average class sizes and reduce the number of student transfers.

- **Consideration of programmatic changes (like primary centers or K-8 schools) should be explored for specific schools but not proposed uniformly throughout SRT 3. Such solutions would be supported by some neighborhoods for some schools but would be rejected and opposed if tried elsewhere.**

- APS has an opportunity to attract/keep more families in Midtown if it can address over-crowding issues in a positive way.

- Achieving cost savings by consolidating schools or reducing need for new construction could be viewed positively IF those savings are invested in improving educational resources and programs.

- **APS has the opportunity to reduce or eliminate differences in the “quality” of area schools (as defined by perception, test scores and building aesthetics) by balancing resources.**

- Build a new High school to relieve Inman and Grady. Build a centralized sports complex at the Walden site.

- Maynard Jackson is a candidate for a new IB program and is scheduled for renovation.

- APS should take another look at using the closed Howard schools as a potential solution to over-crowding.

- The new Edgewood development will bring 140 unites of family housing to the

area within the next 18 months. The first 10 homes sold contain 6 ES and 6 MS students. Be sure to consider the effects of Edgewood and similar projects before “prematurely” recommending closing schools.

- Parents at the Toomer and King ES would be open to evaluation of a K-8 grade configuration.
- Past redistricting efforts were perceived to be done on an ad hoc basis with no consistent method of decision making. **APS needs to articulate and adhere to a consistent policy regarding feeder patterns, programming, etc. so decisions are viewed as fair, uniform and resulting in an improved educational environment.**

#### THREATS

- Redistricting children into larger attendance zones and transporting them to schools further from their homes will be viewed as a threat to cohesive neighborhoods.
- “Fear of change” is prevalent in some areas. Perceptions of resulting property value losses from neighborhoods being zoned to poorer performing schools will cause opposition among many residents, even households without children in APS.
- Forcing parents to transfer children from top to lower performing schools will result in flight to charter and private schools and more families moving out of

the area. The result could make current imbalances worse rather than better.

- Major roads and geographic barriers make redistricting more difficult to accomplish without compromising student safety and parental involvement.
- **The current general lack of “trust” in APS Administration will make it more difficult to win acceptance of solutions which are likely to be difficult.** The bad economy is keeping dissatisfied parents in the system for now. As soon as conditions improve they will leave if positive changes do not occur.
- Overcrowding at Grady HS must be solved, starting with stronger address verification and a reduction in allowed administrative transfers.
- On-site expansion through new construction will be very challenging on constrained sites. Concerns regarding student safety on construction sites or potential needs to temporarily relocate students to other schools could be controversial.