Dear New Era Academy Families, Students, and Community Members,

Last year, my staff held community meetings with your school community and shared that the Southside school building where New Era is located has major challenges. While these challenges do not interfere with the district’s ability to follow the Health and Safety protocols needed to address Covid-19, they do impact the long-term sustainability of the facility that houses your school. Specifically, of major concern is that the heating system and the pipes that take heat throughout the building are failing and in need of a total replacement. While the district has continued to make repairs to ensure heat works for now, these solutions are only temporary fixes that will not work long term. A replacement of a school’s heating system is a Capital Improvement Project, and Capital Improvement Projects require state approval. A requirement for state approval is that the student population of a facility occupies 60-65% of the facility. New Era’s enrollment does not meet that requirement and so the district cannot get approval to fix the existing facility; the heating issue is not the only issue with the Southside building.

In addition, New Era is one of the district’s smallest high schools. The size of the school population impacts our ability to provide your student(s) with strong academic programming because schools are funded on a per student basis. When schools are of a healthy-size (a sustainable small high school program is about 500-600 students), per student funding allows school leaders working with families and community partners to prioritize rich and varied programming in schools.

The closest high schools to your school community are Digital Harbor High School and Benjamin Franklin High School at Masonville Cove. Digital Harbor is a comprehensive high school housed in a building that was remodeled in 2005 and has air conditioning. The school is a community school and intensive literacy site. It offers a full complement of AP and Honors courses and several CTE pathways. Ben Franklin High School at Masonville Cove is a community school with the United Way of Central Maryland serving as its lead agency. The school offers Honors courses and the IT Networking Academy (CISCO) pathway. As part of the CTE plan approved last year, Ben Franklin will also be offering CTE pathways in welding, carpentry and electrical in the future.

Tonight, based on the results of this Annual Review of Schools, I am recommending that the Baltimore City Board of School Commissioners consider closing the New Era Academy program at the end of the current school year in June 2021. If approved, starting in school year 2022-23, the PTECH and Seagoing pathway at New Era would be relocated to Digital Harbor High School. The Army JROTC program would be moved to Benjamin Franklin High School at Masonville Cove.

Additionally, if approved current students attending New Era Academy would be able to continue their work in existing pathways at these receiving schools. I am also recommending that a preference be created for students from the Cherry Hill, Maree G. Faring, Curtis Bay, Bay Brook, Westport, and Lakeland zones at Benjamin Franklin High School at Masonville Cove and Digital Harbor High School, meaning students from these zones would who want to attend these high schools would be considered before other students and would have greater access to the high schools closest to their homes. If the Board approves the closure, students would still have the option to select from among other high school choices beyond Digital Harbor and Ben Franklin.

As a member of the New Era community, your feedback on this recommendation is critical. A meeting will take place at your school on Thursday, November 11 at 5:30 p.m. where you can learn more and get answers to your questions.

In addition to attending meetings to better understand the reasons for the recommendation, you can also view the report that has been provided to the Baltimore City Board of School Commissioners (“Board”). The report is titled Annual Review of Schools: Review and Recommendations, 2021-22 (“Report”). The Report outlines the recommendations and the factors the Board must consider in this process. The Report is available on the district’s
website (www.baltimorecityschools.org) and upon request can be reviewed at your school.

You can provide written feedback to the Board from now through 5:00 p.m. on Friday, January 7, 2022. Written comments must include full identification of the sender and should be directed to the Baltimore City Board of School Commissioners, 200 E. North Ave., Room 406, Baltimore, Maryland 21202, or sent by email to portfoliorecommendations@bcps.k12.md.us.

In addition, there are two opportunities where you can give oral commentary to the Board on the recommendations.

- Public hearing: Thursday, December 2, 7:30 to 9:30 p.m.
- Special work session: Wednesday, December 15, 6:30 to 8:30 p.m.

Due to the ongoing COVID-19 public health emergency, all Board meetings are being held remotely. Please check the Board calendar or BoardDocs on the City Schools website for call-in information to observe the meetings which can be found here: https://www.baltimorecityschools.org/board-meetings. The opportunity for oral testimony will be closed after completion of the December 15 special session.

After consideration of all of the factors, other information learned through the process including public feedback, the Board will vote on this recommendation at a meeting on Tuesday, January 11, 2022. If the Board votes to approve closure of New Era Academy, district office staff will be available to meet with you to ensure that the transition process is smooth and meets students’ and families’ needs.

Thank you for supporting our schools and students. We look forward to working in partnership with students, families, and school communities to create a district of high-quality school programs that meets the needs of every student in Baltimore.

Sincerely,

Dr. Sonja Brookins Santelises
Chief Executive Officer