November 9, 2021

Dear Digital Harbor High School Families, Students, and Community Members,

City Schools is committed to making sure that every school across the city provides our students with high-quality educational experiences that enables students to thrive, supports their learning and encourages their personal growth.

Part of our work in reaching this goal includes an annual review of the district’s schools and programs that looks at a broad range of considerations, including academic performance, school climate, school programming, enrollment trends, conditions of school facilities, the range and balance of school options in different parts of the city, and the 21st Century School Buildings Plan.

Tonight, based on the results of this year’s review, 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.

If approved current students attending New Era Academy would be able to continue their work in existing pathways at Ben Franklin or Digital Harbor. 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 of New Era Academy, students would still have the option to select from among other high school choices beyond Digital Harbor and Ben Franklin.

A major reason for this recommendation is the facility that houses New Era Academy which is the closest high school to Digital Harbor and Benjamin Franklin, has major challenges. Specifically, the heating system is failing and in need of a total replacement. While the district has continued to make repairs to ensure the heating system works for now, these solutions are only temporary fixes that will not work long term. A replacement of New Era’s heating system is a Capital Improvement Project, and Capital Improvement Projects require state approval. New Era’s utilization does not meet state requirements for Capital Improvement Funding and so the district cannot get approval to fix the existing facility. The heating issue is not the only issue with the Southside building. Additionally, New Era Academy is one of the district’s smallest high schools, which impacts our ability to provide comprehensive academic programming to students.

Relocating the PTECH program (a program where students can earn their high school diploma, a no-cost associate’s degree and support with job placement) and the Seagoing CTE pathway to Digital Harbor will allow more students to benefit from these programs linked to careers in in-demand industries. Providing preference for students from the zones indicated above will allow these students from an area that is not very accessible, greater access to the high schools closest to their homes.

As a member of the Digital Harbor High School community, your feedback on this recommendation is critical. A meeting will take place at your school on Wednesday, December 8 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 and other information learned through the process including public feedback, the Board will vote on these recommendations at its meeting on Tuesday, January 11, 2022. If the Board votes to approve closure of New Era Academy, district office staff will support the transition process to ensure it 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