Dear Johnston Square Elementary 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 enable 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.

Johnston Square has had low enrollment over the past several years. The size of the school population impacts our ability to provide your student(s) with robust and varied academic programming. The school facility can safely accommodate many more students and is in better shape than another nearby undersized school, Dr. Bernard Harris, Sr. Elementary School. When schools are of a healthy size (a sustainable elementary program is about 400 – 500 students), per-student funding allows school leaders working with families and community partners to prioritize rich and varied programming in schools.

Additionally, Harford Heights recently opened in its new 21st century building and has space for additional students. Closing Dr. Bernard Harris and splitting the zone between Johnston Square and Harford Heights will ensure students have access to facilities better able to support learning in healthy environments, and will increase access to rich, robust, and varied educational programs.

Therefore tonight, based on the results of this year’s review, I am recommending that the Baltimore City Board of School Commissioners consider closing the Dr. Bernard Harris, Sr. Elementary School and splitting the zone between Johnston Square and Harford Heights at the end of the school year. I believe this will increase student and family access to schools in better buildings with the capacity to have increased per-student funding to sustain rich, robust, and varied educational programs less than a mile from students’ homes.

I am also recommending that the Baltimore City Board of School Commissioners consider returning the Dr. Bernard Harris, Sr. building to the city of Baltimore in summer 2022.

If the closure is approved, starting in the 2022-23 school year, students in the Bernard Harris, Sr. zone who live south of Preston Street would be rezoned to Johnston Square, and students who live north of Preston Street would be rezoned to Harford Heights. As part of this recommendation, the district will also make additional improvements to the Johnston Square facility and academic programming.

As a member of the Johnston Square school community, your feedback on this recommendation is critical. A meeting at your school will take place beginning at 5:30 p.m. on Tuesday, November 30 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 this recommendation at its meeting on Tuesday, January 11, 2022. If the Board votes to approve closure of the Dr. Bernard Harris, Sr. school program, 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