



T.C. WILLIAMS HIGH SCHOOL
3330 KING STREET, ALEXANDRIA VA 22302

April 20, 2016

To The Honorable Mayor Allison Silberberg, Honorable Members of City Council,
And Honorable Members of the School Board:

As you, the City Council, continue your deliberations for the FY 2017-FY2018 budget, please take a bold step and allocate funds to build a new secondary school on the site of the present Minnie Howard Ninth Grade Center.

This letter is signed by PTA presidents of secondary schools, who agree that you need to make a strong capital investment on behalf of our high school students, increasing capacity and providing the needed space for the steadily increasing number of students choosing to attend T. C. Williams High School.

We know this is a very big “ask.” Yet we read your newsletters, watch your meetings, and hear your comments that for too long, the city has not addressed the capital needs of our school buildings, many of which were built prior to 1960.

Indeed, this request is beyond what the School Board recommended in its Capital Improvement Budget. To meet your budget guidance, the Board scaled back and redistributed funds in the Superintendent’s proposed 10-year CIP request for repair of elementary schools, to rent a building for a second pre-K center, and to build an elementary school on the West End (in addition to renting a building for a West end elementary school and a building for a high school “middle college” program).

While we support what the Board is requesting, we nonetheless ask that you go further and allocate funds to address secondary capacity needs, thus providing the city with a long-term solution. Our position supports that of the TC Williams Instructional Leadership Team (ILT), which is comprised of department chairs of the high school. Representing the ILT, Mark Eaton, co-chair of the high school’s English department and a former chairman of the School Board, testified recently before the School Board that overcrowding at T.C. Williams’ King Street campus necessitates creating more room for the growing number of high school students. A very feasible solution is to rebuild the Minnie Howard Ninth Grade Center on its present Braddock Road site to accommodate more students at Minnie Howard, thus reducing the number of students at the King Street campus.

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The Board's budget projects a combined enrollment for T. C. Williams King Street Campus and Minnie Howard Ninth Grade Center at 3,594 (854 for Minnie Howard) students in FY2016 and 4,623 (986 for Minnie Howard) by FY2026 – a 28 percent increase. Clearly, our relatively new T. C. Williams will not be big enough for the enrollment growth.

An over-crowded situation will get much worse before it gets better. Already, there are concerns about the safety of our students at T. C. Williams. Students and faculty have told us of:

- fire drills at the King Street building, in which students were jammed into stairwells and had there been an actual fire, would not have been able to escape.
- too many students in the TCW cafeteria, causing long lines for all and consequently, not enough time to eat lunch. Many students end up taking their lunch with them to their next class period.
- the greater likelihood of fights breaking out in too-crowded spaces, such as the cafeteria.
- traffic jams every morning at arrival and every afternoon at dismissal, on both sides of the TCW campus.
- several teachers having 30-plus students in their classes.
- King Street campus running out of classrooms. Some staff members are “floaters” – teachers who live on a cart and move from room to room.

You have excellent data and research at your fingertips, in the final report of the Long Range Educational Facilities Work Group. This report, undertaken jointly by City staff and ACPS staff, as well as various stakeholders, studied enrollment trends, housing challenges, and educational facilities. The Council endorsed this report in June 2015, which stated that our public schools currently require a high level of maintenance and repair just to keep basic systems operating and structures safe and sound. The report called on our City's elected officials to improve our school buildings, knowing the enrollment trends we've seen in the past few years will continue a steady upward trend.

Nine of our 13 elementary schools are currently over capacity. All but two will be over capacity by FY 2026, and the two schools that will not be over capacity -- Jefferson Houston Elementary School and Cora Kelly Elementary School – will be over 90 percent of capacity at that time. Both of our middle schools are currently beyond capacity. All of these students will arrive at the doorstep of Minnie Howard, and then T. C. Williams, in the very near future. If we're beyond capacity now in our lower grades, what will happen to our high school in just two years?

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We must together think outside the box. Please look ahead in your budget deliberations, and support the City's only public high school with funds to build a new school at the Minnie Howard Ninth Grade Center, providing desperately needed space for our students to excel academically and an environment in which our school administration and faculty can deliver their very best teaching and care to our students.

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TCW PTSA Board
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