

Alice Johnson Cain: Students deserve a solution to busing question



Alice Johnson Cain is a member of the Annapolis Education Commission and is executive vice president of Teach Plus, a nonprofit that works with teacher leaders in Maryland and seven other states to improve outcomes for underserved children. (Handout / HANDOUT)

By **Alice Johnson Cain**

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This week, more than 100 Annapolis Middle School students were slated to lose school bus service and, instead, walk a total of three miles to and from school every day under dangerous conditions. After a public outcry, including parent testimony at a recent school board meeting, schools Superintendent George Arlotto and the county Board of Education wisely reversed the decision – for now.

A letter from the superintendent made it clear, however, that this is only a temporary fix and that “this postponement should not be viewed as a reversal of our earlier decision ... It should be viewed as ... the opportunity to have continued dialogue (and further) study. That study, to be clear, may eventually lead us

to the same decision as was previously announced.”

This is simply not good enough. The decision needs to be extended indefinitely because the three main reasons for the outcry – which all center on student safety -- are problematic now and for the foreseeable future.

First, the longest stretch of the proposed walking route is along Forest Drive, where cars regularly drive well above the 40-mph speed limit. Portions of the route, such as the heavily traveled driveway of the 7-Eleven on the corner of Forest Drive and Spa Road, do not have a sidewalk, and there is a constant flow of cars and trucks all day.

Second, there are reportedly at least 48 registered sex offenders along the route, as well as a halfway house for recovering addicts. This is of particular concern, given that Anne Arundel County Public Schools has no plan for any adult presence among the 11- to 14-year-olds.

School staff told parents that no crossing guards would be added along the route, since that decision is out of their control and is up to the City of Annapolis.

Even more alarming: At least two students have been hit by cars while going to and from Annapolis Middle School, one in November and one last year, while biking home from school on Forest Drive.

Third, do we really want children walking three miles a day in the rain, snow or freezing cold? What will happen if snowdrifts cover the sidewalks and children walk in the street instead?

Several parents told the school system that under those circumstances they would keep their children home. This is a reasonable choice, but it will not advance the system’s stated goals of improving academic achievement and promoting equity.

Surprisingly, the school system says its motive for this change is not cost. It will not save any money. Parents were informed that the system will divert these buses from Annapolis Walks, Greenbriar, Newtowne and Woodside Gardens to other bus stops in order to alleviate overcrowding on other bus routes for other Annapolis Middle School students.

The stated rationale from the school for the removal of bus service is that sidewalks were added or repaired along the proposed walking route over the summer and that the school’s policy requires any who lives within 1.5 miles of a school with sidewalks to walk rather than ride a bus.

Policies were made to be reviewed, updated and, at times, waived. The only acceptable next step for the

school system is to let common sense prevail, reverse this decision for the long-term, and continue to provide bus service for these students and families who are important members of the Annapolis Middle School community.

Every parent at this school entrusts the school system with their greatest treasure: their our children. The system's decision on this matter will demonstrate whether it is worthy of this trust.

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