

Virginia Spatz

Testimony of a concerned neighbor of Eastern Senior High School  
to the Committee of the Whole  
Hearing on OPEFM, 6/25/08

Some members of the Council know me in my capacity as a writer covering education and community issues. I regularly write for several local papers. But I am not here in that capacity today.

I am a resident of DC, the parent of two DCPS students, and a neighbor of Eastern Senior High School. From our first apartment here in the District, my husband and I listened to Eastern football games announced over the loudspeaker, and we have lived within a few blocks of the school for twenty years.

I am here today as a concerned neighbor of Eastern high school who has watched the school turn from the vibrant "Pride of Capital Hill" to a struggling institution in a facility which is in desperate need of modernization. As a resident of what is now called Hill East, at the far edge of Capitol Hill, I believe the entire community should be included in decisions about Eastern and its physical plant, beginning with those most immediately affected and most intimately aware of school needs.

Members of Eastern's LSRT and PTA are participating in a principal selection panel today and were unable to take off yet more time from work. Some will be submitting written testimony. The Friends of Eastern Society, which consists of past PTA officers, alumni and community members, was similarly unable to draft an official representative for today. Because my day job was bringing me to this chamber anyway, and because I wear many hats in the neighborhood, I was asked by the immediate past president of the Eastern PTA to appear today so that Eastern's concerns would be conveyed.

In the 2006 Master Facilities Plan, Eastern – which is 85 years old and has had little work done in the last 15 years -- was deemed in dire need of renovation and was slated to undergo modernization during the upcoming 2008 school year. During the MFP development process, there were discussions with the Eastern community about temporary relocation of students during renovations and about the educational basis for facilities decisions. At this point, here in 2008, there have been no discussions with the community about facilities improvements or a timeline for the work.

This is particularly worrisome to the Eastern community in light of the May 15 restructuring announcements. The decision to phase-out/re-open Eastern, which was announced at a press conference along with the 26 other restructuring plans, was not first vetted with the school community. The plan was not brought to the LSRT or PTA for discussion. Nor was the wider community around the school consulted, or even notified, that Eastern's current program would begin phasing out in 2008. Were modernization handled similarly, the neighborhood would learn of building timelines only when a construction crew turned up, and we would be left begging for design details long after walls were moved.

Notification of the decision to deny admission to ninth graders for 2008 disrupted active school improvement efforts, coming after the school had worked for months with an external partner to create a new Ninth Grade Academy and following music and athletic recruitment. Were modernization similarly handled, ground-breaking for a new aero-space-based school design would destroy a vegetable garden planted six months earlier when Eastern launched a partnership for urban agriculture

education.

Outreach to Eastern's rising ninth graders to let them know that Eastern was not accepting a new freshman class, was not begun until June 19 -- five weeks after the initial announcement -- according to the Chancellor's office. If modernization were similarly handled, students could be told of swing space arrangements only after their desks and lockers had been gone for a month.

As a result of the surprise restructuring action, the failure to communicate to those most affected, and the complete disregard for community input, there is a consequent fear at Eastern that facilities decisions will be made in a similar manner – without consultation with, or even notice to, those most concerned or to the wider community.

In addition, there is concern that any facilities planning must now be coordinated with the phase-out/re-open timeline so that the academic program and extra-curricular activities of existing Eastern students are not further compromised by disruptive renovations or last-minute moves.

The condition of Eastern facilities and any redesign efforts are of concern to the neighborhood, to Ward 6 as a whole and to many residents east of the river, for whom Eastern has been a neighborhood school. For the sake of all concerned – from current students and faculty, to neighbors who are just now considering where they might send their young ones to high school, to the future neighbors who will come with the Hill East Waterfront development – community input is imperative and must begin with those most immediately affected.

I implore Councilmembers to ensure that neither Eastern nor any other school community is treated in the modernization process the way Eastern has been treated in the restructuring process and to ensure that all modernization decisions are undertaken with meaningful participation by all concerned.

Thank you for your consideration.