



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20515

October 14, 2014

Mr. Scott E. Congdon, Board President
Neshaminy School District
2001 Old Lincoln Highway
Langhorne, PA 19047

Dear President Congdon:

In 1954, the Samuel Everitt Elementary School, located in the Snowball Gate section of Levittown, opened its doors to 380 students, grades kindergarten through fifth. William J. Levitt, credited as the creator of the modern American suburb, built and designed Levittown as a complete community, with schools being an integral part of a neighborhood. Notably, Levitt donated land in each neighborhood for a public elementary school.

Levitt also was creative in planning the street names, with some reminiscent of their purpose or their location. For example, Learning Lane connects two sections with the Walt Disney Elementary School. He had the vision to foresee how the different sections formed neighborhoods and ultimately a community.

In addressing our school district issue, I see Samuel Everitt, Oliver Heckman and Lower Southampton elementary schools as much more than buildings. They represent our community history, the future of our neighborhoods and certainly the children who learn there. In the case of Samuel Everitt, it is the distinct part of the larger concept of a community's plan.

Municipalities and developers now look to include schools and other critical uses into development plans to create walkable communities with ancillary benefits -- we can rely less on our cars, reduce traffic, improve air quality and benefit our health.

I grew up in Snowball Gate and along with my wife, Kathy, have chosen to raise our family here. Samuel Everitt happens to be my neighborhood school. I attended kindergarten there and have many childhood memories playing with friends on the streets, our yards and the playground at Samuel Everitt. I feel fortunate my children have had a similar experience growing up.

As a former school district solicitor, I fully understand the pressure school districts face in complying with government mandates, fiscal constraints and curriculum requirements in a rapidly changing society, but it is important to know our children are not line items in a budget.

School merger and consolidation plans are often considered a favorable solution to declining enrollment, however these measures may be shortsighted. After reaching a peak in the early 1970's, public school enrollment across the nation declined during the remainder of the 1970's and early 1980's but began rising in the latter part of the 1980s. Enrollment continued to increase throughout the 1990's, 2000's, and early 2010.

Over the decades, we've seen the enrollment rollercoaster play out across the county. Although today, Central Bucks School District is the third largest district in the state, in the early 1980's the enrollment was trending downward. Assured decreasing enrollment would continue, they closed three elementary schools; however, enrollment did not remain in decline. In fact, enrollment was on the rise by the mid- 1980's. It was gradual at first but by decade's end, it was rapid. Then Superintendent Winters said, "To be frank, we weren't prepared for it. We've had to scramble."

By the mid 1990's headline grabbing cost-overruns were commonplace. In one year alone, cost overruns at several schools hit the \$1 million mark.

Such occurrences were not limited to the Central Bucks School District -- school districts throughout the county had similar experiences. Rather than scrambling sometime in the future, I respectfully request that the Neshaminy School District Board of Directors to give careful and thoughtful consideration to moving ahead with their plans. Please take more time to study census data, real estate trends, the real cost of renovation and construction, faculty positions, class size and logistics. This information should be presented in public forums with ample opportunity for resident input and feedback.

Our schools are a critical part of our community plan and our country's future. There are many elements of the decision to close and consolidate schools that must be carefully examined. Revisiting the history of decisions made by nearby school districts highlights the importance a holistic approach to these critical decisions.

Again, consider the concept of the Levittown developer – neighborhoods and communities that bring people closer together and in contact with the educators of our most precious commodity – the children, our future. Interaction comes easier with familiarity, which is why I believe this is a most important link in the decision-making process.

In closing, I am most appreciative of the dedication demonstrated over the years by the members of the Neshaminy School Board to our community. I ask that you thoughtfully consider your decision regarding proposed school closures and thank you in advance for your consideration.

Warmest regards,

Mike Fitzpatrick

cc: All Neshaminy School District Board of Directors