



## **Barnard Elementary School Parent Teacher Association**

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**Officers 2023-2024:** ShaVaughn Sanders (President), Eliza Cava (Vice President), Tiffany Reed (Treasurer), Nathalia Melamed (Secretary)

### **Finan Tesfai**

Project Coordinator, Facility Planning and Design

Office of Innovation and Systems Improvement, District of Columbia Public Schools

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June 13, 2024

Dear Ms. Tesfai,

The Barnard Bears PTA is very excited to be included in the Facilities Improvement Team (FIT) assisting DCPS and Barnard leadership in reviewing plans for the upcoming addition to our school campus to replace our outdated portables (which we call the "Annex"). Thank you for agreeing to set up a FIT, for inviting us to be on it, and for sharing concept plan options. Thank you also for creating a survey and inviting its distribution. We hope that many teachers and families get the chance to take the survey and share their ideas. While many of us have individually and anonymously taken the survey, the PTA Executive Board and other undersigned parent leaders at Barnard wish to take this opportunity to state our opinions on the concept plans, and the process to date, in more detail.

The PTA works with Barnard Administration to support families in meeting their basic needs, providing enrichment to the children, advising the administration in decision-making, and providing avenues of communication between families and school. Our meetings are scheduled in-person at the school on Thursday evenings once each month during the school year, with interpretation provided in Spanish and Amharic, and a livestream available for remote participation.

Below please find our comments on the process and the concept plans.

# I. Process of Addition Design and Contracting

## a. Community Engagement

We appreciate that DCPS reversed its initial decision not to create an SIT or FIT, and began engaging our broader school community - thank you! We look forward to extensive additional collaboration over the year to come ensuring that voices from throughout the school community are included. We look to our peer schools, such as Truesdell Elementary, Maury Elementary, and others with recent modernizations, as a standard for the level of community engagement that should be reached throughout these processes.

## b. Scope / Need to Repair the Existing Building

We have heard throughout this spring that the capital budget number, \$19 million, is "set in stone" and not able to be adjusted, and the Ed Spec for this project is exclusively the addition, athletic fields, and the points at which the addition will connect to the main building, without otherwise touching the main building. However, our school has additional needs that may not fit within the Ed Spec or budget, and so we look forward to working with you on a plan to address them all within the next few years. We appreciate this opportunity to share our ideas, with the hope that DCPS and the Council will find the means to fund them in the near future.

While the main school building is about 23 years old and not in need of a complete renovation, it has structural issues that affect use and instruction that should be addressed while investments are being made into Barnard's campus. For example, the basement leaks even in small rain storms, and a large storm can set off the fire alarm.

**We have had sewage backups, broken water fountains, broken door locks, an unreliable front desk phone system, and broken HVAC components just in this past school year. Storage spaces are also inadequate for the needs of such a large student body.** These issues (or other priorities identified by the school administration) should be addressed, if not in the current capital budget, in a very near one.

The most important systems upgrade would be to our **plumbing** system. Clearing clogs, replacing broken fixtures, and generally preparing the plumbing to last another 25 years

is essential and should not cost millions of dollars. Secondary to that, our **HVAC** system also seems to be on its last legs and in likely need of replacement.

Another, more minor concern but important for morale, is the state of our **teachers' lounge**. Including a very small and inexpensive set of upgrades to the teacher's lounge, or perhaps a new teacher's lounge in the new wing so that the existing one can be converted to an office, storage, or special projects room, would be a real morale boost to our wonderful staff.

**At the very least, the main building should receive cosmetic touch-ups and new matching student furniture as part of this project.**

## II. Comments on Concept Designs

### Instructional Design

The PTA does not have strong opinions on either concept from an instructional perspective and defers to the teachers and staff on questions such as classroom layout, colors and materials, etc. We do support an **outdoor classroom** (Concept 2).

### Gathering Space / "Hub"

We strongly support the idea of a **larger indoor gathering space/"hub"** in the new wing (Concept 2). Our current large space cannot be easily divided (and it's impossible to soundproof) at the gym/cafeteria. The only other medium-sized gathering spaces in the school are the library and the front lobby, both of which can conflict with other uses. For example, the PTA this year has set up all our meetings in the gym at the same time as after care is wrapping up in the cafeteria and gym. Besides the in-school staff, the PTA would be eager to use such a new "hub" for our meetings and other gatherings.

### Access to Campus

It's excellent that both concepts will provide more secure access to the playground during regular school hours and afterwards. We support a **breezeway-type access to the playground** (closest to the entryway described in Concept 1), perhaps with two sets of glass double doors, to continue to support parent engagement and community at

the playground during pickup, especially. This entrance should be secure but also inviting, with a clear visual to the playground and across it to the door to the existing lobby. Currently during pickup, parents allow their children to linger at the playground while adults engage one another in conversation. The walk through the playground to the office allows parents to view banners, and PTA announcements. Our monthly food distribution takes place in the playground and is very important to the community. The PTA distributes flyers, sells tickets, and recruits volunteers at a table near the playground for several days each month. It's important that this community hub remain accessible as well as secure.

Another important use of the playground space is to **access pre-K classrooms directly on the ECE wing**. Parents greatly appreciate being able to drop off and pick up ECE students to their classroom or the one across the hall, instead of into the crowded lobby with the older children. It allows daily interaction with teachers and is a calmer, better-suited entrance point for our smallest scholars. Please maintain direct access to pre-K classrooms.

We also request that a **separate playground gate** be maintained, which the PTA can maintain a combination lock on, so neighborhood families can access the playground on weekends. We have a Playground Committee that schedules themselves to open, close, and clean-up the playground on Saturdays and Sundays.

## Athletic Facilities

We are THRILLED that our soccer-obsessed students will get a full, high quality soccer field and a new basketball court as well! **Thank you for this much-needed upgrade of our athletic facilities!**

## Bus Access, Bike Access, and Pedestrian Safety

As a school with a well-known and large CES program, we have a need for **adequate and safe bus parking** every day at dropoff and pickup, as well as more occasional use for field trips and athletic events. Bus access does not seem to be included in either concept design and is very important to the school. Asking students in wheelchairs or using other assistive devices to climb up the very long ramp from the lower parking lot would be a challenging way to access the school on a daily basis, so please be sure that bus access is either on 4th or Decatur Street.

We anticipate a **need to work with DDOT on bus access, drop-off and pick-up safety** (for example, making the 400 block of Decatur St NW one-way at those times, similar to what was done at Bancroft Elementary School) and will appreciate DGS, DCPS, and contractor support on exploring and creating those changes.

Finally, the current bike rack is inside the playground near the lobby door, and it seems that it will not be accessible once access is through a breezeway. There will likely need to be a **new bike rack at the sidewalk**.

## Garden

We are very pleased that DCPS plans to move and maintain our garden. We would like to be sure the greenhouse is replaced as well. **We request not only making a plan to retain the greenhouse and annual garden, but also the mature fruit orchard.** Our students love those trees for both climbing and eating the fruit and they should be either moved or replaced with mature trees at the new garden site.

## Shade

We need **more shade elements** in the schoolyard and around the new field area. We've had the loss of a mature tree recently and the new playground doesn't have enough shade.

Thank you again for the opportunity to comment. We appreciate your work to improve our school and are excited to be a part of the process.

Sincerely,

ShaVaughn Sanders  
PTA President, 3rd- and 5th-grade  
parent

Tiffany Reed  
PTA Treasurer, 3rd-grade parent

Eliza Cava  
PTA Vice-President, 1st-grade and PK4  
parent

Nathalia Melamed  
PTA Secretary, 1st- and 4th-grade  
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Alissa Mickelson  
LSAT Member

Rebecca Sanghvi  
LSAT chair, rising K and rising 3rd parent

Dylan Butler  
FIT Member, incoming PK3 and K parent

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LSAT member, rising 3rd grade parent

Melissa Luce  
FIT Member, incoming PK3 and K parent

Courtney Edwards  
LSAT Member, Rising 4th-grade parent

Wasima Gary  
FIT member

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CC:

Dr. Grace Reid, Barnard Elementary School

Office of Councilmember Janeese Lewis-George