

SRT 4 (North) Focus Group Meeting Notes
October 18, 2011
Sutton Middle School

Strength-Weaknesses-Opportunities-Threats Analysis (SWOT Analysis) is a tool for investigation and decision making. SWOT analysis is used for a variety of purposes in business and by different kinds of organizations - including school districts. SWOT analysis promotes brainstorming. Rather than relying on ingrained or instinctive reactions, SWOT Analysis promotes proactive thinking. On October 18 two SRT 4 Focus Groups conducted a SWOT analysis for elementary schools, followed by a similar discussion of middle/high schools. The SWOT was conducted around the following general subject areas:

- a. Communities and schools
- b. Redistricting, consolidation, expansion
- c. Alternative grade configurations/center concepts

Discussion results are summarized below. "Identified issues" summarize findings reported by the consultant team or observations made by focus group participants which do not easily fall into the SWOT framework. Issues are followed by the SWOT results. Where points apply specifically to middle or high schools they are noted as such. Otherwise the statements either refer to elementary schools or are applicable to all grade levels. Observations marked in red were identified as priorities by 3 or more focus group participants.

IDENTIFIED ISSUES:

- Demographic trends indicate that enrollment at most SRT 4 schools should continue to rise over the next several years, particularly in the middle and high school grades;
- Most SRT 4 schools are already over-capacity;
- Most existing school sites are constrained and have limited potential for further on-site expansion. Existing SRT 4 elementary and middle schools are already among the largest in APS based on current enrollment;
- Some existing schools cannot accommodate as many students as "design capacity" standards indicate due to the physical characteristics of the structures or the space requirements of programs being operated within those schools;
- SRT 4 has a large percentage of school-aged children attending private schools. This population has the potential to further increase enrollment if those students re-enter public schools. At the same time, SRT 4 parents have numerous options and could leave the system if over-crowding is not addressed or redistricting solutions are perceived to be detrimental to student achievement.



STRENGTHS

- Most neighborhood schools have strong community/business support and partnerships. Several schools have strong parental involvement and active PTAs. PTAs have been successful in expanding financial resources for schools.
- Many students are able to walk to their schools.
- Diversity is a strength at Rivers, Garden Hills and Bolton Academy. There is a greater diversity of student population at the middle and high school levels because of their larger attendance zones.
- Strong academic performance and student achievement, quality teachers and staff. Parents throughout the SRT tend to have higher educational levels and support the schools. The IB program was identified as a strength.
- The participation rate in public schools has increased in recent years as private school students have been returning to APS - although that momentum may have stalled recently.
- APS is perceived to provide a good value relative to cost in SRT 4, particularly in comparison to private schools.

WEAKNESSES

- Some schools in the SRT lack diversity. Parental involvement is not strong at all schools (i.e. Garden Hills).

- While neighborhood schools are strengths, several schools are located on constrained sites with little/no potential for further expansion.
- The quality of facilities, use of technology and educational delivery vary across neighborhood schools.
- Larger attendance zones and primary centers complicate transportation issues and stretch resources of parents who have children in different schools.
- Negative publicity and a “trust factor” with APS are keeping some parents from sending their children to public schools. Many are taking a “wait and see” approach regarding how APS addresses crowding issues in SRT 4.
- There is a general perception that schools are perhaps getting too large in terms of enrollment, causing class sizes to increase and straining resources. Lack of facilities and competition for limited slots were denying some students (particularly middle schoolers) the opportunity to participate in sports and cultural activities. This places APS at a disadvantage against smaller private schools which offer better athletic facilities and more opportunities for students to participate.
- Sutton’s large grade level enrollment makes it difficult for teachers who are teaching 150 to 200 students to get to know those students as individuals. Middle schools provide a less personal

educational experience for students.
Some students get “lost in the crowd.”

support for schools, split neighborhoods
and increase transportation costs.

OPPORTUNITIES

- Approach redistricting in a “positive” way while minimizing community division.
- Consider alternative grade configurations, including K-5 models in place of primary centers, 5th/6th grade, K-8 configurations, etc. in some locations where it may make sense.
- Evaluate the option to create a new elementary school at Sutton MS.
- Make sure that the new North Atlanta High School offers a “total” educational experience, including athletics. High schools which have developed long-standing athletic traditions help to build more cohesive communities around them.
- Moving the middle school to NAHS and building a new high school could enable APS to reduce student populations at the remaining schools.

- “Class issues” complicate redistricting. If two middle school attendance zones are created, should the zones be drawn with the objective of making them demographically diverse (internally) or different from each other? (Opinions are mixed on that point.) In an area where parents have ample private school choice, APS runs the risk of setting up some schools for failure.
- Potential loss of IB certification.
- Potential loss of Title I funding.
- Perceptions of academic inequality/poor performance levels in some schools are worse than reality. Perceptions will have to be fought to achieve solutions which benefit the SRT as a whole.

THREATS

- Redistricting children into larger attendance zones and transporting them to schools further from their neighborhoods. Creating oddly shaped or gerrymandered attendance zones just to achieve enrollment balance.
- Redistricting could potentially dilute parental involvement and business

