

MEMORANDUM

TO: City of Coral Gables (the “City”)
FROM: Abby Corbett, Stearns Weaver Miller Weissler Alhadeff & Sitterson, P.A.
(Reviewed by Craig E. Leen, City Attorney)
RE: Update on Controlled Choice Schools
DATE: December 10, 2014

This Memorandum summarizes the status of our efforts to work with the School Board to end the use of Controlled Choice (also known as Controlled Open Enrollment) at Coral Gables Preparatory Academy, George Washington Carver Elementary, and Sunset Elementary.

I. The December 4th ABC meeting

On December 4th, Commissioner Keon, Commissioner Quesada, City Attorney Craig Leen, and I attended a publicly-noticed meeting of the School Board’s Attendance Boundary Committee. This is the Committee that oversees changes to boundaries for school assignments. Although we originally were told by School Board staff that only one of us would be permitted to speak, the Chairman of the Committee gave all four of us permission to talk. We also passed out to the Committee copies of Mayor Cason’s November 24th letter to Superintendent Carvalho.

For purposes of this December 4th meeting, we focused our discussion primarily on the Controlled Choice issue, although issues relating to West Lab and Tucker Elementary were also discussed briefly at the meeting. We requested that all three of the schools where Controlled Choice is still being used be put on “targeted” status, which is one of two actions that the Committee could take at this stage. Targeted status means that the Committee intends to recommend changes to the boundaries for these schools before the start of the next school year and that community meetings will be held to discuss the potential changes. Another, lesser action that the Committee could have taken was to put these schools on “advised” status, which – as the Committee explained it – means that more research will be done into the issue but action will not be taken for the next school year.

We presented all of our strongest arguments against the application of Controlled Choice at these three schools, including (1) the lack of certainty it creates for many families in not knowing where their children will be assigned until approximately six weeks before school starts; (2) the illogical result of families living near, or even walking distance from, one school and dealing with the traffic and congestion from that school on a daily basis but their children being assigned to a different school across town to fight that traffic each morning; and (3) the fact the City’s residents are being treated differently than residents elsewhere in the County where Controlled Choice has been abolished.

The issue spawned a vibrant debate among the Committee members and others in attendance, and the details of that debate will be outlined in our presentation at Tuesday’s Commission meeting.

After the discussion ended, the Committee ultimately voted – 16 to 1 – to put the three Controlled Choice schools on “targeted” status, which is the action that we asked for.

II. What Happens Next With These Three Schools

According to the standard Attendance Boundary Committee protocol, the first thing that happens after schools are put on targeted status is that the principals of the targeted schools are notified. Then, our Central Region Superintendent – Dr. Albert Payne, Jr. – will coordinate community meetings jointly with the Office of School Facilities and School Operations to discuss proposed boundary changes with the affected communities and to receive the community’s input. The dates for those community meetings will likely be posted on the School Board’s website this Friday, December 12.

After each meeting, the Region Superintendent’s office submits reports about these community meetings to the School Operations staff. Ultimately, the community submits their recommendation(s) to the Attendance Boundary Committee, and the Region Superintendent’s office submits its recommendations. Principals of the affected schools then meet with community and student leaders to inform them of the recommendations, and the recommendations are also posted on bulletin boards and/or other prominent locations at the schools.

Because the Attendance Boundary Committee anticipates that there will be more community meetings this year (given the large number of schools district-wide that are on targeted status), the deadline by which all of the community meetings will be completed is still up in the air. But it is our understanding that the next meeting of the Attendance Boundary Committee is tentatively set for February 12 at 9:30 a.m., and that is the meeting at which the Committee will review recommendations submitted by the community and by the Region Superintendent’s office.

After that February 12 meeting, the School Board’s Diversity, Equity, and Excellence Advisory Committee will meet and will review the boundary change recommendations. Then, the Region Superintendent will present the recommendation that have been approved by the Attendance Boundary Committee to Superintendent Carvalho, the School Board attorney, and appropriate School Board staff. Then, sometime in April, the School Board itself will have a Conference Session, and there will be a first reading of the 2015-2016 attendance zone changes at that meeting. Then, at a School Board meeting sometime in May, a final reading of the changes will be presented.

It should be noted that in our discussions with the School Board staff, they have encouraged us to work closely from the outset with the Carver Elementary community and to attempt to submit a joint recommendation plan map to the Attendance Boundary Committee, rather than having competing plans. They have also cautioned us – in general terms – that some citizens of Coral Gables will likely be unhappy with how the school assignment map is ultimately changed, in part because Sunset Elementary only has the capacity for a small home school (versus its substantial magnet program), and therefore a number of Coral Gables residents may still ultimately be assigned to other elementary schools that are not in Coral Gables.

III. West Lab Elementary Status

We are also continuing to work on the West Lab student assignment issue. The City Manager's office is currently working with the University of Miami and the School Board to attempt to negotiate a student assignment policy that provides an admission preference for those within some geographic proximity to the school.

IV. Tucker Elementary Status

The Attendance Boundary Committee did not vote on whether or not to put Tucker Elementary on advised or targeted status. However, there was discussion about the fact that the boundaries for Tucker may ultimately be revised if changes are made to the three Controlled Choice school boundaries as well as to Coconut Grove Elementary which is also on targeted status.