

Letter from the EMAC Secondary Schools Subcommittee to the PAUSD Board of Education

December 3, 2015

Members of the PAUSD Board of Education,

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the findings and recommendations of the Enrollment Management Advisory Committee, Secondary Schools Subcommittee (henceforth “EMAC-SSS”) at the School Board meetings on October 26 and November 10 and in our subsequent meetings with each of you individually.

The EMAC-SSS would like to more fully address a set of questions and assertions that emerged in these meetings. We wish to share the perspectives of the EMAC-SSS team for both the School Board and the community of Palo Alto, to encourage additional dialogue with each of you, and to pass these points of view on to the next Task Force that will take up these matters.

We heard positive feedback from the Board in open public session on the following aspects of our recommendations, and specifically, Board members said that our recommendations:

1. Presented concrete options to actively reduce the **aggregate enrollment** in each of our middle and high schools
2. Highlighted the desires of our community for more **programming alternatives**, specifically choices and pathways similar to the terrific programs already in place, but nascent and oversubscribed today, such as Team and the Social Justice pathway at Paly
3. Explored the **unique opportunity** presented by **available land at Cubberley**
4. Impacted the **greatest number of students** possible by focusing investment and attention toward our existing schools in addition to creating a new school
5. Presented concrete opportunities to **increase connectedness**, which is a top priority particularly for our high school students
6. Designed for **both middle and high school**, with particular emphasis on the middle school where there is broad agreement that current enrollment already exceeds District stated capacity
7. Represented a terrific opportunity to bring a **student-centered approach** to school design

The EMAC-SSS believes this is a great foundation to build upon. **Now** is the time for School Board members as community leaders to lead. **Now** is the time to harness the positive energy of the community. **Now** is the time to get deeply curious about these ideas, focus on the positives, show our community that there is a way to engage in positive dialogue, to explore creative partnerships, without reverting to prior fault lines, and to lead the way to discover what might be possible.

Since our Board presentations on October 26 and November 10, the EMAC-SSS has heard 14 distinct issues or concerns about our preliminary findings and recommendations. We address each in turn.

A. Clarifying key misunderstandings of EMAC-SSS recommendations

We recommend that the District establish a Design Task Force to consider how or whether to:

1. Expand small learning communities or pathways in our existing secondary schools
AND
2. Design, finance and phase-in a new 6-12 school (or schools)

The Design Task Force should be inclusive, specifically including teachers, principals, students, and a diverse and representative group of community members and other stakeholders. It should be focused on how best to improve our secondary schools, including BOTH of the EMAC-SSS proposals, and consistent with a strategic, deliberate, shared vision of the future.

We are disappointed that in the Board meetings and the media, discussion of a potential new school has eclipsed discussion of the EMAC-SSS recommendation for our existing schools. We ask the Board to kindly not disregard or lose sight of how critical, achievable and beneficial the thoughtful design and consideration of expanded SLC's and pathways can be for our existing schools.

Equally important, the EMAC-SSS is not recommending an immediate Board decision on *whether* these recommendations should be implemented. Those decisions should be reserved for a later date – e.g., June 2016 – after a Design Task Force has met and completed their work, so that we can investigate what might be possible.

The EMAC-SSS is proposing a Design Task Force to explore how these actions *might* be done. Stated more plainly, our recommendation is to continue the work EMAC-SSS has started on the “why” by commissioning a Design Task Force to come up with the “what” and the “how” so that the Board can be ready to make a set of go / no-go decisions by Summer 2016.

Perhaps it is human nature to skip ahead. We ask the Board's leadership in helping the community focus on the specific recommendation in front of us now, not the one that is potentially down the road.

Please see **Appendix A** for the full articulation of EMAC-SSS recommendations.

B. EMAC's charge and scope

After hearing the EMAC-SSS draft recommendations, several Board members questioned in open public session whether we went beyond the scope of our charter, given our committee contains the label “enrollment”. Please recall Board member remarks quoted in the [Palo Alto Online](#) in January 2015 praising the broadened charter of the newly commissioned EMAC, specifically citing the inclusion of academic programming and the environment in which such programming is delivered.

Could the EMAC-SSS have disentangled program vs. capacity vs. school structure? Please refer to Slides 28-34 in the October 26 Board Meeting Materials in which the EMAC-SSS explained its point of view that the size, structure and efficacy of learning communities are inseparable in the minds of the constituents that we interviewed and in the academic research. All three elements are part of an integrated picture.

Now, if the School Board actually wanted more narrow recommendations focused only on pure enrollment-based input, it could have simply used a demographer and District staff and dispensed with volunteer committees comprised of members from diverse professional backgrounds. However, the Board specifically did NOT ask for this (cf. [January article](#) referenced above), and to do so would miss a unique opportunity to draw strength and insight from diverse and fresh viewpoints.

EMAC-SSS recommends that the Design Task Force – the next step in this journey – contain a balance of students, teachers, administrators, parents, and perhaps outside experts to achieve the broad-based representation that creative problem solving and community alignment requires.

C. XQ concept submission

We wish to clear up any confusion or misperceptions about the role of the EMAC-SSS and the purpose for the concept submission on November 15 for the XQ Super Schools Initiative. XQ is a competition run by the Emerson Collective for private funds for innovative high schools. \$50 million will be granted to 5-10 high schools in 2016. The November 15 deadline was a qualifying deadline to submit responses to a set of questions with the actual grant application deadline being in February 2016.

A few days *after* the *Palo Alto Weekly* reported on our preliminary proposals to the Board on October 27, Professor Jo Boaler from Stanford Graduate School of Education (an existing Emerson grantee) reached out to Superintendent McGee and suggested working together with the District to submit a XQ concept proposal as a placeholder for a potential future grant. Dr. McGee connected Professor Boaler with the EMAC-SSS, members of the Stanford d.school, District parents and community members so that they might organize themselves to proceed with the concept submission.

The concept submission does not commit the District to build a school, or place any other obligations on the District. There is no downside and potentially a lot of upside – in the event that the School Board approves a Design Task Force to advance the findings of the EMAC-SSS. The submission is a placeholder that preserves the “option value” for a later date in the event the School Board chooses to move forward with a new high school.

The EMAC-SSS and associated XQ contributors from our community are obviously not responsible for communication protocols and processes between the Superintendent and the School Board. However, please note that the EMAC-SSS applauds the initiative of Superintendent McGee and the members of our community who were willing to volunteer their time to submit a concept and generate this option value in the form of potential non-taxpayer dollars for our community at no cost other than their own time.

D. Rumors of a charter school initiative

An unfounded narrative has surfaced that an initiative to establish a charter school is either underway, or that the current dialogue to improve our secondary schools is reminiscent of prior charter school discussions.

The EMAC-SSS team wishes to clarify unequivocally:

1. The EMAC-SSS presentations make no mention of needing a charter secondary school.
2. The XQ concept submission does NOT call for a charter secondary school, but rather clearly, specifically and optimistically calls for innovation within PAUSD.
3. The parent community that spoke in favor of EMAC’s recommendations did so respectfully, initiating a dialogue with nothing but positive and collaborative support within the District.
4. The EMAC-SSS individually and collectively as a team are NOT aware of and are NOT participating in any conversations or initiatives regarding a charter school.

We urge the School Board to monitor its own rhetoric about charter schools. Please do not incite the community to retreat to entrenched positions, to rush to judgment, to prematurely gird for battle, or succumb to fear that is perpetuated solely by speculation and rumor.

E. Allegations of bias in the EMAC Secondary Schools Subcommittee

Some have suggested there might be a pre-conceived bias within the EMAC-SSS, and insinuated that it might compromise the integrity of our findings.

One of the best things about the EMAC-SSS process is that we came together as five independent minded individuals, who looked objectively at the data, and who decided together that the preponderance of evidence unambiguously leads to a strong desire for a focus on connectedness, expanded programming options, smaller learning communities in our existing schools, and potentially a new school. We held healthy debates about the different points of view, and formed our recommendations as a team.

Citizens who serve on committees are obviously allowed to have a point of view, but that isn't the same as steering recommendations toward a pre-conceived bias.

- One member of EMAC-SSS is a prior School Board member and Cubberley Community Advisory Committee member
- Another member served on the recent Minority Achievement and Talent Development advisory committee
- A third member helped build and deliver a presentation to the School Board last June to envision what a new school might achieve.
- Yet another member is a 15+ year PAUSD PTA member and activist
- Members of EMAC were undoubtedly influenced by the work of several past committees and several came into the process with strong points of view for or against opening new schools.

The point is this: the EMAC, the School Board and other community members may have different points of view, but we believe we all have the best of intentions. This is democracy at work. Again, we urge the School Board to monitor its own rhetoric on these matters, and as community leaders, model productive dialogue for all.

F. Regarding school size

After reviewing the EMAC-SSS data and findings, several Board Members expressed agreement in open public session that a new middle school is advisable because enrollment exceeds district stated capacity at each school today. However they expressed differing viewpoints regarding our high schools.

The EMAC-SSS team wishes to point out that if the Board follows that argument for middle schools today, then the Board will surely arrive at the same conclusion about our High Schools 4-5 years from now, when enrollment will be 700 students greater than today. So why not start acting now?

A lot in this realm is debatable:

- Reasonable people can disagree whether high schools at 2300+ each are good or bad thing. We can find examples of very high performing high schools at that size or even bigger, but most academic studies show that large schools are not optimal.
- Some will dispute our list of benchmark schools. Some will prefer more study and gathering more data. Others prefer action and learning by doing.
- Some believe that we can just ride this out and hope for the best. Others believe that that is not an acceptable approach.

What is not debatable:

- . . . is the parent survey feedback that indicates a marked decline in connectedness and satisfaction from elementary to MS to HS. The EMAC-SSS does not believe, as some have suggested, that is an acceptable and expected fact of life.
- . . . is that students learn in different ways, that parents are asking for additional curriculum and programming options.
- . . . is the District has land available and a contractual obligation to develop a Master Plan for Cubberley with the City of Palo Alto for joint use.
- . . . is the national zeitgeist, local appetite for innovation in education, and confluence of other factors that make this a unique moment in time.

As with the climate change / global warming debate, a smart person can cherry-pick at any one of the data points due to their own prior bias, but we should not allow the debate to prevent us from taking a bold next step forward to discover what might be possible.

Please see **Appendix B** for more commentary on the school size debate.

G. Understanding the “true” enrollment capacity of Paly and Gunn, even after the recent bond and capital investments

This is an area of concern because our high school enrollment is expected to increase by an additional 700 students by 2020 compared to 2015, from 3900 to 4600 students. EMAC-SSS has made repeated efforts to vet the District’s “stated capacity” numbers for Paly and Gunn (i.e., each can supposedly accommodate ~2300 students when construction is done). Three members of the EMAC-SSS have engineering degrees and possess an analytical mindset, and yet we could NOT confirm that assertion unless we made some arduous assumptions. We recommend pursuing this line of inquiry harder, as EMAC-SSS has doubts as to whether the District’s stated capacity numbers are rooted in reality, in the schools.

For example, Paly and Gunn are able to hold just over 2300 students each (i.e., the District’s stated capacity) if and only if you accept 3 assumptions: (1) run capacity at 100%, (2) average classroom size of 28.5 students, and (3) many classrooms are used 6 out of 7 periods. If the Board wanted to go to 27.5 instead, you lose space for 70 students, or equivalently you will need 3 more classrooms at each school. Or if the Board wanted to run at a more reasonable 95% of capacity and a 27.5 ratio, now Paly and Gunn can enroll ~200 fewer students than the Stated Capacity. And all of this still assumes many classrooms being occupied 6 out of 7 periods – which means some teachers will not have their own classroom for prep and collaboration space, and also likely limiting space for teacher-student office hours.

Said another way, there seems to be a fundamental disconnect between the perceived capacity of the school and the actual situation on the ground at each school. The potential result is a false sense of precision and a false confidence in the District’s stated capacity figures for each school.

H. Regarding costs associated with fulfilling the EMAC-SSS recommendations

The EMAC-SSS team urges the Board to empower a properly constituted Design Task Force to propose creative solutions to manage the costs associated with fulfilling the recommendations. Clearly, the Board cannot make a fair, data-based decision about building a new school until it has empowered a team to delve deeper. We recommend exploring creative solutions with City of Palo Alto.

Please do not accept “\$10M incremental” as the cost of operating Cubberley as a school or schools. The quick, off-the-cuff answer is almost never the best answer. Don’t presume this is a fixed sum game. Let the Design Task Force do its work and give it parameters, such as:

- Any new school cannot spend more cost on a per capita basis than other schools in the District.
- The School Board and District administration should provide guidance on the upper limit of District funds that can be used toward achieving the recommendations.
- The Design Task Force will then design solutions and return to the School Board and District administration with a financing plan and options – both for capital costs and operating costs – by June 2016.

I. Ability to innovate and transfer innovations

[Board member comments removed pending Brown Act review] We heard divergent points of view on the ability to innovate within existing schools, and the pace at which innovations could be driven in our District. The EMAC-SSS agrees, this point is debatable.

- Some point to the multi-year process to implement a block schedule at our high schools, and a similar timeframe to rearrange elementary desks in pods not rows.
- Others point to innovations that have sprung up in the last few years like Team and the Social Justice Pathway.
- Both points of view cite reasonable data points as evidence.

[Board member comments removed pending Brown Act review] We also heard divergent points of view on the ability for innovations to transfer from school to school within the District. The EMAC-SSS also agrees, this point is debatable.

- Some point to Ohlone not changing other Palo Alto elementary schools much.
- Others point to little distinction currently between the Connections program at JLS, and the mainstream JLS experience.
- Yet others highlight that innovation transfer should be possible due to new/recent hires in district and point to individual school administration leadership who are more favorable to cross-school collaboration.

The EMAC-SSS team believes that (a) if the School Board decides that innovation transfer is important, (b) if a Task Force is empowered to design how it might be done, (c) if the School Board measures and rewards and reports on innovation transfer, then it will happen.

Additionally, the divergence in points of view on these matters is not a valid reason to prefer inaction, or to cease and block the recommendation of the EMAC-SSS to proceed with a Design Task Force. Deliberate effort must be applied to the conditions, the scaffolding, and the incentives for transfer to make sure that the improvements we make in new and existing schools can be shared. Perhaps a meaningful investment should be dedicated specifically to innovation transfer initiatives.

J. Parent appetite for “risk” at the high school level

[Board member comments removed pending Brown Act review] We heard the concern expressed that parents would volunteer someone else’s child to attend a new, unproven high school, but not their own child, due to the perceived high stakes associated with college admissions outcomes.

[Board member comments removed pending Brown Act review] We also heard other concerns expressed that a new high school as proposed by the EMAC-SSS would unfairly leave kids behind

because the new school would be smaller than actual demand, thereby excluding students who wished to attend but did not place through a choice-based lottery.

EMAC-SSS's belief is that both points of view are debatable, and we note that both points are opposites of each other. And they cannot both be true.

This leads the EMAC-SSS to believe that it has proposed a good first starting point for the Design Task Force to specify a new school that phases into an appropriate size over time to meet demand.

K. Leadership bandwidth

[Board member comments removed pending Brown Act review] We heard some questions regarding the ability of our District to manage change, and that even the exploration of opening new secondary schools will divert attention away from improving our existing schools. The EMAC-SSS believes this is a great question for the Board to pose to Superintendent McGee.

We also recommend learning from other districts and schools with the humility to understand what might be learned from others. Examples: How did Nueva expand to high school? How did Issaquah School District in the Seattle area (slightly larger district, comparable social-economically and academically) recently add a new comprehensive high school and an alternative choice high school?

EMAC-SSS also recommends that the Board, District staff, and the Design Task Force ask the community broadly for help, and be amazed at what turns out.

L. Modular and phased approach for new schools

[Board member comments removed pending Brown Act review] We heard the concern expressed that an initiative which also includes a new high school might be too complex and therefore risks completing a middle school which the Board may regard as a higher priority. Please note:

- One of the 5 charges of the proposed Design Task Force is to design a startup plan with options and recommendation for locations, size, scope and timing.
- It is common for schools to open progressively, grade-by-grade, and expanding grade size.
- The District has a contractual obligation to the City of Palo Alto to collaborate in good faith to jointly develop a Master Plan for Cubberley. This should be in-scope for the Design Task Force.
- If the School Board wishes, the Design Task Force can adopt a modular approach, considering the possibility of middle school and high school as distinct phases.
- The Design Task Force should include consideration of District sites other than Cubberley as part of phased solution.

M. Factoring in additional data from students and faculty

We are currently analyzing results of a survey of students (over 1500 responses) and faculty (over 175 responses) which concluded November 24.

N. "What would you do if you knew that you could not fail?"

This quote hangs in many classrooms around Palo Alto public schools. In this time of great opportunity, shouldn't PAUSD heed our own advice that we impress upon our students? There are some in our community who are promoting a campaign of fear, uncertainty and doubt regarding the EMAC-SSS recommendations. To them, we answer with the above remark, and invite them to a constructive conversation, to help imagine new possibilities, and to allow themselves to be inspired.

EMAC-SSS is not seeking a Board decision – at this time – on the opening of a new secondary school, nor are we asking the Board to implement smaller learning communities and pathways. We understand the School Board does not have enough information on whether to make those decisions today. Further work needs to occur by the larger PAUSD community, via the Design Task Force.

However, we do believe there are no obstacles and many good reasons to proceed with a Design Task Force to bring forth detailed answers to the key questions of budget, timeline, program and land use.

The decision at hand is whether these data, recommendations and community support that has been expressed so far calls for the establishment of a Design Task Force to creatively pursue specific answers to key questions before decisions can be made. We believe the answer is “yes”.

We praise both Superintendent McGee and the School Board for their leadership, enthusiastic support, and the environment that encourages the creative energy of this community to imagine what might be possible for our secondary students.

With warm regards and optimism for the future of PAUSD and our students,

The EMAC Secondary Schools Subcommittee

Sheena Chin

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Joe Lee

Diane Reklis

Mark Romer

Appendix A: EMAC-SSS Recommendations to the PAUSD School Board

EMAC Secondary School Recommendations

We recommend the Board should immediately form a “Design Task Force” to pursue the findings of the EMAC Secondary Schools Subcommittee. The time is now.

- 1 **Design Task Force (DTF):** Continue the work EMAC has started on the “why” by commissioning a Design Task Force (DTF) to come up with the “what” and the “how” so that the Board can be ready to make a set of go / no-go decisions by Summer 2016.
 - A. Use the DTF as inclusive vehicle to engage Palo Alto stakeholders—parents, teachers, students, administrators, citizens—on how best to improve our secondary schools. . . not only for the near-term, but to craft a strategic, deliberate, shared vision 10-15 years from now
 - B. Ensure the DTF adheres to strict Board policy guidelines of “parity spend per student” throughout the District
 - C. Narrow the scope of the DTF by providing Board input into the relative priorities the DTF should investigate— **see below**

- 2 **Areas of focus for the DTF:** The EMAC Secondary Schools Subcommittee surfaced five (5) distinct areas of issues / concerns that deserve further investigation by the Board. EMAC recommends that all of these areas are worth investigating by the DTF. . . . in a phased & modular way.
 - A. **Our middle schools are too big** – Look into opening a new middle school that will bring enrollment within a normative band of 600-900 students per school. Recommend design element details including site location, school size, timetable, choice, phase-in approach, etc.
 - B. **Our high schools are too big** – Investigate whether Paly and Gunn can actually hold 2300 students each, even after \$200M in recent capital improvements. Look into opening a new high school that will bring enrollment within a normative band of 1200-1700 students per school. Recommend design element details including site location, school size, timetable, choice, etc. Investigate private funding sources.
 - C. **Our schools need to offer new learning pathways** – Look into how the District can innovate and lead in providing the best 21st century education for our secondary school students (e.g., curriculum that is experience-based, team- and inquiry-oriented, cross-disciplinary). Recommend actionable plans on how innovation can become quicker and more pervasive throughout our current secondary schools and across the District. Get assistance from Stanford’s School of Education and d.school.
 - D. **Our students crave more teacher + student engagement** – Look into how to make our secondary schools feel more personal & accessible and improve connectedness. Recommend actionable plans for scaling up existing pathways and creating new small learning communities such as “core teams” or “house system” more systematically and robustly than exists today.
 - E. **Our agreement with the City specifies we work on Cubberley together, and soon** – Look into how to develop a joint Master Plan for Cubberley site redevelopment. Work closely with City of Palo Alto staff.

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In over 1000 hours of committee work since April 2015, the EMAC-SSS surfaced five (5) distinct areas of issues and concerns that deserve further investigation by the Board. We recommend that all five of these areas are worth investigating by the Design Task Force, to be done in a phased and modular way.

- A. **Our middle schools are too big** – Look into opening a new middle school that will bring enrollment within a normative band of 600-900 students per school. Recommend design element details including site location, school size, timetable, choice, phase-in approach, etc.
- B. **Our high schools are too big** – Investigate whether Paly and Gunn can actually hold 2300 students each, even after \$200M in recent capital improvements. Look into opening a new high school that will bring enrollment within a normative band of 1200-1700 students per school. Recommend design element details including site location, school size, timetable, choice, etc. Investigate private funding sources.
- C. **Our schools need to offer new learning pathways** – Look into how the District can innovate and lead in providing the best 21st century education for our secondary school students (e.g., curriculum that is experience-based, team- and inquiry-oriented, cross-disciplinary). Recommend actionable plans on how innovation can become quicker and more pervasive throughout our current secondary schools and across the District. Get assistance from Stanford’s School of Education and d.school.

- D. **Our students crave more teacher + student engagement** – Look into how to make our secondary schools feel more personal & accessible and improve connectedness. Recommend actionable plans for scaling up existing pathways and creating new small learning communities such as “core teams” or “house system” more systematically and robustly than exists today.

- E. **Our agreement with the City specifies we work on Cubberley together, and soon** – Look into how to develop a joint Master Plan for Cubberley site redevelopment. Work closely with City of Palo Alto staff.

APPENDIX B: EMAC-SSS response to a community member letter addressed to the PAUSD School Board

On November 21, 2015, Todd Collins sent to the PAUSD Board and Superintendent [a critique](#) of the EMAC Secondary Schools Subcommittee (“EMAC-SSS”) findings and recommendations. Mr. Collins’ critique boils down into 4 distinct buckets. Our responses are in **BLUE TEXT** below.

Mr. Collins’ critique, in summary:

1. Mr. Collins says the District’s 3 middle schools and 2 high schools can accommodate the number of students we have, now and into the foreseeable future. He says the District has recently spent \$50M on the middle schools and \$200M on the high schools toward that end.
2. Mr. Collins disagrees with the recommendations the EMAC-SSS has made to improve our students’ educational experience – which encompasses student learning and connectedness – and he believes an alternative set of recommendations should be followed instead – i.e., the formation of a “Task Force to Improve Secondary School Learning and Experience”.
3. Mr. Collins claims that EMAC-SSS overlooked, omitted or misrepresented the data presented in the Board meetings on October 26 and November 10, 2015.
4. Finally – even if the data is cleaned up according to his specifications – Mr. Collins dismisses the value, the applicability and the relevance of the data presented by the EMAC-SSS on Palo Alto secondary school size. He states that there are plenty of high-performing middle and high schools which are bigger than Palo Alto’s, and therefore we don’t need to address school size.

EMAC-SSS response:

1. Mr. Collins says the District’s 3 middle schools and 2 high schools can accommodate the number of students we have, now and into the foreseeable future. He says the District has recently spent \$50M on the middle schools and \$200M on the high schools toward that end.
 - a. **EMAC-SSS believes these capital improvements were necessary simply because our secondary schools were so under-capitalized over the past 30 years, due in part of the effects of Prop 13. By no means do we regard these investments as “wasted” even if we chose to open another secondary school or schools. A careful analysis of the \$200M bond money spent shows that only a minority fraction was spent on expanding the number of classrooms we have in our middle and high schools.**
 - b. **More importantly, EMAC-SSS has made repeated efforts to vet the District’s “stated capacity” numbers for Paly and Gunn (i.e., each can supposedly accommodate 2300 students when construction is done). Three members of the EMAC-SSS have engineering degrees and possess an analytical mindset, and yet we could NOT confirm that assertion unless we made some arduous assumptions. We recommend pursuing this line of inquiry harder, as EMAC-SSS has doubts as to whether the District’s stated capacity numbers are rooted in reality on the ground, in the schools.**
 - c. **Finally, there appears to be broad sentiment that our middle schools are too crowded, and there is appetite to “do something” about that by opening a new middle school. Note that the middle school capacity will peak in Fall 2016, adding 100-200 more students from where we stand today. Now, consider that our high schools will peak in Fall 2020, adding 700 more students from where we are today. This is a virtual certainty**

given the size of the current 5th grade class and historical progression ratios – which have been reliable. Therefore, our high schools will be in the SAME EXACT position five (5) years from now as our middle schools are today. Said another way, it seems inconsistent and illogical to ignore the high school size / capacity / enrollment problem when there appears to be consensus today to tackle the middle school size / capacity / enrollment problem, especially when it takes 3-4 years to meaningfully alter school capacity without relying on portables.

2. Mr. Collins disagrees with the recommendations the EMAC-SSS has made to improve our students' educational experience – which encompasses student learning and connectedness – and he believes an alternative set of recommendations should be followed instead – i.e., the formation of a “Task Force to Improve Secondary School Learning and Experience”.
 - a. EMAC-SSS believes everyone is entitled to their opinion in a robust democracy, and there is no shortage of such in Palo Alto. We applaud that, full stop.
 - b. In fact, we are delighted to see that our call for a “Design Task Force” is precisely the same as Mr. Collin’s call for a “Task Force to Improve Secondary School Learning and Experience” which seems to be the exact same thing but with a much longer name. EMAC-SSS is willing to change the name of the DTF to something more palatable if it will temper desires to rush to judgment and prematurely gird for battle. For a better understanding of EMAC-SSS’s specific recommendations, refer to the main letter above and the one-page slide summary in Appendix A.
 - c. Are there possibly some more efficient, less expensive ways to improve our secondary schools beyond opening new schools or forming SLC’s (small learning communities)? Yes, very possibly, but EMAC-SSS does not know enough about the entire universe of pedagogical alternatives to provide judgment. Realize that from the perspective of the _enrollment_ committee, EMAC-SSS made specific recommendations based on the ONE topic we researched in-depth for 7 months and 1000+ man-hours – that is, enrollment and school size, and the effects of such on student connectedness and learning. Thus, that is the arrow we pulled out of our quiver to attack the problem. To achieve better student outcomes, the Superintendent and Board may very well choose to shoot another arrow(s), but that is a far different matter than saying *“key evidence had been overlooked, omitted or misrepresented”* in our report, nor does it *“reflect a predisposition within the committee toward wanting to open a new school and not necessarily the underlying data.”*
 - d. More importantly, it should be made loud and clear that EMAC-SSS final recommendations are “to commission a Design Task Force to pursue the findings of the EMAC-SSS”. We are NOT asking the Board to immediately approve opening a new secondary school or schools, nor are we asking the Board to implement the “house system” or “core teams” without further study. Those are significant decisions and obviously will need further vetting with input from the larger PAUSD community – teachers, students, parents, administrators, and local citizens.
 - e. Rather, the specific ask is to continue the work EMAC-SSS has started on the “why” by commissioning a Design Task Force (DTF) to come up with the “what’ and the “how” so that the Board can be ready to make a set of go / no-go decisions by Summer 2016.
 - f. The EMAC-SSS has started baking a metaphorical pie – and surfaced five (5) specific areas of concern as shown in the one-page slide summary in the main body of this letter – but the pie is only half-way done. So let's finish baking the pie -- via the DTF -- rather

than prematurely deciding that the pie doesn't taste any good, and stopping the process.

- i. Are big potential changes scary, especially in a District that is already quite excellent? Yes, without a doubt.
 - ii. Does this mean we should stop or avoid the hard work necessary to craft a strategic, deliberate, shared vision for our secondary schools not just for the near-term but 10-15 years from now? No.
 - iii. Can we make the Design Task Force a robust and inclusive vehicle to engage and rally the community around this shared vision? Yes.
3. Mr. Collins claims that EMAC-SSS overlooked, omitted or misrepresented the data presented in the Board meetings on October 26 and November 10, 2015.
 - a. EMAC-SSS believes Mr. Collins has cherry picked facts to support his own particular bias – i.e., that the District doesn't need any new schools at either the elementary or secondary school level.
 - b. Anything can be explained away with an alternative interpretation if you selectively choose this quote or that factoid. Even on the issue of anthropomorphic global warming, it is possible to find quotes and data that suggests the exact opposite.
 - c. This is especially apparent with respect to Mr. Collin's comments about the academic research. There have been numerous studies (and studies of studies – c.f. Leithwood which is a rigorous, widely cited survey of 57 other research studies) that say school size absolutely makes a difference to educational outcomes, not only in lower social-economic communities but even in more 'homogenous', affluent ones like Palo Alto. See footnote on academic studies (*).
 - d. EMAC-SSS has consistently said that we found no single "smoking gun" that our secondary schools are too big. Rather, our conclusion that the District has a problem with school size is based on a "preponderance of data" argument – based on benchmark averages, academic studies, surveys, interviews, informed comments from PAUSD teachers and administrators. Even if you choose to throw one or some of them out, the overall logic holds.
 - e. Making social policy observations is not like a math problem where there is one true answer that is blindingly obvious. If it were, life would be easy. The question that should be asked is simply this: "Is this entire collection of evidence so weak that the whole set should be ignored?"
4. Finally – even if the data is cleaned up according to his specifications – Mr. Collins dismisses the value, the applicability and the relevance of the data presented by the EMAC-SSS on Palo Alto secondary school size. He states that there are plenty of high-performing middle and high schools which are bigger than Palo Alto's, and therefore we don't need to address school size.
 - a. This last argument is the most troubling for EMAC-SSS to understand. It is plainly difficult to have a fact-based, data-driven argument with a perspective that doesn't value data. Or with a point of view that asserts that most data points can be "explained away" ... such as "[The drop in parent survey scores about their satisfaction with middle and high schools] is likely due in part to familiarity and parent accessibility – many parents visit their elementary school regularly, while visits and interactions drop drastically in the secondary years." And here is another example from the critique: "The survey results show a dramatically different positive to negative satisfaction scores that what EMAC-SSS reported" which conveniently ignores standard industry practice to

drop the 2 middle responses in a 6-part survey response in order to gain insight into the results. In this case, the possible survey responses were Highly Satisfied, Satisfied, Mildly Satisfied, Mildly Dissatisfied, Dissatisfied, and Highly Dissatisfied. EMAC-SSS stated at the Board study session on October 26 that we only looked at the top 2 categories, vs. the bottom 2 categories, as advised by Chris Kolar (PAUSD survey czar) and as is standard practice in survey methodology. In this case, we believe Mr. Collins chose to read the EMAC survey using a method that advances his own beliefs and biases rather than using industry standard practices.

- b. More importantly, Mr. Collins claims that there are numerous examples of large high schools in the United States, and therefore the existence of those demonstrates that “large is OK”. Our response is the following: certainly a 450 lb man with a BMI of 50 can be perfectly healthy. But averages (and medians) are relevant and meaningful because they show that it is far better – for the average man – to be 175 lbs with a BMI of 24, everything else being equal. Is Palo Alto so exceptional that we can ignore averages?
- c. Furthermore, if enrollment size truly does NOT mean anything in terms of pedagogical policy setting, then there wouldn't have been so many academic research studies over the past 50 years on this very subject of school size. In other words, most educational professionals actually do believe that school size matters.
- d. Certainly EMAC-SSS is NOT claiming that size ALONE is the magic bullet to improved student outcomes. There are a plenty of other areas the District can – and has – worked on. But neither do we find it reasonable to claim that "size doesn't matter" simply because someone is able to find successful exceptions. Human beings can make anything "work", even if the District went to a single high school sized at 5000 kids. But that doesn't mean that we should. Benchmark averages (and medians) play a role in informing our own behaviors. To be sure, not the ONLY role, but neither should they be dismissed or hand-waved away.

*** Footnote on academic studies:**

To counter cherry-picking of quotes from one North Carolina study and one Maryland study, the EMAC-SSS in return quotes Leithwood, which is a rigorous longitudinal study of 57 (!) other academic papers on school size. Leithwood was originally referred to the EMAC-SSS by Todd Collins via Ken Dauber, and is hardly mentioned in Mr. Collins critique.

- *“While evidence about secondary school size effects on academic achievement is mixed, the most defensible conclusion favors smaller to midsized schools. This conclusion is most accurately portrayed in studies reporting nonlinear relationships between school size and achievement.”*
- *“Students who traditionally struggle at school, students from disadvantaged social and economic backgrounds, for example, are the major benefactors of smaller schools. But smaller schools do not seem to be an impediment to the learning of more advantaged and/or high-achieving students, at least if those students have access to the specialized instruction they need to master complex subject matter.”*
- *“There is a clear indication in the weight of this evidence, however, that smaller secondary schools have superior “sticking” power; student attendance and retention rates are significantly better in smaller than larger secondary schools.”*

- *“Breadth of curriculum is no longer a justification for large schools. The breadth of the curriculum, often cited as a major advantage of large comprehensive secondary schools, seems achievable in schools as small as 500 to 600 students. Such breadth, however, is now regarded as a threat to the academic progress.”*
- *“[Studies] provide entirely consistent evidence in support of the claim that smaller schools are associated with greater student engagement.”*
- *“Smaller does not usually mean “really small.” Smaller is a relative term. In districts with secondary school sizes exceeding 2,500 students, for example, smaller can mean as many as 1,500 students, a size that would be considered very large in other districts.”*