

July 14, 2023

To the Decatur Public School Board of Education:

Before we begin our discussion of the School Board's plans for the deficient Dennis Lab School buildings, we want to reiterate the experiences of the Dennis Lab School students through the lens of a hypothetical 6th-grader:

- In 2018-2019, this student attended school at the Dennis Lab Mosaic Campus, the only Dennis campus at the time.
- In 2019-2020, this student spent the second half of the academic school year on a tablet during the midst of a global crisis.
- In 2020-2021, this student was eventually moved to a new, unfamiliar building called the Kaleidoscope campus, where the student had approximately a quarter of a school year to acclimate.
- In 2021-2022, this student was sent back to another school campus, the Mosaic Campus, with new building arrangements to accommodate the dual campuses.
- In summer of 2022, it was announced that Dennis Lab School would be getting a brand new, single campus building specifically designed to meet the needs of the school community - only to have that vision immediately erased by angry neighbors worried about property values and "Decatur as it used to be."
- At the end of 2022-2023, another crushing blow. Both campuses were immediately closed following the end of the school year, with personal belongings and teaching materials trapped inside.
- In summer of 2023, an announcement that the Dennis buildings cannot reopen but that all students will be bussed to a different neighborhood to a school too small to accommodate the 4th-largest school community in the district, where half of the students and teachers will spend the year learning in modular units.
- Another announcement that the school year will not even begin on time, but that students and staff will be forced to wait and wonder about how their school year will start and if they will ever have a reasonable chance of reaching the same academic achievements as their peers at other DPS schools
- This student is full of questions, anxiety, uncertainty, and the pervasive toxicity of not knowing or understanding if there is something wrong with you, your family, or your neighborhood in order to justify this kind of experience.

How will our Dennis Lab School students, of all ages, possibly recover from five years of academic crises? While no-one could have predicted the two years of the global Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown, we are now inflicting another academic catastrophe on our Dennis Lab School students, as well as their teachers and staff. We want to start by acknowledging the monumental challenges and adversity faced by the Dennis Lab School community in context, and we want to acknowledge the monumental efforts of Dennis teachers

and administrators in doing everything in their power to provide a safe and effective learning environment, in person and virtually, for students and families.

The authors of this letter, Mark and Dr. Kaitlin Glause, have three children attending Dennis in 2023, ranging from kindergarten through 4th grade. We have been a part of the Dennis Lab School community since the fall of 2020 and we joined the Dennis Co-Op in 2021. We have been active members of the community, volunteering time and resources for activities both inside and outside of school. We are deeply committed to the success of Dennis Lab School and to the well-being of its students, teachers, staff, and community. We urge you to carefully consider our experiences and concerns, and we thank you for taking the time to read and discuss.

The chaotic transition between school buildings and the overall decay of the current Dennis campuses is going to negatively impact the personal and academic growth of Dennis students. As seen in the bulleted subset below, multiple studies of schooling and education outcomes evidence that children who feel as though they are unwelcome, or don't belong in their environment, struggle more than their peers in discipline, attendance, and academic areas. A 2013 story by Education Week stated that, "Students who experience chronic instability and stress have more aggressive responses to stress, along with poorer working memory and self-control." In the same article, Dr. Jack P. Shonkoff, the director of the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University said, "We need to protect the brain from bad things happening to it. We all understand that in terms of screening for lead, because lead does bad things to a brain, mercury does bad things to a brain, ... but toxic stress does bad things to a brain, too—it's a different chemical doing it, but it's still a big problem interfering with brain development." The last five years have been chronically unstable for Dennis Lab students, and there is currently no available vision to show that students can expect academic stability moving forward. This instability is not just a product of being shunted from building to building, but also because of the poor quality and limited physical offerings of all the buildings that the Dennis community has been asked to use (Dennis Lab, Mary French, Garfield).

Additional empirical evidence supports the claims that the quality of the physical environment has long-term impacts on student learning. A subset of this evidence includes the following:

- Higher quality learning environments, including the physical space, materials, and aesthetics, lead to both more positive student outlooks as well as improved student learning and retention and vice-versa (Bowen, 2021; Han, et al., 2018).
- The uncertainty that an individual feels about whether they belong or whether they are valued in a certain organization or environment, called "belonging uncertainty," can lead to disparities in achievement (Walton & Cohen, 2007).
- Students who feel anxiety about confirming a negative stereotype (such as "we don't deserve a new school or we don't deserve a school that meets our needs") spend so much

mental energy worrying about the threat, called “stereotype threat,” that they chronically underperform on assigned tasks (Steele & Aronson, 1995).

- Additional research on stereotype threat states that “experiences of stereotype threat may increase individuals’ feelings of anxiety, negative thinking and mind-wandering which deplete the working memory resources required for successful task execution” (Pennington et al., 2016 as seen in Artze-Vega, et al., 2023).
- A student’s sense of “belonging” is also predictive of a student’s grades and GPA and a strong sense of belonging correlates to the avoidance of high-risk behaviors (Trujillo & Tanner, 2014).
- “Belonging” has also been studied as “mattering,” which explains how minoritized students in particular struggle to believe that they matter within academic and social contexts. When students feel disposable, it is impossible to achieve their academic and personal potential (Love, 2019).

The quality of a person’s physical environment is absolutely a reflection of their “mattering” and “belonging”. The Dennis Lab School students, teachers, staff, and families have been implicitly told by the DPS district and surrounding Decatur community that they do not matter enough to justify the hard work of building a physical school environment that meets their academic and personal needs.

We do not believe that the buildings of Dennis Lab School are functional for the students of our community. Below is a short list of our experiences with the Dennis school buildings over the last two years. After reading these, please ask yourself if you believe that these buildings in their current form are functional enough to be called a school. And if so, are you PROUD of these buildings? Do you feel these examples provide a sense of BELONGING to the staff and families of Dennis? Here are a handful of examples from one Dennis family:

- With no general assembly hall, we had to sit outside on metal folding chairs in a parking lot during the opening presentation of PBL day for our children.
- With no assembly hall, we had to drive multiple miles away to a church in order to participate in a book fair and spring festival put on by the school.
- With no assembly hall, we had to drive multiple miles away to a church with an auditorium large enough for us to have music concerts for our kids.
- With no sports facilities or green space, we have had to bus or drive our kids off site to participate in a limited set of sports.

The experience that hurt the most: with no assembly hall, we had to eat dinner in our laps during a student celebration because there wasn’t enough room to seat all of the parents at tables inside the building - and this event was only a small subset of the larger school community. This was a celebration for students who earned special recognition by the school for being stellar students,

citizens, and volunteers of the school system. Parents were literally eating from their laps alongside their children. They were there to praise and lavish with special recognition the exceptional qualities of their children, while being asked to eat in a gymnasium/cafeteria/auditorium that did not even have the capacity to provide enough tables and chairs for its invited community.

These are instances that we have seen personally. We can't imagine the complaints that must come through from teachers about the quality of the school space and academic environments. We already know as parents there isn't room for orchestra, theater, sports, or even handicap accessibility. What inside knowledge do the teachers and staff have about the limited functionality and space availability of these buildings?

Dr. Glause and I live in the West End Neighborhood of Decatur. It is a beautiful neighborhood. We love both our neighborhood and the city of Decatur. But we also recognize the ways in which Decatur and Decatur Public Schools have been organized to facilitate the inequities that we are experiencing at Dennis Lab School. According to data from the 2020 Boundary Committee Recommendation and the 2022 Illinois Report Card for Dennis Lab School, the West End Neighborhood has one of the largest defection rates in the city. While the 2020 report showed that 896 elementary age children live in the Dennis Lab School boundary with an anticipated enrollment of 690 students, in 2022, only 532 neighborhood students attended Dennis Lab School. Over 40% of neighborhood children are attending a DPS magnet school or private school outside the neighborhood, the majority of which are from affluent families.

This is exemplified by our own experiences living in the Dennis Lab School district. The majority of our peers and friends send their children to the Montessori Academy for Peace to avoid sending their kids to Dennis. Families in the neighborhood are utilizing the school district's unequitable enrollment practices to segregate their children by socioeconomic class through the M.A.P. preschool program. This segregation is accomplished within DPS61 by using the following practices:

1. Bussing all grades EXCEPT preschool to the M.A.P.
2. Offering just a half day for preschool for a majority of the preschool classes.
3. Allowing M.A.P. children admitted to the preschool to skip the lottery process to enroll into kindergarten at M.A.P.

This practice effectively segregates students by socioeconomic status because it requires both financial and social resources to be able to afford to drive your preschooler back and forth from M.A.P., especially in the middle of the day, as well as to afford the cost of the preschool itself. Once the preschoolers are enrolled in kindergarten, how much room does that actually leave for other students who require bussing and full-day programming to lottery into the school?

Other friends and peers of ours in the neighborhood send their children to the Lutheran School Association or the Catholic School System. While many affluent families send their children away from the school next door, some of these same people shouted “FOUL” to us when it was announced Dennis was getting a new school in Lincoln Park. The number one complaint we heard in our neighborhood? That property value would go down if Dennis Lab were to move. What we asked was this: “If the building next door isn’t good enough for your kids, yet you want to reap the rewards of living next to a school, then whose kids is this building good enough for?”

Given the current state of neglect, disrepair, and vast spatial and physical inequities compared to other DPS and local area schools, the answer should be no one’s.

We gather with neighborhood family friends frequently. We have been told multiple times to work the system. To send our kids to a different school. Others who have kids still attending Dennis have said they can’t wait to see if they can get into a lottery the next year and switch schools. How can we ethically do this, or ask others to ethically move their children as a remedy for the neglect and disrepair of the neighborhood school? There is no place for all our neighborhood kids to go. There is no place that could accommodate an influx of hundreds of students. If the school buildings aren’t good enough for some of our neighborhood kids, then they aren’t good enough for any of our neighborhood kids. We cannot simply keep saying that if you don’t like them, move. There will always be hundreds of children left behind.

We have also heard our neighbors disparage the idea of a new school because of the historic aesthetic of the original Dennis Lab School building. We understand the beauty of historic buildings - we live in the West End because it is one of the many beautiful Decatur neighborhoods that hold historic and cultural value. We are working hard to maintain the integrity of our old home. We also understand that it is possible to completely rebuild the interior of homes, businesses, and schools while maintaining the aesthetic of the historic exterior. We want to reiterate that there is nothing wrong with keeping an old building. However, making sure that the building is functional for modern use takes precedence. We cannot continue to punish Dennis Lab students and family (as seen in the many examples listed above) because we are infatuated with the way things used to be.

We have offered a wide range of examples from the perspective of students, parents, and community members who share this neighborhood. These are issues that closely affect the families of students attending Dennis Lab School, and these are also issues that need to be recognized by the broader Decatur community who are not immediately impacted by these challenges. The following are legitimate questions to ask each of the voters and taxpayers inside of Decatur:

- What is the city of Decatur doing to the students of Dennis Lab by requiring them to go through all the adverse situations that have been described in that 6th grader's story above?
- How would any of us feel as the parent of a child at a school where there literally aren't enough physical resources to let us participate in their schooling?
- In what ways are the decisions of the citizens of Decatur doing irreparable harm to the children of Dennis Lab?
- In what ways is the city of Decatur exacerbating the anxiety and stress of Decatur children? The students of S.D.M.S. and Garfield need to be asked if they are cared for as the closing of Dennis Lab Buildings has had a serious impact on their lives as well.

It is IMPERATIVE that the DPS School Board take immediate, creative, and forward-thinking action to ensure that a long-term plan is in place for the care and future of all DPS61 students and families. It is IMPERATIVE that the DPS School Board commit to a plan of action that effectively results in a new building or extensive renovations to current buildings to meet the Dennis community's needs. All of this upheaval, displacement, and anxiety cannot result in simply being moved back into the same dysfunctional space that has sent West End and Near West End families seeking schooling elsewhere. Dennis families cannot be asked to live in fear of a building closing, followed by extensive community displacement, again. Dennis families and teachers, and all DPS families, should rest assured that these experiences will never be repeated.

We are committed to Dennis Lab School, the West End and Near West End neighborhoods, and to the amazing potentials of all the children who live around us and teachers and staff who work with us. We are certain that with effort and creativity, the School Board and DPS administration can find a solution that meets the needs of Dennis families while being thoughtful to the concerns of the West End neighbors.

We believe that there is an opportunity to address the issues we have heard from our peers in the neighborhood noted above while still executing effective change for Dennis Lab Schools. In a June 27th article by the Decatur Herald Review, it states that the two million dollar modular units were advised to be retained on a two year lease with the potential to negotiate for a longer lease if needed. Furthermore, in the same article, a 1% sales tax passed in 2010 has an excess amount that would cover the leasing of these units every year. While these modular units are in place, we have an opportunity to make long term plans.

We propose that, after all this effort to obtain and implement the modular units at Garfield, the School Board plan to use these modular units as a stop-gap to make time for the best possible long term solution. If the modules can be maintained for enough time to build a new Dennis or gut and rebuild the current Dennis buildings, then it should be done. With no classroom learning

taking place in the Dennis Lab buildings right now, paired with the utilization of S.D.M.S. and Garfield to hold the students for multiple years, the school board and DPS administration must be creative and innovative in their resolutions. Teachers, families, and students need to know that there is a plan to create a learning environment that works for them: even if it means working within the existing school sites. There is nothing wrong with keeping the brick colonial aesthetic of the current buildings. It is a beautiful look. There are many ways that DPS can meet the needs of Dennis students while committing to the needs of the neighborhood. Examples include:

- Turning the Kaleidoscope campus site into a full gymnasium for Dennis Lab suitable for middle school athletics, potentially including Middle School classrooms.
- Buying vacant lots in the West End to turn into a parking lot to increase the footprint of the current Mosaic campus.
- Building an entirely new school on the Woodrow Wilson site, including demolition of an old school building while renovating the other into a preschool.
- Conducting complete demolitions of current Dennis buildings and building new on site.

Not only is it MANDATORY that these buildings be rebuilt (or a new building built in a different location) to accommodate the needs of the students and teachers, but this is the perfect opportunity for students and teachers to engage in meaningful, authentic, and contextualized PROJECT BASED LEARNING where the Dennis Lab School community can contribute to the construction of a building(s) that authentically meets the needs of the school community. Empirical research supports the ways in which students can contribute to school building projects as a means to find purpose, joy, and care in their experience:

- Students are able to contribute to the planning and construction of functional and aesthetic school spaces, both at the classroom and school level, that meet their academic needs and honor their cultures and experiences (Bowen, 2021; Said, et al., 2015).
- Classroom experiences are tied to students' persistence in learning and academic progress (Braxton, Milem, Sullivan, 2000). This includes access to the discussion and high-order thinking incumbent in PBL schools, but can also be inferred to support the idea that when students are experiencing the kinds of upheaval caused by the Dennis buildings, they will need a clear vision and purpose in overcoming these obstacles.

The teachers, staff, and students of the school are the ones who can best articulate the needs of the new school building. As parents and community members, here is a short list of needs we know through experience our Dennis school community does not currently have and desperately needs:

- A general assembly hall or auditorium (separate from a gymnasium or cafeteria);
- A full sized gymnasium or sports complex (separate from an auditorium or cafeteria) that can accommodate middle school athletics in particular;
- Bathrooms and eating areas that are up-to-date and ADA accessible;

- A full-sized library (not in a hallway) that can accommodate book fairs, classroom instruction, and collaborative project-based learning.

After all of this, we plead the School Board and DPS administration to efficiently explore all options before quickly wasting more taxpayer money on a quick fix. The goal is not to get kids back into Dennis Lab as quickly as possible - but to give them an academic home that fits their needs and those of their community. By simply repairing some of the structural deficits of the buildings and putting the kids back into them as they sit now, we will feel as though nothing has been done, and it will only be a matter of time before the trauma of the last five years will be compounded when we are displaced again. The students and staff of Dennis deserve more than a quick fix.

To the Dennis Lab School TEACHERS: We see you, we hear you, and we know that you are experiencing pain the way our families are. Please hang in there with us. Please do not leave Dennis. We love you all and we are so grateful for the amazing work you have done on behalf of our children over years of turmoil. We understand that you can take a job anywhere. We have seen the job postings in DPS61 alone and we know there are shortages everywhere. But we ask you to please stay and continue the work you are doing on behalf of Dennis children. Please don't leave.

To the Dennis Lab School ADMINISTRATORS and STAFF: We see you, we hear you, and we know that you also are making gut-wrenching decisions on behalf of our families. We have been amazed by all of you and your hard work, care, and love for the children inside those buildings. We recognize the ways in which you have bent over backwards to provide a high-quality experience for students and connections for families despite the shortcomings of the buildings.

To the Decatur Public Schools SCHOOL BOARD and ADMINISTRATION: We insist that you ensure that these teachers, administrators, and staff members know you support them. Thoughts and prayers are not sufficient. All Dennis Lab staff must be provided access to mental health resources and must be reimbursed for financial losses. All Dennis Lab Staff should be provided with emergency hazard pay through the school district or by the city of Decatur through a state of emergency grant in collaboration with union representatives. Losing a building is hard enough on the kids. The board and DPS61 needs to do all that it can to ease these transitions for teachers, staff, and administrators. Students do not need more havoc during what has already become a serious traumatic event.

Unlike school staff that get to choose where they work, the children of Decatur have little choice in where they must go. It is untenable, unethical, and morally wrong to suggest that any children in DPS61 be subject to substandard, outdated, or decrepit school buildings that cannot functionally support their learning or sense of belonging.



We support Dr. Clark in requesting a full district analysis of all the properties owned by DPS61. We believe it is best to use the shut down Dennis has generated in a positive way. What other DPS schools are hiding lingering structural and spatial deficits? We do not want any other students or families in the city of Decatur to have to go through this. What has been done to Dennis has been done, and we cannot dwell on “what could have been” when it comes to the buildings of the Dennis Lab School. We can, though, ensure that Dennis is the only school forced into an unprecedented emergency shut down.

Four years of disrupted learning for Dennis students has already happened. As seen in the experiences and empirical evidence previously mentioned, our Dennis children have already seen the ceilings of their academic potential lowered. Our students have already seen a rise in disciplinary issues. Our students have already lost weeks of education compared to their peers. Our students have already seen their excitement for a new school deflated. All by no choice of their own. Displacing Dennis and Garfield students has been done. Requiring Dennis students and teachers to begin the school year weeks behind their peers has been decided. The children of Dennis have been forced to go through this. But the kids have been through enough. Take the time to get this right and build them a school worthy of their return.

We beg you now to take a collective breath and evaluate the needs of Dennis Lab School and the city schools as a whole. Insist with each other that a plan be put in place that includes making things right. Since moving to Decatur in 2020, we predominantly hear from our neighbors that Decatur Public Schools “keeps putting band aids on bad situations.” Board, we ask you to stop that trend now. Take pride in what we can offer the children of Decatur. Do what needs to be done now to serve future generations of children in both our neighborhood and in every Decatur neighborhood.

With respect and shared hope for our students’ brightest future,



Mark Glause

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*West End residents*

*Dennis Lab School family*

*Dennis Co-Op members*

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*For additional resources and evidence on the impact of physical space on academic learning and on trauma and displacement on academic learning, please contact Dr. Glause at [kaitlin.glause@gmail.com](mailto:kaitlin.glause@gmail.com) or [kglause@millikin.edu](mailto:kglause@millikin.edu).*