

# Position Paper

## George Wythe High School

Should Richmond build a 2,000-seat high school on the George Wythe site (as originally planned), or the smaller, 1,600-seat school recently proposed?



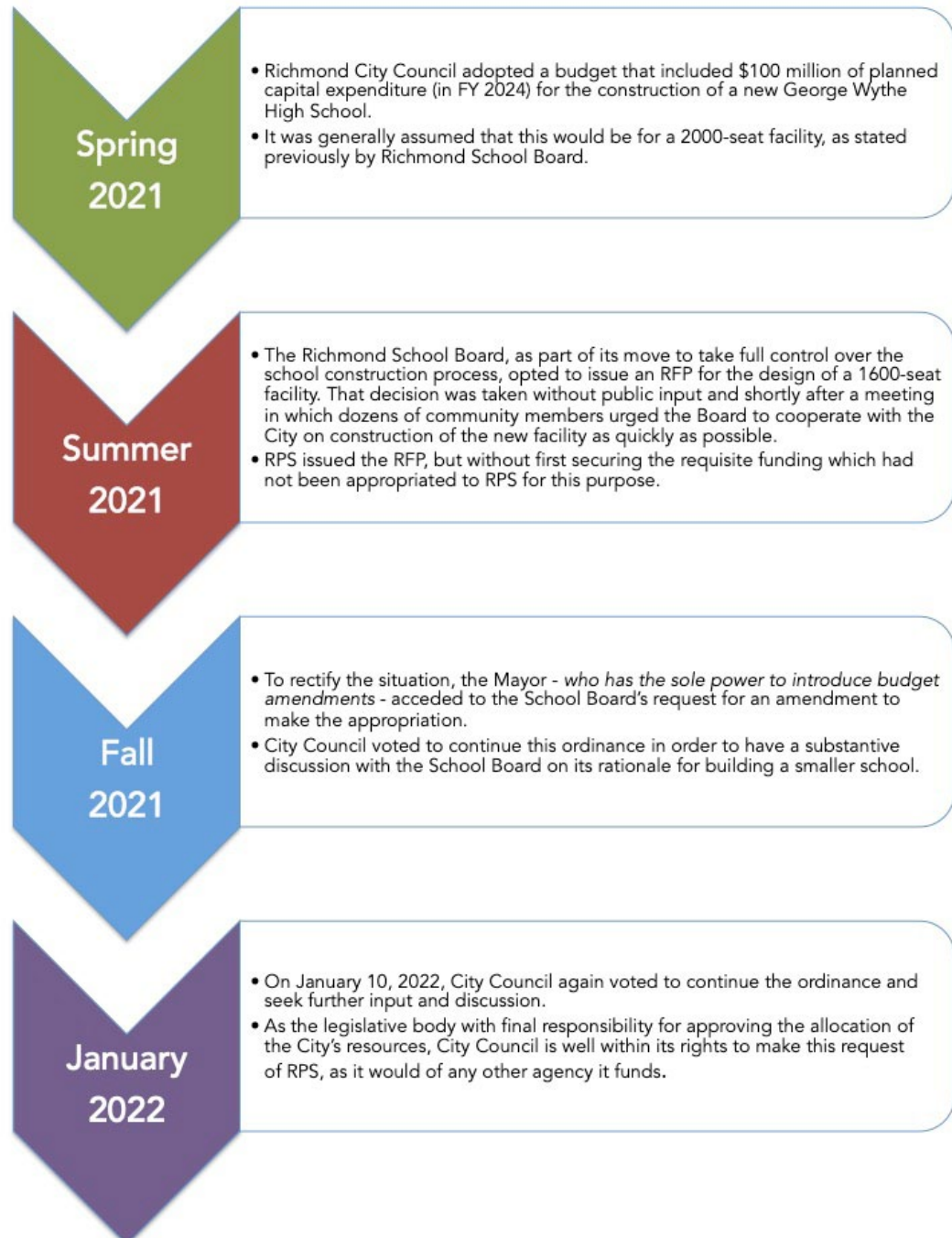
**RICHMOND  
TOGETHER**

### Mission Statement

To engage in advocacy and education aimed at promoting bold, practical change in Richmond informed by a community wealth building and racial equity perspective. We engage with local elected and civic leaders to advance bold equity goals such as dramatically reducing poverty and improving educational outcomes in the City of Richmond, through policy steps that engage and empower all citizens.

# Context

In 2021, Richmond School Board elected to exert full control over the school construction process. *Richmond Together* respects this decision ... but we are also concerned that prior commitments to Richmond communities be kept and that major decisions about the use of City funds be properly vetted and justified. This document is **not** about the “schools build schools” decision; *it is about the simultaneous decision to shrink the size of the long-promised rebuild of George Wythe High School.*



# Background

In late 2017, Richmond Public Schools adopted a long-term facilities plan. That plan marked as high priority, construction of a new George Wythe High School and stipulated that the school (and other future high schools) be built to a capacity of 2,000 students. The decision to build larger schools was a deliberate policy choice, motivated largely by the desire to achieve economies of scale in moving more RPS students to top-quality facilities as quickly as possible.

Those plans were based on projections of robust growth in the City as well as the desire to achieve economies of scale in school construction. The subsequent Richmond 300 Master Plan presents growth scenarios in which Richmond grows from 226,600 (2020 Census) to 260,000, 300,000, or even 340,000 people by the year 2037 (just 15 years away).

**Richmond is a growing, in-demand city and  
must plan for the future accordingly.**

The current capacity of George Wythe is 1,401 students. Estimates by consultants (Cropper) made during the 2019 rezoning discussion projected Wythe to run over 120% of its current capacity by the end of the 2020s. (See Table 1). At the time the facilities plan was adopted, RPS staff stated that 85-90% usage of a facility's maximum capacity is considered best practice to allow for flexibility and contingency in planning for the future.

**Table 1. Projected Enrollment RPS High Schools to 2028-2029**  
*Cropper Demographics, Capacity and Utilization Study, 2019, p. 51*

High School Building Utilization												
Capacity	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25	2025-26	2026-27	2027-28	2028-29	
ARMSTRONG HIGH	1255	77%	79%	76%	78%	78%	76%	74%	74%	77%	80%	
FRANKLIN MILITARY ACADEMY	550	73%	73%	73%	73%	73%	73%	73%	73%	73%	73%	
GEORGE WYTHE HIGH	1401	91%	97%	103%	110%	113%	118%	122%	123%	122%	127%	
HUGUENOT HIGH	1426	106%	99%	100%	104%	110%	112%	116%	116%	118%	124%	
JOHN MARSHALL HIGH	1391	51%	47%	45%	46%	44%	45%	47%	47%	49%	52%	
OPEN HIGH	198	101%	98%	98%	99%	100%	103%	105%	104%	106%	109%	
RICHMOND COMMUNITY HIGH	726	33%	33%	33%	34%	37%	37%	38%	38%	39%	39%	
THOMAS JEFFERSON HIGH	1127	73%	75%	77%	80%	81%	80%	79%	77%	74%	77%	
HS Total	8074	76%	75%	76%	79%	81%	82%	83%	83%	85%	87%	

# Background

In 2019-20, 1,133 students attended George Wythe (2019-20, the last year before the pandemic is used as baseline.) Of these, 508 were Latino – including 414 9th and 10th graders and 94 11th and 12th graders. Going back to 2017-18, 300 Latino students were 9th and 10th graders.

Over 200 Latino students who would have been expected to be in the school in 2019-20 were not present due to a high dropout rate.

In 2020, the graduation rate for Latino students at Wythe was 24% and the dropout rate was 74.7% (112 students).

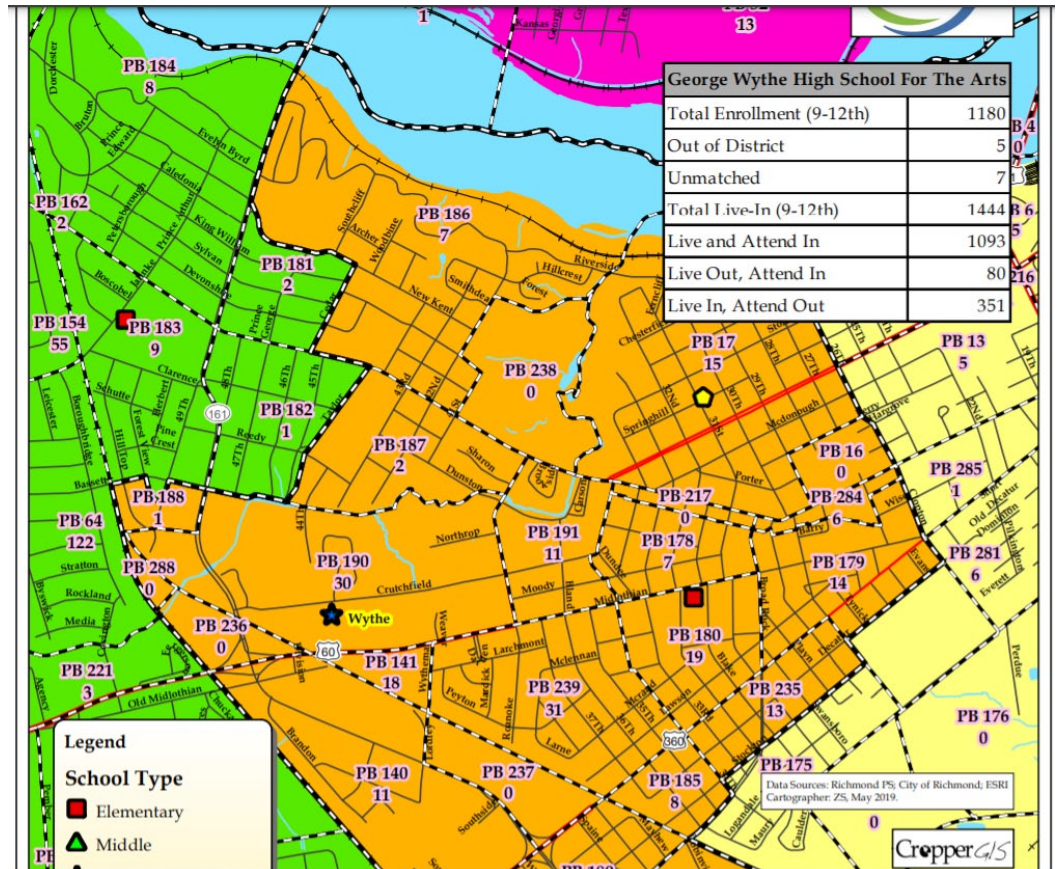
It should be a given that RPS will build schools on the expectation that all racial and ethnic groups will attend and graduate at a rate comparable to the statewide average (just above 90%). Any analysis of Wythe’s capacity should note that at least 200 students are in effect “missing” because of the high Latino dropout rate.

In addition, the redistricting analysis of 2019 conducted by Cropper showed that 351 students in the current Wythe zone now attend schools out-of-zone, whereas only 80 students from out-of-zone come to Wythe (see Table 2 on the following page). This is net transfer of 270 students out of the school.

It is a safe presumption that many students who previously would have planned to attend a high school in a different zone will wish to attend the new Wythe once the current failing facility is replaced with a state-of-the-art building.

# Background

**Table 2. Out-migration from George Wythe Zone**  
RPS Rezoning Background Report, p. 55



Altogether, it's reasonable to estimate that if Latino students currently dropping out remain all four years, and more in-zone students choose to stay, that at least 400 more students would on "Day One" seek to enroll at the new Wythe. Even without projected population growth in this part of the City, that would put Wythe near or even over capacity of a 1,600 seat school on "Day One."

Additionally, it's important not to assess this question as if the current school zone lines are locked into place in perpetuity. A significant part of Southside is now zoned PB for Armstrong ... if Wythe were to have excess capacity, boundaries could be expanded to include this area and conceivably also neighborhoods just north of the river that are also geographically close to the Wythe location.

# Position



Richmond Together believes that it is in the best interest of RPS students, the larger community, *and* City taxpayers to build the originally planned larger project, to meet *both* current and future needs.



# Position

*Indeed, the better question to ask is how many RPS high school students currently have access to a state-of-the-art high school facility?*

The November 2017 RPS facilities plan states that three of the City's five high schools are in need of major renovation and one of five are in need of modest renovation (see Table 3 below).

**Table 3. Summary of Facilities Conditions, RPS, 2017**

*RPS Facilities Plan, November 2017*

RESILIENCE PRIDE SUCCESS		Current State of Buildings			
School Type	Complete Renovation/ Replace	Major Renovation	Moderate Renovation	Minor Renovation	No Renovation Work Today
Elementary	7	5	4	4	5
Middle	2	2	0	1	2
High	0	3	1	0	1
Specialty	2	1	0	2	0

Of the 4,599 high school students in RPS attending a comprehensive high school in 2019-20, only 1,283 (27.9%) attended a modern, state-of-the-art high school building (Huguenot).

Holding other figures constant, a new 2,000 seat George Wythe High School would increase the number of students with access to a modern building to 3,283 ... or 71.4% of RPS students in comprehensive high schools. A smaller, 1,600 seat school would only raise this figure to 2,883 (or just 62.7%).

An increase from 27.9% to 71.4%  
of RPS students would a game-changing  
investment for RPS and the City of Richmond.

# Position

In short, the fully-built George Wythe High School would meet “Day One” need ... with room for flexibility and growth. Boundary adjustments could increase enrollment in the school if there is excess capacity in initial years, and that would make sense during the time period between Wythe’s reconstruction and the potential renovation or reconstruction of Armstrong and John Marshall.

Building out the full-sized school would immediately shift the landscape for RPS students: nearly three-fourths would have access to a state-of-the-art, comprehensive high school, compared to barely one-fourth today.

## ***What about other school needs?***

There is no question RPS has many other school facility needs beyond George Wythe. The primary stated justification for shrinking the size of the Wythe project is to save funds in order to accelerate renovation of an elementary school in the East End.

We agree that the community needs a plan to meet the documented needs in the East End. However, cutting the size of George Wythe High School cannot and should not be the means to accomplish that plan.

**High schools are generational investments.**

There may not be another opportunity to build a new, comprehensive high school on the South Side for decades. It’s important that the school meet current and future needs ... we must act for both the near- and the long-term.

Equally important, we will not break the cycle of poverty and academic underachievement in Richmond by trying to cut corners. Our students deserve a full-scale state-of-the-art high school on par with facilities in



# Position

our neighboring suburbs. The new full-sized school can be an anchor for community services and engagement as well as for education to serve future generations of kids and all residents. The new George Wythe needs to be a school we can all be proud of, while serving an appropriate number of students.

The George Wythe community has waited literally decades for a new high school. Now that the Wythe project has finally risen to the front of the line, they are being told they won't get the full loaf after all. That is not right! *Our collective strategy must be to meet each of our communities' needs **in full**.*

If the School Board feels it is ready to take on additional projects faster, such as elementary school renovations, it should make that request to the Mayor and City Council. Bluntly, it is a request for money, which likely would require an additional tax or tax increase. Proposed legislation in the General Assembly would allow for new taxes to be levied specifically to build schools.

Instead, one School Board member has stated that there is a fixed amount of revenue available for school construction, and the goal should be to stretch it to do as many projects as possible.

That approach is likely to leave all the concerned projects short-changed. A better approach, if there is a desire to accelerate the implementation of the facilities plan, is to ask Council to provide more money specifically for that purpose. That ask can be made, and likely would have considerable community support.

At any given time in Richmond, there are always more needs than resources available to address them. It becomes all-too-easy to pit competing neighborhoods and communities against one another. This logic must be rejected. We must instead *adopt a strategic approach to*

# Position

*meet the needs of our various communities, in full, over time; and once such an approach (such as the RPS facilities plan) has been adopted, we need to stick to the commitments that have been made. Otherwise, no community's needs will ever be fully met and the cycle of under-investment and inadequate facilities will be perpetuated.*

Instead of short-changing students and communities by shaving projects, the School Board should ask for the funding needed to do the job right. *That is the truly progressive position on meeting long-term school construction needs.*

## **What about the Technical Center?**

It has been suggested by some that the Technical Center, which also is in the City's current budget for FY 2024, amounts to a second Southside high school in the making.

**This is incorrect.** The concept of making the new Technical Center a full-scaled high school with traditional academic offerings and full day education is an interesting one. But it has not been vetted, discussed by the community, or adopted as policy. It's also unclear that this would be the best use of the former Altria space, or what the associated additional costs of that approach might be.

In any case, the new Technical Center is designed to serve students from across the city, not just Southside. Bringing the Technical Center online offers the potential to bolster pathways to good careers for many students citywide, but **it is not a substitute for building a properly sized George Wythe High School.**

# Response to Letter

## Comments on School Board Letter of January 21, 2022

Subsequent to the drafting of this memorandum, [Richmond Together](#) received access to Richmond School Board's official reply to City Council questions about the George Wythe project, contained in a letter dated January 21, 2022. We would like to briefly respond with some key points.

- The letter seeks to discredit the Cropper projections for George Wythe by noting that current year enrollment at Wythe is below the Cropper projections for 2021-22. *This observation completely ignores the fact that system-wide enrollment in RPS was 19% higher in 2019-20 than in 2021-22, following the pandemic and the resumption of in-person classes this year.* If Wythe enrollment were 19% higher this year, another 246 students would be enrolled, accounting entirely for the gap between Cropper projections for 2021-22 and actual enrollment.

More generally, we believe it is incredibly disingenuous to make any projections based on enrollment from this year. RPS, like other school systems, has endured a massive crisis and it may take years for enrollment patterns to return to "normal." However, school building decisions need to be based on long-term expectations, not short-term blips in data, especially highly anomalous and temporary blips such as 2021-22 enrollment.

- The letter challenges advocates to explain why more seats at Wythe are needed. In addition to projection data, this memo notes: a) many Latino students are currently dropping out ... but RPS needs to plan for success, not project continued high dropout rates into the future for any group; b) many students in the Wythe zone currently leave the zone, a net exodus of 280 students a year according to most recent available data; many of these may stay in-zone to attend school in the new building; c) there is no reason to project current school district lines into the future as permanent. They can be adjusted, and if there is excess capacity at the new Wythe, its zone can be expanded.

# Response to Letter

- The letter obfuscates the obvious fact that **building a smaller Wythe will deny 400 RPS high school students a year access to a state-of-the-art building**, compared to a larger building. It may be years before there is an opportunity to build (or renovate) another comprehensive high school in Richmond. We believe we should take this opportunity to build a facility that creates more opportunities for RPS students to be in an excellent building ... not fewer!
- The letter references plans for the Technical Center, but only presents ideas and possibilities, **not** a solid plan that has been fully vetted by the community and approved by the entire Board. While we look forward to continued development of the Technical Center plans, there is no logical reason at this time to regard it as a substitute for a full-scaled new George Wythe.
- Importantly, the letter does not explain what the stated savings of \$16 million will allow in terms of rebuilding Woodville Elementary School. Woodville was slated in 2017 to be **rebuilt**. When/How did this become downgraded to a “possible renovation”? And what will be achieved with the supposed \$16 million? *The truly progressive position on garnering the resources needed to accelerate work at Woodville is for School Board to request more funding capacity from the City.*
- More generally, there is reason to be skeptical that these projects could all be executed on a tight budget with no unexpected increases in costs due to shifting market conditions, cost overruns, or other unforeseen events—especially since these would be the first projects in many years managed completely by RPS. We worry that the ambition to squeeze three projects out of available funds will end up harming all projects. (If the School Board does not fully fund the new construction team—cuts in this area to the Superintendent’s proposals have been proposed—that will make these challenges even starker.) *Two well-done projects is ample ambition for the first run of the “Schools Build Schools” process the School Board has embraced.*

# Recommendations

## *“What Should Happen Now?”*

*Richmond Together* recommends that Richmond School Board revert to the original plan of building a 2,000 seat George Wythe High School and work with City Council to develop a plan (including requisite financing) to accelerate completion of other parts of the 2017 facilities plan not yet completed.

We also recommend that the Richmond School Board consider whether the Technical Center needs to remain a more urgent priority than work on Woodville, or whether phased-in approaches might be taken on that project to free up resources.

We further recommend that City Council continue to request that the School Board provide professionally vetted, complete accounts of justification, costs, and timelines related to the three projects the School Board currently plans to pursue. This should be a considered a minimal standard for any agency to meet before approval of \$200 million in capital projects goes forward. We are hopeful that RPS expands its staff capacity to manage construction projects it will be possible to provide this information to Council in the near future.

Finally, we welcome potential compromises between City Council and School Board leadership that might bring a healthy resolution to this matter. We would like to see School Board be able to move forward with the projects and City Council be assured of greater confidence in the basis for them. These might include adopting a compromise position on the size of George Wythe, ensuring flexibility in the design of Wythe to allow for additional expansion, or other approaches. What is most important now is that decisions be avoided that have not been fully vetted and may carry long-term, irreversible costs. *We have no wish to see further, needless delay in this project and look forward to City Council and School Board working together to deliver the schools that have been promised to the community.*