November 12, 2019

Dear Western High School Families, Staff, Students and Alumni,

During tonight’s Board meeting I recommended that the Board of School Commissioners approve the selection of Western High School for a feasibility study to determine the kinds of building improvements necessary to support an improved school environment and academic programming for the school. As you may know, during the 2019 legislative session, a bill was introduced to provide City Schools with an appropriation of $400 million for facilities funding to pay for the renovation or replacement of additional schools as a continuation of the 21st Century Buildings Initiative. While the 2019 legislation did not pass, we anticipate similar legislation will be introduced in the upcoming legislative session. We hope that with broad community and legislative support the bill will pass this year along with the Blueprint for Maryland’s Future (i.e., “Kirwan”).

City Schools is in the process of fully renovating or creating new buildings for 32 schools in 28 buildings through the 21st Century Buildings Initiative. These new facilities are providing modern learning environments for thousands of our students. However, even with 28 new buildings, a large portion of our students remain in facilities that do not meet 21st Century standards. Also, even with these modernized facilities, City Schools facilities portfolio remains the oldest in the state with buildings in poorer condition than anywhere in the state. As a matter of equity, we believe that every student deserves to be in a 21st Century school.

During a prior legislative session, City Schools was authorized to use existing 21st Century School funds to conduct feasibility studies to consider improvements to five additional buildings. I have recommended to the Board that these feasibility studies focus on high schools, including Western High School, as high schools are city-wide and reach a large number of students from across Baltimore -- maximizing the number of students with access to modernized school environments. Focusing on high schools also makes financial sense given the high cost of maintaining high schools. Each year City Schools only receives about $29 million in state funds for regular capital improvements to address facilities needs across the entire district. The cost of simply replacing outdated systems (i.e. heating, air conditioning and roof) at a single high school can well exceed the annual state funds intended to meet the needs in all our facilities.

I am very pleased that Western High School has been included in the next group of schools recommended for a feasibility study. The schools receiving feasibility studies would be the next in line for any school construction funding made available for City Schools during the next legislative session. This is good news for our current, past and future students though it is
imperative that we work together to advocate for the passage of the school construction legislation in the upcoming legislative session so that the possibilities identified in the feasibility study can become a reality. As proud staff, families, students and alumni, I ask each of you to reach out to your friends, neighbors and elected officials to express the urgency of this legislation to our school, our students and their families. If this legislation passes, we will work through the list of high schools identified in the below order and renovate as many as the schools as possible with the resources allocated.

- Frederick Douglass building (explore creating a shared campus to house both Frederick Douglass High School and Joseph C. Briscoe Academy)
- Baltimore City College
- Western High School and Baltimore Polytechnic Institute
- Francis M. Wood building (explore creating a shared campus for Vivien T. Thomas Medical Arts Academy and Bluford Drew Jemison STEM Academy West)
- Edmondson-Westside High School

There will be several upcoming opportunities to give feedback and learn more at locations throughout the city, and you will receive an invitation for these events soon. In the meantime, thank you for your commitment to Western High School and the students of Baltimore City.

Sincerely,

Dr. Sonja Brookins Santelises
Chief Executive Officer