

Southeast Enrollment Balancing: Options for Phase 2 Scope

Introduction and Key Findings

At its working session on February 22, the Board of Education asked staff to reconsider the scope of the Southeast Guiding Coalition’s Phase 2 work, citing capacity concerns in light of other urgent district priorities. Directors made it clear they still want to prioritize converting Harrison Park K-8 to a comprehensive middle school as soon as possible—but with the least possible disruption to other schools across Southeast.

In the weeks since that meeting, a small group of PPS staff, coalition members, and representatives from FLO Analytics met to consider options for Phase 2 based on the Board’s instructions. The group did *not* create specific scenarios for the full coalition or the Board to consider, but instead worked to understand the extent of the changes required to meet potential Phase 2 goals.

We began by considering the unresolved issues from Phase 1 that could have the biggest effects on students’ middle school experiences. One stood out: the potential for relatively low enrollment at Lane MS and the future Harrison Park MS—which serve the highest percentages of BIPOC middle school students in the region—to inhibit opportunities for students at those schools by limiting staffing and other resources.

We then identified four potential “levels” of scope the coalition could take on in Phase 2 (with each encompassing all the changes from the previous levels):

- Level 1: Maintaining the Fall 2021 status quo for an additional year
- Level 2: Converting Harrison Park to a middle school in Fall 2022
- Level 3: Addressing underenrollment at Lane MS
- Level 4: Balancing enrollment across all Southeast middle schools

For each level, we played out hypothetical scenarios to identify the kinds and amount of changes required. The exercise left us with several key takeaways:

- **The Board should ground Phase 2 in the effects of enrollment imbalances on students’ middle school experiences.** We surfaced a clear connection between enrollment balancing work and the district’s middle school strategy: the middle grades experience PPS wants all students to have depends on robust enrollment (which helps determine staff and electives) across all middle schools. Under current boundaries and feeder patterns, the middle schools serving the highest percentages of BIPOC students

in Southeast would be most at risk of lacking the enrollment and resources to deliver on this vision. The Board should work with district staff to set a minimum enrollment target for each middle school that would ensure all students have access to an equitable middle grades experience. And it should prioritize helping the public understand the important long-term benefits of the work for students.

- **A sharp decline in enrollment in outer Southeast will make addressing middle school underenrollment even more challenging—and more urgent.** Pre-pandemic forecasts show enrollment at Harrison Park and Lane declining by more than 100 students between now and 2024, as gentrification pushes many families in outer Southeast out of the district entirely. Many scenarios that get both schools to acceptable enrollment levels today would be rendered insufficient within a few years. For example, if the Board determined Harrison Park needs at least 600 students to provide an equitable middle school experience, it would need to find a solution that gives it at least 700 students based on this year’s enrollment data. This would mean adopting changes that disrupt even more families and school communities. But it also emphasizes just how damaging the underenrollment at Lane and Harrison Park could become for students if the coalition’s work is postponed for too long. Whether the Board will need to address these trends within the next few years isn’t in doubt—it’s simply a question of when.
- **Converting Harrison Park to a middle school—as the Board has repeatedly promised to do—would by itself require significant changes.** Opening Kellogg MS didn’t require changing any feeder paths for existing middle schools. Opening Harrison Park MS will be a different story. The school would need several hundred more students beyond its current middle grades enrollment—and because the Board converted all the other K-8 schools in Southeast in Phase 1, those students can only come from other middle schools. This would mean changing current feeder paths for 1-2 neighborhood programs—including at least one current Kellogg feeder school—and relocating at least one middle school DLI program. The Board would also need to identify a location for Harrison Park’s current K-5 students, which means either displacing Creative Science School at the Clark building (the only plausible location for the full cohort) or separating the K-5 cohort to nearby elementary schools—and reversing the precedent it just set in Phase 1 around keeping school communities together.
- **Boundary changes alone would not be enough to address underenrollment at Lane.** If the Board decides that addressing underenrollment at Lane should be a priority from an RESJ perspective, it will effectively be authorizing feeder pattern changes even beyond what would be required to convert Harrison Park. Modest boundary changes alone won’t get the school to a robust enrollment, so changing feeder patterns for several K-5 programs (neighborhood and DLI) would have to be part of any solution.
- **Taking a piecemeal approach to the remaining middle school balancing work would cause more disruption across Southeast, not less.** With all the challenges PPS and its families are facing right now, breaking the coalition’s work into smaller

chunks over a longer period of time might seem appealing. But our scoping exercise showed this approach would likely backfire, due to the interconnected nature of the work and the accelerating enrollment decline in outer Southeast. We're already seeing this play out with Kellogg's feeder path: isolating that component in Phase 1 led to decisions we will need to reverse to convert Harrison Park, meaning some communities will experience back-to-back changes. The same would hold true in trying to separate Harrison Park's conversion from right-sizing Lane. If the Board wants to minimize the overall disruption of the coalition's work, it should decide on a set of outcomes it can stand by for 5-10 years and instruct the coalition to find a plan that meets all those goals during Phase 2. If it's necessary to lengthen the timeline for Phase 2 to accomplish the final scope of work, that would be better for the community than doing the work in several smaller stages.

Below, we offer a more detailed recap of enrollment imbalances across Southeast after Phase 1 of the coalition's work. We also provide an in-depth description of each possible "level" of Phase 2 scope (along with the opportunities, challenges, and extent of potential changes for each. Finally, we list the most crucial questions the Board will need to answer before it can choose and implement one of these options.

Unresolved Issues From Phase 1

The coalition's Phase 1 work will allow Kellogg Middle School to reopen in Fall 2021. This is a huge accomplishment that will give hundreds more students across Southeast access to a comprehensive middle school.

But Phase 1 failed to address the widespread overcrowding and underenrollment across Southeast schools—and in some ways made these imbalances even worse. This is especially true at the middle school level, where three schools (Kellogg, Mt. Tabor, and Hosford) are projected to be overcrowded in 2021-22. Meanwhile, Lane will have a projected utilization rate below 60%, and current feeder patterns put Harrison Parks's middle school on track to have a utilization rate under 40% when it converts in Fall 2022.

Phase 1 also created four K-5 schools (Arleta, Creston, Marysville, and Lent) that will have projected enrollments below 60% in 2021-22, to go along with two that were already underenrolled (Vestal and Whitman). Almost all these schools serve high percentages of BIPOC students and students from low-income families. And overall, enrollment in outer Southeast is projected to decline sharply over the next several years.

Finally, while the coalition didn't attempt any changes in Phase 1 that would affect high school enrollment, it's worth noting that Franklin High School remains on track to be severely overcrowded (above 100% utilization) for the foreseeable future.

Four Levels of Change for Phase 2

Below, we describe four possible “levels” of work for Phase 2. With each additional level, we’d potentially address more of the unresolved issues from Phase 1—but with more disruption to more school communities. Each level is contingent on the prior ones: for example, we can’t proceed to addressing underenrollment at Lane or a broader rebalancing effort without making several tough decisions required just to convert Harrison Park to a middle school (Level 2).

Level 1: No Additional Changes until Fall 2023

We could delay the conversion of Harrison Park (along with any other boundary or feeder path changes) until Fall 2023, with the assumption that we would use the additional time to address all or most of the original Phase 2 priorities. As part of this option, PPS would continue to handle middle school assignments for Bridger neighborhood students administratively, splitting them between Harrison Park K-8 and Kellogg.

Schools Involved

Bridger, Harrison Park, Kellogg

Strengths

- Potentially allows for more district capacity to open Harrison Park Middle School (and potentially a new elementary school at Clark) successfully in Fall 2023
- Least immediate disruption across the region
- Creates time for a less rushed process and more community engagement (i.e., parts of the process could continue this year without the pressure of needing final decisions in time for Fall 2022)
- Harrison Park has more robust middle school programming than many smaller K-8s, which could be strengthened further by additional temporary support

Challenges

- Harrison Park would not open as a middle school in Fall 2022 as promised, meaning some Bridger and all Harrison Park students would not have access to a middle school until Fall 2023 at the earliest
- Bridger remains without a permanent middle school feeder path. Harrison Park K-8 has a spilt high school feeder path, with students in the Bridger attendance area still feeding to Franklin
- It’s impossible to guarantee that the Board/district would follow through on the more comprehensive process a year later--the political challenges would remain the same
- Large middle school imbalances would remain across the region until at least 2023-24 (Kellogg, Mt. Tabor, and Hosford overcrowded; Lane underenrolled)
- Many K-5 schools across the region would remain underenrolled until at least 2023-24
- Franklin would remain overcrowded until at least 2023-24

Level 2: Open Harrison Park Middle School in Fall 2022

We could prioritize converting Harrison Park to a comprehensive middle school in Fall 2022 as promised. This would mean ensuring it has enough students to be a viable middle school—and therefore assigning it additional feeder schools and, most likely, additional Dual Language Immersion students. Without this infusion of feeder schools and programs, utilization at Harrison Park MS would be below 40% with current feeder patterns (Harrison Park K-5 and part of Bridger). It would also mean finding a location for Harrison Park’s current K-5 students: either at the Clark building or splitting them among several nearby schools. While some of these changes may help address overcrowding or underenrollment at other schools, that wouldn’t be the coalition’s primary goal: we’d make the fewest number of adjustments required to give Harrison Park enough students.

Schools Involved

Bridger, Harrison Park, Kellogg, Arleta, Atkinson, Lent, Marysville, Vestal, Mt. Tabor, Woodstock, Hosford, Creative Science, Whitman, Woodmere, Creston

Strengths

- Harrison Park MS opens in Fall 2022 as promised with a good projected enrollment
- All K-5 schools in Southeast would have a middle school assignment by Fall 2022
- Requires changes that may help with overcrowding or underenrollment at some other middle and K-5 schools
- Less disruption overall than Options 3 or 4

Challenges

- Some middle school imbalances would remain across the region indefinitely without specific plans to address them as part of another phase/process
- Some K-5 schools would remain underenrolled indefinitely
- Requires decisions that would be controversial: for example, relocating or reconfiguring Creative Science School (and potentially consolidating underenrolled K-5 schools as a result), relocating one or more DLI programs, changing several neighborhood middle school assignments (possibly including a current Kellogg feeder)
- Without a more comprehensive look at high school feeder paths, Franklin would remain overcrowded indefinitely

Level 3: Address Underenrollment at Lane

In addition to opening Harrison Park Middle school as described in Level 2, we could prioritize addressing the chronic underenrollment at Lane (which will be exacerbated when ACCESS relocates next year).

Schools Involved

Bridger, Harrison Park, Kellogg, Arleta, Atkinson, Marysville, Lent, Vestal, Mt. Tabor, Woodstock, Hosford, Creative Science, Whitman, Woodmere, Creston, Lewis, Lane, Richmond

Strengths

- Harrison Park MS opens in Fall 2022 as promised
- All K-5 schools in Southeast would have a middle school assignment by Fall 2022
- Lane would no longer be underenrolled
- Some changes would likely help address underenrollment at K-5 schools

Challenges

- Requires many changes that may be controversial—potentially relocating or reconfiguring Creative Science School (and possibly consolidating underenrolled K-5 schools as a result), relocating one or more DLI programs, and changing the feeder paths for several neighborhood programs (including some current Kellogg feeders)
- Avoiding changes to other middle schools limits options for increasing enrollment at Lane and Harrison Park—and would still leave the region’s two most racially diverse middle schools with significantly lower enrollment than others (along with any staffing/programmatic impact that creates)
- Without a more comprehensive K-5 boundary review, some K-5 schools would remain underenrolled indefinitely
- Without a more comprehensive look at high school feeder paths, Franklin would remain overcrowded indefinitely

Level 4: Balance All Southeast Middle Schools

We could use the conversion of Harrison Park as an opportunity to address the large imbalances in middle schools across Southeast—not only ensuring that Harrison Park opens as a middle school with robust enrollment, but addressing the overcrowding at Kellogg, Mt. Tabor, and Hosford, as well as the underenrollment at Lane. We’d use a combination of feeder path adjustments and boundary changes to bring each school’s projected utilization rate as close to 80% as possible—roughly the average middle school utilization rate in Southeast. This wouldn’t include a comprehensive K-5 boundary review, though; we’d limit boundary changes to the fewest necessary to balance middle schools across the region.

Schools Involved

All elementary and middle schools in Southeast

Strengths

- Harrison Park MS opens in Fall 2022 as promised
- All middle schools across Southeast would have robust enrollment without overcrowding
- All K-5 schools in Southeast would have a middle school assignment by Fall 2022

- Increased confidence that middle school assignments would not require further adjustments
- Some changes would likely help address underenrollment at K-5 schools

Challenges

- Requires many changes that may be controversial—potentially relocating or reconfiguring Creative Science School (with possible consolidation of underenrolled K-5 schools as a result), relocating one or more DLI programs, and changing the feeder paths for several neighborhood programs (including one or more current Kellogg feeder)
- Requires significant community engagement and staff resources throughout Fall 2021
- Without a more comprehensive K-5 boundary review, some K-5 schools would remain underenrolled indefinitely
- Without a more comprehensive look at high school feeder paths, Franklin would remain overcrowded indefinitely

Questions and Considerations

All the options above come with challenges and difficult choices: put simply, there is no easy off ramp from this process now that it has begun. The questions below should help Directors clarify their goals and values, make an informed choice about the scope of Phase 2, and ensure the coalition has the specific guidance it needs to deliver on the Board's charge.

- **Where will Harrison Park's K-5 students go when it converts to a middle school?** We can't proceed with converting Harrison Park (or planning for any other potential Phase 2 objectives) until we have a specific answer to this question. Is the Board willing to relocate or reconfigure Creative Science School so that these students can move as a group to Clark? Alternatively, is the Board willing to split Harrison Park's K-5 students among several nearby schools, over the strong objections of the Harrison Park community, and reversing the precedent just set in Phase 1 around keeping communities together?
- **What is the minimum enrollment the Board would tolerate over the long run at Lane and the future Harrison Park Middle School?** While part of enrollment balancing work is about efficient use of facilities and resources, our main priority is providing all Southeast students with equitable access to an excellent education—especially in middle school. The Board, with help from district staff, should determine the minimum enrollment necessary for a middle school to offer the student experience the district is promising. Can the Board justify enrollment at Harrison Park or Lane that falls below this threshold, even if addressing it would involve significant disruption across Southeast?
- **How would delaying some or all of the Phase 2 work affect students—especially BIPOC students?** Delaying conversion of Harrison Park would mean students there and some at Bridger would continue to lack access to a comprehensive middle school, despite the Board's urgency to give as many students as possible immediate access to a

middle school in Phase 1. And if we prioritize giving the new Harrison Park Middle School robust enrollment, is there any RESJ justification for allowing underenrollment to continue at Lane, which serves a notably high number of BIPOC students? On the other hand, it's possible the district would have more capacity to support opening Harrison Park Middle School (and a potential new elementary school at Clark, along with any other changes flowing from that) with an additional year to prepare. Do the potential benefits of a delay outweigh the costs for students?

- **Is the Board prepared to make specific plans for continuing any deferred parts of the Southeast balancing work?** If not, we should ensure the outcome of Phase 2 is an acceptable medium-to-long-term solution—for middle schools, but also for the underenrolled K-5 schools and for overcrowded Franklin High School.

