

4516 Alton Place, NW
Washington, DC 20016
October 30, 2006

Zoning Commission
441 4th Street NW
Rm. No. 200/210 South
Washington, DC 20001

In support of Applicants in Case No. 06-17

To whom it may concern:

Modernization of School Without Walls is long overdue, and I urge you to approve the pending application.

My name is Robert O'Sullivan. My older daughter, Mairead, graduated from School Without Walls in 2003 and is now a senior at St. Mary's College of Maryland, the honors liberal arts college in the Maryland state system, where she is completing a double major in English and African Studies.

Mairead wanted to attend Walls since she first heard about it, when she was in the fourth grade at Janney. The older siblings of Janney students who were attending DC public high schools spoke about them at an evening assembly. Mairead was immediately convinced that she wanted to go to Walls and started there in the ninth grade, after two years at Deal.

At Walls, for the first time, Mairead was enthusiastic about school. She was excited about her classes, became involved in extracurricular activities, and particularly enjoyed the atmosphere of being in the midst of a college campus and the sense of being given more personal freedom and responsibility than in a typical school environment. She had attended a fine elementary school and junior high school, but there was something different and special about Walls.

School Without Walls benefits enormously from its location in the midst of the campus of George Washington University and from its partnership with GW. To some extent, the university facilities make up for the inadequacy of the school's own building - the lack of a cafeteria, an auditorium, an appropriate library, etc. The opportunity for Walls students to take GW courses for free is a definite attraction and a special opportunity for them to get an early experience of the challenge of college level work. For a small school, Walls has an impressive range of unusual courses of its own, including the African literature course that inspired Mairead to design her college double major. The program at Walls is unique, is available to qualified students from all over the city, and represents one of the few successes

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stories in the DC public schools. This year, a Walls student is the only National Merit Semifinalist in the entire public school system. The Walls program would not be the same in another location or without the partnership of a fine university.

The Walls program has also succeeded because of the partnerships within the school among students, teachers, parents and administrators, as well as the school's relationships with community organizations and corporate partners and the continuing involvement of alumni throughout the city. Parents are actively involved in the school. While my daughter was a student, I served on the Local School Restructuring Team and the Executive Board of the Home School Association.. With another parent, I started a girls soccer program and have continued to serve as coach of the team. Although Walls has no athletic facilities of its own, the girls soccer team has won three consecutive public school championships. Other athletic teams have also succeeded in spite of the odds.

However, there are limits to what can be achieved in athletics or academics by muddling through and trying to do more with less. A twenty-first century high school program should not have to operate in a nineteenth century elementary school building. The renovation of Walls is long overdue and could not take place without the Walls/GW public/private partnership.

It seems that opposition to the project stems largely from general neighborhood antagonism toward George Washington University. As a resident of American University Park and a parishioner of Holy Trinity Church in Georgetown, I understand very well that a university can sometimes be a difficult neighbor. But this project is not just another university expansion; it represents an outgrowth of the partnership that the university has formed with a public school that serves the entire city. By making the renovation of Walls possible, GW is acting as a good neighbor to the entire city. The application for the renovation deserves to be approved on its own unique merits and not be treated as just another episode in an ongoing town-gown conflict.

My daughter wants to teach someday in the DC public schools. Last summer, she worked as a teacher's aide at Walls. I hope that a few years from now she is able to return to teach at her alma mater but in a facility that is appropriate for the School Without Walls program.

I appreciate the opportunity to express support for this application. If you would like to discuss any aspect of my testimony, I can be reached at 202-336-8420 (W) or 202-244-1716 (H).

Sincerely yours,



Robert C. O'Sullivan