Testimony of Pearl Richardson
on BZA Application #17022,
Edmund Burke School
October 14, 2003

My name is Pearl Richardson, I live at 2940 Upton Street, N.W. Since, before moving to Washington, I was Director of Housing for the New York City Planning Commission, I would like to focus on the effects of the proposed expansion, apart from traffic, with specific reference to the report submitted to you by the Office of Planning (OP).

The Context

In describing the area of the proposed expansion, OP's report says that Connecticut Avenue "has a pattern of alternating medium-high density residential uses with moderate and medium density commercial centers"...that usually extend "no more than one lot-depth back from the avenue. Typically, broad swaths of lower-density residential areas are located behind the avenue's denser uses." That general pattern, says OP, *" is somewhat altered in the area near the site of the proposed school addition* [italics added]."

To say that that pattern is "somewhat altered" is grossly misleading. The area from Tilden to Van Ness Street, east of Connecticut Avenue, is a small residential enclave engulfed by several substantial institutions, some of which are currently planning their own expansions. Apart from Edmund Burke, those institutions include the Howard University Law School (450 students), and the Levine School of Music (600 students) on Upton Street alone–not to mention other institutions in the surrounding neighborhood, including a nursing school (350 students), UDC (nearly 5,500 students), the Hillwood museum, and several embassies. On a typical (nonsummer) work day, between 1,500 and 2,000 students and faculty come and go from the neighborhood. That's a heavy load for a small residential enclave to absorb–and it's having trouble doing so. Add to the student traffic, embassy traffic, Hillwood Museum tour buses, and several apartment buildings that were built decades ago and provide no parking, and it's easy to see why our streets are congested and unsafe and residents lack for on-street parking. The neighborhood cannot withstand further institutional encroachment. It's past its tipping point.

The Burke School

In 1978, when my husband and I moved into the neighborhood, Edmund Burke had 165 students and 28 teachers and staff who occupied a charming early 20th century red brick schoolhouse. The application before you and the OP report incorrectly state that the current site has been in continuous use as a school since 1911. In fact, the Burke School was on a considerably smaller site and has steadily torn down residential properties to make way for its expansion–first in 1983 and more recently in the past year. The BZA authorized the school's expansion to 270 students and 35 faculty and staff in 1983–an expansion that my husband and I did not oppose at the time. The school now has 290 students and 59 faculty

BZA
Case No. 17022
Exhibit No. 173
Board of Zoning Adjustment
District of Columbia
CASE NO. 17022
EXHIBIT NO. 173

and is out of compliance with the BZA order. The school, with its current population, brings congestion into the neighborhood all day long and often into the evening.

The Proposal

The proposed expansion will only make the situation worse. Why?

- The proposed site for expansion of the Burke School would be inadequate for any middle or high school of 320 students. The school currently lacks adequate physical facilities, and the new building does not provide them. Consequently, the school's activities will continue to spill onto the sidewalks, streets, and alleys of the surrounding neighborhood.

- The applicant's and OP's statements to the contrary, the proposed new building will not reorient the school toward Connecticut Avenue and away from the residential area to the east. With its main entrance at the corner of Connecticut Avenue and Upton Street, it will have little effect on the current orientation of the school and no ameliorating effect on the school's use of the neighborhood to compensate for its lack of adequate indoor eating facilities or outdoor athletic facilities. Students engaged in outdoor athletic activities will continue to spill out onto Upton Street. Traffic exiting the school will spill out onto Upton Street. Visiting buses will pull up on Upton Street. And the proposed addition of a black box theater will likely make for more congestion.

- OP's statement that "the proposed building...should not have a significant noise impact on the residential portions of the immediate neighborhood, most of which are east of the existing school buildings" might be true if the Burke School were a closed campus, but it's not. Burke School students use the sidewalks of Connecticut Avenue, Upton, Tilden, and 29th streets and the alleyways that connect them as jogging tracks and the fields of Howard University for soccer practice and other athletic activities.

- The OP's report acknowledges that "some outdoor activities" cause the Burke School's students to "walk to the park within the Intelsat campus or along Upton Street to the Howard Law School fields." The OP report neglects to note that the students also run and jog in packs, so that at times the sidewalks become inhospitable to normal residential use.

- "For assessing noise levels generated by the school" outside its "existing or proposed boundaries," the OP's report says that it needs "additional information about the applicant's use of Howard University's playing fields and the noise generated by such use." The noise levels generated by the school outside its current or proposed boundaries are a significant adverse impact. The OP requested the applicant to furnish a description of "its current and planned use of the open space at...Howard...Law School;" and "an assessment of the noise that would be generated by the use of this area after the requested increase to a 320 student population." That information has not been provided, and its absence is a significant omission in an analysis of the effect of the school's expansion on the residential fabric of the neighborhood.

- The OP report notes that "other private schools recently approved by the BZA do not provide cafeterias," including "the Field School...and Georgetown Day School." The OP neglects to note that, unlike the Burke School, the Field School is a closed campus. Moreover, neither of those schools has a student density level that even closely approximates that of the Burke School.

- The OP report states that "in addition to perceived traffic, circulation and parking problems,...alleged problems have included increased student foot traffic and loitering in the alley system; increased trespassing by students on private property;" etc. Further, the "OP notes that the location of other schools, including UDC and a new nursing school in the area makes it difficult to verify that Burke students are the cause of such problems." The student population at Burke consists of preteens and teenagers between the ages of 11 and 18. They are clearly distinguishable from college and law school students. As for the nursing school students, they are predominantly women who appear to be in their 20s and 30s. Finally, the students who have been observed loitering in the alleys and trespassing on private property have also been observed going into and out of the Burke School.

Some Conclusions

More Burke students will mean more spillover into the neighborhood, not less; more noise, not less. The school could have added facilities that reduced its spillover into the neighborhood. It chose not to. In short, contrary to OP's conclusions, the location of the new school will be objectionable to adjoining and nearby property because of noise and number of students, not to mention traffic.

The OP has concluded that "approval of the current application, with the TMP as modified by DDOT and OP recommendations, will be more likely to reduce possible negative impacts than would the approval of a matter of right development without these measures." That statement is gratuitous and without foundation in the absence of a thorough analysis comparing the effects of the proposal on the neighborhood with those of an as-of-right residential (or other) building.

Would a special exception to allow the Burke School to expand be in harmony with the general purpose and intent of the zoning regulations and maps? The OP has concluded that it would. It goes on to say: "Public schools are matter of right uses in residential zones. Private schools are considered to be uses that are compatible with residential neighborhoods, provided conditions are met with respect to minimizing possible negative impacts." The implication of the OP's conclusion is that the proposed expansion of the Burke School will have no more of an adverse impact on the neighborhood than would a public high school or middle school. But could a public high school or middle school that does not provide a cafeteria or outdoor recreational facilities be constructed–or be permitted to expand–in Washington, D.C. today? No. Could a public middle or high school that does not provide on-site parking for buses from other schools or other visitors be constructed in Washington, D.C. today? Again, the answer is no.

The Burke School is surrounded by neighbors who are highly educated and for whom

education matters. But zoning also matters–and becomes increasingly important as urban congestion grows. The zoning regulations–with good reason–impose a higher standard on private schools than on public schools; hence, the need for a special exception to construct a private school in a residential neighborhood. An expanded Burke School, however, will not meet the standards that current regulations impose on public schools; hence, some of its adverse impacts on a neighborhood that is already overrun with institutions. (The standards for construction of public schools are available and can be provided upon request.) **In short, the Burke School imposes itself on the neighborhood in ways that public schools do not–and could not–and therefore–OP's statements to the contrary–its expansion would not be in harmony with the general purpose and intent of the zoning regulations and maps.**