

## Tobin Montessori/Vassal Lane Upper School Program Background Information

### **Background**

The Innovation Agenda responded to conditions in Cambridge Public Schools that were unfair and inequitable. Prior to its passage, enrollment challenges at about half of our schools had led to our system becoming unacceptably unequal in terms of resources available in different parts of the city. While about half of our K - 8 schools had strong programs, the other half struggled with dwindling enrollments and a dearth of opportunities for meaningful enrichment.

The creation of four geographically-scattered Upper Schools ensured that all students in Cambridge would have the benefit of a consistent and robust academic and enrichment program. To fully realize a vision of excellence in middle school education, a team of city and school officials came together to develop a comprehensive plan for elementary school building renovation. Chaired by School Committee members Fred Fantini and Nancy Tauber, the team also included Deputy City Manager Richard Rossi, Assistant City Manager Ellen Semonoff and CPS Chief Operating Officer Jim Maloney.

This committee developed guiding principles, utilized a Building Capital Needs Assessment by an outside engineering firm in 2006, and then identified 5 schools for renovations/replacement:

- The Martin Luther King, Jr. School building on Putnam Avenue
- The King Open School building on Cambridge Street
- The Tobin School building on Vassal Lane
- The Kennedy Longfellow building on Spring Street
- The Graham and Parks building on Linnaean Street

With this report as a foundation, the Cambridge School Committee identified the Martin Luther King, King Open, and Tobin buildings as the three buildings in most dire need of renovation. Within the passage of the Innovation Agenda, these sites were selected as locations of three of our four new Upper Schools, allowing the city to solve the problems with those buildings while at the same time creating appropriate facilities where the Upper School program could thrive. The Peabody School building was selected as the fourth Upper School because it was among the most recently-renovated buildings and was fairly well equipped to accommodate a new Upper School within it.

As you know, the Martin Luther King/Putnam Avenue Upper Campus opened in 2016, and the King Open/Cambridge Street Upper School building opened this past September. For the past year the District has been engaged with the City and architects in a feasibility study for the promised Tobin Montessori / Vassal Lane Upper School project, with a planned completion of September 2024. It should be noted that both the King Open/Cambridge Street Upper School and the King/Putnam Ave. Upper School are significantly larger than the buildings they replaced. The Cambridge Street project also includes a new administrative building for Cambridge Public Schools.

### **Enrollment Pressures for Vassal Lane Upper School**

The design for the Tobin Montessori / Vassal Lane Upper School campus will accommodate a somewhat larger Upper School than originally proposed in the Innovation Agenda. This is

necessary, due to both district-wide enrollment pressures and issues specific to Vassal Lane Upper School and its feeder schools.

In order to fully understand enrollment pressures, it is important to note that the Upper Schools are fed by a network of elementary schools that feed into the Upper Schools. By policy, all fifth graders must move on to a specific Upper School. This pattern applies to all students, including those in substantially separate special education classrooms and Sheltered English Immersion classrooms.

The feeder schools for Vassal Lane Upper School are Graham & Parks, Haggerty and Tobin Montessori. Graham and Parks is home to both a Sheltered English Immersion Program (SEI) for English Language Learners and a Substantially Separate Special Education Program. When students in the SEI program achieve English proficiency, it is highly preferable to allow them to remain in the same school. While we can control school assignments to general education placements, we must place all SEI-eligible students at Graham and Parks / Vassal Lane Upper School.

To plan ahead for movement by SEI students into the mainstream program at the upper school level, we have had to place caps on all three Vassal Lane feeder schools beginning as early as the third grade. Limiting enrollment in this way has often led to smaller class sizes at the VLUS feeder schools -- reducing the number of families who can get into in schools in North and West Cambridge, and creating size pressures at other schools in the district.

To give one example, under the Controlled Choice policy, we strive to balance the socioeconomic demographics of our schools, so that at every school, approximately 45% of students qualify for Free or Reduced Price Meals, and 55% do not.

- At Haggerty, enrollment caps mean that no new students can enter the school. Through attrition, just 18% of fifth graders qualify for Free or Reduced Lunch, and the vast majority (82%) do not. Additionally, this cap has resulted in two small fifth grade classrooms of 14 students.
- By contrast, Grade 5 at the King Open School is composed of two classrooms of 20-21 students, of whom 54% qualify for free/reduced lunch. A situation where one school has an average class size of 14 while another has an average class size of 20.5 is not meeting the goal of equity and access.

### **Rising Enrollments District Wide**

VLUS is not the only Upper School to be feeling the strain. In fact, all CPS Upper Schools are experiencing the growing pains that come with success. Increasing city populations, combined with confidence in our public schools has resulted in an overall district enrollment increase of 843 students since the Upper School program began, just 8 years ago (a 13.1% increase). Upper School enrollment (grades 6-8) has grown by 119 students or 11%.

In the program design for the Innovation Agenda, ideal enrollments were set at 88 students per grade level, with a maximum capacity of 100. We are currently at or above capacity in one or more grades at each of the upper schools, making it difficult to provide a seat to in-coming middle school students throughout the year. As shown in the table below, all of our Upper Schools are presently at or above capacity for grade 7. There is no room to grow.

| School           | Grade 7 Capacity | Enrollment | Available Seats |
|------------------|------------------|------------|-----------------|
| Cambridge Street | 100              | 100        | 0               |
| Putnam Avenue    | 100              | 100        | 0               |
| Rindge Avenue    | 100              | 99         | 1               |
| Vassal Lane      | 100              | 101        | (1)             |

These enrollment pressures are only getting worse. There are not enough classrooms to accommodate our current cohort of 5th Graders, as shown by the following table. While there may be some attrition, these numbers are at an all-time high.

|                                 | Current<br>5th Graders | 6th Grade<br>Capacity | Available<br>Seats |
|---------------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|
| Rindge Avenue Feeder Schools    | 90                     | 100                   | 10                 |
| Cambridge Street Feeder Schools | 128                    | 100                   | (28)               |
| Vassal Lane Feeder Schools      | 120                    | 100                   | (20)               |
| Putnam Avenue Feeder Schools    | 108                    | 100                   | (8)                |

Total District enrollment for 6th-8th grade students was 1,223 as of October 1, 2019. According to projections developed by the University of Massachusetts Donahue Institute, this number may rise to 1,323 by 2024 and to 1,591 by 2030.

Given these pressures, expanding the capacity of Vassal Lane Upper School from 300 students to 450 represents a cost effective and sustainability-driven solution. It would be difficult to justify renovating the other three Upper Schools to add more classrooms, given how new they are and how many schools are in greater need of updates. Enrollment won't be large enough to seed another Upper School for likely a decade; and it is hard to conceive of the City of Cambridge erecting portables on Upper School Campuses to spread the 150 seats we need equally around the city.

The goal of offering four equally-sized upper schools must be balanced against the lack of reasonable alternatives. Additional Upper School seats are needed *now* -- and they are especially needed at Vassal Lane due to the additional pressure caused by Sheltered English Immersion.

### Meeting the Needs of Children with Disabilities

Elementary enrollment K-5 is projected to increase by 777 students by 2030. Our district must prepare for this growth in enrollment. The Tobin Montessori School has shown impressive academic results among all demographic groups including students with disabilities, and our plan for this school's expansion seeks to capitalize on this demonstrated success. A total of 4 new Special Start classrooms would be added to the school, joining the one Special Start classroom already within the building.

Special Start is a program mandated for children ages 3-5 who are identified as requiring Special Education services due to a disability. In anticipation of new space becoming available at Tobin Montessori, three Special Start classrooms have already been moved to temporary swing space at Kennedy-Longfellow School, opening up space in the elementary schools they left behind. A fifth classroom would be added once construction is complete, allowing us to better respond to the rising demand for specialized early childhood education services.

For Special Start students, there would be important benefits to being housed within a school that has an age of entry of 3 years old. Students with disabilities benefit immeasurably from opportunities to be included in activities that involve same-aged peers who are developing along a more typical developmental timeline. The Office of Student Services, which oversees the Special Start, additionally argues that Special Start classrooms should not be located in isolated classrooms throughout the district. Grouping Special Start classrooms together provides greater opportunities for collaboration and pooling of resources.

In addition to Special Start, a JK - 5 Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) program has been added to Tobin Montessori School under the proposed plan. When these students enter middle school, they will attend a program at the Vassal Lane Upper School. Currently, ASD programs are in place at King Open School and Fletcher Maynard Academy. Students in the ASD program at those schools attend the Cambridge Street Upper School ASD program when they enter middle school. Like other school districts, CPS has seen steady growth in the number of students who are identified with this disability. Our city should be immensely proud of our ability to educate these most vulnerable members of our community within CPS schools rather than sending them to private special education outplacements. To maintain this commitment, we will simply need more space.

### **Other Considerations**

***Updating Our Facilities Master Plan:*** The proposed Tobin Montessori/Vassal Lane campus has been promised to the students, families and teachers of Cambridge Public Schools since the Innovation Agenda was approved in 2011. The decision to renovate this campus was made following completion of a 2010 facilities study and 2006 building condition assessment study.

CPS is working with the City Manager's Office on an updated Facilities condition and potential expansion study; but our goal for this work is to begin analyzing our next set of priorities, under the assumption that work will move forward in response to previous recommendations and votes of City Council and the School Committee.

***Future of Existing Swing Space at the Kennedy Longfellow School and 359 Broadway.*** Until the completion of their new campus, the Tobin Montessori School will be housed in temporary swing space at 359 Broadway, and Vassal Lane Upper School will occupy the upper floors of Kennedy Longfellow School. While these swing spaces are occupied, the updated facilities condition and expansion study will provide recommendations for the use of space within CPS, including future uses of the swing spaces.