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Reaction Is Mixed to Proposal for School Addition

By Michael Alison Chandler
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A surprise proposal from the [Fairfax County](#) executive to spend \$10 million to build additional classrooms for South County Secondary School would alleviate crowding on the Lorton campus but could delay or derail plans for a new middle school in the fast-growing area.

[County Executive Anthony H. Griffin](#)'s proposal to add a wing to the campus is a response to the growth the school experienced soon after opening in 2005. South County Secondary has 2,929 students in seventh through 12th grades, more than 400 above capacity. The proposal was disclosed this month.

Many residents and politicians have long championed a new middle school to ease crowding. Griffin's proposal, which casts doubt on the prospects for a new school, puts them in an awkward position.

"I don't want to be ungrateful," said [Fairfax County School Board](#) member Elizabeth T. Bradsher ([Springfield](#)). "I appreciate their offer. But if you have this amount of money for a wing, why won't you go all the way and work toward resolving the problem in its entirety?"

Griffin said the county can't afford a new middle school, which officials said could cost \$35 million to \$40 million if built soon. Instead, he offered to recommend that county supervisors approve \$10 million over two years to fund the expansion. The deal is subject to approval from the School Board and the Board of Supervisors.

"I can't fix their problem for them, but I can help them in the short term," Griffin said. He added that he was looking for creative ways to ease crowding, in response to queries from supervisors.

Officials said Griffin's proposal was unusual because it would circumvent the usual process for planning and funding school construction. But as the former Lorton prison and the area around it developed, many residents have lobbied to expedite school construction. Their cause has drawn support from supervisors, state lawmakers, members of Congress and at least one congressional candidate.

[Dean Tistadt](#), the school system's chief operating officer, said he was "pleasantly surprised" by Griffin's offer and called it an "elegant solution to a complicated problem." He said he plans to recommend that the School Board accept it.



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The wing would add up to 35 classrooms, enabling the school to rid its parking lot of more than 20 trailers and to operate with the standard seven-period schedule. The school is using a nine-period timetable to accommodate extra students.

Tistadt said the expansion could be completed as early as the 2010-11 school year. That would eliminate the need for a change in South County Secondary's attendance zone, which Tistadt said would otherwise be necessary next year. In the aftermath of a widely unpopular boundary change just approved in western Fairfax, School Board members might find that appealing.

Tistadt acknowledged that expanding South County Secondary would reduce the likelihood of adding a middle school in the area in the near future. But he said an expansion would not rule out a new school, especially if plans to realign the region's military bases bring a wave of students to [Fort Belvoir](#) and surrounding neighborhoods.

Many south county residents dispute official assurances that a middle school is unnecessary in the short term.

"The need has been here since the school opened," said Christine Morin, a [Laurel Hill](#) resident and co-chairman of a group dedicated to getting a middle school built. South County Secondary exceeded capacity a year after it opened, and the School Board afterward approved a controversial boundary change to move some students out.

Students left with the understanding that they would have the opportunity to return once a middle school was built, said School Board Chairman Daniel G. Storck ([Mount Vernon](#)).

Storck called Griffin's offer "generous" but said it could "exacerbate" some problems. An addition would lift the school's capacity to 3,000 at a time when the School Board is seeking smaller schools, he said. An addition also would solidify South County as a secondary school, even though it was designed to be a high school. These complications have concerned some supervisors.

"If you add a wing . . . you are still mixing seventh-graders with 12th-graders at a school that has 3,000 people," Supervisor [Pat S. Herrity](#) (R-Springfield) said. "I think it's a short-sighted solution," he added.

[Gerald E. Connolly](#) (D), chairman of the Board of Supervisors, and [Supervisor Gerald W. Hyland \(D-Mount Vernon\)](#) agreed. "I appreciate the effort to try to address the problem, but I think the long-term solutions really will require a separate middle school," Connolly said. Hyland said he would "much prefer that we assert all efforts to construct a new middle school."

The supervisors and others have been seeking an investor for a public-private partnership to build a middle school, similar to the one used for South County Secondary. Herrity said a deal could be close.

Hyland said he would like to try to find a way to use the money Griffin suggested for a wing as a "down payment" for the school. Storck and Bradsher also support that goal.

School Board member Tessie Wilson (Braddock) said she strongly supports Griffin's proposal. "We need to find some relief for South County [Secondary] now," Wilson said, "not four years from now or 10 years from now. . . . I think it is unfair to a lot of people to turn this down with the hope that you find the money to build a middle school."

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