

An Open Letter from Cypress Families

Children and families at Cypress Academy have been in turmoil for the last week, since being notified that our school was closing suddenly, a few days before the end of school. Parents spent countless hours trying to figure out what happened and how to do right by our kids.

Superintendent Lewis recognized this as a crisis, and OPSB stepped in to directly run the school. We all recognize that this is an extraordinary situation.

Stability is crucial in this moment in our children's education. It is for this reason that many of us are willing to partner with OPSB in saving Cypress by remaining at the school with the promise of recreating it as a stronger school. We want Cypress to be a story of success: thriving students, professional faculty, great leadership, and invested parents. We think Cypress can be a model of what an inclusionary school can look like in New Orleans.

Why New Orleans Needs Cypress

Our school leader, Dr. Bob Berk, the Cypress staff, the founding Board, and parents, created a school where something very rare happens - an inclusive model of special education (SPED), where high needs students, with more expensive and complex learning needs, learned alongside regular education students and students with reading difficulties. Special education students were well served. Regular ed students were as well - benefiting from the smaller student-to-teacher ratio and an evidence-based expertise around reading and math. Cypress created a unique educational environment that school leaders and OPSB consider a successful model for the district.

OPSB recently shared with Cypress parents that our SPED population is at 26%, and that the average for other schools is 13%. In some Orleans Parish public schools with selective admissions, the SPED population is as low as 5%. Cypress has very intentionally served a SPED population that is sometimes underserved, or "counseled out," from other schools in this city (both public and private).

What Happened:

Cypress's inclusive model at the current stage of growth is expensive. Simply put, Cypress needs more students to be financially stable. At this rate of growth, in accordance with its charter from OPSB, it will take several more years. The Cypress board addressed this structural deficit with philanthropic donations but fell short for this coming year and were unwilling to run on a deficit and risk having to close mid-year. Although OPSB were aware of this funding gap, these concerns were not made public nor were they resolved by either party. The Cypress board voted to merge with Lafayette Academy Extension at Dunbar, and now, in light of the OPSB takeover, to officially close.

The Cypress Board and Dr. Berk should have shared this with parents much earlier, and engaged us in both addressing this deficit and also making informed decisions for our children's education. OPSB should have found a solution to this no-win funding situation. If, at current funding levels,

schools can't provide true SPED inclusion in accordance with the law, then OPSB (and State and Federal education bodies) must find a solution to this catch 22. Our children got caught in the middle of this mess.

Moving Forward

OPSB committed to running Cypress for several years with interim leadership. OPSB also committed to engaging the parent community and the former school leader to stabilize Cypress while maintaining its core values, pedagogy, and commitment to inclusive and robust special education services. OPSB has committed that they will maintain the unique level of service currently provided by Cypress and have the ability to use more district funds to ensure a successful inclusionary model.

The groundwork for something successful and wonderful to emerge out of this is here. But there are still a lot of unanswered questions about the basic structure of the school: Will Cypress be re-chartered? What will that process look like? Will it be run as a training ground / lab school for SPED inclusion schools? Will OPSB be able to draw enough regular ed students to this school and avoid the outdated practice of isolating special education students to a "SPED school"?

Even with all of these outstanding questions, many of us have been heartened by the chance to save Cypress. Many are excited by a chance to be led by Mrs. Fleming and Dr. Parker - the interim school leaders chosen by OPSB - who are both well-respected and have been an integral part of Cypress all along. Parents are energized to create a co-governing model to ensure that Cypress and OPSB are transparent. We want a seat at the table and a way for a parent advisory role to have a real say in decision making. Given what we've been through with this extraordinary situation and given the uncertainties going forward in how OPSB will run the school, we believe a partnership with a strong parent co-governing model will ensure that we are making the best possible decisions for current and incoming Cypress families. We are drafting a framework document for what we propose that could look like on Wednesday.

While we believe that OPSB is sincere in its efforts to produce a quality model school at Cypress, we have deep concerns. Accordingly, as a show of good faith on the part of OPSB, we are calling for the right to determine if a quality school exists at Cypress at the end of January, 2019. We ask that one vote per student and a majority of 51% be required to keep Cypress open. If it is determined by a majority of Cypress families that the OPSB run school is substandard, Cypress will be closed at the end of the 2018-19 school year. All students will receive priority placement. We are committed to making this school excellent and sustainable and our deep intention is not to use our power to close the school.

However, we need some insurance in order to sign our children up for this experiment. We also ask that OPSB commit to keeping Cypress open for three years acknowledging that under the co-governing model, families may decide to re-charter Cypress or another course of action if in the best interest of the students.

Parents have coalesced around this document and are ready to commit to the school and send this out to the larger parent community to gather signatures. We are truly optimistic about the potential of this school, but we have warranted concerns. We look forward to working with you in partnership.

In summary, here are our asks:

- Establish a co-governing model based on what families outline and through which parents have a real seat at the table
- A three year commitment by OPSB to run the school unless rechartered by a family-led group
- The power for families to vote to decide if the school can stay open after January 2019
- We ask that all of these conditions be agreed to by the OPSB in writing

Our Promise

We, the undersigned parents / guardians, commit to keeping our children registered at Cypress Academy for the 2018-2019 school year, if a family co-governing model, a multi-year commitment by OPSB, and the power to close the school through a voting process in 2019 is given to families.

Name _____ / Child's Name(s) _____ / Grade Entering _____ / Signature _____