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BGR defends criticism of school master plan

Friday, October 31, 2008

Re: "School plan is a cost-effective, detailed vision," Your Opinions, Oct. 24.

Recovery School District Superintendent Paul Vallas asserts in his letter that concerns raised by BGR and the Cowen Institute about the high costs in the School Facilities Master Plan were based on flawed analysis. Specifically, Mr. Vallas took issue with "the misguided assertion that the proposed project costs are nearly double the national average." He claimed that the numbers we used do not factor in facilities such as gymnasiums, auditoriums and science labs.

According to the author of the study we cited, Mr. Vallas' claim is simply not true.

The superintendent also attempted to debunk our analysis by comparing per-square-foot costs to those of other school construction projects in the area. We note that our analysis was based on a more useful measure -- cost per pupil. That measure takes into account not just the cost per square foot, but also the number of square feet per student.

As we acknowledged in our comments on the School Facilities Master Plan, national and regional medians are rough benchmarks and comparisons are difficult. Nonetheless, the huge differences between the national and regional medians, on the one hand, and the school system's numbers, on the other, are significant enough to warrant further inquiry.

Interestingly, the 2,000-page School Facilities Master Plan itself contains no information on the cost per square foot or the cost per pupil. The public cannot tell from the hundreds of pages of building standards whether the plan will produce the equivalent of palaces or moderate homes.

It is vitally important that policymakers understand what is driving the costs before they approve the plan. Without that knowledge, and a realistic assessment of funding prospects, they cannot make an informed decision.

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