



**Before the Montgomery County Board of Education
MCCPTA Testimony
Superintendent's Recommended
FY 2012 Capital Budget and
Amendments to the
FY 2011-2016 Capital Improvements Program**

November 10, 2010

Good evening, President O'Neill and Members of the Board of Education. I am Kristin Tribble, President of the Montgomery County Council of PTAs. I speak tonight on behalf of the over 50,000 members in our organization to advocate for the welfare of the more than 144,000 MCPS students in the county. MCCPTA speaks with one voice for all children.

Our objective is simple. Even in tight budget times, quality in education is our first priority. We strive to ensure that MCPS provides our students the best opportunities to learn. As you will hear in the testimony over these two nights, the projects listed in the CIP contribute directly to student success. Collectively, we appreciate the Superintendent's efforts to keep all projects on track and to implement county-wide projects to renew and revitalize our school facilities. We support these programs and we support this CIP.

At the same time, we are here before you these next two days to say that the Board can do more, and can do it more wisely in some instances. Success for our students should not be negotiated or compromised.

SUMMARY

The Recommendation is consistent with the CIP priorities adopted by MCCPTA. Under the Recommendation, all current additions and modernizations will stay on schedule. These critical projects must continue on schedule, because we can't afford to fall behind. In addition, we are pleased to see the recommendation to restore key HVAC and life-cycle asset replacement items to levels proposed last year, before they were trimmed by county budget cuts. We also support the proposal to maintain other county wide projects at the same level as planned in the six-year CIP. This CIP, coupled with an operating budget that ensures appropriate staffing and support to keep class sizes low, is essential for students to reach their full potential.

Nevertheless, we must find way to do more. Even with the projects in the Recommendation, the Richard Montgomery, Quince Orchard and B-CC clusters will go into moratorium next year under the county's Growth Policy. Other clusters are constrained by city or town adequate facilities ordinances. This particularly concerns us because, for the past three years, kindergarten classes have been the largest ever, and are predicted to continue at these high levels for a few years at least. The Board should be questioning whether we have adequate capacity to accommodate these students, not only at the elementary level but also at the middle and high school level. No student should spend all of his or her educational years in portables or a construction zone.

As we have for the past few years, we also urge you to take maximum advantage of the opportunity presented by a down construction market. MCPS reports that construction costs are 20-30% below recent experiences. Now is not the time to be timid with preparing the backlog of additions and modernizations for bid. We should be allocating resources to accelerating the design process so that Glenallen ES, Hoover MS, and Gaithersburg HS – and others – can be bid as soon as possible in the current environment. While we recognize the complexity of the design process, MCPS still takes too long to move projects from design to bid. We should do more to speed this process.

Further, the Board is considering a revision to its Renewal and Modernization Policy that emphasizes a shift to systemic improvements to maintain quality learning environments and to lengthen the useful life of a building before modernization. This shift will require a re-evaluation of the county-wide projects and a shift in the way we plan those projects. For example, we are extremely pleased to see our calls for more HVAC spending being heeded. However, is \$15 million per year enough to replace HVAC systems at all of our 201 educational facilities over the useful life of each system? We need well-defined, adequately funded county-wide programs to maintain our schools, to lessen the need for costly repairs and remediation, to lower energy usage and to improve security in existing school buildings.

Finally, MCCPTA appreciates the thoughtful process used to develop the FACT criteria for assessing the next round of schools for modernization. Input from a broad range of stakeholders – including MCCPTA – has been helpful in the process. We appreciate that you have accepted our request for an additional round of public comment on the criteria after the scoring methodology and weighting criteria have been developed. MCCPTA and our schools look forward to providing our comments on the criteria later this month.

School Modernizations

Despite efforts to “catch up” with deteriorating school buildings, MCPS continues to modernize at a pace that is too slow. The reports in this area continue to be glum: the Superintendent reports a pace of modernizations of 65 years for elementary schools, 76 years for middle schools and 50years for high schools.¹ A pace of 76 years to modernize

¹ Even this report is a bit misleading. The Board has not set an objective for when schools should be modernized. These figures represent the “pace” of modernizations, not a schedule for modernizing

middle schools is simply too long. At this pace, Cabin John MS, which is being modernized now, will not be due for another modernization until 2085 or later. It is clear that MCPS will need to devote substantial resources to renewing core building facilities over the lifetime of its schools in order to provide a safe, secure and modern facility for our students.

Unfortunately, the Recommendation does little to take maximum advantage of the current construction market. MCPS reports that current bids are coming in 20-30% lower than they were a year ago. Surely this is the result of a down economy where construction firms are aggressively competing to maintain business. It's a buyer's market, especially for large projects like our modernizations. When the prospect is saving 30% on a \$40 million middle school or a \$100 million high school, the prudent thing to do is to attempt to bid the project sooner rather than later. Therefore, we continue to urge the Board to look aggressively for ways to bid planned projects earlier than scheduled. As we said last year, we believe the maximum time period between presentation of plans to the Board and bid of the construction documents should be 12 months. We urge the Board to set and enforce this goal.

In addition, we would like to receive further information on the costs of individual projects included in the Current Replacement/Modernization line item in the CIP (see p. 1-12 of the Recommendation). This line item represents modernizations for which construction funds are allocated in the next two fiscal years. As we have seen, construction costs can change, but this line item no longer reports the projected cost of each project individually. We urge the Board to publish the details of each individual project estimate annually.

County-wide Projects

MCCPTA supports the restoration of the HVAC replacement item to \$15 million as was proposed last year. County-wide programs such as these have been very successful in the past and can, over the long term, lessen the need for extensive renovations or modernizations as our newer facilities age. We also support the expansion of existing county-wide programs and the development of new systemic programs similar to the roof replacement and HVAC programs in the CIP. We need MORE well-defined county-wide budget programs that maintain our schools and lessen the need for costly repairs and remediation, that lower energy usage and that improve security in existing school buildings.

We have the following additional comments relating to the Superintendent's Recommendation for county-wide projects:

- **HVAC.** We would like the CIP to include a list of the projects planned for the next two years under the HVAC program. Although we recognize that sometimes urgent needs may develop that were not anticipated, publishing a

schools. Instead, this figure merely represents the number of schools modernized recently divided by the total number of schools at that educational level.

tentative list of HVAC projects will better enable us to evaluate whether the program is adequate to meet the needs of the county's schools. Further, we would like to see MCPS set a target for routine replacement/rehabilitation of HVAC systems. We understand that the useful life of an HVAC system is 15-20 years. We believe the annual amount allocated to HVAC replacements should reflect a reasonable expectation of the useful life of a system and should enable MCPS to replace or rehabilitate the HVAC systems at all 200 schools at the end of the system's useful life. In other words, we should not plan the HVAC item based on the amount of money we think is available. We should plan it based on the amount we project is needed.

-- **BMPI.** We are concerned that this line item is not funded past FY 2012. We also would like more definition of the eligibility for projects under this line item. In the past, it has been hard to determine precisely what types of projects are suitable for funding under this program. In addition, schools on the modernization list often are given conflicting information concerning whether BMPI projects will be considered for their schools. These eligibility questions should be clarified.

-- **PLAR.** We support continuation and expansion of the PLAR program. PLAR should include routine upkeep, such as painting and cleaning also. We question why Appendix F lists fewer completed PLAR projects in summer 2010 than last year, despite an increase in the PLAR budget last year. As with the HVAC project, we should plan this line item based on the amount of work we project is needed to replace assets on a life-cycle basis.

-- **Improved (Safe) Access to Schools.** We note that this item is not funded after FY 2012, but there is no explanation of its termination. We believe this project continues to support an important purpose in our schools.

Further, we would like better information on the ranking criteria used by MCPS for prioritization of projects within the county-wide programs. With the full implementation of the maintenance tracking system, we should be able to identify more precisely how each of these line items is being spent each year. Moreover, we would like the planned projects for each county-wide program to be listed each year, even as we understand that the rankings may be adjusted over the year due to urgent health and safety issues, unanticipated breakdowns and the like. As is, it is virtually impossible for parents to determine if the urgent needs of our schools are being addressed.

Finally, costs that are embedded in countywide projects should be examined closely for overlap and cost savings. For example, has the Fire Safety Upgrades project outlived its usefulness? Originally created in 2001 to address a "punch list" of code violations cited by the Fire Marshal, the project is now described as providing for the replacement of fire alarm systems in county schools. This clearly is a worthwhile objective and one that we support. However, the project appears to overlap with PLAR items, where fire alarm systems also are being replaced. We recommend that the Board review these two line items to determine if they are in fact duplicative.

Alternatively, the Fire Safety Upgrade project could be examined for possible combination with the School Security System replacement project. Fire alarm and security systems often operate as integrated systems, so it is possible that the Board could achieve greater efficiencies by upgrading and integrating school fire alarm systems with other security systems.

Renewal and Modernization Policy

For several years, we have asked the Board and the County Council to work with us to address long range capital needs for our schools. Although such a task force has not been created, we are encouraged by the Board's work session over the summer. We recommend that the Board, in consultation with the County Council, build upon this work session to discuss long range planning for our schools.

As stated above, we believe one objective should be to identify ways to accelerate the modernization process itself. We should look for opportunities to standardize school designs in order to shorten the planning period. We should look for ways to implement systemic upgrades in order to lengthen the useful life of school facilities. We also should look at whether our existing designs will lessen the likelihood that a building will need to be replaced in order to modernize it. Further, we believe this process should also examine the optimal size of schools in order to promote learning while realizing efficiencies in building construction and operation.

We welcome the draft Renewal and Modernization Policy's recognition that a systemic approach for the replacement of building systems goes hand-in-hand with a modernization policy. However, we are concerned that the Board's draft policy lacks meaningful goals to guide MCPS's activities. The policy should identify the specific targets for maintaining schools in good working condition. It should identify the major system components that will be replaced on a periodic basis and should identify a target useful life for replacement of the assets. Further, the policy should establish clear criteria for determining when modernization, as opposed to systemic maintenance, would be appropriate. Our Board of Directors has authorized comments on the draft Renewal and Modernization Policy, which will be submitted for your consideration shortly.

With respect to the FACT criteria for the next round of schools to be modernized, we appreciate the inclusive approach MCPS has followed in developing the revised FACT criteria. Input from a broad range of stakeholders – including MCCPTA – has been helpful in the process. We appreciate that you have accepted our request for an additional round of public comment on the criteria after the scoring methodology and weighting criteria have been developed. MCCPTA and our schools will be reviewing the final methodology and scoring rubric and will provide our comments later this month.

Other Concerns

For many years, we have expressed concern with the relationship between capital replacements, which are funded through the CIP, and maintenance, which is an Operating Budget item. For years, MCPS has struggled to keep up with repairs and has had precious little room for preventive maintenance. If MCPS wants its buildings to last longer, plans must be made to maintain them better. However, because maintenance is not considered until the Operating Budget, it often is difficult to evaluate the adequacy of either the capital budget or the level of maintenance needed to support the CIP. For example, when new schools or additional capacity are added, do we need to increase the maintenance capacity as well? If so, by how much, and where? We urge the Board to integrate into the CIP planning cycle an assessment of the impact that the capital program will have on MCPS's maintenance needs.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we recognize that the short term economic difficulties place great pressures on this budget and on your task as a Board. As you confront the difficult task of setting priorities, we again urge you not to compromise on our goal. Every child in the system deserves a safe, secure and modern classroom that enables him or her to achieve the high standards that we set.

Thank you and good evening.