

Bethesda-Chevy Chase Cluster
Bethesda-Chevy Chase HS
Westland MS
Bethesda ES*Chevy Chase ES*North Chevy Chase ES
Rock Creek Forest ES*Rosemary Hills PS
Somerset ES*Westbrook ES

Testimony on the Superintendent's Recommended FY 2009 Operating Budget
January 9, 2008

Good evening, President Navarro, Superintendent Weast and members of the Board of Education. I am Deborah Missal, co-coordinator, with Joy White and Jack Hayes, of the Bethesda Chevy Chase Cluster, and I am pleased to be here tonight testifying on the 2009 Operating Budget for Montgomery County Public Schools. I would also like to recognize our cluster principals and members of our community who have come here tonight. The B-CC Cluster supports the MCCPTA Operating Budget Compact, as well as the testimony you have already heard from MCCPTA, and that of our quad cluster.

We are obviously aware of the current fiscal situation facing the county, as well as the fact that the county, state, and federal revenue projections may impose even greater financial restraints in the future. The Superintendent has proposed an Operating Budget that recognizes these fiscal realities, but does not retreat from some of the important initiatives that have been enacted in the past few years, particularly in the area of class sizes, and we applaud him, as well as the MCPS staff, for managing this feat. We are also gratified that the budget was developed with the input of the PTA community.

The budget includes several initiatives that we support, including the additional assistant principals and lunch hour aides for elementary schools. While we applaud the increase in guidance counselors in elementary schools, we still believe that there is a need for more guidance counselors in our high schools, as demands on their already strained workload continue to increase.

We are also pleased to see that the county has added teaching positions in order to include special education students who are also in general education classes to be incorporated in the staffing ratios in elementary schools, as well as the increased move towards hours-based staffing for special education students in middle school.

We support the implementation of middle school reform, and we hope that the county will be able to fully fund this endeavor. These pivotal years are so critical in the emotional and academic development of our children, and we hope that the reform effort will help us to capitalize on students' youthful passion for learning and growing intellects. We do, however, hope in seeking to attain some of the objectives MCPS has set forth, that the proper resources are provided, not only at the middle school level but at elementary schools as well.

All of our elementary schools continue to enrich and accelerate the math and reading instruction of our students, who continue to perform well and are mastering the material successfully. Once they enter middle school, the number of students who are taking above grade level math classes increases every year, and we currently have 77% of our 8th grade students enrolled in Algebra or higher.

However, as our students continue to excel, we find ourselves in a unique staffing quandary at the elementary schools. Who will teach our accelerated above-grade-level students in the future? At the present time, thanks to the commitment and skill of our staff throughout the cluster, students are effectively receiving instruction in above grade level math sectioned classes. However, our teachers are stretched thin to make this happen for our students. We recommend that resources be allocated to ensure that elementary school teachers have access to middle school content math content specialists. Additionally, we hope that MCPS will look at teacher training to support the move towards increased acceleration, and will take this into consideration in recruiting teachers with stronger math backgrounds. Finally, it would be helpful to align the math curriculum from kindergarten through 5th grade to allow for effective acceleration of students into above grade level classes at any point throughout the school year. We want the county to ensure that elementary and middle school students have all the preparation they need to tackle the high bar set by the high school math curriculum.

For the past several years, we have testified to you that if MCPS truly wants to encourage every student to take more challenging classes, they must provide the supporting services necessary to help them succeed. Like MCPS, we are extremely proud of our success in providing rigorous academic opportunities for all of our students. We take exceptional pride in the level of participation of the entire school community in accelerated classes, and are especially proud of our International Baccalaureate program.

But while we may tout our successes, we are also seriously concerned about the number of students who are struggling to maintain a C average. Far too many B-CC students risk not graduating, or are academically ineligible for extra-curricular activities. Many of our students need assistance to keep up with our rigorous curriculum. If we are to truly reach the first goal of the strategic plan, “ensuring success for EVERY child,” we must look at each student individually, rather than simply as part of a category that shows up in annual statistics. Once again, we implore you to direct resources towards students who need additional support services, no matter which school they attend. Specifically, we believe that the county should allocate resources to provide summer academic support courses for those students who are taking honors courses for the first time, general academic support after school during the year, and staff to support teachers and students prepare for more rigorous courses and testing. This is especially important as passing grades on HSAs will be required for graduation starting in 2009.

As you may know, the B-CC cluster has established a variety of programs to meet these critical needs. In the absence of existing county programs to help these students, and thanks to the visionary leadership of our principals and the extraordinary generosity

of our cluster families and community, the B-CC Cluster has funded a high school Summer Academy for incoming freshmen, a vast array of tutoring and mentoring programs, homework clubs, college counseling, and adult ESOL and computer literacy classes. In addition, we are helping to subsidize elementary school students who attend summer school by providing transportation and financial aid above the amount given by the county.

Virtually all of the funding for these programs has come from our cluster PTAs and/or School Foundations. We are now faced with the very real situation, however, where our cluster schools must make difficult choices about which of these critical programs to continue funding from already stretched PTA coffers. As we stated at the beginning of our testimony, we recognize the fiscal realities facing the county and the state, and that now may not be the time to seek additional funding for bold new programs. But we believe that providing academic support to those students who are willing to stretch themselves represents a wise and necessary investment, and we urge you to consider whether existing resources can be channeled more effectively to meet this goal.

We hope that the elementary school magnet and immersion programs will be fully funded in the Operating Budget, including all school-based staff at the Spanish Immersion program at Rock Creek Forest Elementary School. The school-based lead teacher provides job-embedded classroom support to teachers new to the program, as well as co-teaching and model lessons in the Spanish classroom, curriculum and instructional support for teachers, data review with teachers and communication with parents. The lead teacher also supports with translation of in-house documents and assessments that classroom teachers may not be able to complete due to regular teaching responsibilities. Without the school-based lead teacher, it will be a greater challenge for the staff to provide timely documents and assessments for student learning in the immersion program and to respond as quickly as we currently can to parent and community questions about the program. And without the school-based lead teacher, student learning will be most heavily impacted as we lose a key position that monitors student achievement and directly supports teachers in working with students in our Spanish Immersion program.

We also have serious maintenance issues facing at least one of our cluster schools. The building and grounds at Westbrook Elementary School are in need of immediate repairs to eliminate liability of accident due to broken and unattached fencing and other safety issues, including soil erosion, and masonry problems, not to mention peeling paint and water damage. If unaddressed, these problems will become even more severe, and we urge you to commit sufficient funds to take care of these maintenance issues.

We appreciate having this opportunity to testify and we look forward to working with the Board, and with our county and state legislators, to support the budget for our schools.