

Walter Johnson Cluster PTAs

Walter Johnson High School__North Bethesda Middle School__Tilden Middle School__Ashburton Elementary School__Farmland Elementary School__Garrett Park Elementary School__Kensington Parkwood Elementary School__Luxmanor Elementary School__Wyngate Elementary School

Testimony to the Board of Education on the Superintendent's Recommended FY 2010 Operating Budget for MCPS January 21, 2009

Good Evening President Brandman, members of the Board of Education and Superintendent Weast. My name is Deedee Jacobsohn and I am a Walter Johnson Cluster Coordinator, along with Liz Sadove and Jen Cope. We thank you for this opportunity to comment on the proposed MCPS Operating Budget.

The Walter Johnson cluster is part of a quad-cluster comprised of Wheaton, Bethesda-Chevy Chase, Whitman and WJ. As in past years, each cluster will focus to some extent on different areas of the budget. But we want you to know that we fully support the MCCPTA operating budget priorities and the testimony of the other members of our quad-cluster.

MCPS has received a lot of positive publicity lately with the release of a report that ranked Maryland's public schools the best in the nation, a fact that has been directly attributed to increases in spending on public education.¹ Clearly, this is not the year for additional increases for education initiatives. However, to protect and maintain the improvements in our school system and

¹ "Education Week" ranked Maryland schools number one in the nation. A report by MGT of America to the state's General Assembly directly connected increased funding for education with improved test scores.

the advances our students have made, we need to make sure that we do not jeopardize the recent initiatives that have helped MCPS achieve its success.

Class Size

One of the most important initiatives has been the move to smaller class sizes. We applaud the decision to craft a budget that preserves almost all of the smaller class size limits. I'd also like to take a moment to express our appreciation for the teachers and other state employees who sacrificed their raises to make this budget possible.

Maintaining smaller class sizes is the top priority not only of our cluster, but of our quad cluster, and indeed the entire MCCPTA. Smaller classes, particularly in the primary grades, have led to measurable academic improvements. For example, more children are reading on or above grade level in grades K-2 than ever before.² Smaller classes also make it easier for teachers to know their students better and provide more tailored instruction, whether for students who need special help or for those who need enrichment.

Special Education

Initiatives related to special education have a particularly strong impact on our cluster. Our cluster is home to many quad-cluster and regional special education programs, including a preschool education program (PEP) at Ashburton ES, School/Community based programs at Luxmanor ES and Walter Johnson HS, Learning for Independence (LFI) programs at Tilden MS and Walter Johnson, GT/LD (gifted and talented/learning disabled) programs at Wyngate

² Office of Shared Accountability, "Attainment of End-of-Year Reading Benchmarks in Kindergarten to Grade 2: 2006-2008."

ES, North Bethesda MS, and Walter Johnson, an asperger's program at Tilden MS, and secondary learning centers (LC) at Tilden MS³ and Walter Johnson.

We are very pleased to see that funding for hours-based staffing for special education was maintained at middle school reform schools like Tilden. Hours-based staffing ensures that each school can accommodate the particular needs of its population of special education students. While we cannot directly attribute improvements in test scores to hours-based staffing, it is important to note that Tilden's special education students showed significant improvements in their MSA scores in both reading and math last year.⁴ We hope that this hours-based staffing model will be expanded in future years.

At the elementary school level, special education initiatives are moving more children into home schools and classes with the least restrictive environment (LRE). This means that elementary schools are receiving a growing population of special education students. We are therefore concerned about the proposed reduction in the number of special education teachers at the elementary school level and their replacement by para-educators. The targets for demonstrating annual progress (AYP) in math and reading as mandated by No Child Left Behind are rising, and our schools are in danger of failing to reach the targets established for the special education population. We are

³ The secondary learning center at Tilden is scheduled to be phased out at the end of the current school year.

⁴ According to the 2008 Maryland Report Card for Tilden, from 2006/2007 to 2007/2008 proficiency for special ed students increased in math from 41% to 51.9% , and in reading from 39.5% to 59.9%. In 6th grade, math proficiency for special ed students increased from 59% to 75.5% and reading from 47.7% to 70.8%. In 7th grade, proficiency for special ed students increased from 30.8% to 52.6% in math and 25.7% to 63% in reading. Scores for 8th grades increased as well, but not as impressively: math proficiency rose from 25.8% to 32% and reading from 33.8% to 44.6%.

concerned that special education students will not have the skilled teachers necessary to help them succeed in their home schools.

Maintenance

Another item of concern for our cluster is the reduction in maintenance staff. In previous years, WJ cluster coordinators have spoken about how the FY07 operating budget cut a full unit of twelve positions from the Division of Maintenance, despite a \$40-\$50 million backlog in maintenance projects. Nothing was done to improve the situation in the past two budgetary years, and this year maintenance faces further cuts.

For years, our cluster and many others have testified to you about maintenance issues such as inadequate heating, ventilation and air conditioning; poor plumbing; roof, window and pipe leaks; mold; and lead in the water. Even with modernizations and additions, maintenance issues continue to plague our schools. Kensington Parkwood ES was left with a leaky roof after its modernization, and has concerns about mold in the building. Farmland ES had problems with heating in its new addition, and Garrett Park ES, which is scheduled for a modernization, has had persistent problems with heating and cooling issues. Some of the schools in our cluster are not even on the modernization schedule and face deteriorating building conditions for many years. Our students deserve a safe, healthful, and comfortable environment in which to learn. Maintenance must remain a priority, even in economically challenging times.

PSAT

There is one small budget cut that we hope you will reconsider. The funding for 11th graders to take the PSAT was removed, for a savings of \$93,000. Currently, MCPS pays for students take the PSAT in the 9th and/or 10th grades for practice test-taking, and as a diagnostic tool for schools to identify students who may

need additional acceleration or academic support. The PSAT is designed to be taken in 11th grade, yet 11th graders must sign up for the exam and pay for the registration fee on their own.

Many colleges use 11th grade PSAT scores as a way to identify potential recruits. Scores from the 11th grade PSAT are also used to determine candidacy for a variety of scholarships (such as the National Merit Scholarship), minority scholarships (such as the National Achievement Scholarship Program for African Americans) and minority recognition programs. Last year, for example, eight students at Walter Johnson qualified for the National Hispanic Recognition Program, which requires that students take the PSAT in 11th grade.

The PSAT should be required and funded for all 11th graders so that all of our students, regardless of their economic situation or their familiarity with the nuances of scholarship and college application processes, can take advantage of these opportunities.

Finally, I would like to commend the decision to maintain staffing levels for physical education, the arts and music. I mention this in order to end my testimony on a high note...our cluster has many wonderful music programs, and in particular we are very proud that WJ students and alumni performed as part of the Pre-Inauguration Concert at the Lincoln Memorial on Sunday.

Congratulations to the WJ students, and to Miss Hernandez-Cata, the WJ Choral Music Director who made it all possible. This is only one example of the extraordinary opportunities that an MCPS education provides, and we look forward to working together to ensure we maintain these same possibilities for future students.

