

# Watkins Mill Cluster

Watkins Mill High School.  
Montgomery Village Middle School; Neelsville Middle School  
South Lake Elementary School; Stedwick Elementary School; Watkins Mill Elementary School;  
Whetstone Elementary School

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Testimony presented by:

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Good evening President Brandeman, Dr. Weast, and members of the Board of Education:

My name is Susan Young, and I appreciate this opportunity to testify on behalf of the schools in the Watkins Mill Cluster.

I want to start by thanking you for making Maryland schools #1 in the nation. The state's strong commitment to public education, backed up with funding, makes me both proud and grateful to be a Maryland resident. I am also grateful that Montgomery County is diligent in making sure our local schools actually receive the money that we are supposed to receive.

We fully support the Operating Budget priorities outlined earlier this evening by Kay Romero. But I also thought I'd bring a few friends with me to demonstrate that the Watkins Mill cluster is alive and well, and is back in the advocacy business! We are here tonight to ask a question:

Is MCPS still in the magnet business?

I can sure give one compelling reason to NOT have magnets: We recently learned that Watkins Mill has *50 high school students* currently attending magnet programs at either Poolesville or Richard Montgomery high schools. What's more, that number—50—does not even capture the huge loss to our school. That's because those 50 students often take younger siblings with them (via the open transfer policy for siblings), as well as their highly-involved parents.

But since we do seem to still be in the magnet business, we are here once again with a very compelling case for designating Watkins Mill as the host site for an upcounty IB magnet program. So, with apologies to David Letterman, here are The Top 10 Excellent Reasons to Make WMHS an Upcounty IB Magnet:

10. Our program has a proven track record with students of all demographic backgrounds, something which we value very much in this county, but which is not typical in IB programs as a whole.

9. Due to the loss of so many highly-motivated students to Poolesville and Richard Montgomery, our IB program can accommodate many more students than it currently serves.
8. With a full program, our IB can remain both viable and vibrant, allowing WMHS to offer a more complete range of IB courses.
7. The IB magnet at Richard Montgomery HS turns away 80 percent of its applicants.
6. There are twelve high schools with no access to IB programs (other than the RMHS magnet). Eight of those twelve are in the upcounty area.
5. Three of the four downcounty schools with no IB access are on the *Newsweek* list of the top 100 schools in the nation. So let's assume they are doing pretty well.
4. There is a clear precedent for having a magnet of each type in both the upcounty and downcounty areas: Blair is the downcounty math/science and humanities magnet, and now Poolesville is its upcounty twin. Eastern and Takoma Park Middle Schools house the downcounty Highly Gifted magnets, and now Roberto Clemente is their upcounty...triplet.
3. We even have a line with an official name to designate these upcounty/downcounty pairings: the Middle School/High School Catchment Boundary Line.
2. According to the U.S. Department of Education, the rigor of a student's high school curriculum "counts more than anything else in predicting whether a college freshman will persist and earn a bachelor's degree."<sup>1</sup> In this time of extremely tight budgets, transitioning the WMHS IB to magnet status offers a nearly cost-neutral way to greatly expand student access to rigorous instruction.
1. The need is there, the capacity is there, and the precedent is there. MCPS needs an upcounty IB magnet. Watkins Mill HS is centrally located and ready to open its doors.

However, we have been told that a magnet IB program "will adversely affect schools that lose students. Although IB programs are designed for a wide variety of students, they tend to attract accelerated students. The loss of accelerated students by a school could have a negative impact on course offerings and standardized test scores." The Watkins Mill cluster is fully, no...*painfully* aware of this phenomenon. And yet, 13 magnet programs are alive and well in this county. So either we are in the magnet business, or we are NOT. Which is it?

While we ponder that question, let's look at the only other option for recruiting more students to our IB Diploma Program: bringing the IB Middle Years Program to our feeder schools. Every high school IB program that preceded ours already has a MYP, and one even enjoys a Primary Years Program. When speaking of the need for continued funding for those existing MCPS Middle Years Programs, the Superintendent's 2009-2014 Operating Budget noted that they "increase students' capacity for advanced level instruction and prepare them to take advantage

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<sup>1</sup> From Dr. Weast's message in the Winter, 2008 issue of *Parent Connection*

of IB Diploma program options as well as Honors and Advanced Placement coursework.” Our students are therefore at a distinct disadvantage, doing IB coursework with no middle school preparation. They are doing it, but the situation calls to mind the old joke about Ginger Rogers—she did everything Fred Astaire did, but she had to do it backwards, and in high heels!

What’s more, each of the other Middle Years Programs is at a “downcounty” school. In fact, of the 15 middle schools with special programs of *any* kind (magnet, immersion, Middle Years, etc), only two are in schools that could be considered “upcounty”: Roberto Clemente MS (Upcounty Center for the Highly Gifted) and Gaithersburg MS (French Immersion).

Here’s another important number: \$316,794. That is the projected maximum cost to bring the Middle Years Program MYP to *each and every student in our cluster*, thus bringing us onto a level playing field with other IB clusters. We’ve been told that this is not possible, given the dire budget circumstances. We get that, really we do. And frankly, if I were just advocating for my own 3 kids, I would cave in, knowing that they will be OK, even when funds are tight. But I’m not. And the kids we represent only get one shot at this school system. So can we have a commitment that when the money starts flowing again, we’ll be first in line for a Middle Years Program?

In fact, we’d like to start laying the groundwork now, so that when the money is there, we’ll be ready to apply for accreditation from the International Baccalaureate Organization. I know you’ll want to make that commitment, because surely we can all agree that the Middle Years Program should not be limited to 5 schools in the lower half of the county.

Most of you have heard me make these arguments before, but I hope this time is different. This time, you can see that it’s not 1 or 2 lone voices, asking for your help. The parents and kids you see here tonight are from our cluster schools, sure, but there are also parents here whose kids are in those HS magnet programs, or whose kids attend private school, or whose kids have already graduated from our schools, or not yet entered our schools. We all know one thing: the Watkins Mill schools need help in order to be able to compete on a level playing field. We hope that our presence here has captured your attention, and will inspire solutions for the benefit of all of our students.