

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 2008 Operating Budget
January 11, 2007

Good evening, President Navarro, Superintendent Weast and members of the Board of Education. I am Deborah Missal, co-coordinator, with Terri Salus and Jack Hayes, of the Bethesda Chevy Chase Cluster, and I am pleased to be here tonight testifying on the 2008 Operating Budget for Montgomery County Public Schools, together with the Walter Johnson, Wheaton and Walt Whitman Clusters. 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 welcome and congratulate the new members of the Board, and we appreciate your affording us this opportunity to testify.

In many ways, the B-CC cluster is a microcosm of the entire county. While there may be a widespread perception of suburban affluence and accomplishment, a closer look at the true composition of our cluster presents quite a different picture. In fact, a significant portion of our student population has challenges similar to those found in many other parts of the County - limited economic resources, limited English skills, unfamiliarity with the school system, and other issues which, unaddressed and unsupported, can threaten academic success. Just as MCPS is justifiably proud of its record in addressing the achievement gap that has historically existed throughout the county, so must we bridge a similar gap that we see within the walls of our own schools.

Throughout our cluster, we pride ourselves on providing rigorous academic opportunities to all of our students. We are especially proud of our International Baccalaureate program at B-CC, both the full diploma and certificate programs. In addition, we are one of the few middle schools to have a Middle Years Programme at Westland Middle School and for sixth graders at North Chevy Chase and Chevy Chase Elementary Schools. This is the fifth year of implementation of the program, and it has grown stronger every year. The MYP can be seen in the daily classroom instruction, the school climate and in the interest level of the school community in service and citizenship.

The number of students taking advanced courses at B-CC High School continues to climb, resulting in widespread recognition, not only in our local community, but nationally as well – 34th in the nation, according to the Newsweek Magazine listing of America's top high schools, and sixth in the *Washington Post* Challenge Index. Over

92% of all students take at least one honors course, and in grade 12, 79% of all students take at least one AP or IB course. Of all B-CC students:

- 81% of Hispanic students take at least one honors course
- 83% of African American students take at least one honors course
- 60% of African American students in Grade 12 take at least one AP or IB course.
- 58% of Hispanic students in Grade 12 take at least one AP or IB course.

At Westland Middle School, enrollment in above grade level courses is 75% for 6th graders, 88% for 7th graders, and 95% for 8th graders. Participation for African American students rises from 43.3% in 6th grade, to 74.5% in 7th grade and reaches 86.9% by 8th grade; for Hispanic students, the number goes from 44.7% in 6th grade to 75% in 7th grade and up to 93.5% by 8th grade. In addition 79% of 8th grade students are taking algebra or honors geometry and virtually all of our 8th graders (95%) are taking a foreign language.

But the statistics do not tell the whole story. While we may tout our successes, we are also seriously concerned about the number of students who are struggling just to get by. Far too many B-CC students risk not graduating based on the latest HSA results, or are academically ineligible for extra-curricular activities. We are also aware that for many of our students, increased academic rigor will actually be counter-productive unless we provide supporting services to help them succeed. **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 funding towards students who need additional support services, no matter which school they attend. Specifically, we believe that the county should 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 extra staff to support both students and teachers as they prepare students for more rigorous courses and testing.

We are familiar with the types of programs that benefit lower-performing students because we are already providing many of these services ourselves. 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, we have established and funded a variety of programs to meet these critical needs. One example of such a program is our B-CC Summer Academy. Studies continue to show that students who enter high school with failing grades are unlikely to graduate, and a significant number of 9th graders entering B-CC have been identified as “at-risk.” For the past several years, the B-CC High School Educational Foundation has funded a four-week summer program designed to ease the transition from middle school to high school and to help prepare incoming 9th grade students who are likely to struggle academically for the challenges they will find in their freshman year. The Summer Academy allows students to express their concerns, fears, and expectations of high school in an environment that is accepting and comfortable for the students. The program offers an academic component, a character development component, and job skills training.

The students graduating from the Summer Academy are supported by B-CC's TAP (Time for Academic Progress) and BRAG (Barons Reaching Academic Goals), two year-long academic support programs staffed by B-CC teachers and funded entirely by the B-CC High School Educational Foundation at an estimated annual cost of \$55,000. TAP provides after-school tutoring at all levels for all students in English, Math, Science, and Social Studies, Tuesdays through Thursdays every week from 2:15 to 3:15pm at B-CC, and twice a week at the Coffield Community Center in Rosemary Hills. BRAG, in its second year of operation, closely monitors the academic progress of those 9th grade students who have been identified as academically at-risk in the middle school, matches these students with trained mentors who meet with the students weekly, and arranges meetings and support with the parents of these students. It is the intention of this program, funded currently by the BCC Education Foundation, that eventually every academically at risk student throughout the grades will have a personal mentor.

At Westland, after school and Saturday programs provide tutoring, and the PTA has funded Skillstutor, a computerized learning program that will be implemented by teachers, after school personnel, and summer school teachers. Realizing that we must reach out to those students who are starting to slip away in the elementary grades and catch them before they fall, many of our cluster schools have set up homework clubs, which run anywhere from two to four days a week, where teachers supervise parents and secondary school student volunteers to help struggling students with any work they may need. For four years, our cluster operated an intensive Summer Scholars program in the first two weeks of August to help elementary school students get a jump start on the new school year.

Virtually all of the funding for these programs have 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. This year, because of budgetary constraints, we are exploring other, less-costly alternatives to our summer scholars program. **If MCPS truly believes that every student should be challenged by taking more rigorous classes, they must provide the supporting services necessary to help them succeed.**

At this time, we have not had the opportunity to fully analyze the middle school reform plan, although we are encouraged that the funding proposed in the Operating Budget demonstrates a significant commitment to this initiative. We especially support the increase in middle school guidance counselors. 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.

Four years ago, Westland embarked on a bold initiative whereby all of our eighth grade students take honors English. We have already seen some successes in this area, particularly in the numbers of students who choose to continue in the honors program in high school. The program has also experienced its share of challenges, as teachers

struggle to adequately meet the wide range of needs of students in their classes. More staffing support will allow teachers to help both the students who are new to honors who may need more guidance with the material, as well as those students who require additional challenges, in the form of literature circles or electives. We believe composition assistants would greatly enhance this program by helping teachers respond to increased demands in reading and writing. In addition, we are already piloting the use of interactive boards, or “smart boards” in several of our science classes at Westland, thanks to an initial grant and a successful fundraising campaign. We urge the County to consider adopting this exciting technology across the board.

Perhaps no issue in the Superintendent’s budget has received as much attention as the proposal to phase out the secondary learning centers for special education students, as well as the closure of one site for the elementary Gifted/Learning Disabled program. We echo all of the many questions that have been raised about this plan, and urge the Board to tread carefully in this area. Our major concern is for those students who were not receiving adequate services at their home school to begin with, (thus the recommendation that they be placed in one of the learning centers) and how those students can be assured that their home school can now address their particular needs. The problem goes far beyond just one of staffing, (although that is an important element) but involves additional training, as well as the need to develop mechanisms that will foster each student’s re-integration – both social and academic – into their home school environment. In addition, while assurances have been made that this proposal will not result in a facilities issue, in our already overcrowded secondary schools where space allocation is a constant challenge, this proposal may pose additional problems. We are also concerned about the closure of one site of the elementary Gifted/Learning Disabled program. This marquee program, which brings national recognition to the Montgomery County Public Schools, provides highly talented students with learning disabilities with targeted intervention at a critical point in their educational careers while recognizing and building upon their impressive strengths. Once again, this is an area where we must focus on the **individual** needs of each student, and we urge the Board not to act until the many serious questions that have been raised are adequately addressed.

In the area of special needs, we also want to add our support for the program that will be piloted at Wheaton High School for ESOL students with limited or interrupted education. We are acutely aware of the need to provide services to such students, because our cluster houses one of the county's Multidisciplinary Education, Training, and Support (METS) Programs at Chevy Chase Elementary School. While we recognize the need to meet the needs of these older students, we remind you that early interventions are the most successful.

The B-CC Cluster is particularly gratified that the budget includes an increase in the salary structure for its employee associations. The cost of housing throughout Montgomery County has made it difficult to attract and retain employees, many of whom must travel for hours to work in the down-county area, and we hope that the new contract will alleviate this problem in some measure.

We also support any effort to enhance the music, art, and physical education program in elementary schools, and hope to see funding in this area increased further in the future.

Because we believe that a parent is a child's primary teacher, we recognize the need to include parents in every facet of their children's education. To this end, our community is once again providing adult ESOL classes for cluster parents, and we urge MCPS to support adult language and computer literacy courses so that all parents can be engaged in their children's learning.

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.