

**Blair Cluster PTA Operating Budget Testimony FY 2007-2008**

Good Evening, My name is Pete Lafen, along with Susan Fleck I serve as Cluster Coordinator for the Blair Cluster Schools and I thank you for the opportunity to comment on the FY07-08 Operating Budget for Montgomery County Public Schools.

First I want to take a moment to welcome our new Board of Education members and thank those who have departed the Board. Dr. Haughey, Gabe Romero, and Valerie Ervin have devoted much time and energy to the service of public education in our county, and I want to offer our sincere thanks for their work, and particularly for Valerie, congratulations and best wishes for continued service on our County Council. We welcome the experience, talent and dedication of our brand new board members Ms Docca and Ms Brandman, and it would be a grave omission to not congratulate and welcome Mr. Chris Barclay to the Board from our PTA ranks, because we are confident that his insight, dedication and passion will be a real asset to all of our County schools, and will make him an able replacement for Valerie Ervin. Finally, I want to thank and recognize all of the talented, dedicated, and superbly qualified candidates who competed with Chris for that seat. We are indeed blessed to have so many citizens prepared to make the sacrifices necessary for Board service on behalf of our children, and school communities.

The Blair Cluster PTAs support the Operating Budget presented by Dr. Weast, and endorse the resolution by the Montgomery County Council of PTAs in support of that budget.

The remainder of my statement will focus on the budget and policies in our cluster elementary, middle and high schools, and the overall theme of a new era of partnerships and communications in our challenging school environment.

**High School Programs and the DCC**

We welcome the continued support that the budget brings to reducing overcrowding at Blair High School, and developing a community of excellence and opportunity in the Down County Consortium. We endorse the submissions of our fellow DCC clusters for their schools because it is the key to the success of all of our schools, that each school in the DCC be regarded as a school of academic strength. We particularly support the requests of the Northwood Cluster for Northwood High school because the strength of that school's academic offerings are most important for reaching our goal of attaining and maintaining appropriate enrollment levels at both Blair and Einstein High Schools.

We also endorse the request for analysis and evaluation by our Einstein cluster representative in order to make certain that we and the Board and the Council can understand that the programs and investments that the budget supports in the DCC are resulting in real academic improvements for all of our students.

We ask you to make additional investments in both middle school and high school guidance counselors in order to reduce the number of students assigned to each counselor. Our ratio of students to counselors is too high, even without consideration for the increased complexity of choices that are afforded to students in the environment of consortium and academy choice. Without adequate counselor staffing, the richness of choice becomes yet another MCPS mystery, available to the initiated, and closed to the new, the poor, and the foreign born. Whether it is accomplished through counselors or through academy staff, we encourage you to explore and support the impending need to arrange for capstone internships, projects and placements that will be a part of the academy programs for each of our DCC schools.

As the parent of an eighth grade student I want to thank and encourage the DCC office for their continued improvement of the outreach and choice management process for the rising 9<sup>th</sup> graders in our DCC middle schools. Information in the form of materials and meetings has made the process a clearer one for parents and students to navigate, and we encourage your continued support of their efforts.

We would like to see students who are no longer attending high school in daytime classes included in the completion rates for their high schools. Accountability for their success, and accountability for the quality of courses and teachers in afternoon or evening classes is an important step in not losing sight of these students.

With regard to the transition for special education learning centers to mainstream schools and curricula we applaud the growth in special education resources, and the integration of students into mainstream schools, but are concerned that the each of the schools assiduously track and meet the needs of their special education students in this new environment. Many parents are concerned that the transition of learning center students into different schools with different teachers in different buses is likely to be traumatic and negatively impact the learning of these students. Furthermore, our parents are asking that measurement of the success of these students should be part of any process of reorganization of special education services and teaching. Additionally, parents of special education students in our cluster are clammering for opportunities for summer learning, which are few and far between, even for special education students who are working below grade level.

### **Middle Schools**

We thank you for the support and leadership that MCPS has shown in the development of the Middle Years IB program for Silver Spring International Middle School. This program promises to revitalize the school and the communities support for the school through the

establishment of a rigorous academic program open to the entire school. We support the concerns of the SSIMS community regarding unfilled vacancies in their teacher staff.

At Eastern and Takoma Middle Schools we are ask you to extend to our school communities for next year the equity and opportunity that was extended to the school community of Roberto Clemente MS at its founding and reserve seats for our base area students in the magnet programs at these schools. We ask for a simple standard, that no student at these public schools who is capable and willing to do the challenging work embodied in the magnet curriculum will be forced to attend those schools and be denied the opportunity to do that work. We are pleased that our Community superintendent has convened a committee to examine the benefits and problems that the magnet programs present to our two magnet middle schools, and we are hopeful that the lessons of opportunity and inclusion from the new middle school magnet consortium will provide guidance for a new path for our schools.

Additionally, we hope that the lessons learned in twenty years of magnet education in our two middle schools will be incorporated into the development of challenging and exciting middle school reforms for all of our county schools.

### **Elementary Schools**

We continue to support and applaud the initiatives in small class size and enriched education that have been implemented in our elementary schools. These investments are truly the foundation stones of success for our system.

At East Silver Spring Elementary School we look forward to MCPS building upon the success of the roundtable discussions on converting to a K-5 school, and working with the school community to develop an exciting and attractive whole school signature program.

With regard to Oakview Elementary school and the development of the additional Highly Gifted Center program our cluster is clearly and strongly divided. We have heard strong voices of support from the faculty and staff and PTA and neighborhood for the implementation of the center program at Oakview, and we have heard equally strong objections from the leadership of other PTAs in our cluster. We are encouraged that the plans developed to date for the center promise to integrate the center students to an unprecedented degree into the classes of the school, and hope that the process of implementing a new center model will not only bring middle class families back to Oakview, but will also become a model for change in other HGC schools where there are stark demographic differences between center classes and community classes.

### **Strengthening Important Partnerships for Education**

*Parent Partnerships* - Developing and sustaining partnerships with parents is an area in which significant progress has been made and where significant work needs to be done. We applaud the success of MCPS in translating report cards, and in providing an ever increasing

supply of informational materials in an appropriate number of languages. The website of the Division of ESOL/Bilingual programs has dramatically improved and provides excellent information to parents. We continue to be pleased with the results of Conquista tu Suenos in educating and empowering Latino parents for full participation in the education of their children. Conquista graduates, when organized by our parent outreach staff, have become full participants and leaders in many of our school communities, and become another important link between our school staff, our PTAs and our large Spanish speaking communities of parents.

That said, communication must be a two way street, and MCPS must address the need to communicate to parents in school, in real time. Parent outreach staff must be available in every one of our schools where language, culture, or poverty present barriers to parental involvement in education. These positions need to be staffed on a twelve month basis so that they can provide in depth assistance in course planning and academic guidance support during the summer months as well as during the school year. Many of our principals have been both flexible and inventive in using their outreach staff, teachers, para-educators, and building services staff to translate for important meetings with parents. We believe that our schools should develop a communications audit that assesses the interpretation needs of our schools and the staff assignments and resources that will be needed to meet those needs.

These outreach resources should not be limited to limited English proficiency families. Programs like Linkages to Learning and Conquista should be available for families in need of support and intervention even if English proficiency is not an issue.

*Business Partnerships-* We recommend that MCPS initiate a Spanish language radio program to provide regular and timely information on school issues. Radio is the medium of choice for many of our Spanish speaking parents who can listen while working in the home or on the job site. Regular programs on grades, guidance, college preparations, and parental involvement would be an important addition to the communications tools available to MCPS.

*Transportation Partnerships-* Many of our middle and high schools are located on arterial and state highways with unreasonably high speed limits and lacking adequate sidewalks, timed crossing lights and other state of the art pedestrian safety infrastructure. MCPS should initiate pedestrian transportation audits in cooperation with county and state, and state legislative officials to develop comprehensive and cooperative plans to make the walking environment around our middle and high schools as safe as possible for our students.

We thank you for the opportunity to comment on the FY-07-08 operating budget, and look forward to working with you in further deliberations, and before the Council and the State Legislature. We are at a crossroads in becoming a cluster and a district that can provide comprehensive educational opportunities to a rich and complex multicultural population of parents and students. The provisions in this budget, and the recommendations that we have submitted, together with the talent and dedication of the MCPS staff can bring that rich potential to reality. We thank you for your commitment and your support.



Silver Spring International Middle School Parent, Teacher and Students Association  
313 Wayne Avenue, Silver Spring, MD 20910

January 8, 2007

To the Board of Education:

Silver Spring International is pleased to be one of the first middle schools in the nation to be considered as a candidate for the three year Middle Years Programme (MYP) and to have our current 8th graders be the first in MCPS pilot the Passion Project as a culminating, extended project. We are cautiously optimistic that we will become an authorized MYP school this winter. We believe that the three-year MYP is a very promising model for raising academic expectations and achievement for all our students before they enter high school. The continued funding of the program included in the Operating Budget is essential to its success. Since Silver Spring International does not have an articulation path to continue the MYP/IB program, we have the challenge and opportunity to establish the MYP as a model for middle school achievement. Therefore it is especially important that our school's MYP coordinator be converted to a 12-month position as Silver Spring International continues to implement this unprecedented program and offer the success of our students as an example for middle school reform.

Silver Spring International continues to struggle to maintain our historic building and grounds on Wayne Avenue. At the testimony on the Capital Improvement Plan, Valerie Ervin commented on the unkempt grounds at Silver Spring International. Despite excellent management of our building services resources, our administrators have found it impossible to provide adequate upkeep to our grounds despite enlisting parents and community members to aid in the effort. An excellent article in the Silver Spring Gazette on January 3 details some of the efforts in the community to maintain this challenging facility. We ask that a groundskeeper position be added to our building services to ensure that our school can be a good neighbor in the community.

Silver Spring International has been glad to be one of the two schools to field test the hours-based staffing model in FY 2007 and to demonstrate how that model can improve the performance of our special education subgroup. However, while the staffing under this model is adequate staffing resources to address the needs of all of our current students, it does not address (and members of our community are concerned it is not appropriate for) those who previously may have been served in secondary learning centers. We ask that MCPS work collaboratively with parents and special education staff to insure that those children who require more restrictive environments are not left behind.

We appreciate the strong support of all parts of MCPS as Silver Spring International works to demonstrate that all of our students are important to the success of our school.

Mary C. Abe  
PTSA President  
Silver Spring International Middle School