

**Einstein Cluster Comments to the Board of Education
on the Proposed FY 2008 Operating Budget
January 11, 2007**

Good evening. My name is Alies Muskin and along with Kay Romero, we serve as the Einstein cluster coordinators.

The budget addresses many issues. We support MCCPTA's testimony on the overall budget. Tonight we look to focus our comments on a few areas:

- Middle School Reform
- High School Success
- Learning Centers for GT/LD programs
- Downcounty Consortium programs

These topics have common threads. Initiatives are begun and fade away, without visible assessment of their effectiveness or failures. There are some very basic principles at play. No parent expects their child to fail. Parents assume that teachers and administrators are all working in the best interest of their child. Learning that this is not always the case results from bad experiences. Poor communication, dramatic shifts in academic focus, misinformation and multiple negative experiences breed mistrust. There are several recommendations being made through this budget process but in many cases there has been no time to evaluate efforts, assess their success, plan for implementation, communicate with administrators, teachers and parents, or establish measures of success.

Middle School Reform

The successes in the elementary initiatives are fantastic. All of the Einstein cluster elementary students have dreams. They have a future. Somewhere between leaving the shelter of an elementary school and arriving at high school, things change. The middle school years have failed to firmly plant a core value that academic achievement is cool. Parents debate and teachers shake heads when discussing the range of variation among student preparedness for high school. Unprepared for high school level courses, students feel like they hit a brick wall in ninth grade. Middle school coursework and high school expectations are out of sync. Simply stated, middle school reform is past due.

It is not possible to ensure success for every student if the middle years do not offer support to students who did not grasp basic concepts and provide challenges to those who are ready. The MCPS plan for middle school reform is unclear. It is impossible to sort through the recommendations in the budget and come away with a coherent understanding of how students will benefit from these changes, what success in middle school will look like, what interventions will be put in place for which students with what expected outcome. Also data are unavailable. How many students are promoted from eighth grade reading below grade level? How many 8th grade students at each school have successfully completed algebra or beyond? Communities should be able to access this information.

High School Success

From the positive environment of elementary school to the edgy hallways of high school, students, parents, teachers and administrators have come to accept failure as a part of the system. There are multiple data points that support this. At Einstein, the ineligibility rate has held fairly steady above 30 percent for at least six years, with a dramatic dip the first year of the pilot for the grading and reporting policy. In human terms, we accept that on average more than 550 students per year have less than a 2.0 GPA. They cannot participate in student government, competitive sports, plays, or band, they may need to repeat a class or two, they are at higher risk to drop out, and they continue to fail. These students usually are not enrolled in AP, honors, or IB classes. They have little chance of attending community college or trade school without remediation. Disaggregating the data paints an even more dramatic picture. Over 40 percent of Hispanic and African American students are ineligible.

Many initiatives have been funded to reverse this situation, from Algebra Lead teachers to literacy coaches, ninth grade academies, subject academies, and smaller learning communities. The School Improvement Plan states “the school will continue to group ninth grade students in smaller learning communities (20:1) according to their academic needs.Finally, the Algebra I Lead Teacher and the Literacy Lead Teacher will again support 9th grade academy teachers in curriculum planning and development, assessment of students and professional development opportunities. They will also give support to 10th grade teachers to insure that exiting 9th grade students still have the academic support they need to succeed in 10th grade.” I forgot to mention that this was from the SIP dated July 3, 2003 to the MD State Dept of Education Challenge Schools Initiative, the last year of the 10 year Challenge Grant. *What gains have been sustained with coaches and lead teachers, ninth grade academies and other resources?*

Change is slow. Einstein is making improvements, but it takes years and students only spend four years in high school. Studies show that ninth grade students who fail more than one class are less likely to complete high school. Ineligibility rates for first time ninth grade students average annually around 25 percent. They are higher for those who are repeating ninth grade. *After at least three years of these initiatives, what is the evidence that they are working? If ineligibility rates remain fairly constant and graduation rates have not improved, then where have gains been made and sustained?*

High school is the eleventh hour. Today at Einstein administrators and teachers move as fast as they can to intervene and turn around the lives of many students. While we appreciate that continued funding is included for multiple initiatives, we believe that an analysis needs to be conducted of what is working, for which students, where and why. Just simply allocating money in hopes that it will solve the problem is not always the right answer.

We encourage the Board to request a report from MCPS of what improvements have been made and sustained in schools with ninth grade academies, algebra lead teachers and literacy coaches before more resources are spent in these areas. Understanding what works, under what conditions, will improve the future allocation of resources.

Attendance poses a major obstacle at Einstein. The attendance rate has ranged between 90.3 – 92.0 percent at Einstein. In 2005-06 Einstein's attendance rate was only slightly improved at 93.7%. Truancy is a problem that MCPS does not address. This must be true at other schools. No amount of money, no number of extracurricular activities or pizza parties after school will reverse this. Changing attitudes about attendance requires change in mindsets of students and parents or guardians. They must all recognize the value and importance. A sustainable program addressing attendance as part of the cultural shift that must occur to engage students in academics is needed, not just a call from the attendance lady.

We request that the Board look into the development of a comprehensive plan to address how to improve attendance through outreach to parents and students.

MCPS has emphasized participation on the SAT, even though an increasing number of colleges are accepting alternative tests including the ACT, SAT II and IB exams. Every college meeting I have attended stress rigorous classes and grades first. But without grade level or above literacy and math skills, success on the SAT is impossible to grasp though participation is possible. Another assessment of the effectiveness of the ninth grade academies and other academic interventions is to look at improvements in the SAT scores. The recommendation in the budget to offer an SAT prep course as an elective is good *IF* the course is taught by a qualified teacher. Otherwise it becomes a waste of time, which is what we hear from many parents. Many Einstein students do not have the resources to take a review course. Many teenagers do not have the discipline to prepare independently online or with a book.

The Downcounty Consortium is supposed to offer choices. Yet for a college bound minority student none of the Downcounty Consortium schools offer an SAT profile that inspires hope. Last year Asian graduates at Einstein had the lowest mean score in the County. The lowest mean scores for African American students were at Blair. There was a 570-point spread between the lowest mean score at Wheaton and highest mean score at Whitman. Success must be measured by performance, not the number of students taking exams.

Colleges tell students to take challenging classes. MCPS has lauded its success in increasing the numbers of students taking AP and honors courses. *Who benefits by placing an emphasis on participation and not performance?* At Einstein last Spring, 142 students, 8 % of the students in the school, were failing honors, AP, and IB classes. Did the experiences of these students keep them away from rigorous courses this year? Did their experience influence their friends? Einstein made available tutoring, which was paid for through school discretionary funds. Few students took advantage. Why? MCPS is correct in its November 2006 report on AP exam performance that there are differences in participation and performance associated with gender, ethnicity, and other demographics as well as wide variation in the AP exam performance of graduates who attend different high schools. However, MCPS fails to report the numbers of students taking courses in comparison to those taking exams as well as performance of 9th – 11th grade students, to get a real picture of success. Too many students take these courses

without successful completion. Attached are charts on AP and SAT scores for Einstein and other DCC schools.

It is unclear how MCPS will achieve some of its objectives under Strategic Goal 2 when no funding has been allocated for academic interventions. What's the plan? With little or no additional funding, Einstein among other schools, have implemented strategies which included paying teachers to tutor, involving students in tutoring, and relying on teachers willingness to help after school. None of these are sustainable, reliable, strategies with proven track records.

We encourage the Board to request a report sooner than later on how student performance differs by school, course, teacher training, and demographics and develop a well thought through and funded intervention plan to improve success for all students.

The recommendation to close night school and offer extended days at home schools is welcome. But the pilot is only in its fifth month. This proposal raises more questions than it answers about how individual schools will address the needs of their students. Will schools be able to offer classes for three or five students? Will extended day teachers be qualified? Who will administer the extended day hours at schools? Will some schools offer classes in the evening and others immediately after school? Are these programs for remediation only or for students who want to advance? And what about students who pass the course but not the High School Assessment? Where do they go for help? A good idea, but it seems that MCPS is rushing to full implementation without the data to support best practices.

Teacher Recruitment and Qualifications

Many reports from multiple sources have highlighted the challenges of recruiting and retaining teachers. This issue affects our entire County at every grade. Some turnover is natural, but patterns seem to emerge. The perspective in the DCC is that these high schools are training grounds for new teachers. Hired with little if any experience and given specialized training in literacy, AP or IB teaching, many teachers move on after just a few years. This is a trend that costs individual high schools in many ways and affects our students adversely.

In addition, reports about minority achievement have discussed the need for economically disadvantaged and minority students to have experienced, qualified teachers. A state of Maryland report, *Minority Achievement in Maryland at the Millennium (2001)*, pointed out that poor performing students are adversely affected if they have more than one bad teacher.

To illustrate the situation in Montgomery County, let's look at the data released by the State on teacher qualifications. In 2005, the percent of classes not taught by highly qualified teachers throughout the County ranged from 9.8 – 36.7 percent. Among the five DCC schools, the range was 18.5 - 36.7. Countywide, high schools with free and

reduced meals (FARMS) rates above 20% had an average of 25.9 percent of classes not taught by qualified teachers.

Among all high schools in the County, African American and Latino students account for 42 percent of the population. Looking at high schools with minority populations larger than the County average, 23.4 percent of classes are not taught by highly qualified teachers.

MCPS needs to look at the needs of students and work with individual schools to make sure there are qualified, well trained teachers in schools where students are at increased risk.

Guidance Counselors

The need for additional guidance counselors at the middle and high schools is long overdue. However, the funds recommended in the budget do not increase the numbers of counselors in any way that will improve counseling for students. The request will not decrease counselor load, especially at the high schools. The funds will merely provide for additional administrative hours. Few students feel they receive good advice and attention from counselors. I was asked by an MCPS administrator whether parents really believe that counselors are responsible for scheduling. My response was yes, that is what they are told - counselors are busy with schedules. How can a high school counselor get to know 300 plus students well enough to recommend courses, make scheduling adjustments, write recommendations, encourage a student to try a more challenging class, befriend a pregnant student, and maybe prevent a suicide?

The recommendations fall short of addressing the inequities in counseling from K-12.

It is nearly one year since the two tragic suicides of Einstein students. While we appreciate that Einstein is one of the high schools to be piloting the Red Flags unit in Health, this is not enough. It is the equivalent of anti-drug programs in elementary and middle school to prevent substance abuse or educational efforts about safe sex to prevent pregnancies. Their effectiveness is minimal. Einstein and other high schools need to have available in school mental health services. Teaching skills for coping with stress, identifying signs of anxiety and depression and getting treatment, are critical for students and teachers.

Smaller Learning Communities

For several years the Einstein cluster has testified to champion the concept of smaller learning communities. Implementation of smaller learning communities connects individual students to smaller groups of students and adults within a school with the ultimate goal of improving learning and increasing student success. However, we continue to find that every school has a different definition of what this means. Is it an academy? Is it a mentor? To be part of a smaller learning academy does a student have to be in an academy? Will non-academy students be part of a smaller learning community

or penalized because they did not make a choice? The academy concept, or having lots of specialized programs at different high schools, has exploded. The smaller learning community concept however, has been deemphasized or forgotten. What is the role of academies and smaller learning communities in schools that emphasize and place higher value on higher level, rigorous college preparatory courses?

As strategies for improvement, the Downcounty Consortium offered choice and academies. By last count, the five schools had more than 25 academies. But how do we measure whether academies engage students? Should focus be on academies or smaller learning communities? Without competencies in basic reading and math skills, it is hard to engage a student about media literacy or sports medicine. MCPS emphasis is on enrollment in rigorous courses and SAT participation. Is this in step with the academy concept? With smaller learning communities? Both? Neither? Which is it?

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Without trained teachers to offer higher level AP or IB classes, students struggle. Word gets out about poor performance, long-term substitutes in rigorous classes, and other negatives faster than a wildfire. And like the fire, the results are long-term and visible. Parents stop trusting that the school knows what it is doing or will be assisted by MCPS to meet the needs of students.

MCPS is creating consortia and yet we have seen no data to support that this works to engage students and improve their success. Actually there is evidence to the contrary. In addition, at Einstein, due to scheduling conflicts and small numbers of students interested in academy electives, students may not be enrolled in any academy class. This semester, 131 out of 1230 students in 9-11th grades are not taking academy-linked courses. Out of 1230 9-11th grade students who should all be assigned to academies, 363 have declared none. This is not necessarily a bad thing, however, since the consortium was established with academies that were supposed to serve as smaller learning communities so every student could be connected to adults and smaller groups of students, how does this model serve all students? This raises questions about staffing to support smaller classes in academies, implementation of choice and the programs offered, and what it takes to be successful to implement smaller learning communities. Without any mention in the budget, it is impossible to get a clear picture on how MCPS is supporting an initiative begun five years ago.

Learning Centers

Much has been said about the recommendations regarding the Learning Centers. We support the MCCPTA Special Education Committee's resolution, which is attached. At

this time, it is unclear why MCPS thinks this idea will improve success for children with specific learning needs. The information provided in the budget, the rationale and plan to communicate with administrators, parents, students and others all fail to explain why this is a sound idea. Of concern is whether individual schools will be able to maintain a full continuum of services and placements. How will students be affected by closing the learning centers under their IEPs? Why weren't parents asked to provide input on this plan before it was announced? What data are available to support inclusion for students with all IEPs? What does success look like? And finally, what is the backup plan if inclusion does not work?

Given the relatively small numbers of students who will be placed in Einstein cluster schools, how will schools meet the needs of these students? In the coming weeks of discussion on this issue, we ask that you consider what the plan is to engage parents/guardians who due to language, culture and other obstacles may not understand the change in policy and may be unable to advocate for their children to get all supports in place in IEPs.

Parent Outreach

We also want to comment on the need for more and better communication. We do not underestimate how difficult this is given the many voices of our community. However, if MCPS is going to accomplish their third goal, strengthen productive partnerships for education, they must wholeheartedly embrace improving family and community partnerships. For many years, MCPS supported programs such as Comer and the National Network of Partnership Schools. Is there a continued commitment to these philosophies of engaging community? If not, why? What evaluations were done of the effectiveness of these programs? Did they bring about any institutional change? Why should the Conquistatus Suenos program, which is noted in the FY 08 Operating Budget, continue? Have goals been met? This is an excellent program, but its purpose is unclear. Last April about 40 families participated at Einstein including parents of middle school students. This year the Comite Hispano, which has been in existence at Einstein for more than 10 years, is failing from lack of participation. Ineligibility, suspensions are high among Hispanic students. Where is the continued support to the community? Should staff have been involved to create opportunities for parents in a comfortable and safe environment? As stated earlier, more needs to happen than simply spending money. Programs must have trackable, positive outcomes.

In closing, please remember that every action taken, every decision made, every program started or stopped has an impact on the future of a child. We thank you for the opportunity to comment on the operating budget. To truly engage in Baldrige philosophy, MCPS must face the weak links and address them with honesty. "Courageous" discussions need to be had to meet the goal of success for every student. We look forward to having these discussions and working with you to make sure every student grows into an outstanding citizen.

Number and Percentage of Graduates in MCPS Classes of 2002-2006 Who Earned One or More AP Exam Scores of 3 or Higher

School	2002				2003				2004				2005				2006				
	grads	test takers	mean score	AP* Scholar	grads	test takers	mean score	AP Scholar	grads	test takers	mean score	AP Scholar	grads	test takers	mean score	AP Scholar	grads	test takers	mean score	AP Scholar	
MCPS	8129	3688	3.2	1476	8655	4128	3.1	1692	8788	2027	3.1	2027	9030	4852	3.1	2228	9483	5282	3.1	2419	
African Am	1584	304	2.5	46	1551	368	2.5	68	1688	442	2.6	93	1887	105	2.5	105	1882	515	2.4	108	
Asian	1316	809	3.1	367	1331	832	3.0	394	1389	956	3.0	495	1429	1015	3.0	565	1556	1159	3.1	642	
Hispanic	986	255	3.1	50	1064	302	3.3	56	1125	366	3.1	65	1200	458	3.2	91	1303	541	3.0	134	
White	4223	2314	3.3	1011	4687	2619	3.2	3062	4574	2756	3.3	1373	4487	2817	3.3	1461	4728	3062	3.2	1533	
F/ARMS	715	144	2.7	20	799	186	2.7	30	868	246	2.9	42	883	285	2.8	42	1071	351	2.8	57	
SpecialEd	647	78	3.0	13	707	97	3.1	29	685	86	3.1	28	686	108	2.8	22	809	145	3.0	44	
ELL	325	37	3.6	0	298	31	3.7	3	283	68	3.5	2	418	115	3.4	2	115	67	3.5	1	
School																					
Einstein	292	95	2.8	30	330	110	2.8	40	332	142	2.7	48	348	160	2.9	53	330	155	2.4	24	
Kennedy	299	150	2.2	24	306	154	2.3	40	300	133	2.3	27	305	135	2.2	29	299	122	2.5	32	
Blair	617	251	3.9	124	604	270	3.8	160	612	288	3.7	182	684	335	3.5	193	667	323	3.7	192	
Wheaton	212	42	2.5	7	271	56	2.6	14	235	88	2.5	19	278	109	2.5	13	259	130	2.5	25	
W Johnson	349	185	3.4	107	396	208	3.3	111	390	231	3.5	133	446	293	3.4	151	452	304	3.5	183	

*AP Scholar is awarded by the College Board to students who took at least 3 exams and received a minimum score of 3 on each exam

MCPS high schools outside of DCC with mean AP exam score below 3.0

- Gaithersburg (2.7 in 2002 to 2.5 in 2006)
- Paint Branch (3.1 in 2002 to 2.9 in 2006)
- Rockville (2.9 in 2002 to 2.4 in 2006)
- Seneca Valley (3.0 in 2002 to 2.9 in 2006)
- Springbrook (2.8 in 2002 to 2.5 in 2006)
- Watkins Mill (3.2 in 2002 to 2.4 in 2006)

Data from MCPS Office of Shared Accountability, Report on Participation and Performance of the MCPS class of June 2006 on the New SAT

SAT Scores for the Class of 2006

School	SAT participation # grad	% out of 2400	Combined Score	African American	Hispanic	Asian	White
MCPS (all)	9,483	75.8	1634	1360	1410	1710	1735
State of MD	45,231	NA	1511	1275	1456	1646	1622
National	1,465,744	NA	1518	1297	1370	1600	1582
Einstein	330	70.9	1459	1320	1300	1400	1685
Kennedy	299	64.9	1420	1294	1363	1474	1622
Blair	667	78.3	1628	1249	1311	1887	1917
Wheaton	259	62.9	1313	1223	1290	1416	1363

Red scores = lowest in MCPS

MCPS school with highest mean score – Whitman 1884 (N=409)

MCPS school with lowest mean score – Wheaton 1313 (N=163)

MCPS school with highest mean score for African American students – Wootton 1601 (N=12)

MCPS school with lowest mean score for African American students – Wheaton 1223 (N=33)

MCPS school with highest mean score for Hispanic students – Whitman 1742 (N=23)

MCPS school with lowest mean score for Hispanic students – Quince Orchard 1249 (N=24)

MCPS school with highest mean score for Asian students – Whitman 1942 (N=46)

MCPS school with lowest mean score for Asian students – Einstein 1400 (N=42)

MCPS school with highest mean score for White students – Blair 1917 (N=189)

MCPS school with lowest mean score for White students – Wheaton 1363 (N=32)