

FY 2008 Operating Budget Testimony, 11 January 2007

Northwood Cluster

Good evening, I am Patrick Herendeen, one of the Northwood cluster coordinators. We are pleased support the MCCPTA testimony and Operating Budget Compact, and we support the MCCPTA resolution on operating budget priorities.

We are pleased to see additional revenue being devoted to middle school and high school counselors, assistant principals, resource teachers, art, music and PE teachers, and online learning resources. I can even support the need for new floor burnishers!

Bullying and Gang Prevention

The additional staff resources targeted on reducing student bullying and gang activity are greatly needed, and appreciated, although I must state that I believe MCPS is still being too timid in their embrace of anti-gang education and intervention programs.

Special Education

We are very concerned about the proposed changes to the special education program. Closing the learning centers does not seem to be an action that has been proposed based on what is best for the students. Rather, it seems to me to be motivated purely based on cost savings. This change will not only affect these students, it will also affect the general student population because it seems very unlikely that adequate additional staffing will be provided to the numerous schools that will receive these students. For example, Silver Spring International Middle School, which is piloting the program this year, doubled the number of special educators in implementing the hours-based model this year. Will there be adequate funding for every school to hire these additional staff members?

We are not arguing against moving any students from learning centers to their home school. If such a move is the most appropriate decision for a student based on a proper evaluation, and the parents are supportive of such a move, then clearly the student should be moved to a less restrictive environment. But one size does not fit all, and "Least Restrictive Environment" is not necessarily synonymous with full inclusion. We support the MCCPTA resolution that calls for a continuum of services and a choice-based model for children in special education. Not "learning centers vs. inclusion" but a full continuum of services and placements.

It has been asserted that these students will do better if they are moved to their home schools, but the data we have seen on the performance of special education students in the Walter Johnson Learning Center as compared to average scores for all special education students in the county argue against this assertion. We need to do what is best for the students, not just what is best based on some other non-academic rationale.

Middle School Reform

We are very interested in the middle school reform effort, although we do not have a clear picture of exactly what it entails. I will note that Silver Spring International Middle School is one of the test cases for reform experiments. And I happen to know from first hand experience,

because my daughter is a 6th grade student there, that the schedule system being implemented this year is working very well. That said, we are concerned that the resources being invested in middle school reform will be insufficient to really change the middle school experience for the better.

Reading intervention programs in middle schools, such as Reading 180 and Corrective Reading, are clearly important. But are these programs working? We trust MCPS will be gathering appropriate data to evaluate these initiatives at an appropriate time. We must have successful programs to address reading deficiencies.

Speaking of evaluation of programs, we are not particularly impressed with how pilot programs and new programs are assessed and evaluated to determine whether they are making a difference. Programs are begun, ended, changed, etc. with minimal documentation of success or failure. Pilot programs are experiments, and our children are the test subjects. Experiments require data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Our impression is that this is not being done properly. Pilot programs are rolled out more broadly before the data are in and without apparent evaluation. It seems to us that many decisions are being made to continue or discontinue various programs without adequate evaluations. And please remember that behind all of these plans and data points, such as they are, there are real children who are potentially being jerked around.

Outreach and Communication

For years we have been pushing for greater attention and resources for communication with parents and the community- in English and other languages as necessary. Those needs are still inadequately addressed, although we are pleased there are some signs that MCPS is slowly catching on. In this regard, Parent Community Outreach Coordinators are an important element in helping the school system communicate with and engage parents in the education process. This is important at all levels, elementary, middle and high school, but this is also an important part of middle school reform. Changing the middle school experience must involve more than just changing schedules and parts of the curriculum. There must be a change in the culture as well, and better communication and involvement of parents is essential. Why does MCPS not see the value in these positions?

Staffing Challenges

We continue to experience challenges in recruiting highly qualified teachers, especially in the Downcounty Consortium, and in math and the sciences here in the DCC as well as elsewhere in the county. Something must be done about this. In fact just yesterday I received a communication from the Silver Spring International MS PTSA president regarding difficulties they have had in recruiting reading teachers and reading specialists. At Northwood we have now lost two chemistry teachers, including the AP chemistry teacher, and have had difficulties finding appropriate long term substitutes. How can we encourage students to take high level classes if we don't provide adequately trained staff? Finding highly qualified teachers in the sciences is hard enough, and finding appropriate substitutes is even more difficult. We need some creative approaches to finding qualified teachers and substitutes, especially those in math and science that are particularly difficult to fill.

The need for additional guidance counselors at the middle and high schools is a major concern. The funds requested 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. How can a high school counselor get to know 300 plus students well enough to do their job properly? The recommendations fall short of addressing the inequities in counseling from K-12.

Maintenance

The Division of Maintenance seems to be getting the short end of the stick yet again in this budget. They have a substantial backlog of work, the number of work orders is increasing, our schools are not getting any younger, and it appears that there is no change in staffing.

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