

Rockville Cluster

Operating Budget Testimony

1/10/2007

Good evening, I am Caitlin Hendel, one of three Cluster Coordinators for the Rockville Cluster. We in the Rockville Cluster support the goals stated in the MCCPTA testimony and its operating budget compact. We also support the MCCPTA resolution on the operating budget priorities.

MCPS has identified five worthwhile goals in its Strategic Plan for Fiscal Year 2008. We respectfully ask the Board to consider our requests to help meet these goals.

Goal No. 1 is to ensure success for every student, and **Goal No. 2** is to provide an adequate instructional program. The schools in the Rockville Cluster, particularly on the secondary level, have made great strides toward these goals in an ongoing effort to increase the level of rigor for students. Rockville High School started an IB program this school year, with a pre-IB program at Wood Middle School. Rockville also has established Journalism and Engineering academies. On the other end of the spectrum, the high school this year created its CyberCafe program – a mentoring program for about 50 at-risk ninth-graders and their parents. We thank the Board for supporting these programs. MCPS has included \$394,000 for the High School Plus after-school program (p. 1-26) to replace night school, and we see that as another worthwhile avenue toward educational success for our students.

Lincoln Park Bus. We do have a special request tonight for one particular group of Rockville High School students, those who live in the Lincoln Park area in Rockville. That particular area happens to be just inside the two-mile minimum required for MCPS bus service, and we are asking that the Board support us in our effort to establish bus service for those students. Many of the kids who live in Lincoln Park come from households in which getting to school is not always a priority. As elementary school students, they can walk to Maryvale Elementary School, and they live outside the minimum distance for middle school and therefore ride the bus to Wood. But when they get to Rockville, it's up to them to get to school. And they don't always make it. For instance, this past Monday, 17 percent of the entire Rockville student body was absent. Of the 145 kids who live in Lincoln Park, the absentee rate that day was 24 percent.

It's not an easy two miles. They have to cross a major intersection – Norbeck and Baltimore -- walk up a steep hill, through a wooded area and a cemetery. It is also poorly lighted – an important factor at 7 a.m. during the school year.

We see the two-mile rule in the Lincoln Park case as one of those inadvertent barriers that can contribute to achievement gaps in our high school, and we see a new bus route as one way to address this particular case of institutional racism. This request is not so much about safety issues – although for all of our students, Baltimore Road is always a safety

issue. It is instead about motivational issues. Rockville's administration and PTSA believe, as do community leaders in Lincoln Park, that the first step toward improving the educational success for these students is to get them into the building. A bus route costs about \$7,500, and we think it would be worth it to at least try this approach to see if attendance and scores improve for these students.

Special Education. Another concern for us that falls under Strategic Plan **Goal No. 1** is the area of special education. The Rockville cluster asks that the Board reconsider the decision to phase out learning centers in the county. While we don't have such centers in our cluster, removing that option would add to a special education population that already includes a significant number of deaf and hard of hearing students and children with autism. We also respectfully ask that as you move toward an hours-based staffing policy for special education that you not forget that one solution usually does not fit all, and that it's imperative that we provide a continuum of services for students with special needs.

Translation Services. In **Goal No. 3**, MCPS wants to strengthen productive partnerships for education. One partnership we think continues to need attention is that between the schools and the non-English speaking community.

The ESOL population of our cluster continues to grow. At Rock Creek Valley Elementary, nearly one fourth of the students are ESOL students. Meadow Hall, with 15 percent of the population ESOL students, has just one ESOL teacher. Last year, MCPS added four positions to its Translation Unit to help translate all requested media, and this year's budget calls for a new programmer position (p. 3-80). We continue to support these initiatives, but again ask that MCPS consider school-based translation resources to help non-English speaking parents understand their children's needs at parent-teacher conferences, at discipline proceedings, and in other myriad ways in which language can be a barrier.

Safety and Discipline. In the Rockville Cluster a group of parents have formed a partnership with the schools, the Anti-Bullying Coalition, to try to identify ways to reduce incidents of bullying. Several of our elementary schools have "peace" initiatives. And yet this disruptive and demoralizing problem continues to exist at every level. At Maryvale Elementary, for instance, much of the bullying occurs during lunch and recess. Many days, only two adults are responsible for supervising up to 200 children during recess – not a safe ratio. We are asking for two additional aides who are well-trained and confident enough to step into a bullying situation quickly to defuse the situation.

Falling under the same goal, a group of parents in the Manor Lake neighborhood – on the other side of Norbeck Road – worked hard two years ago to establish a new bus route, 5202, to ensure their children made it to and from high school safely every day. There is now talk of discontinuing that bus route, and we ask that it continue to serve that neighborhood.

School security. Finally, we believe security issues fall under Strategic Plan **Goal No. 5**: Providing high quality business services that are essential to the educational success of

students. We welcome the addition of an Educational Facilities Officer (EFO) in our cluster. His presence already has made a difference for our students and administrators. However, he must split his time among the schools, and generally focuses on Rockville High School and Wood Middle School. At Maryvale Elementary, it is physically possible for someone to enter the front door and proceed to a classroom without going past the main office. Maryvale and Wood have both asked for ways to better secure the entrances to their schools.

Thank you for your time,
Caitlin Hendel
Rockville Cluster