

Watkins Mill Cluster

Watkins Mill High School.
Montgomery Village Middle School; Neelsville Middle School
South Lake Elementary School; Stedwick Elementary School; Watkins Mill Elementary School;
Whetstone Elementary School

January 10, 2007

Dear Ms. Navarro, Dr. Weast, members of the Board of Education:

My name is Lon Hamann and together with Brenda Szczeszny and Susan Young we are the Watkins Mill Cluster Co-Coordinator. I appreciate this opportunity to testify on behalf of the schools in the Watkins Mill Cluster.

Our Cluster, like many others in the County, has a very diverse student population. Most of our schools have high mobility, high FARMS, and/or high ESOL percentages. Our schools have many students who excel in their studies, while many others have achieved satisfactory levels of performance. Still other students are challenged by language barriers; special needs; non-supportive home situations; or disrupted and inadequate preparation in prior schools. All of these students can likely do even better with additional resources and support.

Our Cluster has many involved parents and active PTAs/PTSA at all levels. Our Cluster also has a dedicated team of principals, teachers and staff who expect much from our kids, and are committed to helping them succeed. This year they initiated a cluster-wide literacy focus, with each school working as part of a vertically integrated team. We need stability and your support to enable this team to accomplish their goals.

The MCPS Strategic Plan speaks to Success for Every Student. Student achievement is clearly enhanced by smaller class sizes. We wholeheartedly support the critical investments required to reduce class size at every level. As taxpayers, we recognize this is not an inexpensive initiative. However, County experiences at the Elementary School level point to smaller class sizes as a proven, effective way to successfully reach and educate students as individuals. We support too the Assistant Principals positions at Elementary Schools.

The MCPS Strategic Plan also speaks to providing an Adequate Instructional Program. We strongly support encouraging all students to take on challenging coursework and community service. Solid foundations in the basic skills of reading, writing and mathematics are critical to students successfully progressing to more advanced curriculums. Likewise, rapid identification and academic support of struggling students is needed to help keep them learning, positively motivated, and on track. The Watkins Mill High School PTSA met last year with the coordinator for the Anne Arundel County AVID program. What they found intriguing was the comprehensive balance of high expectations; course rigor; peer and professional support; and skill training students received, including teaching kids how to study and organizational skills. This holistic

approach has proven successful in Maryland and a great many communities across the country.

Unlike many popular video games, there are no cheat codes or shortcuts to student success. We ask for your support of increased rigor in the Middle School curriculum and increased support for high school literacy, to better prepare students for challenging material. Support for after-school programs at both the middle and high school levels, including transportation, would be greatly appreciated. After-school programs can be vital to helping students achieve, and to maintaining academic eligibility.

Learning and academic success is best nurtured in a clean, professional school environment, one where the faculty, staff and students also feel physically safe. We support increased staffing and resources for desperately needed building maintenance and repair, including sustaining aging HVAC systems. As every homeowner knows, not keeping up with maintenance usually costs more in the long run. We support increased coverage in the Health Rooms so that properly trained personnel are available throughout the day. We support increased security staffing at all of our secondary schools. Security guards do more than just maintain control. When plugged in with the kids, they can sniff out and diffuse small problems before they become big problems. We support additional counselors in middle and high schools to help prevent and control bullying and gang recruitment. We support cameras, key-card locks and other resources as needed to secure the school buildings and portables. And we support the assessment and adjustment of bus stops and traffic patterns around schools to promote pedestrian safety.

We thank you for the expansion of Edline this year. When routinely populated, Edline provides an important and timely means for parents to track their son or daughter's progress. We encourage MCPS to take other steps to help improve two-way communication with parents. We see education as shared responsibility. Thirty years of research have proven that parent involvement is a powerful influence on student achievement. I'd offer that parent involvement with the school system may not always be easy, but it is just as vital.

In closing, I note our support for the positions and priorities of the MCCPTA Operating Budget Compact, as well as the testimonies of the other clusters in our area, Clarksburg, Damascus, Gaithersburg, and Magruder.

I thank you for your attention and your support for the students of Montgomery County, and the Watkins Mill Cluster. We look forward to continuing to work with you and our schools.