

**FY 08 Operating Budget Testimony
Montgomery County Board of Education
Whitman Cluster
January 11, 2007**

Good evening, President Navarro, distinguished members of the board and Dr. Weast. I am Deborah DeMille-Wagman and I am here tonight to speak on behalf of the Whitman Cluster. As we have in previous years, the Whitman Cluster testifies in unison with our quad cluster – Wheaton, Walter Johnson and Bethesda-Chevy Chase. We also support the testimony of MCCPTA as well as both its operating budget compact and resolution on operating budget priorities.

The Whitman Cluster has four issues to raise concerning the Superintendent's FY 08 Proposed Operating Budget. With respect to three of these issues, we are concerned that what is funded on paper is not what actually happens in practice. In particular, we are concerned about high school guidance counselors, special education staffing practices in elementary schools, and the closing of the learning centers. We also want to make sure that the planned revisions for team leadership in the middle schools do not impact the ability to create smaller learning communities of no more than 125 students.

High School and Middle School Guidance Counselors

(This portion of our testimony aligns with *Goal 1: Ensuring Success for Every Student*)

Consider the hiring of more high school guidance counselors. We are genuinely pleased to see that, for the first time in many years, the proposed budget includes funds for the hiring of additional high school as well as middle school guidance counselors. On paper, if this budget is fully funded, for the first time since the initiative was begun in 2000, there will be sufficient high school guidance counselors to meet, and even by a slight amount exceed, the goal of one guidance counselor for every 250 students. However, this is only a paper victory because the reality will be quite different.

Out of necessity, because of the significant additional administrative duties carried by the resource guidance counselor at each high school, that counselor does not carry a full case load. At Whitman High School, for example, our very capable and

excellent resource counselor, Fran Landau, carries a caseload of approximately 150 students. Under the proposed staffing ratio for next year, those additional 100 students that she is not able to serve must be assigned to other counselors. As a result, the other counselors will end up serving close to 280 students each. So, there is a disconnect between what is proposed on paper and what happens in practice.

The work of a high school guidance counselor can be measured in staffing ratios of students to counselor. It can be measured in numbers of college recommendation letters written. It can be measured in IEP and 504 review meetings attended. However, the most important work a counselor does cannot be measured in numbers. That work is done when a counselor makes a true connection with an at-risk student, forging a relationship of trust so that the student will come for assistance when he or she needs it, or actually listen to advice given. The most important work that a counselor does includes proactive work, as opposed to the reactive work in a crisis. It is important that a counselor have the time and resources to look for trouble before it happens – preventing fires rather than putting them out. The reality is that the lower the caseload a counselor carries, the more likely this is to happen. So, although we are grateful for the additional positions included in the proposed budget, we respectfully urge that there be more. Hire enough additional counselors so that, even taking account of the reduced case load of the resource counselors, no one counselor in this county has a caseload that exceeds 250 students.¹

Staffing Model Used in Practice for Elementary School Inclusion Classrooms

(This portion of our testimony aligns with *Goal 1: Ensuring Success for Every Student and with Goal 2: Providing an Effective Instructional Program*)

Another area where there is a disconnect between paper and practice is in the staffing of inclusion classrooms in elementary schools. As we have brought to your attention in several forums during the last two years, when MCPS considers class size capacity for inclusion classrooms in elementary schools, it does not include special education students in the head count for determining maximum class sizes. We have

¹ If each of the 25 high school resources counselors were allowed a caseload of 150 students, 10 additional counselors beyond the four already included in the proposed budget could be added to the budget at an additional estimated cost of \$762,590.

been told that the rationale for this is that there is separate special education staffing for special education students. This produces the absurd result of having inclusion classrooms that exceed the maximum class size capacity guidelines for elementary schools. In our cluster this year, this practice had a direct impact on Wood Acres Elementary School. At the beginning of this school year, Wood Acres had four fifth grade classes, two of which were inclusion classrooms. Two of these four classes had 30 students each and the other two had 31 students each, for a total of 122 students. The class capacity guidelines for fifth grades is 28 students. However, because the number of general education students in these four classes did not total 116 students, and because the seven special education students were not considered in the count, the classes were not considered to be over capacity. Dr. Stetson worked hard on our behalf, and, six weeks after the start of the school year, Wood Acres received an additional teacher. However, this problem had been identified well before the beginning of the school year. Thus, if the staffing practices had been changed, the disruption and anxiety caused by reassigning students after the start of the school year could have easily been avoided. When we asked why this issue was not addressed in the proposed operating budget this year, we were told this staffing practice does not have a significant budget impact across the county, and that any problems that do arise can be addressed on a case-by-case basis. If this so, we urge you to show your leadership in properly supporting inclusion classrooms in elementary schools by directing MCPS staff to stop using this current staffing model and to count all students when class size is determined – regardless of whether the students are in general education or special education categories.

Proposed Changes to Middle School Team Leadership Models and the Closing of the Learning Centers

(This portion of our testimony aligns with *Goal 1: Ensuring Success for Every Student*)

Two other proposed actions also significantly concern us – possible changes to the grade level team structures in middle schools and the proposal to close the learning centers.

Middle School Team Leadership:

We are very proud that Pyle Middle School has been named a National Blue Ribbon School and thank Principal Michael Zarchin and his staff for the excellent job they are doing educating our children. Clearly, it is a well-run school. There is agreement within our cluster that one of the reasons it has been able to serve its students so well is because of the team structure it currently uses. By breaking a large school into three small teams of no more than 125 students, each with its own team leader, smaller learning communities are created within the school. This structure promotes interdisciplinary team work. For example, a recent sixth-grade field trip at Pyle included collaboration among math, social studies, and science teachers. This was facilitated by the team leader. We applaud you for recognizing the importance of this team structure and allowing it to continue.

Closing of the Learning Centers:

At this time, with the information we have been given, and in the absence of detailed information on the research supporting such a change, the legal impact of the change, and the basis for moving in this direction, the Whitman Cluster opposes the closing of the learning centers as set out in the Realignment of Special Education Service Delivery for Secondary Students plan. We oppose the closings because doing so is premature. Last year, there were two pilot projects of hours-based staffing at two different middle schools. To our knowledge, neither of these pilot projects has ever been formally evaluated. Were those projects successful? What do the teachers, students and parents who participated in the new model say about it? We also note with great concern that hours-based staffing does not have to be provided by special educators and we wonder what changes this plan will make in the delivery of services to students who currently are concentrated together, thus having better access to trained special educators. Additionally, we note the lack of consideration of the impact on response-to-intervention on hours-based staffing. We are concerned as the county moves to implement response-to-intervention as set out in the IDEA as amended in 2004, there will be a delay in identifying those students who need an Individualized Education Program (IEP), resulting in a decline in the overall accumulation of IEP hours. How will those students in

the intervention-tracking phase without IEPs be served if the school does not have a sufficient total of accumulated IEP hours?

Most of all we are concerned that the students leaving these centers have a continuum of services with access to the breadth and depth of knowledge of experienced special educators. When you spread these resources over a larger and extended environment, will you also dissipate their effectiveness? The realignment plan does not include sufficient detailed information to assess whether services will be continued for those who need them, and, if so, how those services will be administered. In the absence of information necessary to assess the impact of closure, we cannot support the change.

Although we have questions about numbers, and staffing ratios, and whether the needs of students who need a small, self-contained classroom will be met, we also have other questions that cannot be answered with numbers. The concept of educating a student in the least restrictive environment is a fluid one, changing with the needs of each student – that is why students with disabilities have an “*Individualized Education Program*” and not just an “Education Program.” By closing these centers we believe that you are drastically reducing the chances for some students to get the services they need. How many of the students at these centers started out at their home schools and only went to the centers when it was clear the home school model wasn’t working for them? How can we take a chance with these same students again, asking them to try again at a school that previously didn’t work for them? Haven’t they had enough upheaval and disappointment?

The social impact on a student with a disability can be huge. Indeed, we find no small irony that the plan to close the learning centers refers to returning students to “their home schools.” Most of the students at the centers would consider where they are now to be their home school. Home is not purely a question of geography. Home is where you have forged friendships and bonds, where people know your name, where you identify yourself as coming from. For many of these students, their disability has had a huge impact on their social interactions. Some have been the victims of cruel teasing, others have had the more subtle, but no less horrible or alienating, experience of feeling as if they don’t belong. For these students, it may have taken years to undo the harm caused by being part of such a setting. The idea that it is at all appropriate to tear them

from the communities they consider to be their home without specific and detailed information on the how this plan will impact their own individual education experience, is appalling. This harm cannot be measured but is nonetheless crucially important.

Please know that we recognize all that you've done on behalf of the schools and that we ask that you take our concerns in the spirit they are offered – our shared mutual goal of educating all students in this county in the best way possible. Please also know that, as we have in the past, we pledge our support in working with the county and state government to ensure that the school system obtains the resources it needs. In particular, we understand the importance of the retired health benefits trust fund and the financial implications for the school system in contributing to this fund over the next five years. We will do what we can at the county and state levels to make sure our legislators know we consider this funding a priority.

Thank you and good night.