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The Montgomery County Council of Parent-Teacher Associations

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Testimony on the Superintendent's Recommended FY 2013 MCPS Operating Budget
Wednesday, January 11, 2012
Presented by Kristin Tribble, President

We at MCCPTA thank you for the opportunity to testify on the proposed operating budget for FY2013. Given the stark fiscal realities we face, MCCPTA supports the Superintendent's proposed Maintenance of Effort Operating Budget. We believe strongly in the principle underlying the state Maintenance of Effort law, and we support changes to the law to restore MOE as a true funding floor and to make certain that counties – and not the underfunded schools – bear the burden for any penalty. We are proud of the quality of our school system and will continue to advocate not only to maintain, but also to grow the funding for our schools to meet the challenges of increased enrollment and our changing demographics.

In thinking about the challenges we face, perhaps our school system can fairly be likened to nearly 200 ships sailing together into challenging waters, with swells in testing and new curriculum requirements. Each year, nearly each and every ship takes on additional passengers and we promise each one –regardless of his/her socio-economic status, a first class education so they are prepared to meet the challenges that lie ahead. We have strong leadership, and an extraordinary navigation system – our curriculum, a model for school systems across our country. But fiscal restraints have made for tough times, requiring significant reductions of critical crew - including the crew needed to provide training for this enviable navigation tool. Moreover, many of our passengers have greater – not lesser needs, and some of our vessels are badly in need of repair. Other ships are struggling to keep pace for reasons we don't fully understand.

These are our challenges. While we fully understand that neither the Board nor MCPS control the purse strings, we also know that this is the journey of a lifetime for our children – and a journey they get to take only ONE TIME. We cannot continue to labor in stormy seas without the crew and the provisions needed. Going forward, we must determine what is needed to shore our ships, and to provide the crew and training essential to deliver on our promise to each and every one of our passengers – the students of Montgomery County Public Schools.

And as we embark on a renewed effort to collaborate with our County Council, we encourage asking them to plan with MCPS for operations for the long haul (at least five years)– taking into account projections for increased enrollment as well as demographic shifts . As a county, we should BUILD TOWARD the budget we need (recognizing some changes will be inevitable), rather than simply “backing out” the MCPS budget from available funds. If we know and plan for our revenue needs, the chances of a successful voyage are far greater.

We appreciate that the Board and MCPS have taken a balanced approach to navigating these very difficult times. The Superintendent's proposed budget for FY 2013 is entirely consistent with the Priorities established by resolution of our delegates this past October, reflecting the consensus of our 191 PTAs and nearly 50,000 members.

MCCPTA is committed to protecting the “classroom” and direct support for students to ensure the success of every student, with no further increase in class size and no further reduction in teachers

or staff who provide direct instruction or support to students. The Superintendent's proposed budget speaks directly to this priority and appears to include no further reduction in school based staff.

Cuts over the last several years have taken a significant toll. Just by way of example, there are currently thirteen elementary schools with only a .5 guidance counselor. With median enrollment of 389 students in these schools, there are a total of five thousand students who do not have ready access to a certified guidance counselor for half of each school day. With the challenges our children face, this is simply unacceptable. Moreover, there are at least 35 elementary schools with enrollment of more than 500 students who have only one counselor to address the needs of all students. Twenty-two of these schools have more than 600 students, nine have more than 700 students and two have more than 800. Further, some have higher than average percentage of FARMs ESOL students and – in some cases – students with special education needs. The notion that a single guidance counselor can fulfill his/her responsibility to all of these students strains credulity. There are comparable challenges at the high school and middle school levels given cuts that have been made.

The loss of reading specialists and media specialists, and the resulting impact is equally startling. There are now 25 elementary schools with only a .5 reading specialist. Hence, at a time when the curriculum is demanding greater differentiation, there is less opportunity than ever for differentiation. There are 16 schools with only a .5 media specialist and less time to guide students in these waters. Cuts to music instruction have similarly limited student opportunities to learn and develop in this vital area.

Turning to staff development, we commend Dr. Starr's commitment to focus on alignment of resources in this area, and respectfully submit that additional staff development support will be essential. Comprehensive and effective rollout of all new curricula, with consistent and comprehensive staff development and training across all schools, must be a top priority. In response to Maryland's adoption of the Common Core State Standards, the Board updated the elementary curriculum frameworks in 2010 and the secondary frameworks this past fall. In addition, MCPS has been developing and implementing a phased roll out of Curriculum 2.0, which is designed to address these more rigorous standards at the elementary school level. One key aspect of this new curriculum is the use of thinking and academic skills to integrate different subjects. Parents are concerned that teachers have not received adequate training to implement this new curriculum effectively. In fact, in many cases, teachers themselves have expressed this concern to parents. We need additional staff development to ensure that all teachers receive proper training on the new curriculum. We also note parents should be provided on-line access to this curriculum so that parents can assist their children's learning. Even once curriculum rollout is complete, we agree with Dr. Starr that there should be ongoing professional learning. At present secondary school staffing levels, this is next to impossible. With a single .4 staff development position for each high school and middle school – this is quite literally next to nothing, and must be remedied if we intend to have meaningful staff development as part of our culture. We also note that given the vast number of students with learning differences now being served in the general education setting, it is imperative that primary and secondary level teachers have the professional training needed to differentiate instruction.

In short, as soon as fiscally feasible, we need not only to restore, but also to grow the number of teachers and staff to ensure a quality educational experience for all students.

Continued support for after school activities is also vitally important. The cuts made to JV sports are a disservice to our students; our goal should be to increase the programming available and the services (including transportation) needed to make it accessible to all. There is a growing body of research that demonstrates the link between afterschool activities and graduating from high school, going to college, and becoming a responsible citizen. Research has shown that the odds of attending college were 97% higher for students who participated in school-sponsored activities for two years than those who did not participate in any. The chances of completing college were 179% higher, and the odds of voting – considered a predictor of civic engagement – were 33% higher. (See Academic Value of Non-Academics, The case for keeping extracurriculars, June Kronholz, Educationnext, Winter 2012/Vol. 12, No. 2.) And more immediate benefits of engaging students in a positive way are self-evident.

Turning to the physical plant, maintaining safe, secure and healthy school environments with no further reductions in maintenance, building service, MCPS security staff or School Resource Officers (SRO) is also a TOP priority. Security is an ever-increasing challenge with more students in more spaces, and MCCPTA has and will continue to advocate for at least one SRO to be assigned at every high school. As enrollment grows, so necessarily do maintenance needs – particularly as we now depend on more than 500 relocatable classrooms which require more maintenance than permanent classrooms. Aging facilities and extensive after-hours utilization also contribute to higher breakdown rates in HVAC equipment. In the face of increased maintenance needs, as well as added inflationary costs, maintenance dollars have barely held constant. To maintain healthy and safe schools, we must reduce the backlog of maintenance requests and provide adequate and properly trained staff to keep pace going forward. The \$700,000 increase proposed for FY 2013 is a step in the right direction.

Retaining and recruiting highly qualified and effective school leadership, teachers and staff is also essential in good times and in bad. Dr. Starr's proposal speaks to the need for "light at the end of the tunnel" to recognize the hard work, sacrifice and strain on teachers, staff and school leadership alike. We believe this is a critical time for such recognition if we hope to retain the best of the best.

Full implementation of hours-based staffing for special education students is also a top priority for MCCPTA, and we urge adoption of Dr. Starr's proposal to phase in hours-based staffing for the seven middle schools that do not yet have it. Should funding allow, we urge that it be accomplished in less than three years, so that all middle school students have access to this model, which ensures equitable distribution of staff members to address the needs of individual students.

You will hear further from MCCPTA Cluster Coordinators and individual PTAs about the importance of these priorities in their local schools. Together, we fully support your quest to provide the best possible education for our children. As you receive testimony from our diverse regions of the county, you will gain perspective on perhaps additional priorities unique to each of our communities. We hope you will take these considerations into account as the budget process proceeds.

In the meantime, we look forward to your leadership in emphasizing and informing our citizens that education must be a priority. Schools are the centerpieces of our communities and the youth that attend these schools are one of the most vulnerable populations. They are the future of our county. Let's not let them down.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to provide input in this important process.