

Walter Johnson PTA Cluster

Walter Johnson High School - North Bethesda Middle School - Tilden Middle School - Ashburton Elementary School - Farmland Elementary School - Garrett Park Elementary School - Kensington Parkwood Elementary School - Luxmanor Elementary School –
Wyngate Elementary School - Rock Terrace School

Good Evening members of the Board of Education and Dr. Starr. My name is Jennifer Cope and I am a Walter Johnson Cluster Coordinator, along with Barbara Ferry and Mary Cassell. We thank you for this opportunity to comment on the proposed MCPS Operating Budget for school year 2013, while at the same time our cluster supports the general principle that this budget at a minimum holds the local per pupil funding level at the reduced level set by the County Council earlier this year. And we oppose the dilution of the MOE law. We want to continue the high level of service to our students that has yielded such outstanding results and thus we respectfully request that when it is fiscally feasible that funding be restored for adequate education staffing.

We understand you have tough funding decisions to make and urge you to focus on the Operating Budget Priorities set forth by MCCPTA: no further increase in class size; no further reduction in teacher or staff who provide direct instruction or support to students; no reductions in maintenance, building service, nor security staff to maintain safe, secure and healthful schools; comprehensive and effective roll-out of all new curriculum.

Budget pressures have already forced class sizes up. This increase has been the biggest challenge for many of our Principals. We strongly encourage the Board to pass a budget that decreases class size in kindergarten and 1st grade. The staff is doing the best job they can but there are simply too many children in a classroom during the very important first years of a child education!

We predict, as classroom size increases, the scores that Montgomery County Schools have worked so hard to improve will decline. Please reduce the student/teacher ratios! According to an October 10, 2011 article titled, Increased Enrollment Enlarges Class Sizes in The Pitch, WJH's newspaper, "limited staffing has forced elective departments to 'stack' classes, placing students of different levels in the same room, with a single teacher who has to teach two or three courses."

Hours-based staffing for students with learning differences is especially important to minimize adverse impacts on both these students and general education students. We support the Special Education funding which states, (the budget) "also includes \$170,000 for the first of a three-year phase in for hours-based staffing for special education services in the seven middle schools that do not have it." North Bethesda Middle School is one of the few schools that do not now benefit from hours-based staffing, and we feel it's sorely needed.

We ask for no reductions in staff development teachers, especially at the elementary level, where they are more critical than ever with the Integrated Curriculum being implemented this year. We are pleased to see that staff development has been identified as one of the strategic areas of focus for MCPS in the coming year. We also ask for no reductions in Reading Initiatives and ESOL teachers. In fact, our schools badly need additional Reading Initiative teachers for Kindergarten, a critical year for learning reading. Eliminating these positions will force schools to stop providing programs that give our children access to a high quality education.

These programs are especially needed by our cluster neighborhoods, which are undergoing rapid changes in demographics. County populations are also changing. A statistic from the summary budget page: "there are now 47,365 students who qualify for FARMS, the highest number in MCPS history. This is more than the entire student population of D.C. Public Schools" REALLY puts the County's dilemma into perspective. Merely maintaining the current funding effort is really reducing the quality that we have to provide more services to target low-income and ESOL students. And much of the impact has yet to be felt: "The percent of ESOL students in MCPS system-wide is 13.1%, but increases to 22.5% in elementary grades." So, moving ahead our middle and high schools will be affected even more.

After school programs are important both to provide additional learning and enrichment opportunities and we ask that our high school and middle school activity buses be restored to their former, more inclusive routes and not the limited version we are experiencing at this time. Establishing more Safe Routes to Schools Programs is a great way to encourage walking and biking to our local schools - going green and promoting healthy lifestyles while relieving some of the increased traffic congestion being experienced around our neighborhoods! Also, at one of our cluster meetings, our reps were concerned with the lack of CPR/First Aid training for ALL lunch/recess aides and we'd like to see a training initiative for all paid staff involved with our children.

Our cluster particularly supports increasing per-pupil funding, because schools in our cluster are growing rapidly. Not many other clusters will face the extreme future stresses that the additional increased population density will pose to the Walter Johnson cluster. The first White Flint sector plan, which includes developing new residential high-rise apartments and townhouses, is projected to add over 1,100 students to our schools. These students will begin to arrive soon, since four White Flint developers are moving forward - three have approved sketch plans, and two of them are planning to start construction in the next year or two.

We also ask the Board to consider the impacts of the Kensington Sector Plan - projected to further increase enrollment in the WJ cluster - and the second White Flint Sector Plan (due out in 2013).

The WJ cluster is grateful and fortunate to have two new elementary school buildings open this school year, Farmland and Garrett Park, and want to see these and all our schools maintained with the appropriate building staff and services. Safe and secure facilities for our staff and students are needed to continue their academic journeys. It is our hope that the County and school system are paying attention and take this future enrollment into account as they look at numbers for next year and beyond.

On a final note, we look forward to future dialogue with you. Please be assured of our willingness to assist in advocating the best education possible for our children on the County and State levels.

Thank You and Good Night!