

**FY2011 Operating Budget Testimony
Kennedy Cluster**

John F. Kennedy High School
Col. E. Brooke Lee Middle School
Argyle Middle School

Bel Pre Elementary School
Strathmore Elementary School
Georgian Forest Elementary School
Glenallen Elementary School

Submitted by: Frances Frost, Bel Pre Strathmore PTA President, MCCPTA Kennedy Cluster Coordinator
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You know the saying, “a chain is only as strong as its weakest link”. Montgomery County Public Schools is our chain and each child is a link. To continue to be the outstanding school system that we are, there cannot be any weak links, there cannot be a gap in the chain. Despite all the budget cuts and resulting changes that MCPS is facing, the Board of Education must continue to strengthen every link, to continue working towards closing our achievement gap as put forth in the MCPS Strategic Plan.

Members of the Board of Education, Superintendent Weast, good evening. I am Frances Frost, a parent of students at Bel Pre, Strathmore and Oak View Elementary Schools, Bel Pre Strathmore PTA President, and Kennedy Cluster Coordinator. I come before you tonight on behalf of the students, parents, educators and staff of the Kennedy Cluster schools. I thank you for this opportunity to speak with you tonight about the proposed FY 2011 Operating Budget. I commend the Board and Dr. Weast for their commitment during this economic crisis to moving us toward the goal of higher achievement for each and every student. MCPS has set itself apart in the district’s commitment to equity and excellence for our growing and highly diverse population.

One of the factors that makes MCPS exemplary is that we have a basic principle that every child can and will learn, every child can succeed and will be given the opportunity to do so. MCPS is steadily moving towards the point where success is not predetermined nor predictable by race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, language proficiency or disability. Keep this guiding principle in mind as you work through your budget decisions.

Of the potential budget reductions outlined for the FY 2011 Operating Budget, I would like to highlight those that are of most concern to the Kennedy Cluster.

The Kennedy Cluster's seven schools represent over 4400 students, many of whom face challenges that effect their education.

- On average, 24% of students participate in English for Speakers of Other Languages, double that of the county average
- Almost 16% of students receive special education services, slightly more than the rest of the county
- 63% of our students participate in Free and Reduced-price Meals (FARMS), twice the county average

Despite these daunting statistics, our Cluster's Black and Hispanic students' test scores have shown marked improvements and are making notable progress towards closing the achievement gap. Our concern is that we may lose that momentum due to across the board cuts that will disproportionately affect our cluster, as well as the others in the DownCounty Consortium.

The reduction of school staff is the largest financial reduction proposed. Our students have benefited from smaller class sizes and additional academic support. We realize that, unfortunately, increased class size is almost unavoidable. However, the reduction of classroom teachers as well as academic support staff will equate to a disproportionate and greater reduction of teachers in our Cluster and will have a negative effect on all of our students.

Our classroom, academic intervention, focus, and reading initiative teachers, and para-educators as an entire supportive team are a vital component to student achievement. The effect of larger classes with less teaching support will be felt by all our students, not just those who directly need additional academic help. The extra time for a classroom teacher to assist a student who is behind will affect the learning of the class at large. Our students are links on a chain, when one is pulled, they are all pulled.

There are also proposed cuts to teachers and transportation at our special programs - the magnet, immersion, IB and signature programs at our elementary, middle, and high schools levels. Developed to enhance student learning, offer a wide-range of learning opportunities, and increase student diversity, these programs will lose their purpose and effectiveness as the teaching staff is cut and the teaching loads are increased. Without transportation, students' access to these programs will be determined not by their interest, but their families' ability to get them to school. Instead of cutting key pieces of these programs, consider the long-term. What will these programs look like next year? It may be hard to

think that far ahead, given the current economic conditions, but we have to consider the lasting effects of these short-term cuts on key programs that are working.

Kennedy Cluster is a diverse population – demographically and academically. We have students that participate in the ESOL, FARMS, or special education programs, as well as those that are enrolled in G/T programs and AP classes, the International Baccalaureate and Leadership Training Institute, and the Digital Design & Development magnet program. Our students at all economic levels are working at all academic levels; our “at-risk” students are able to perform as well as their peers, partially due to the academic support that the school system provides.

We cannot afford to let educational initiatives that support student achievement where it is needed most be forgotten in these hard times, because we cannot afford to lose any student. To do so would be against the guiding principles of our school system. To do so would be to suggest that maybe success can be determined by race or gender or economics. But in MCPS, we are working to prove that’s not true, we are working to prove that all children can be excellent.

In this time of economic crisis, we ask you, in your budget decisions, that you consider the academic impact of cutting classroom teachers and supporting staff, where they are needed most. We ask that you protect our schools and make them stronger. Our PTAs thank you for your tireless efforts to provide our children with the education they deserve. Thank you for recognizing that a chain is only as strong as its weakest link and for making sure that each child is as strong as can be.

Thank you.