

**Written Testimony of
Steve Augustino
On Behalf of the
Gaithersburg Cluster**

**Montgomery County Council
February 10, 2009**

Good evening, President Andrews and members of the County Council. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of the Gaithersburg cluster tonight. You will notice that many of the Gaithersburg parents, teachers and students here tonight have these signs with an elephant on them. We adopted this symbol of our plight after an MCPS official called the high school modernizations the “elephant in the room” and suggested that these projects would be the first targets for delay in a tight budget. We took up the mantle in order to show that the elephant is indeed large, that we intend to be heard, and that we are fed up with being ignored and delayed. We are hopeful that the symbol will prove lucky, because elephants usually are not ignored for long.

I recognize that the budgets are extremely tight this year. We are in a recession and projections for county revenues continue to fall below expectations. As a result, you likely can't do some of the things our citizens have come to expect from the county government. I don't envy the difficult choices you have to make. But it is in a year like this that your priorities matter the most. We look to your actions to see what priority you attach to the educational needs of our children. And in particular, my cluster looks to your actions to see what priority you attach to a decent building for students at Paint Branch, Gaithersburg, Wheaton and Seneca Valley.

For years, we have seen MCPS and our elected officials assign a low priority to modernizing the high schools. We ask a simple question tonight: When do the high school modernizations become a top priority?

- Do they become a top priority when the four schools are high in the student populations (FARMS, ESOL, special education, etc.) that MCPS recognizes it needs to reach better?
- Do they become a top priority when the clusters regularly lose a high percentage of their home-grown top performers to private schools, to a flight to other parts of the county and to magnet programs?
- Do they become a top priority when teachers have to place cinder blocks on their HVAC units so the noise does not drown out their teaching?
- Do they become a top priority when AP students spend a week in the middle of winter in a classroom with no heat?

- Do they become a top priority when a school is so run down that students (at GHS and at other county schools) refer to it as "Ghettosburg"?
- Do they become a top priority when a real estate agent has trouble renting a house because the prospective renter has a 9th grader and is apprehensive about moving into the high school district?
- Do they become a top priority when a local radio DJ visits the school for a sports tournament and then trashes the school on the radio the next day, calling it "the worst school in Montgomery County", a "piece of dung" and "a pathetic high school"?

All of these things have already happened at Gaithersburg. And similar things are happening at the other three schools on your list. For my cluster, the modernization already is the top priority. The school affects everything about us: our students, our pride in the community, our home values, our businesses. We ask you, our elected leaders, if these schools are not a top priority now, why is that so? What more has to happen before you make the modernizations your top priority? What do you consider more critical than establishing a decent learning environment for these students?

All we ask is that you provide our students with the same opportunity to succeed that MCPS provides to students at other schools. If equality of opportunity is your primary criterion, then you must make the high school modernizations your first priority in the school budget. Thank you.