

Montgomery County Board of Education
Operating Budget Testimony
January 16, 2008

Good evening. My name is Karen Sullivan and along with Ricky Ford, I serve as an MCCPTA Cluster Coordinator for the John F. Kennedy Cluster of schools. On behalf of the Kennedy Cluster, thank you for allowing me to submit this testimony on the Operating Budget.

I'd like to personally thank you for your previous support of the Kennedy Cluster and for being responsive to all of the issues that we've presented in previous testimonies before the Board. We are particularly pleased with the new Assistant Principal at Glenallan Elementary. Ricky's persistence has been worthwhile. You've proven that the Board takes community/parent testimony seriously and that we are not engaging in an act of futility when we testify. Thank you.

The Kennedy Cluster still has many needs as you have heard in the past from us and other DCC schools, such as Parent Community Outreach Coordinators and increasing the number and retention rate of highly qualified teachers and principals.

We are extremely concerned about the method of change and potential changes in the future. The replacement of the Cambridge Program at Kennedy with the IB Program, while a seemingly positive change, was handled in a manner that concerns the Kennedy community. The Cambridge Program was replaced with the IB Program without consulting or notifying the community until after the decision was made. Additionally, the decision was made just before the Kennedy open house for 8th grade parents and students. A letter about the change was not sent out to all DCC 8th graders and families until after they submitted their choice forms. We are concerned about the ability of MCPS to offer both Cambridge classes and Pre-IB and IB classes at the same time as they are phasing out the Cambridge program. We were quite disappointed with the method of change which suggests a total disregard for the concern, opinions or desires of the students and their parents currently enrolled in the Cambridge Program and those students and parents who were looking forward to participating in that program.

Making changes in a school community without the input of that community leads to distrust and the feeling that the MCPS does not consider the community important enough to participate in the decision making process. This is of particular concern at this time because of the current issues with the Kennedy Cluster Middle Schools: Argyle and E. Brooke Lee.

We recommend the following actions be taken to resolve the issues concerning Argyle and E. Brook Lee:

- Fund the MSMC schools so they can continue to offer their unique and successful programs that are increasing academic achievement for middle school students.

- Allocate additional resources/programs to E. Brooke Lee Middle School that strengthen its programs and attracts the students and families in our community.

Background

Argyle Middle School is one of the three middle schools participating in the Middle School Magnet Consortium (MSMC). The Federal grant that funded the MSMC expires this fiscal year. We would like to ensure that MCPS continues funding for the MSMC.

The goals of the MSMC are:

- Improve performance at Consortium schools
- Broaden student choices in middle school programs
- Decrease socioeconomic isolation in Consortium schools

A review of the data shows that the MSMC has produced a significant improvement in student performance and equally important, students' attitudes towards learning. Students at Argyle have stated that they love their school because now they have an opportunity to learn more and be challenged. The program gives opportunities for success and advancement to many students, who while capable, would not otherwise have the support needed to enter other rigorous academic programs. The Argyle community thanks you for the support.

The performance at the MSMC schools has improved and the schools are becoming more attractive to parents/students. A number of the families who are choosing Argyle would have sent children to private schools the past. There is a true sense of pride within the school and the surrounding community. This change is a direct reflection of the MSMC and the effective administration of the program by the Argyle administrators, teachers and staff.

Unfortunately, the success of the MSMC has created a significant decline in enrollment at Lee Middle School as many students have chosen to attend one of the MSMC schools. Many of the students making this choice are high achievers coming into middle school from the elementary feeder schools. This has had a direct effect on Lee's enrollment which has decreased significantly. There may be as many as 30 fifth-graders from the Lee elementary feeder schools' (Glenallan and Kemp Mill) that chose to attend another middle school, because the programs available at the MSMC schools are more attractive than the courses and programs currently available at Lee.

The loss of these potential sixth-graders is painful for Lee, especially since Lee is such a small middle school with less than 500 students. It makes it much more challenging to develop the Master Schedule or to offer a variety of appealing electives to students. This also makes it more challenging for Lee to make AYP, attract potential students, and have a positive impact on the school's reputation within the community. The students who attend Lee love their school. There is a real community feel in the school among students, teachers and staff. Students expect to have the opportunity to take a variety of classes including those which are challenging and rigorous.

The reality of the current situation is that Lee has to compete with the other middle schools for incoming students and that is difficult without a Signature Program. As a result, we are advocating for the development of a Signature Program for Lee.

MCPS administrative staff are aware of the challenges facing Lee and have started to address the issue. We thank you for the Promethean Boards, the Lights, Camera, Literacy and Perspectives in the Arts courses. However, MCPS must do more and we don't have the luxury of waiting years to respond. Things need to be done now so that they can be in place for the next school year. There has to be some definitive resources in place, very soon, in order for Ms. Cobbs, Lee's Principal, and her staff to market Lee to parents and students by the spring of 2008. The Lee community wants to have input into whatever new programs and resources are recommended for Lee.

Thank you for your attention to these matters.