

THE NORTHEAST CONSORTIUM
A Consortium of the Blake, Paint Branch and Springbrook Clusters

Comments on the FY 2009 Operating Budget

On behalf of The NEC High Schools

January 16, 2008

Blake High School
Paint Branch High School
Springbrook High School

Good evening Superintendent Weast, Mrs. Navarro, and members of the Board. My name is Patti Twigg and I am the Paint Branch Cluster Coordinator. I am here tonight to speak on behalf of the Operating Budget needs of the three high schools in our Consortium — Blake, Paint Branch and Springbrook. Let me begin by saying that the Northeast Consortium strongly supports the MCCPTA FY 2009 Operating Budget Compact and Resolution on Operating Budget Priorities.

Let me give you a brief snapshot of the high schools of the Northeast Consortium. According to Schools at a Glance, 2007 edition, our Ever FARMS rates vary from 33.8 to 55.4%. Our mobility rates vary from 13.9 to 16.4%. Students that receive special education services vary from 8.2 to 8.6% of the total school population.

We have attempted to organize this testimony to correspond to the goals in the Strategic Plan.

Goal 1: Ensure Success for Every Student

For us, the most striking aspect of this budget is what is not contained in it. Namely, high schools seem to be getting short shrift. Starting next year, our high school students will need to have passed the requisite number of high school assessments in order to receive a diploma. While we note that this budget allocates funds to help the most severely impacted students succeed, and continues the High School Literacy Initiative, we see little for the typical student. Bubbling up from the lower grades will not help the class of 2009. Crunch time is here; in fact it is past due. What are we doing to assure success for these students?

The high schools of the Northeast Consortium recognize that this will be a difficult budget year. We understand that cuts are to be expected, and accept the fact that our signature programs are losing some funding in this proposed budget. We do ask that you never lose sight of the importance of our signature programs, however. We believe that by giving our students a choice as to which high school they attend, they are that much more committed to their education. An integral part of this choice is offering unique and challenging programs at each school. We firmly believe that students that are engaged with their school perform better across the board.

With the phasing out of the Secondary Learning Centers, we are concerned about inadequate staffing for the inclusion classes that are replacing them. We wish the solution were as simple as just adding another adult in a classroom, but of course, life is never simple. Inclusion classes need class size reductions as well as additional staffing. We are anxiously awaiting the reports from the Learning Center Transition Evaluation Advisory Group and the Secondary Learning Center Transition Project Management Team.

We are interested to note the expansion of hours-based staffing to more middle schools, but would like to see the data on how it is working. Anecdotal reports point to its success, but we would appreciate seeing the supporting evidence on how well the implementation is addressing the needs of the students. You might be wondering why I am bringing this up, since I am testifying for three high schools. There is method in my madness, and it is that if hours-based staffing proves effective for middle school, then when will it be moved to the high school level? Our high school students have fewer years left in MCPS, and thus fewer years for us to impact their education – and to prepare them for the next steps after high school. Can we really afford to wait? When can we expect the data assessing the hours-based staffing initiative's usefulness?

Goal 2: Provide an Adequate Instructional Program

We note that there is money in the budget to provide math specialists at the middle school level to assist teachers in teaching high school level math courses, but once again, we need to also realize that those middle school students that take Algebra – whether it is in 6th, 7th or 8th grade - will then need highly advanced math classes before they finish high school. In fact, this is not an “in the future” need! Those students are in our high schools now, and high school math teachers trained to teach college level courses are needed; or perhaps partnerships with local colleges could be arranged. Either way, this matter needs to be addressed sooner rather than later.

Blake High School will be undergoing tech-mod this coming summer. They would like to request that they also receive a Prometheus board as part of that tech-mod. They feel that some high schools need to pilot this for those students who are now beginning to use them in middle school, but will not have the technology in high school. One of the middle schools in the Northeast Consortium currently has Prometheus boards.

Goal 3: Strengthen Productive Partnerships for Education

While some students may despise it, all the parents I have talked to love the on-line achievement and reporting systems implemented in all secondary schools. We applaud this program and hope you continue to improve the home-school communication piece, as we believe that is one of the keys to student success.

We very much appreciate the retention of the prior year initiative to increase the number of high school counselors. We believe that their role is critical to the success of our students in high school and beyond.

Goal 4: Create a Positive Work Environment in a Self-Renewing Organization

The elimination of seven Staff Development specialists gives us pause, especially since our schools have found they make a significant difference. It is our hope that the realignment associated with this cut can be done with a goal of maximizing the direct support of our schools.

Goal 5: Provide high Quality Business Services that are Essential to the Educational Success of Students

The maintenance of our aging buildings continues to be a concern. I am happy to report that the difficulty in finding replacement parts for a key system at Paint Branch high school, mentioned by me in CIP testimony in the fall, has been resolved. But as I said at that time, as all our buildings age, we can certainly expect these types of problems to keep cropping up. We feel that preventative maintenance of our schools is a more cost effective solution.

At the MCCPTA summer meeting held with the Northeast Consortium and Sherwood Cluster schools, a long discussion was held over activity buses. These buses are critical in order for our students to participate in the full range of extra curricular, athletic and learning support activities available to high school students. Students involved in their school's activities consistently perform better in the

classroom. The issue is that activity buses drop students off an unreasonably long distance from their homes, requiring those students to walk long distances alone, sometimes in the dark of winter's early sunset. Add that to the long duration of the activity bus ride, and it is no wonder many students choose not to stay after school or are forced to find sometimes less safe alternative methods of getting home.

In closing, we believe that our partnership with you in working for the best for all our students, families and staff shows a strong commitment to our common goals. As I said earlier, we all realize that the budget is very tight this year and that difficult choices must be made. We appreciate your careful and thoughtful consideration of our concerns.

Respectfully,

The Northeast Consortium Cluster Coordinators

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