

**Walter Johnson Cluster of PTA's
Testimony on the Superintendent's Operating Budget
before the Board of Education**

January 9, 2008

Good evening, members of the Board of Education. My name is Pam Moomau. I am a co-coordinator (along with Joanne Vanderhorst and Liz Sadove) of the Walter Johnson Cluster. We thank you for this opportunity to comment on the Superintendent's proposed Operating Budget for fiscal year 2009. Public input on priorities is especially important in tight budget years such as this one.

In general, we support the operating budget priorities listed in the MCCPTA operating budget compact, and the MCCPTA operating budget resolution.

To provide a context for this testimony, I'll briefly describe our cluster to provide a context for our testimony. Walter Johnson cluster schools are located primarily in Bethesda and Kensington. According to last year's School's at a Glance, more than 17 percent of the students at Walter Johnson High School at some time were eligible for FARMS, 37 percent are minority, and nearly 15 percent of students qualify for special education services. Four of our six elementary schools have double-digit ESOL and mobility rates; three of our elementary schools have double digit FARMS rates.

We have organized our testimony to speak specifically to goals in the MCPS Strategic Plan.

Goal 1: Ensure success for every student

Special education

Schools in the Walter Johnson cluster host a significant number of quad-cluster and regional special education programs. These include, but are not limited to, GT/LD programs at Wyngate Elementary School, North Bethesda Middle School, and Walter Johnson High School, and Learning Centers at Tilden Middle School and Walter Johnson High School. As you know, major changes for these programs were instituted beginning with the FY 2008 budget. Many parents of students in these programs have concerns that these changes represent a retreat from the first strategic plan goal of "success for every student." We have not seen strong evidence that all of the ramifications of these moves have been fully thought-through or funded to provide the level of service required, and eagerly await some data on the early stages of this program. We cannot emphasize strongly enough the need for careful, ongoing evaluation of the impacts of major programmatic changes such as the phaseout of the learning centers on both the students whose placement is affected by this and general education students.

Last year, we supported an expansion of hours-based staffing for special education, and we continue to do so. This model seems the only logical approach to providing adequate services to special education students in each school, in light of the variation in required hours of service among IEPs. We are pleased to see the extension of this model to three more middle schools, and encourage continuing expansion of this model.

We are also very pleased to see that the FY 2009 budget provides for an increase of ten elementary school teaching positions in order to account for special education

students in general education classrooms in the elementary school staffing ratios. This innovation should provide very welcome support for providing less restrictive environments for special education students.

Other Goal 1 initiatives

We are pleased to see a continuation of lower class-sizes and the phasing in of additional elementary school assistant principals. We also appreciate that this budget maintains last year's small increase in staffing for art, music and PE teachers at the elementary school level, and additional counselors at the secondary school level. We view the small steps taken in these directions as a promising start, and hope to see this initiative expanded when the fiscal picture allows.

We would like to suggest consideration of a small budget realignment in order to improve access of many students to college scholarships while reducing some strain on high school counseling resources. Currently, MCPS requires all ninth and tenth graders to take the PSATs, supporting this requirement by paying for the PSATs. These universally taken ninth and tenth grade PSATs are used both for test-taking practice for students and as diagnostic tools for schools to identify students who may need additional acceleration or academic support. As you know, the PSAT is designed for eleventh graders and is used to determine candidacy for both the national merit scholarship and an array of minority scholarships. Each student has only one opportunity to take the PSAT that counts; if a student fails to sign up for the PSAT in early Fall of his (usually) junior year, he misses the opportunity to qualify for these scholarships. The eleventh grade PSAT score is also used by many colleges to identify students for possible recruitment; thus missing the eleventh grade PSAT causes a student to miss out on early contacts from colleges. For these reasons, high school counselors often spend a significant amount of time in the Fall hunting down juniors to get them to sign up for the PSAT. If the PSAT were required for all juniors, students would not miss out on these opportunities, and counselors would have more time for their other duties. Ideally, MCPS would be able to require that all ninth, tenth, and eleventh graders to take the PSAT. However, we realize that this may not be realistic given current budget constraints. Thus, we request that MCPS consider funding the PSAT for all eleventh graders rather than all ninth graders.

Goal 2: Provide an adequate instructional program

Math curriculum

For several years, there has been some concern in our cluster about changes to the math curriculum. In fact, the subject arises at every cluster meeting, always generating very lively discussion and questions. While we welcome the move to make sure accelerated instruction is available to all students, we have seen gaps in support for students and teachers in this area. Teachers need more instructional materials, lead time and training (not during school hours) to implement changes. Parents and students need more guidance in determining the best course for each student, and more help when catch-up is necessary.

Instructional Materials

The continued failure of the operating budget to keep up with inflation in funding textbooks and other instructional materials is an ongoing source of concern for the WJ

cluster. The current level of funding for instructional materials is not adequate to supply each child with take-home materials from every class. When children are able to bring home materials that document what they are learning, they are better able to reinforce their lessons themselves and do homework independently. Moreover, when students have questions, parents are better able to understand the context of their lessons, and become partners in their kids' education.

Goal 3: Strengthen productive partnerships for education

We'd like to express our appreciation, again, for the requirement for on-line achievement and reporting systems for all secondary schools. This provides parents with critical information about their kids' progress in a much more timely fashion than the quarterly report cards. It represents a significant improvement in communications from school to home. In general, two-way communication between the schools and parents is the key to a successful school experience. We ask you to keep both directions of communication in your sights.

Local school-based parent outreach coordinators

As we mentioned earlier, several of the elementary schools in the WJ cluster serve significant and growing ESOL populations, and we expect this trend to continue. Serving these students adequately requires being able to communicate with their families. There is a key need for communication between school and home about the specific progress and needs of individual students. This requires school-based parent outreach coordinators who can communicate with families with limited English proficiency. Therefore, we are pleased to see the inclusion for the first time in the FY 2009 budget six positions for parent outreach coordinators.

In addition, with the increasingly complex array of services for both special education and general education students, there is a strong need for more parent education about the choices they have for their students. Not all parents are familiar with the role of school counselors and other resources available to provide this information. While the PTAs try to help publicize such resources to the broad parent population through programs and newsletters, they can't always reach all parents. There is a need for more outreach from the schools as well.

Goal 4: Create a positive work environment in a self-renewing organization

We note that this year's budget eliminates 12 instructional support specialist positions, and reduces training stipends. We would like to know more about what impact these reductions is likely to have in our schools. For example, we would be disappointed if the elimination of training stipends means that more teacher training would occur during school hours, thus requiring more instruction from substitutes and less from teachers.

Goal 5: Provide high quality business services that are essential to the educational success of student

Safe, secure, clean, healthy school facilities

Goal 5 is an area of particular concern to the Walter Johnson cluster, in part because so many of the school buildings in our cluster are still awaiting modernization. We are gratified to see that building safety, health, and security have rated a larger mention in the Strategic Plan with the addition of Goal 5 to the plan. We note the strides that have been made in training HVAC mechanics through the apprenticeship program, and we applaud the long-overdue adjustment in salary schedules to enable hiring of bus drivers, HVAC mechanics, and other key positions.

However, we continue to be disappointed by the inadequate funding of the Division of Maintenance. In the FY07 operating budget, there was a cut of a full unit of twelve positions from the Division of Maintenance, despite a backlog of \$40-\$50 million in needed maintenance projects. Nothing has been done in last year's budget or this year's to correct this situation. In light of the really deplorable conditions of many MCPS facilities, the failure to provide a significant increase in resources to the Division of Maintenance is not only unfortunate, it's incomprehensible. For years our cluster and many others have testified to you about overcrowded conditions, inadequate heating, ventilation and air conditioning, poor plumbing, roof, window, and pipe leaks, mold and lead in water

The queue for repairs from the Division of Maintenance can be six months to years long, depending on the repair requested, and the ease with which the issue can be addressed. Several of our schools have continuing problems with indoor air quality, including recurring mold in both main buildings and portables, and the more unusual (we hope) circumstance of sewer gas venting into the basement near air intakes. Although the MCPS indoor air quality unit has responded to complaints, and made recommendations for addressing these issues, they do not have the resources to follow up and make sure the problems have been solved. They haven't been solved. Or, they have been solved temporarily and recur. Until the Indoor Air Quality unit is expanded to include enough personnel for follow-up, problems like this won't be solved in our cluster or others.

During the MCCPTA operating budget forum two nights ago, mention was made of the retrenchments that occurred in the early 90's, which MCPS has in more recent years worked to correct - in particular the return to all-day K and class size reductions. Maintenance and plant operations also suffered significant retrenchments, in terms of resources per square foot of building, in the early 90's. Sadly, MCPS has not made a similar effort to work its way back in these areas.

The physical environment our students face has a direct impact on learning. Our kids are, by law, confined within these buildings six hours per day. They deserve buildings with adequate fresh air, safe and functional plumbing, and consistent temperature control. To repeat comments I made at a strategic planning forum - fully funding curriculum reforms and class-size reductions without providing for buildings that are reasonably heated and cooled and free of mold and other contaminants is like feeding kids a delicious, nutritionally correct meal on plates that have not been washed. Some kids will get sick and be unable to enjoy the benefits of the meal.

Conclusion

While much of this testimony has focused on concerns we have about initiatives in this budget, and on needs that remain unmet, we'd like to conclude by expressing our appreciation for many of the initiatives in recent years that have responded to parental concerns. We interpret the increased testimony time this year as a good faith gesture of enhanced partnerships to come, and we thank you for your attention.