

Watkins Mill Cluster

Watkins Mill High School.
Montgomery Village Middle School; Neelsville Middle School
South Lake Elementary School; Stedwick Elementary School; Watkins Mill Elementary School;
Whetstone Elementary School

FY2009 Operating Budget Testimony

January 16, 2008

Testimony presented by:
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Good evening President Navarro, Dr. Weast and members of the Board of Education. My name is Susan Young and I am one of the PTA coordinators for the Watkins Mill Cluster. I am also the PTSA President at Montgomery Village Middle School.

I will start off wearing the latter hat, by thanking the Board again for allowing MVMS to serve as one of the five pilot sites for middle school reform. While it is still early in the pilot process, signs are good that middle school reform is having an impact. Conversations about rigor are taking place more and more often. In fact, the staff at MV will soon present a workshop for parents entitled, "How can I tell if my child is being challenged?" I, for one, have been looking for an answer to this question. Middle school reform may provide a big part of the answer. I've also been impressed with the wonders of those Promethean boards. I've always been somewhat suspicious of technology for the sake of technology. However, in the age of video games and text messaging, this kind of interactive technology seems to be just the thing to keep our cyber-savvy kids engaged. It's sure working at MVMS. Kids and teachers alike are eager to explore the possibilities across all subjects and all grade levels. We would make one request, though: MVMS was slated to receive an additional 18 boards through the technology modernization process, but has not yet received them. We would appreciate any help you can give with this issue.

I am delighted to see that this budget provides for expansion of the Positive Behavior Interventions and Support (PBIS) program. Both MVMS and Neelsville MS have embraced the PBIS program, and it has been wonderful to see the impact on student behavior. For example, MVMS has seen a 34.5 percent decrease in suspensions when comparing Sept - Dec of last year to the same time frame this year. We've also seen a 41.2 percent decrease in office referrals during the same time period.

And now I put on my Watkins Mill Cluster Coordinator hat.

For the past several years, we parents in the Watkins Mill Cluster have allowed our advocacy skills to become a bit rusty. However, the past year has been a Starbucks-strong wake-up call. We started 2007 anticipating bringing all of our children back together with the prospect of a brand new middle school. That school is currently not in our future. So you can understand our sense of having lost something precious. Multi-million-dollar precious.

But that is a bricks-and-mortar issue. We are here to make a fresh and bold new start as advocates for our children, and we are learning all we can from every source available to us. Clearly, we picked a tough budget year to bring these new skills to the table. However, even in tight year, we think a \$2.1 billion budget might just have some wiggle room for Watkins Mill cluster kids.

The parent leaders of the Watkins Mill Cluster, with the full support of its principals, have developed a vision for raising the level of academic performance across our schools. The two keys are to increase the potential and competitiveness of our high school-level International Baccalaureate (IB) program, and incorporation of the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program.

The Watkins Mill High School IB program is in full swing and its first graduates are reporting back from college and convincing us that this program makes all the difference. These students, and those currently pursuing their IB Diploma at Watkins Mill High School, are reaping tremendous benefits from this international education. A world-class education that develops the intellectual, personal, emotional and social skills needed to live, learn and work in a rapidly globalizing society.

We are thrilled to have an IB program at Watkins Mill High School, and we know it was put in place with considerable effort and expense. So thank you. However, we believe this program has the potential—and the capacity—to serve more students than it currently does. We see three reasons for this situation, all of which you can help us address:

First, the program is still new, and so has not had time to build the reputation of, say, the IB magnet at Richard Montgomery HS. This will take time, and all we need from you in that regard is to continue your support for our program.

Second, the Watkins Mill High School IB program is the only MCPS IB Diploma Program without an IB Middle Years Program. When speaking of the continued funding for the other MCPS Middle Years Programs, the Superintendent's Operating Budget notes that they "increase students' capacity for advanced level instruction and prepare them to take advantage of IB Diploma program options as well as Honors and Advanced Placement coursework." We could not agree more, and so we ask you to bring the MYP to Montgomery Village Middle School and to Neelsville Middle School to eliminate the disadvantage our students currently face. Any and all of our elementary schools would also welcome an IB Primary Years Program.

Finally, Watkins Mill High School loses many top students and ideal IB candidates every year to magnet programs. That's why they're called magnets, right? They pull from all directions. We are here to ask you to help us do some pulling, too. We would love to open our IB Diploma Program up as a magnet, and there is clearly a need for it: most students who apply to the IB magnet at Richard Montgomery are turned away from their excellent program. And by my count there are 12 high schools whose students have no other access to the IB, eight of which are upcounty schools. To minimize the negative impact on other schools, and maximize the IB

program's availability within our cluster, we would propose a small number of external seats, perhaps 15-20. This would provide upcounty students with an option they do not have today.

With the IB program supported to stabilize and lift the top end, we ask you to bring the AVID program to our cluster to kick start the academic middle. We have heard nothing but great news from numerous people with friends or professional contacts in schools in Maryland and North Carolina using AVID. AVID comes with a proven track record in school systems across the nation. With its focus on students in the academic middle — B, C, and even D students — a relatively small investment per school can shake up stagnant scores and help close the continuing achievement gap. AVID indicates good success with students willing to work. Students who “may be the first in their families to attend college, [with] many from low-income or minority families.” Take a look at our cluster's FARM, ESOL and mobility data, our demographics and our statistics. If AVID doesn't hit the mark for our kids, we'd like to know what will. We believe strongly in our community and in our cluster. We need your help to show these kids that we all believe in them and that together we will do our part in helping them succeed.