

## **Magruder Cluster Operating Budget Testimony for January 14, 2009**

Good evening Dr. Weast, President Navarro, and members of the Board of Education. My name is Annie Foster Ahmed. Ted Willard and Dawn Trahern, and I represent the Magruder Cluster.

We thank you for reserving time for each PTA cluster to testify on the Operating Budget and continuing your collaboration with MCCPTA in the budget development process.

The Magruder cluster fully supports the MCCPTA Operating Budget Priorities, the testimony by Kay Romero, and the MCPS Academic Priorities as they are designed with the success of our children in mind.

We recognize that this year the county and MCPS face “unprecedented fiscal challenges” as outlined in the Recommended FY 2010 Operating Budget Brief and we applaud the Superintendents efforts to maintain the essential services that are critical to the success of our children.

While we recognize and understand our budgetary constraints, and the shared sacrifice from school and county employees, we would like to express the impact of the cuts on the Magruder Cluster.

Although we appreciate your willingness to minimize the impact on class sizes and classroom instructions, I think it is important to point out that the elementary classes in the Magruder Cluster are already at the top end of the suggested change and it is likely that many of our county schools are in the same position. We believe that our schools have already been affected by past budgetary constraints, as we have had to adapt to the slowly increasing class sizes – in particular to our Kindergarten classes. The Magruder cluster schools are already carrying an average class size for Kindergarten of anywhere from 17 to 19. Again, we imagine this is probably true with other MCPS elementary schools. The Magruder Cluster believes we must hold the line here. If the proposed

budgetary cut is made, our parents will expect class sizes not to exceed 17. Since our Kindergarten numbers are already at the top end of the proposal, we think that 17:1 is a number we can support in an effort to meet tight budgetary needs; however, we remain cautious that 17:1 will really mean something greater, just as 15:1 has meant something other than 15:1. Lower class size in Montgomery County has set us apart from other school districts and we believe that our students have benefited greatly from this initiative. We must protect the initiatives that most directly affect the students. To increase our Kindergarten class size requirements or any of our class sizes does not protect our students and must be considered very carefully before a proposal such as this is accepted.

Further, we are concerned about proposed cuts to our schools with lower enrollment numbers. For example, consider, Cashell Elementary, one of the schools in our cluster that may face staff reductions. Cashell has received notice that its staff may be reduced and this reality is difficult and painful to contemplate by parents who believe that highly effective educators are teaching their children. Cashell is currently operating without an assistant principal leaving the staff development teacher and reading specialist to provide all the training and instructional support that the MCPS very challenging curriculum requires. The support and training needed by teachers is the same whether the school has 300 or 700 students. This staff reduction notice would reduce the time, energy and attention that teachers would give to Cashell students who in the past have consistently excelled on all standardized tests and continue to excel when they go on to middle school, high school, and college. And as the PTA President of this school states,

“This success is not accidental. Nor is it sustainable if the proven means by which it is achieved are removed. The teachers and their professional development are fundamental to the success of our children.”

We recognize the value and importance of assistant principals in servicing the needs of a diverse pool of students. Unfortunately, at least 20 of our elementary schools in the county still need assistant principals. We firmly believe that each elementary

school in the county should have an assistant principal and urge that as funds become available this initiative is fully implemented.

The roll out of Middle School Reform was significant to the Magruder cluster. Shady Grove Middle School was included in this process and has benefitted greatly from the additional resources designed to address the many concerns of our middle school population. We sincerely thank you for this. However, the Magruder Cluster is concerned that now there will be a reduction of teacher support in these schools. This reduction would undoubtedly increase the responsibilities of other staff members serving a population of students experiencing a myriad of physical and psychological changes while also helping them grow intellectually. We need to ensure that we do not backslide from the progress we have made by cutting back on the resources that supports the middle school reform initiative. The support provided to faculty and staff is invaluable with the growing demands being placed on them with NCLB and our competitive MCPS curriculum. Many of the Middle School Reform initiatives go directly to meeting these challenges; however, please be aware that a cut to the Middle School Reform program means that schools currently in the program may lose pertinent staffing and there are 23 schools still waiting their turn for the roll out of Middle School Reform. There is now an inequity within the middle school community caused by the proposed cut and we now have students within the same cluster receiving a different educational experience. In the Magruder Cluster, Shady Grove Middle School has benefited from the roll out of Middle School Reform with a much needed math specialist, reading specialist, staff developer among an array of other course offerings; however, their sister school – Redland Middle School may not be able to take part in Middle School Reform due to the proposed budget cuts. For those 23 number of schools that have not had the opportunity to see middle school reform they are unable to benefit from the reforms and the resources that support the much needed educational improvements to our middle schools. As a parent of a sixth grader at Shady Grove Middle School, I am personally benefitting from the resources that are provided by the middle school reform and recognize that all children in our county should be receiving these same resources. For this reason, our cluster would like to

reiterate the need to keep Middle School Reform as a top priority and that as funds become available the Reform is implemented in all middle schools across the county consistently and swiftly. MCPS should also ensure that adequate funding is available throughout the roll out so that all schools receive the support intended by the Reform.

We urge you to consider staff reductions in all schools as a measure of last and desperate resort. However, should a cut be inevitable, it is important to allow the school officials the flexibility to determine or recommend the staff position that would least impact on the progress of the school. I believe that this will not be same position in each school because of the varying needs.

In addition, we are concerned about the impact that the reduction of counselors would have on some of these same schools. School counselors already deal with a variety of issues. Our cluster services a significant number of students who qualify for free and reduced meals (FARMS) and who are ESOL students. Considering the tough economic times this number is rising not just in our cluster but also all over the county. We have to ensure that we have the qualified and sufficient number of staff to deal with the issues that are brought to schools by children who are hungry and new to this culture. Sometimes when these issues are not addressed the students result to behaviors that are disruptive to the school community. For this reason, the Magruder Cluster also cautions against cutbacks to PBIS. This year, PBIS was implemented at Redland Middle School and the impact has been immediate. We strongly believe that this program has contributed to a positive school climate that was necessary for the success of our school. It also contributes positively to the communication with our parent community. Our cluster, like the county as a whole, has had changes in our demographics over the last decade. Reaching parents in general is difficult and it is particularly difficult when parents are not native English speakers; therefore the reductions in the Office of Community Outreach also are a concern to us. The Magruder cluster has made attempts to address this concern through a few cluster efforts. This year the cluster supported its first African-American Parents Symposium and continued its support of the Hispanic Parents Breakfast. Each

gathering invited parents to learn about data showing achievement gaps and allowed parents to voice their concerns and recommendations to school officials. Cluster principals have developed math goals and are organizing efforts around this goal. In addition, our newly created PTA cluster calendar allows our parents to collaborate on and support each other's events.

Making sure that our students can graduate from high school and are prepared for college is our end educational goal. We must ensure that MCPS focuses on helping students pass the HSA and we need initiatives to support the state mandate. On the high school level we are deeply concerned about the fact that a number of seniors from Magruder that have not passed the HSA's, a requirement for graduation. MCPS has to ensure that this issue stays as a top priority. However, the budget cuts to the high schools may impact progress on this issue and college preparedness.

On a final note, Magruder is one of the high schools that currently uses the Comcast Center for its graduation ceremonies due to its large number of students. With this in mind, we are concerned about larger schools having sufficient space to host their graduation ceremonies. The proposed budget recommends a \$5,000 cap on the rental of graduation venues, leaving upwards of \$5,000 to be provided by the schools if they opt to hold graduations at a site that provides adequate space for their families. Given the already dismal outlook of funding to schools we suspect that many would opt for smaller venues resulting in a limited number of family members that may attend the ceremony. Many of the children in our schools have worked hard to reach this level, and unfortunately it is still the case that for some families these children may be first in their families to graduate from high school and go on to college. We believe it is important rite of passage and all efforts should be made to provide a venue that allows for maximum family involvement.

We recognize and appreciate that cuts are necessary to meet this year's budget. Last year many of us cautioned that future cuts would likely have to come closer to the

student population. However, we must keep direct services to students as a top priority as tough decisions are being made.

We appreciate your dedication to our students and the Magruder Cluster looks forward to working with the Board in the future. We also plan to continue pressing our state legislators and Governor O'Malley to ensure that the Geographic Cost Index (GCEI) is fully funded and that MCPS receives the \$20 million that it is due.

Thank you for your consideration.

---