

The Northeast Consortium
A CONSORTIUM OF THE BLAKE, PAINT BRANCH AND SPRINGBROOK
HIGH SCHOOL CLUSTER SCHOOLS



Testimony Regarding the MCPS FY2010 Recommended Operating Budget

Elementary Schools: Broad Acres, Burnt Mills, Burtonsville, Cannon Road, Cloverly, Cresthaven, Dr. Chas. Drew, Fairland, Galway, Greencastle, Jackson Road, Roscoe Nix, Wm. T. Page, Sherwood, Stonegate, and Westover.

Good Evening President Brandman, Superintendent Weast, and Members of the Board of Education. My name is Dawn Dolan and I'm here tonight to represent the concerns of the schools of the Northeast Consortium as we approach this year's Operating Budget.

Listening to an interview with Tony Blair on NPR this morning, I found his comment that "one doesn't always get to choose the agenda, but you have to work with what your given" quite apropos to our dilemma in testifying on behalf of this year's Operating Budget. *Specifically, I'm referring to the idea that if we advocate for maintaining budget criteria proposed for reductions or cuts we must suggest where those changes could be offset. I would like to state up-front that I feel neither fully informed nor qualified with the information at hand to make any sort of recommendations.*

Our academic achievement and program expectations remain the same. We have instituted changes within our curricular guidelines that require ardent staff and student support to achieve. Our math and reading goals are certainly not over-reaching in a society that needs to raise students to compete and succeed on a global scale – one that the U.S. is already embarrassingly lagging behind. Additionally, we have incorporated program changes, such as "Inclusion" among others, that have necessitated staffing adjustments to accommodate. The adjustments to these programs require that we equally consider the successful education of these students in order to become successful and productive adults.

While I am to represent the elementary schools within the NEC, there are very few differences in the concerns spread amongst all the grades. Within the NEC, our three primary areas of concern are Class Size, Staffing, and Maintenance and only vary in the detail as they apply to the elementary, middle and high school programs.

While our choices are narrow (virtually impossible) it is absolutely essential at the elementary level that we do not reverse our trend to contain class size – especially with dwindling resources. Parents and principals at our elementary schools have conceded that given a choice of "bad or worse," an increase from 15 up to 17 students in Kindergarten within our Focus schools, and perhaps an increase of 1 additional student in all other classes is "doable." As one principal rallied, "Our teachers are strong." We do not want this to be perceived as precedent setting and to witness a "trickle-up" (or "across") effect in future years, or throughout our schools.

Yet this leaves us with a real conundrum: that the proposed increase in class size make even more essential the need for content and staff support, given that the academic and

program goals must be maintained. The distress our schools will experience by the reduction in Staffing has been echoed in every corner.

While the *Operating Budget in Brief* (p.33) states that "School-based reductions are minimized to avoid any unnecessary impact on classroom instruction," the list of eliminated staff is as follows: Math Content Teachers, Reading Specialists, Focus Teachers, Academic Intervention Teachers, Literacy Coaches, Special Ed and ESOL Teachers, and Staff Development; Special Programs and Resource Staff, Coordinators, Teaching and Composition Assistants, Teacher Support, Media Assistants, Instructional Specialists and Building Service Workers. And while I did not find the reference in the *Brief* specifically, our High School Principals have also noted their deep concern for the reduction in Security Personnel.

This equals 197.4 positions and a total of 55% of the reductions in the *ENTIRE* proposed Operating Budget. Wow! And while the *Brief* asserts that this only represents 1.2% of school-based services, I can't help but find this an interesting use of statistics – I'd love to take that back to my undergrad SPSS days in Research Methodology. And I do not aim to project negative connotations with respect to a very serious situation.

Perhaps it is best expressed by the angst our Principals are feeling (and I do not mean this in other than the true sense of the word) in their own words:

"...We are resigned to the elimination of pay increases. We can minimize the use of our paper and electricity. But the resources...that contribute to quality instruction more suited to divergent thinkers and problem solvers suited for tomorrow's working world, are essential."

"It's a perfect storm to lose lots of phenomenal staff with little flexibility and opportunity to reabsorb critical people." "I believe everyone 'gets' the reason for no COLA's next year, but the increased responsibility is going to be a hard sell; there just aren't enough hours in the day to do it all with dwindling resources."

I counted 21 times that the *Budget Brief* referred to the absorption of tasks and responsibilities by remaining staff as a result of school-based reductions (between pages 33 and 39). It is difficult to imagine the feasibility of this proposal. We seem to have established an irreconcilable path of contradiction. Only in reference to students receiving Alternative Level Placements has it been specifically suggested that there will be a reduction of services to students. Yet the Budget directly refers to the increased enrollment and needs for students within the spectrum of Special Education (including LRE) and Home School Model programs.

With respect to all other programs, it is expected that they will continue the academic achievement goals and successes that have been gained. It is assumed that the efforts and goals for closing achievement gaps will continue and that we will set our sights to promoting increased scores for SAT and ACT, as well as HSA's as our students move up through their academic careers.

Again, it is understood that this is a devastating budget year for everyone. The \$24 million shorted to our school system this year, is unlikely to be seen in usable funds in the 2010 budget. There is the issue of reserving funds to potentially absorb a realignment of teacher retirement pensions from the State. There is the unpredictability of future fuel and energy costs.

But it is difficult to look through the proposed school-based changes and not be tempted to compare them to the “realignments” being made within Central Office. Not to directly isolate any department, but for example purposes only, the Office of the Chief Operating Officer, indicates a realignment of \$856,382. Except for \$1900 in advertising, the remainder of these monies reduces transportation services, food services, Kennedy Cluster personnel and custodial supplies. I find it difficult to see how these are non-school based services.

There are other departments and areas that equally raise questions, but the point is that it is difficult to assess the merits of many of the budget changes based on the information we have. There are expenditure specifics that many of us may feel are less necessary in the effort to preserve the quality of education and staff in our schools.

And while I may have cut very close to my time, and have so much more that I would like to address, I have yet to make a comment about the preservation of our Maintenance program. It has been an objective of our schools and advocacy efforts within the CIP process to upgrade our approach to maintenance as a way of maintaining the quality of our buildings and to hopefully change the impact to our long-range costs. We ask that you reconsider the breadth of changes being proposed within this category.

Thank you for hearing (this probably very agonized) testimony on behalf of the NEC schools. We know the task you face this year is a difficult one, but we love our schools and are proud of the quality and dedication they instill into our children’s education.