

Walter Johnson Cluster PTAs

Walter Johnson High School__North Bethesda Middle School__Tilden Middle School__Ashburton Elementary School__Farmland Elementary School__Garrett Park Elementary School__Kensington Parkwood Elementary School__Luxmanor Elementary School__Wyngate Elementary School

Testimony to the County Council on the Proposed FY 2010 Operating Budget for MCPS April 15, 2009

Good evening, members of the county council. My name is Deedee Jacobsohn and I am a Walter Johnson PTSA Cluster Coordinator, along with Liz Sadove and Jen Cope. We thank you for this opportunity to comment on the proposed Operating Budget for Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS).

We are well aware of the challenges of crafting a budget in the current fiscal situation, when revenues are down, costs are rising, and our financial future remains uncertain. The difficulties were painfully evident in the school budget developed by the Board of Education (BOE). We appreciate the generous sacrifice of our teachers and other county employees who gave up their Cost of Living Adjustments (COLAs) to help close the budget gap. Even with their sacrifice, the budget contains significant cuts and slows down the introduction of initiatives designed to improve the education of our children. We support fully funding the budget as requested by the BOE and urge you to protect the federal funds intended for education.

MCPS received a lot of positive publicity in the fall with the release of a report that ranked Maryland's public schools the best in the nation.¹ To protect and maintain the improvements in our school system and the advances our students have made, we need to make sure that we do not jeopardize the recent initiatives that have helped MCPS achieve its success.

¹ "Education Week" ranked Maryland schools number one in the nation. Furthermore, a report by MGT of America to the state's General Assembly directly connected increased funding for education with improved test scores. The money in previous school budgets has been well-spent to improve the education of our children.

Background information about the WJ Cluster

Walter Johnson cluster schools are located primarily in Bethesda, Kensington and Garret Park, and parts of Rockville.

Enrollment in the cluster rose more than 4% this year from 6,406 to 6,710 due in large part to the transfer of students from private to public schools. Enrollment is projected to increase by nearly 2% again next year to 6,834. Current projections show most of our elementary schools will be at or near capacity in five years, and this does not take into account planned development (particularly the White Flint Sector plan) which has not yet been approved.

According to the most recent demographic figures released in the FY2010 Capital Budget publication, last 38 percent of the students at Walter Johnson High School are minority. North Bethesda MS has over 30% minority students while Tilden MS has over 46% minority students. All of these numbers reflect increases from last year. In most of the cluster's schools, the percentage of Asian Americans is slightly higher than the percentage of Hispanics, followed by African Americans with a negligible number of American Indians.²

Special Education students comprise between 9% and 19% of the population in almost all of our cluster's schools.³ In addition, our cluster is home to many quad-cluster and regional special education programs, including:

- a Preschool Education Program (PEP) at Ashburton ES
- School/Community based programs at Luxmanor ES and Walter Johnson
- Learning for Independence (LFI) programs at Tilden MS and WJ highschool
- GT/LD (gifted and talented/learning disabled) programs at Wyngate ES, North Bethesda MS, and Walter Johnson
- an Asperger's program at Tilden MS
- Secondary Learning Centers (LC) at Tilden MS⁴ and Walter Johnson

² Garrett Park ES has the largest percentage of Hispanic students, at 21%; this is larger than the percentage of Asian Americans at the school. Luxmanor ES has almost 25% Asian students (second only to Farmland ES with almost 38%); Luxmanor also has the highest percentage of African American students in the cluster, at just over 14%.

³ Only Farmland ES and Garrett Park ES had fewer than 9% SPED students last year, and those numbers are growing.

⁴ The secondary learning center at Tilden is scheduled to be phased out at the end of the current school year.

According to last year's *Schools at a Glance* statistics, approximately 17% of WJ students participated in **Free and Reduced-price Meals Program (FARMS)** now or in the past. While the numbers are not readily available for this year, it is anticipated that the percentage of FARMS students in our cluster is on the rise.

The percentage of elementary students requiring **English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)** averaged about 13.5% in the cluster last year, but that number masks the high ESOL enrollment at Farmland (26%) and Garrett Park (21%) Elementary Schools.

I would like to take my remaining time to discuss our cluster's specific budgetary concerns for next year and for the future.

Budgetary Concerns

Class Size

One of the most important BOE initiatives has been the move to smaller class sizes. We applaud the decision to craft a budget that preserves almost all of the smaller class size limits. Smaller classes, particularly in the primary grades, have led to measurable academic improvements. For example, more children are reading on or above grade level in grades K-2 than ever before.⁵ Smaller classes also make it easier for teachers to know their students better and provide more tailored instruction, whether for students who need special help or for those who need enrichment.

Special Education

Budgetary cuts to special education will have a particularly strong impact on our cluster. We are very pleased to see that funding for hours-based staffing for special education was maintained at middle school reform schools like Tilden, and that

⁵ Office of Shared Accountability, "Attainment of End-of-Year Reading Benchmarks in Kindergarten to Grade 2: 2006-2008." We hope that at some point this initiative will be extended to kindergarten classes in all schools, since the kindergarten reading curriculum has also become more rigorous.

federal funding of IDEA grants will allow additional middle schools to move to the hours-based staffing model.

Hours-based staffing ensures that each school can accommodate the particular needs of its population of special education students. While we cannot directly attribute improvements in test scores to hours-based staffing, it is important to note that Tilden's special education students showed significant improvements in their MSA scores in both reading and math last year.⁶ We hope that this program will continue to be evaluated and expanded in future years.

One drawback to the hours-based staffing model that has raised concerns in some of our schools, such as Garrett Park ES, is that the meetings held outside of school hours are not included in staffing allocations. As the special education population grows in both number and needs, numerous planning meetings and consultations with specialists and parents take place outside of the school day. These additional hours need to be recognized when determining staffing allocations.

At the elementary school level, special education initiatives are moving more children into home schools and classes with the least restrictive environment (LRE). This means that elementary schools are receiving a growing population of special education students.

We were very concerned about the proposed reduction in the number of special education teachers at the elementary school level and their replacement by para-educators. We are pleased that IDEA grants will restore positions for special education teachers and other reductions made to the special education budget. The targets for demonstrating annual progress (AYP) in math and reading as mandated by No Child Left Behind are rising, and our schools are in danger of failing to reach the targets established for the special education population. Special education students need skilled teachers to help them succeed in their home schools.

⁶ According to the 2008 Maryland Report Card for Tilden, from 2006/2007 to 2007/2008 proficiency for special ed students increased in math from 41% to 51.9% , and in reading from 39.5% to 59.9%. In 6th grade, math proficiency for special ed students increased from 59% to 75.5% and reading from 47.7% to 70.8%. In 7th grade, proficiency for special ed students increased from 30.8% to 52.6% in math and 25.7% to 63% in reading. Scores for 8th grades increased as well, but not as impressively: math proficiency rose from 25.8% to 32% and reading from 33.8% to 44.6%.

Maintenance

Another item of concern for our cluster is the reduction in maintenance staff. For years, our cluster and many others have testified to you about maintenance issues such as inadequate heating, ventilation and air conditioning; poor plumbing; roof, window and pipe leaks; mold; and lead in the water. Even with modernizations and additions, maintenance issues continue to plague our schools. Kensington Parkwood ES was left with a leaky roof after its modernization, and has concerns about mold in the building. Farmland ES had problems with heating in its new addition—not to mention losing heat in certain classrooms every year in the old building, which thankfully will be modernized next year—and Garrett Park ES, which is scheduled for a modernization in 2011-2012, has had persistent problems with heating and cooling issues. Some of the schools in our cluster face deteriorating building conditions for many years. Luxmanor ES is not programmed to be modernized until 2017-2018. Rock Terrace School, which is affiliated administratively with our cluster, was built in 1950 and renovated (not remodeled) in 1974. It currently does not even have a FACT (Facilities Assessment with Criteria and Testing) score to place it on the modernization schedule, and it is overcapacity. Our students deserve a safe, healthful, and comfortable environment in which to learn. Maintenance must remain a priority, even in economically challenging times.

Rec Extra and other County Cuts

Tilden MS has been extremely happy with the Rec Extra program that was added to the school's after-school activities program last year. Rec Extra has brought babysitting certification and sports classes to Tilden at no charge to the students.⁷ We are very concerned that the Recreation Department is cutting the number of middle schools that will have access to this valuable program from 38 to 25. We are also concerned that the significant budgetary cuts to the Recreation Department, targeting programs serving the teen population, will eliminate the two after-school program staffers who are sponsored by the Recreation Department at North Bethesda MS.

We strongly advocate that the county maintain at least current staffing levels for Educational Facilities Officers, crossing guards (from the county police budget), and

⁷ According to last year's *Schools at a Glance*, Tilden is 45% minority students, 19% special education students, and over 22% of its students have received FARMS now or in the past.

health room technicians (county public health budget). We are especially concerned that cuts to the public health budget will adversely affect families with children in need of the most intensive services, particularly those in need of mental health services in what is likely to be a time of additional stress.

Conclusion

Recently, in a letter to the Maryland State Board of Education, County Executive Isaiah Leggett and County Council President Phil Andrews wrote that “K-12 Education is one of the most important priorities of Montgomery County.”⁸ We heartily applaud their commitment to maintaining the quality of Montgomery County’s public school education, and we urge the council to fully fund the proposed operating budget and ensure that MCPS receives all the Federal stimulus funds intended for education.

⁸ Letter from Mr. Leggett and Mr. Andrews to Mr. James DeGraffenreidt, Jr. requesting a waiver of the State’s Maintenance of Effort Requirement, March 31, 2009.