

Montgomery County Council of Parent-Teacher Associations
D a m a s c u s C l u s t e r

January 10, 2007

Damascus Cluster Testimony before the Montgomery County
Board of Education, Operating Budget FY 2008

Members of the Board and Dr. Weast:

We in Damascus Cluster are feeling very fortunate. Our high school is no longer overcrowded; our middle school and two of our elementary schools have been recognized by the MSDE for their achievement in improving test scores; and our cadre of outstanding teachers continues to grow. We thank you for the establishment of the Assistant Principal position at Rockwell Elementary and look forward to the continuing effort to staff all elementary schools with such a position. That said, we fully support the recommended operating budget in regards to staffing increases and all salary increases.

It is a wise investment as only the quality of people with whom we surround our children will make the needed impact and keep us on that path to success.

Damascus Cluster also fully supports MCCPTA's Budget Compact and the accompanying resolution on budget priorities for our county's students. We support the testimony of Jane de Winter on behalf of MCCPTA and feel it is representative of all local PTA communities. After all, local PTAs, MCCPTA, MCPS and the Board of Education have the same goal...to ensure the success of every student.

Regarding Middle School Reform and the accompanying initiatives as outlined in the Operating Budget, we are excited about the prospects and hope the ball keeps rolling in the right direction. The emphasis on consistent rigor throughout the county as well as increasing the support systems to assist

middle schoolers during those difficult "tweener" years is a comprehensive and strategic goal. The Middle School Reform process did show us, however, that the perception exists that parents are not stakeholders in the process. We hope MCPS will work towards involving all parents in the *formation* of new initiatives. We acknowledge the great deal of effort that has gone into posting numerous reports and studies on the MCPS website. This transparency of the system is appreciated; but it is a passive mode of communication and is not the same as pulling parents into the fold and involving them in the creation of policy. The same applies to involving the MCPS teachers countywide. We all need to work together on the same page and on the same level playing field. Encouraging teachers who are "in the trenches" to contribute their knowledge and experiences along with recruiting parents' own unique perspectives will achieve incredible results. (These efforts fall under Goal 3:

Strengthen Productive Partnerships and Goal 4: Create a Positive Work Environment.)

Regarding the recommended Learning Center phase-out, we are certain that this seemed a brilliant idea to someone at three o'clock in the morning. But the light of day sheds uncertainty on the plan's success. It still may be a brilliant idea once all questions are answered and all necessary supports have been planned and funded. Until then, we urge MCPS and Board members to research the issue carefully. Please ensure that the continuum of services can be in place for each affected child and please listen to the concerns of the parents who see this initiative as a disastrous end to their child's formal education. "Ensuring each child's success" means meeting students' needs on an individualized basis. MCPS may need to retain the alternative that Learning Centers offer to children within Montgomery County.

Please review ALL options carefully and do not necessarily eliminate the status quo as an option in your decision-making. A special education plan that reaches into the future to foresee all potential pitfalls is difficult, but should be the goal of MCPS.

Lastly, we wanted to again put in a request for certain items within our Cluster. Namely, Clearspring Elementary needs a fence installed around the perimeter of the play area. Balls roll into bramble bushes and poison ivy (Kris' son can attest to that!). Neighborhood dogs too often enjoy frolicking with scurrying elementary students, seeing the playground as an extension of their own backyard. Whether it is considered a capital expense or an operating expense, we simply ask that someone please consider finding the \$12,000 it would take to install. This is a security issue that MCPS really needs to address.

We realize the Board has a great deal of issues through which to sift when it comes to finalizing the MCPS Operating Budget. We appreciate the constraints on new spending such as funding health benefits and budgeting for increased utility costs. They are not popular advocacy items for cluster coordinators. But in considering the new initiatives set forth by Dr. Weast, we are encouraged that the Board will make the appropriate choices, always putting the students' needs first. Thank you for your time and consideration. Damascus Cluster looks forward to meeting with all of you at our May 14th cluster meeting.

Kristin Tribble

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