

Magruder Cluster Operating Budget Testimony for January 10, 2007

Good evening Dr. Weast, President Navarro, Vice President Brandman, and other members of the Board of Education. My name is Ted Willard and along with Linda Kuserk and Dawn Trahern, we represent the Magruder Cluster.

Our cluster is very happy that the Board of Education chose to reserve time for every PTA cluster to testify on the Operating Budget. We encourage you to pay close attention to the testimony you hear tonight and tomorrow night and to let it guide you in your plans for this year and future years. As you have requested, I have tried to organize my testimony according to your Operating Budget Priorities.

The Magruder cluster enthusiastically supports the MCCPTA Operating Budget Compact, it's Operating Budget Priorities, and the Testimony Jane de Winter gave this evening.

In many ways, Montgomery County Public Schools deserve its reputation as one of the premier school systems in the country. However, when it comes to the goal of **success for every student**, we still fall far short of our objectives.

Given the pressures of No Child Left Behind, and how it frequently rewards improvements at the margins, we need to ensure that the choices we make are done with the goal of meeting every student's needs, not just meeting adequate yearly progress. In the calculation of AYP, moving a student from one side of the line between basic and proficient is all that matters. This leads all too frequently to the cherry picking of students that can be easily moved across that line to the exclusion of paying attention to other students and their needs. For example, we would encourage you to review the School Improvement Plans across the county and see how many have meeting AYP as their number one goal, if not their only goal. Is this all that MCPS hopes to achieve?

With this in mind, the Magruder cluster is very concerned about the Superintendent's proposal to close learning centers across the county. While we are pleased that inclusion models have been implanted effectively in MCPS, including at schools in our cluster, we think it is very premature to discuss closing the learning centers. We would also like to point out that the issue of inclusion is separate from the issue of hours-based staffing. Shady Grove Middle School, as you know, has been piloting a very effective inclusion model this year. It does not, however, have hours based staffing.

But as you evaluate the Superintendent's plan to close the centers, we ask that you look before you leap, or at least plan before you land. Because even if the inclusion model used at Shady Grove this year is expanded to other schools, it is far from clear that the needs of every student currently in a learning center can be met in their home school. What is clear is that implementing the Superintendent's plan would make it easier for schools to meet AYP, as the confidence interval for a population becomes greater when the population is smaller. But such a change is then simply a numbers game and does nothing to actually improve the achievement of the students involved.

While we understand that you have no control over how the federal government and the state administer No Child Left Behind, you do have a say in how MCPS responds to it. If you are going to truly ensure success for every student, you must meet the needs of **every** student.

One area where this is clearly a need for improvements is our Middle School programs. With that in mind, the Magruder Cluster strongly supports your plan for providing funds in the operating budget for Middle School Initiatives. As the PTA president for a middle school, I see the many challenges faced by students, parents, faculty and staff in our middle schools. We need a program that helps students deal with the great physical and psychological changes they are experiencing, while also helping them grow intellectually so they are prepared for the challenges they will face in high school and beyond.

To help them face these challenges, they need the support of a strong cadre of counselors who will follow them as they move through middle school. This means that there needs to be at least one counselor for every grade in a middle school, regardless of the overall student enrollment. The Magruder cluster therefore endorses your initiative to increase the number of middle school counselors. ~~We are concerned that the budget (p. 1-19) projects the student-counselor ratio to actually increase this year, and would ask that you make sure that this does not occur.~~

It is nice to see that a significant allocation for middle school initiatives, and we have no doubt that middle school education in the county is deserving of every penny and more. However, it is difficult to say we support that allocation until it is clearer what that money will go to.

At the High School level, the initiatives are more clearly defined and overall look quite good. We specifically want to thank you for your plans to increase the high school counselor allocation, resource teacher allocations, and the number of days that counselors work each year. Far too many of our children, in far too many of our schools, are not ready to graduate and go on

to college or to work. We owe it to each of these young people to give them all the knowledge and skills they need to be successful.

At the Elementary level, we are pleased to see plans to add an additional 15 Assistant Principals. We firmly believe that every elementary school in the county should have one, and so if that means you need more than 15, we ask that you increase the number even further.

I am going to group my comments about an **Adequate Instructional Program, a Positive Work Environment, a Self Renewing Organization, and High Quality Business Services** together because to me, many of the initiatives in these areas overlap with one another.

In considering these goals, one question that came to my mind is why is our goal just to have an *Adequate* Instructional Program, rather than an *Exceptional* one.

The Magruder clusters thanks you again for adding a magnet program at Poolsville High School last year and we support the continuation of building that program by phasing in grade 10.

We are also pleased to see an initiative for greater professional development. As Dr. Weast frequently mentions, we need to increase the capacity and capabilities of our teachers so they are able to address the needs of every student in the system. Teachers in elementary grades need a firm understanding of the content in every subject they are expected to teach, and that is not currently the case with mathematics and science. Teachers at all grade levels and in all subject areas need to know how to help students improve their reading and writing skills. Teachers who every year have more students with special needs and more English language learners in their classroom need strategies to help these students achieve. Teachers need to know how help a student who is struggling tremendously with a particular concept to finally master it as well as how to help a student who long ago mastered that concept continue to grow intellectually without being bored.

There are many fine teachers who possess these skills, but in a system of over ten thousand teachers, they are far too small a percentage. Given the teacher education system in this country, it is probably unreasonable to expect every teacher who enters the school system to have all the skills that they need. Therefore, it is up to you to help each teacher grow into the teacher our children deserve.

In providing more training for teachers, we hope that the school system will do everything in their power to cut down the time that teachers are out of the classroom. To take teachers away from their students in order to make them better able to help those students is penny wise and pound foolish.

With regards to **Productive Partnerships for Education**, the Magruder cluster is pleased to see that addition of one full time systems programmer to assist with translation services. However, far more is needed. As PTA leaders, we share your frustration on how difficult it can be to get parents involved. But you know as well as we do that getting parents involved in their children's education is essential to their academic success. Our cluster, like the county as a whole, has had changes in our demographics over the last decade. Reaching parents is particularly difficult when parents are not native English speakers. We have run a cluster-wide session of Conquistas Tus Sueños which has met with some success, particularly at Sequoyah Elementary School. In the interactions with parents through this program, we have seen the potential of really making a connection with parents. Therefore, our cluster, like many clusters around the county asks you to provide funding for school-based parent community outreach coordinators. Greater investment in such outreach will show even greater dividends.

As a final note, I would share a personal observation. Even though I have closely followed the work of MCPS for several years, I still find it overwhelming in preparing to speak about the operating budget. The number of pages of material exceeds my capacity to process in the time available. I would expect the same problem for you members of the Board of Education. The difference is that ultimately, I am not responsible for understanding all of this material and you are. While I know that the MCPS staff is extremely able and willing to assist the Board in interpreting the budget, I believe there is something fundamentally problematic in the Board having to rely on the MCPS staff who have compiled the budget to help you in interpreting the budget. Even though I have no doubts about the integrity of the staff who prepare the budget, I feel it undermines your role as an independent overseer of the school system to be so dependent upon them. Last year, the county council added two staff positions to aid them in analyzing the school systems budget. I strongly encourage you to add at least one position to the Board of Education staff so that you have similar assistance.

Thank you for your consideration. The Magruder cluster looks forward to working with the Board in the future.