

Testimony to the Montgomery County Board of Education
FY2008 Recommended Operating Budget
Comments from the Northeast Consortium of Schools
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January 10, 2007

Good evening. My name is Gloria Salas-Kos. I am a parent from Burnt Mills Elementary School and chair the ESOL Committee for MCCPTA. I am speaking tonight on behalf of schools in the Northeast Consortium.

In a few moments, you will hear testimony from one of our Consortium's high school students on the recommendations of a study circle that took place last year in the NEC. It was comprised of students, staff and parents and the results echoed many of the same requests we continue to hear from virtually every school in the Northeast Consortium. These requests concern the need for additional ESOL teachers, bilingual staff – especially counselors – and outreach efforts to families in the immigrant community.

I. First, we must provide **adequate counseling resources -- especially Spanish-speaking counselors -- in our schools.** We desperately need additional guidance counselors trained to meet the needs of our diverse student and family populations. Today's counselors are expected to work with an unbelievably high number of students, preventing them from being proactive in meeting some very complex needs. This is certainly a concern at the high school level, but also in middle and elementary schools. The need for Spanish-speaking counselors onsite, alleviates concerns from parents who may not have a complete grasp of the English vocabulary, particularly when it comes to understanding the curriculum, student progress, and other school related issues.

While she does not speak Spanish or another language, the counselor at Burnt Mills recognizes the need to have interpreters for families who meet with her. Burnt Mills is fortunate to have Spanish speaking staff on board to support our counselor. **However, schools that lack adequate bi-lingual staff or counselors, have to request and schedule interpreters. This process may not always be the most convenient way to work with non-English speaking parents when student issues arise that must be immediately addressed.**

II. Second, our schools must receive **adequate ESOL staffing by individuals who speak another language.** Current staffing levels are insufficient to meet the needs of today's students both as they progress through this program and then transition out of it.

A perfect example is Cresthaven Elementary School which began the year with a 1.7 ESOL allocation – one full-time and one part-time staff member. Last month that part-timer was reassigned to another school. This was a big hit for Cresthaven. While the school's ESOL population may not be as high as some other schools, it does have a large group of students that recently graduated from the ESOL program into regular classrooms. These students require additional staff support in order to assure their continued success. Without this part-time instructor, it will be much more difficult to provide these important support services.

Westover Elementary School faces a similar situation with a current allocation of .6 when a full-time ESOL teacher is now needed to meet the changing needs of its student population.

III. Third, **we need full-time Parent Community Builders and Coordinators at schools that have large immigrant populations.** Keeping a pulse on our parent community is a huge challenge in our area with its growing range of cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. Current staff members are already taxed with both the day-to-day operations of their schools and educational requirements of both the State and County. PTAs and parent volunteers offer their support but it often lacks consistency as parents have their own jobs and family responsibilities.

It is no long enough to simply offer an interpreter at a meeting or teacher conference. We have moved beyond that. If there is to be real growth in the education of *ALL* students, then we must work together with our parents -- in their own language, if necessary -- to ensure the success of our children.

A perfect example is White Oak Middle School. In 2005-06, after five years of continuous advocacy efforts by a group of active parents, White Oak was finally able to hire a half-time Parent Community Coordinator. During her first year in this position, the PCC was able to make a noticeable difference in several areas.

-- Advocating with the staff for changes to increase parent participation in various school activities.

-- Building relationships across the spectrum of our parents, especially among "hard-to-reach" parents.

-- Hosting a well-attended and very successful Conquista tus Sueños program last spring. Out of this program (and with critical support of our PCC) White Oak now has an energized group of Latino parents who have organized themselves with the mission of increasing engagement of Latino parents in the PTSA and other school activities.

Unfortunately, White Oak's part-time PCC left in June 2006. It is now January 2007 and the school still does not have a replacement for this position. White Oak is struggling to hold on to the gains achieved last year, and having a PCC in the school would have been an invaluable resource to have last fall when several White Oak students were injured at the bus stop accident.

As you know, this is a critical year for White Oak to meet AYP. Broad and effective parental engagement is key to increasing student achievement.

The Parent Community Builder and Coordinator position directly impacts schools efforts and supports the PTSA's efforts to engage all our parents. Please show your commitment to genuine and effective community involvement by funding a permanent full-time position for White Oak MS and other similarly situated schools in which there are limited numbers of bilingual staff members.

IV. Finally, but no less importantly, we must ensure that the immigrant community's needs are addressed with **safe and engaging after-school activities where cost and transportation are not barriers to participation.**

On behalf of all the schools in the Northeast Consortium, I thank you for your time and attention to these very timely and important requests.