

**Walter Johnson Cluster of PTA's
Testimony on the Superintendent's Operating Budget
before the Board of Education**

January 11, 2007

Good evening, members of the Board of Education. My name is Pam Moomau. I am a co-coordinator (along with Ellen Paul and Joanne Vanderhorst) of the Walter Johnson Cluster. We thank you for this opportunity to comment on the Superintendent's proposed Operating Budget for fiscal year 2008. In accordance with the BOE request, we have organized our testimony to speak specifically to goals in the MCPS Strategic Plan.

In general, we support the operating budget priorities listed in the MCCPTA operating budget compact, and the MCCPTA operating budget resolution, as described in the testimony of MCCPTA president Jane de Winter.

As we do each year, we have coordinated our testimony with other clusters in our area, Wheaton, Bethesda-Chevy-Chase, and Whitman, so that we will focus our testimony on a few of the priorities mentioned in the MCCPTA documents, while associating ourselves with the comments of the other clusters in our area. The exception this year is that each cluster in our area will be speaking for itself with respect to the proposed changes in the special education program.

With so many new Board members, I'll briefly describe our cluster to provide a context for our testimony. Walter Johnson cluster schools are located primarily in Bethesda and Kensington. According to last year's *School's at a Glance*, almost 17 percent of the students at Walter Johnson High School at some time were eligible for FARMS, 35 percent are minority, and nearly 15 percent of students qualify for special education services. Three of our six elementary schools have double-digit ESOL and mobility rates; four of our elementary schools have double digit FARMS rates. Our early primary students do not have the benefit of 15-1 student teacher ratios or full-day paraeducators.

Goal 1: Ensure success for every student

Special education

Of particular relevance in light of this year's budget recommendations, schools in the Walter Johnson cluster host a significant number of quad-cluster and regional special education programs. These include, but are not limited to, GT/LD programs at Wyngate Elementary School, North Bethesda Middle School, and Walter Johnson High School, and Learning Centers at Tilden Middle School and Walter Johnson High School. As you know, major changes have been recommended for these programs, and many parents of students in these programs have concerns that the proposed changes represent a retreat from the first strategic plan goal of "success for every student." We have not seen strong evidence that all of the ramifications of these moves have been fully thought-through or funded to provide the level of service required.

We are aware that the MCPS reasoning for reducing the number of GT/LD centers is that there is inadequate demand for three centers. We find this to be at odds with the experience of many parents in our cluster and others who have tried to have their students placed in a GT/LD program and were not admitted to the program or were not offered this option. We are wondering how these two views can be reconciled.

Last year, we supported an expansion of hours-based staffing for special education, and we continue to do so. This model seems the only logical approach to providing adequate services to special education students in each school, in light of the variation in required hours of service among IEPs. However, the extent of funding of this initiative appears to be inadequate in light of plans for phasing out the Learning Centers.

As for the phaseout of the Learning Centers: we do not have enough information to enable us to provide support for the proposal. Our lack of information is not for lack of trying to gather it. Along with many parents in our cluster, WJ PTA leaders and cluster coordinators have attended the MCPS meeting with Learning Center parents; we have had several conversations with our Community Superintendent and other school officials within the WJ cluster, as well as with several MCPS officials; we have talked with parents of students in our learning centers; and, we have pored over the operating budget documents to obtain information about how the proposed changes will impact both the special ed students and the general ed students in our schools. Nevertheless, we do not have a clear picture of how the special education students will continue to receive the same level of service outside the Learning Centers that they would receive in them under the current proposal. The phaseout of the Learning Centers is described as a cost neutral plan, with re-allocation of many staff positions from the Learning Centers and elsewhere to unspecified alternatives in home schools. The crux of the question is how dismantling a program that was originally placed in a Center so as to achieve economies of scale from providing commonly needed services to more students in one place can be replaced with the same level of services at widely dispersed schools for the same price.

On the one hand, we are told that increasing inclusion in general education classrooms is a goal of this reorganization; on the other hand, we are assured that if a student's IEP calls for a small, self-contained classroom, it will be provided in his home school. On the one hand, we are told that many inclusion classes will be co-taught by general education teachers and special education teachers allocated to home schools on the hours-based model; on the other hand, we observe there is no increase in the training budget to bring teachers in widely dispersed schools across the County up to speed on this teaching model, and that the hours-based staffing model will not be extended to all schools. Many Learning Center parents have discovered that the small, self-contained classroom is the best setting for their kids. Test scores from the WJ Learning Center appear to bear this out. We request that any phaseout of the Learning Center program be accompanied by adequate planning and resources to ensure a smooth transition for both special education and general education students; we are concerned that there is not evidence of such support in the current budget.

Other Goal 1 initiatives

We are pleased to see a continuation of lower class-sizes and the phasing in of additional elementary school assistant principals. We also appreciate that this budget provides a recognition of the need for additional art, music and PE teachers at the elementary school level, and additional counselors at the secondary school level. We view the small steps taken in these directions as a promising start, and hope to see this initiative expanded.

Goal 2: Provide an adequate instructional program

Instructional Materials

The continued failure of the operating budget to keep up with inflation in funding textbooks and other instructional materials is an ongoing source of concern for the WJ cluster. The current level of funding for instructional materials is not adequate to supply each child with take-home materials from every class. When children are able to bring home materials that document what they are learning, they are better able to reinforce their lessons themselves and do homework independently. Moreover, when students have questions, parents are better able to understand the context of their lessons, and become partners in their kids' education.

Goal 3: Strengthen productive partnerships for education

General commentary on “productive partnerships”

Like parents everywhere, parents in the WJ cluster are strong believers in the benefits of parent involvement in their kids' education. We have very active parent volunteers in all our schools and we are eager to work with MCPS to enhance our kids' education. For a truly productive partnership to ensue, however, communication needs to become more of a two-way street. Parents would like to hear about issues and initiatives affecting their kids in a timely manner, and they would like to be heard about issues and initiatives affecting their kids in a timely manner. In our minds, a “timely manner” implies “with enough time to provide input that could affect the outcome.” The manner in which parents and even local school personnel were informed about planned changes in the special education program does not qualify as “timely.” The manner in which local PTAs were notified about opportunities for input in the Strategic Planning Forums does not qualify as “timely.” The manner in which information about middle school reform has been dribbled out does not qualify as “timely.” An effort to include parents in the planning of major changes would seem to be required by the Baldrige Model.

Ed Line and Connect Ed

On the plus side, the implementation of Ed Line in our secondary schools represents a major leap forward in making parents partners in our kids' education. In our cluster, both WJHS and North Bethesda Middle School have implemented Ed Line, and parents love it. Kids are not so sure - as one of our kids remarked, it can have the effect of half the school being grounded simultaneously. ConnectEd is another welcome innovation, providing an alternate avenue to newsletters and listserves for getting basic information about what's happening in the schools. Thank you for instituting these lifelines; we encourage you to expand their use.

Local school-based parent outreach coordinators

As we mentioned earlier, several of the elementary schools in the WJ cluster serve significant and growing ESOL populations, and we expect this trend to continue. Serving these students adequately requires being able to communicate with their families. While the MCPS translation services allowing for key documents to be translated into multiple languages are helpful in this regard, they do not address the key need for communication between school and home about the specific progress and needs of individual students. We believe that there is a strong need for school-based parent outreach coordinators who can communicate with families with limited English proficiency.

In addition, with the increasingly complex array of services for both special education and general education students, there is a strong need for more parent education about the choices they have for their students. Not all parents are familiar with the role of school counselors and other resources available to provide this information. While the PTAs try to help publicize such resources to the broad parent population through programs and newsletters, they can't always reach all parents. There is a need for more outreach from the schools as well.

Goal 4: Create a positive work environment in a self-renewing organization

With respect to the fourth goal, related to staff training, we again observe that we have concerns that the special education initiative does not appear to have adequate support for training. We are still not able to get answers about how much time and teacher training the Middle School Reform will require.

Goal 5: Provide high quality business services that are essential to the educational success of students

Safe, secure, clean, healthy school facilities

Goal 5 is an area of particular concern to the Walter Johnson cluster, in part because so many of the school buildings in our cluster are still awaiting modernization. While we are gratified to see that building safety, health, and security have rated a larger mention in the Strategic Plan with the addition of Goal 5 to the plan, we are saddened to

see that there was no commensurate increase in resources. We do support the addition of funds for burnishers and the expansion of the building service staff to keep up with the continuing expansion of our school facilities.

However, we continue to be dismayed by the inadequate funding of the Division of Maintenance. In the FY07 operating budget, there was a cut of a full unit of twelve positions from the Division of Maintenance, despite a backlog of \$40-\$50 million in needed maintenance projects. Nothing has been done in this year's budget to correct this situation. In light of the really deplorable conditions of many MCPS facilities, the failure to provide a significant increase in resources to the Division of Maintenance is not only unfortunate, it's incomprehensible. For years our cluster and many others have testified to you about overcrowded conditions, inadequate heating, ventilation and air conditioning, poor plumbing, roof, window, and pipe leaks, mold and lead in water

The queue for repairs from the Division of Maintenance can be six months to years long, depending on the repair requested, and the ease with which the issue can be addressed. Several of our schools have continuing problems with indoor air quality, including recurring mold in both main buildings and portables, and the more unusual (we hope) circumstance of sewer gas venting into the basement near air intakes. Although the MCPS indoor air quality unit has responded to complaints, and made recommendations for addressing these issues, they do not have the resources to follow up and make sure the problems have been solved. They haven't been solved. Or, they have been solved temporarily and recur. Until the Indoor Air Quality unit is expanded to include enough personnel for follow-up, problems like this won't be solved in our cluster or others.

Perhaps because it has fallen out of the news, the lead remediation project within MCPS has been proceeding at a glacial pace. While we recognize this is in part a capital budget issue, it is also an operating budget issue. Some of the remediation is done by Division of Maintenance staff. Review of testing results and development of remediation plans is done by environmental staff. Meanwhile, while schools fail to be "released" from lead protocols, flushing takes up the time of building service staff, and reduced water fixtures inconveniences everyone in the building. The current status of lead remediation for each school is not posted to the MCPS website.

The physical environment our students face has a direct impact on learning. Our kids are, by law, confined within these buildings six hours per day. They deserve buildings with adequate fresh air, safe and functional plumbing, and consistent temperature control.

Conclusion

While much of this testimony has focused on questions and concerns we have about initiatives in this budget, and on needs that remain unmet, we'd like to conclude by expressing our appreciation for many of the initiatives in recent years that have responded to parental concerns. We interpret the increased testimony time this year as a good faith gesture of enhanced partnerships to come, and we thank you for your attention.

