

President Barclay
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Members of the Montgomery County Board of Education:

I'm Gegi Leeger and I am a MCCPTA Representative from College Gardens Elementary School. Our entire cluster is extremely pleased that MCPS has recognized the over-crowding at all the elementary schools in our Cluster and at Julius West Middle School, where enrollment is 100 students over capacity this year, and has recommended funding to build RM#5 and to expand JW. My testimony supports the testimony given earlier by our RM Cluster Coordinator (Cheryl Moss Herman) and it will expand on the impact of severe over-crowding. Our schools were not designed to handle this many students.

Our core classrooms, cafeterias and playgrounds are over-crowded. Many College Gardens students have art and music on a cart in their homerooms. In the limited "cart environment," art projects are generally less enriching than those done in the art room, depriving our children of a foundation in multi-media art.

Lunch periods take up much of the school day, which has many negative repercussions. First, students are not getting a central break in their work day in which to re-charge their minds and expend their physical energy. Second, having six lunch periods makes it difficult to schedule educational enrichment assemblies, chorus, etc. in the APR. As our student body is greater than 800 students, we now have to hold multiple identical Cultural Arts Assemblies. Assemblies that are extremely interactive would require three sessions, but with the APR in use from 11 to 2, the most we can hold is two. So, these types of experiences are now unavailable to our students. Third, even with six lunch periods; lunch and recess logistics are difficult to manage. I commend the College Gardens staff's ability to move 150 kids through hand-washing, lunch lines, trash pick-up, lunch box collection and recess line-up in 30 minutes. At Richie Park, one of the large grades is split between lunch periods, preventing friends from seeing each other if they are in different classes during the school day. At Beall and Richie Park, portables sit on the blacktop, reducing recess play area.

Students need to be moved safely and quickly through halls that were not designed to handle so many people and between the core school and portables, adding an extra safety and logistical challenge. Cluster elementary schools have re-purposed offices and storage spaces as teaching spaces. One of the consequences of this at Ritchie Park is that there is only one small room available for after-school activities, such as language and science programs, so the opportunities for students to participate in these programs are extremely limited. All of this stresses the staff, the students and the school building itself.

I have spoken to the challenges caused by an over-crowded school core, so I'm sure you can understand why I have yet to meet any parent in the cluster that thinks the proposed addition to the Julius West cafeteria is optional. The school population cannot increase by 1/3 without increasing the cafeteria. As we experienced at College Gardens, students will spend more time in the lunch line than eating and in middle school, instead of cutting into recess time, students who exit the lunch line with little time and a class starting soon, will have either eat too fast or throw out much of their lunch and spend the rest of the day hungry. Safety issues also become more challenging in over-crowded cafeterias.

Our students need a good learning environment to perform at their best. By the time the addition opens at JW, 300 students are forecasted to be in portables. These same students will have spent their elementary school years in schools with a crowded core and portables. We ask the BOE to build RM#5 and the addition at Julius West apace. Without the dedication and professionalism of the staff and the support of our families, our students would not be able to perform at such a high level with the challenges provided by their over-crowded school environment. Thank you.