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### **Walt Whitman Cluster**

Bannockburn Elementary School

Bethesda Elementary School (shared)

Bradley Hills Elementary School

Burning Tree Elementary School

Carderock Springs Elementary School

Thomas W. Pyle Middle School

Walt Whitman High School

Wood Acres Elementary School

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## **FY 2013 Operating Budget Testimony**

**January 18, 2012**

Good evening, President Brandman, Vice President Barclay, distinguished members of the Board of Education, and Dr. Starr. My name is Elise Browne Hughes and with me tonight are my Whitman cluster co-coordinators, Jean Schlesinger and Keith Parsky, as well as other members of the Whitman cluster community. We begin by thanking you for your efforts to limit the impact of recent years' budget cuts and your commitment to protecting our classrooms from additional cuts.

Given current fiscal realities, we support the Superintendent's proposed operating budget and applaud the recommendation to recognize the hard work and sacrifices of teachers and staff and to make no further reductions to school-based staff. We also urge not only the restoration, but also the increase of staff and teachers as soon as fiscally feasible to alleviate the strain on our ever-growing schools, and the commensurate impact on students. We also fully support the MCCPTA Operating Budget Priorities (attached).

Three of these priorities—outlined here—are particularly important to our cluster.

#### Staff Development

Meaningful staff development is one of our cluster's top concerns, so we appreciate that Dr. Starr's budget proposal specifically addresses the need to invest in professional development and acknowledges the negative impact of the budget-driven cuts to staff development in recent years.

Staff development is always important, but it is particularly critical during the rollout of new initiatives such as (but not limited to) the new elementary curriculum. Even at elementary schools with a full-time staff development position, training for this new curriculum has been described as “little to none.” It’s like having a wonderful new tool—Curriculum 2.0—shut up in a glass box. We can see it and hold it, and we know it’s fabulous, but until our teachers can fully access and understand how to deliver it, its worth to our students is limited. Even if we cannot increase staffing this year, we ask you to please find a way to get the curriculum off the shelf and into the classroom.

We also value continuous professional improvement for educators at secondary schools as well as at elementary schools. This is vital to ensuring the best possible instruction to support our students. Unfortunately, with less than a half-time staff development position at our high school and at our middle school, training opportunities at the secondary level are minimal. With new teachers entering our schools, class sizes larger than in prior years, and continual challenges to meet benchmarks, we can’t afford to leave staff training at these reduced levels. Thus, as soon as funding enables, we ask you to restore staff development to a level that enables our professional trainers to truly collaborate with administrators and staff on curriculum, technology, best instructional practices, and more.

We also urge that all training be done in a way that does not pull teachers from the classroom during instructional time.

### Class Size and Instructional Staff

Another top priority for the Whitman cluster is keeping class sizes in check and ensuring adequate availability of instructional staff. As a cluster and as a county, we have seen how the expanding class sizes of recent years can diminish the opportunity for each student to learn and succeed. And so, again, we applaud Dr. Starr’s recommendation to not make any further cuts to the teachers and staff who provide direct support to our students.

In our elementary schools, larger classes and insufficient teacher allocations make it difficult for teachers to differentiate in their instruction. Yet this is a critical need given the wide range of student ability levels within any classroom—and it is especially important with the implementation of Curriculum 2.0.

The Elementary Learning Center in our cluster has been particularly impacted, as reductions have necessitated combination classes in almost all grades, requiring teachers to learn and implement two or more curriculums, taught to students of different ages—all while dealing with the challenges of teaching students with a wide array of intellectual, physical, and behavioral disabilities. One teacher, for example, is teaching math to 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> graders, who run the gamut in their abilities, but are, on average, three grades behind. Furthermore, because of scheduling issues, the teachers for these combination classes simply are unable to participate at team planning meetings for both the grades they teach. The support of additional para-educators, if not additional teachers, would help make these challenges more manageable.

At the middle school and high school level, the increase in class sizes has equated to 15 to 20 additional students for some teachers, resulting in substantially greater instructional and grading responsibility, and, for students, a substantially greater lag time to receive feedback on their assignments—thus limiting their opportunity to learn.

The availability of an adequate teacher pool would provide some form of relief for those classes that reach or exceed the upper limits, as well as for those schools that experience enrollment growth late in the summer and continuing into the school year.

Instructional staff support is also vital to student learning. Yet, in some schools the reading specialist position has been cut in half, and in some schools the reading initiative position has suffered the same fate—all at a time when elementary class sizes have risen. This is a potentially devastating combination during the critical reading development years. We are concerned about the effects of these staff reductions on all learners, but especially on those students who barely meet, or fall below benchmarks. With severely limited availability of reading teachers, who will support the

students who need intervention beyond what can be offered by the classroom teacher? Who will support the teachers in their efforts to differentiate reading instruction and to assess student needs?

The media specialist position is also now just half-time at one of our cluster's elementary schools, resulting in gaps during the school day when the media center is closed due to insufficient staffing. Further, students are now only able to meet with the media specialist every other week for one lesson because of this cut.

In addition to budget-driven cuts, reductions under current allocation methods to elementary school "specials"—art, music, and PE—have also disproportionately limited opportunities for students. Some of our schools have experienced staff reductions in this area of 10 to 15 percent because they had fewer teaching stations (classes) due to larger class sizes—but not fewer students.

Not only do these cuts limit the time students are exposed to these important subjects, but they also impinge on the ability of teachers to offer volunteer enrichment opportunities in their content specialties, such as chorus rehearsal or sport skills practice offered before school. There is also no time for collaborative planning between the specialists and classroom teachers, which is particularly problematic given the new elementary curriculum's emphasis on integration of all subject areas.

We hope for the restoration of these positions as soon as is fiscally feasible.

### Guidance Counselors

Last, but by no means least, the Whitman cluster is greatly concerned about recent years' reductions in counseling staff.

At many elementary schools, guidance counselor hours have been slashed, leaving some schools, including one in our cluster, with only a half-time counselor. Because issues requiring conflict resolution can and do arise throughout the school day—regardless of the counselor's part-time schedule—this puts the burden on other staff members, who don't necessarily have the training or time to address such problems. Even more concerning, students are not able to meet with a certified counselor when serious problems present outside the counselor's work hours. This staffing

cut also has the potential to significantly impact special education programs, which require guidance counselor support for developing social and emotional skills.

Cuts to middle school counseling staff in recent years also continue to impact our students. They truly need support during these critical social development years.

Furthermore, given Dr. Starr's pledge to focus on the whole child—an approach we heartily endorse—our schools need more counseling hours, not less!

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In closing, we ask that your ultimate budget decisions reflect the priorities of MCCPTA, the voice for 50,000-plus parents and teachers across our county. We, in turn, will continue to help advocate at the county and state level for education funding, and to help ensure that the Maintenance of Effort law provides a meaningful floor for funding for our schools.

We wish you well in the challenging months ahead.