



**Before the Montgomery County Board of Education
MCCPTA Testimony
FY 2010 Capital Budget and
Amendments to the FY 2009-2014 Capital Improvements Program
November 12, 2008**

“We Can’t Afford to Fall Behind.”

Good evening, President Navarro and Members of the Board of Education. I am Kay Romero, President of the Montgomery County Council of PTAs. I speak tonight on behalf of the over 50,000 parents and more than 139,000 MCPS students in the county.

Tonight and tomorrow night, you will hear from cluster representatives about the needs of the cluster schools and special centers throughout the county. Collectively, we appreciate the Superintendent’s efforts to keep all projects on track while noting that six projects will be delayed while they are re-sized to accommodate enrollment growth. Our objective is simple. We all want to ensure the MCPS provides our students the best opportunities to learn. We believe that excellence in learning requires excellent learning facilities. As you will hear in the testimony over these two nights, the projects listed in the CIP contribute directly to student success. Although some will say that we cannot afford all of these projects at this time, we say that we can’t afford to fall behind. Student achievement should not be compromised or delayed.

We recognize that funding will be difficult again this year. This difficulty results in trade-offs between the need for capacity and the need to renovate and maintain our existing facilities. We continue to support, as we have in the past, all efforts to ensure that Montgomery County obtains from the State of Maryland its fair share of funding for school construction. We also will urge the County Council to provide sufficient funding so that the county can properly meet the capital needs of the school system.

Our organization has a number of broad concerns with the Superintendent’s Recommendation. Once again, the Recommendation fails to outline a vision for how the system will address the long term challenges of growing enrollment, students with greater learning challenges, aging facilities, and higher maintenance costs. For several years, we have asked the Board and the County Council to work with us to address long range capital needs for our schools. The failure to make progress with a CIP task force has been one of our biggest disappointments. We are concerned that the pace of modernizations is too slow and that the increase in the number of buildings puts us at risk of falling even further behind. We need both a plan to accelerate the modernization of schools that are falling below our standards for student learning and a comprehensive plan to maintain and renew our newer buildings. It is our joint responsibility to sit down together with other interested parties and look at the whole picture and plan for both the long and short term.

We are anxious to assess the remaining schools older than 30 years that have not yet been assessed for modernization. Each year that there are schools that should be, but are not, assessed for modernization, means that the county falls farther behind and creates an even larger need for school construction. But we would first like to see a review of the standards that comprise the current FACT score rubric. Parents and the community are entitled to know how decisions to prioritize schools are being made and we all have an interest in ensuring that the standards adequately reflect the gravity of the needs of each school. For example, for the schools that were modernized recently, or are still awaiting modernization, did the FACT score reasonably reflect the relative conditions of each of the buildings? In hindsight, do we feel that the schools were modernized in the correct order? Without a better understanding of the FACT score, we cannot be confident that more FACT assessments will appropriately prioritize the schools waiting for their modernizations.

We believe more can be done to develop comprehensive maintenance and modernization plans for the special centers. The Recommendation does not place the Carl Sandburg center back on the modernization list, nor does it include any discussion of how other centers will be considered for modernization. These centers should be evaluated in a manner that is fair and open to community input and that takes into account the unique programs and challenges of these students. Our most vulnerable students are in buildings that need modernization. A building in great need of being on the modernization schedule, but no hope for that being done, should not be the reason that parents enter collocation discussions. Discussions should happen now about any future plans for the special centers. They must be done in good faith in addressing the needs of the students. Discussions should take into account that more and more children with special needs are being placed back in their home schools. Careful capacity planning is a must as some special education programs require more space than others.

Further, we would like to see MCPS develop and publish a clear set of standards for determining when school additions will be built. These standards should include: capacity; enrollment, construction projects already on site, future modernization dates, special programs, the number of portables, a demonstration of need established by the length of time the portables have been on site, and the age and condition of the portables. The process by which decisions are made and priorities are set must be transparent so that, when funds for additions or other capital projects are allocated, all schools are judged according to the same standards.

We are pleased that the Recommendation seeks an additional \$4.4 million for HVAC repairs in 2010. County-wide programs such as these have been very successful in the past and can, over the long term, lessen the need for extensive renovations or modernizations as our newer facilities age. MCCPTA supports the expansion of existing programs and the development of new systemic replacement programs. Cluster comments the past few years suggest the following areas of need for a county-wide program: (1) HVAC upgrades, (2) renewal of the restroom renovation program after FY 2010, (3) security cameras/security upgrades, (4) roof replacements and (5) climate control in gymnasium facilities and the expansion of programs such as roof replacements, security system upgrades and gymnasium improvements. We would like to have an open discussion of these projects in the time between now and the development of a new six-year CIP next fiscal year.

We are pleased with movement toward transparency in the past few years. We appreciate that the CIP lists completed PLAR projects again this year. We also believe it is helpful that the Board obtained from Facilities Management a list of HVAC programs that were to be completed last year. We would like better information on what the additional HVAC expenditures could accomplish this fiscal year.

Further, we would like better information on the ranking criteria used by MCPS for prioritization of projects in the county-wide programs. With the full implementation of the maintenance tracking system, we should be able to identify more precisely how each of these line items are being spent each year. Moreover, we would like the waiting list for each county-wide program to be listed each year, even as we understand that the rankings may be adjusted for urgent health and safety issues, unanticipated breakdowns and the like. As is, it is virtually impossible for parents to determine if the urgent needs of our schools are being addressed.

Similarly, we note that the Recommendation includes planning funds to assess an additional 99 schools for restroom renovations. Before those assessments are published, we would like further definition and review of the standards used to assess schools for the program. The description contained in Appendix G to the recommendation is sparse, to say the least. We would like to work with MCPS to review these standards before the next stage of the program proceeds. We also believe the Board should explore publishing a preliminary list of the rankings for renovation for comment, prior to releasing a final proposal for funding in the CIP.

Finally, in our testimony we have repeatedly expressed concern with the relationship between capital replacements, which are funded through the CIP, and maintenance, which is an Operating Budget item. For years, MCPS has struggled to keep up with repairs and has had precious little room for preventive maintenance. If MCPS wants its buildings to last longer, plans must be made to maintain them better. However, because maintenance is not considered until the Operating Budget, it often is difficult to evaluate the adequacy of either the capital budget or the level of maintenance needed to support the CIP. For example, when new schools or additional capacity are added, do we need to increase the maintenance capacity as well? By how much, and where? We urge the Board to obtain additional information of the burden that the Recommendation will place on maintenance capabilities.

Once again, we recognize that the short term economic difficulties place great pressures on this budget and on your task as a Board. As you confront the difficult task of setting priorities, we again urge you not to compromise on our goal. Every child in the system deserves a safe, secure and modern classroom that enables him or her to achieve the high standards that we set.

Thank you and good evening.

Kay Romero
President of MCCPTA