

**Written Testimony of  
Steve Augustino  
On Behalf of the  
Gaithersburg Cluster**

**Montgomery County Board of Education  
November 15, 2007**

Good evening. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of the Gaithersburg cluster concerning the Superintendent's Recommended Fiscal Year 2009 Capital Budget and the FY 2009-14 CIP. The Gaithersburg cluster has two critical construction projects scheduled in the CIP and we support its full implementation as quickly as possible. We also support the MCCPTA's recommendation that the Board take a more comprehensive look at long range planning issues, including the priority placed on additions over school modernizations and replacements. Gaithersburg's seven additions have done little to address its systemic age problem, other than to mask its severity. Similarly, throughout the 1980s and much of the 1990s, age and overcrowding problems were "alleviated" by building new schools (Quince Orchard, Watkins Mill, etc.) and moving students to other clusters, without addressing the deterioration of Gaithersburg's core infrastructure. Rather than repeat such mistakes in the future, we should develop a way to modernize buildings more quickly and cost effectively. Other schools should not have to wait the 60-plus years that Gaithersburg High School will have waited for modernization of its facility.

In this testimony, I would like to make you aware of delays in one of our construction projects and to implore you not to allow the other project to be delayed again.

**Washington Grove**

First, we are extremely pleased that the addition and reconstruction project at Washington Grove Elementary School received funding in last year's CIP. This project not only will provide a 12-classroom addition to alleviate an overcrowded school, but it also will include safety improvements to the entrance of the school and, most importantly, will include the demolition and reconstruction of the wing of the school that has experienced persistent indoor air quality issues for over a decade. Our parents have asked for remediation of the air quality problems for many years and we are grateful that a workable solution finally is in the plans.

Construction of the addition was scheduled to start in July. Now, 4 1/2 months later, no work has started. We are told that the latest delay is caused by a problem in obtaining permits from Park and Planning, and, specifically, the Forest Conservation requirement. According to Mr. Song, MCPS recently made a proposal that should satisfy these requirements. But the Washington Grove community has heard that before, only to find out about a new source of delay. Therefore, we would like a concrete answer on what more is needed before construction will begin. Further, given the substantial delay so far,

we are fearful that this project will not be completed on the schedule set forth in the CIP. We request that you obtain from MCPS a plan for how this project can stay on track and meet the projected completion date. We would like this answer now, and an updated answer when all permits are obtained. Please keep in mind that the addition is the first phase of a two phase project. The second phase of this project will address the persistent air quality issues at Washington Grove.

### **Gaithersburg High School**

Second, the 2009-14 CIP includes a long-overdue replacement building for Gaithersburg High School, which was originally constructed in 1951, has been added on to seven different times and never has been completely renovated or modernized. Frankly, the building has shown its age for over 20 years.

We are concerned that the recommended CIP delays the Paint Branch modernization by one year. As far as we can tell, this delay occurred not because the need for modernization is less than anticipated, but apparently because it is a large project and funds are short. We submit that there has to be a better way to decide priorities. Schools placed on the modernization list are asked to endure a lot while waiting for modernization. I can't tell you how many times we have asked about simple maintenance or other needed improvements, only to be told that it does not make sense to spend the money because "you're on the mod list." But the need exists and, most importantly, the needs cannot be remedied unless and until the modernization is completed. There is no interim solution.

At Gaithersburg, the need for our modernization is great. Put simply, we must move forward with the plan on time because the conditions at the existing facility have deteriorated so severely that the need is critical.

**1. The Building Cannot be Fixed.** Originally constructed in 1951, the building has seen a hodge-podge of additions over its lifetime. The architects planning the most recent addition noted that the age of the original building and the extent of the prior additions and modifications have resulted in numerous functional challenges. These include narrow hallways, a maze-like layout, poor bathroom facilities and a leaky or non-functional infrastructure. As one of our teachers succinctly put it in a recent survey of GHS' facilities, "The building is out-dated and a terrible building for teaching purposes and for learning."

All concerned agree that the only feasible solution is construction of a full replacement building. That replacement is scheduled in the FY 2009-14 Capital Improvements Program (CIP). However, the replacement is not scheduled to be completed until August 2012, assuming no funding or construction delays.

**2. The Existing Building Negatively Impacts Learning.** In 2006-07, Gaithersburg High School completed its 10 year review by the Middle States Association. The Middle States review process is a rigorous evaluation of a school's performance in several key

areas. One of the standards of evaluation is Standard 8 – school facilities. Standard 8 addresses whether the school’s facilities are sufficient to meet student needs and contribute to the achievement of desired student learning outcomes.

Here is a sampling of what those who live with GHS day-in and day-out said in response to the Middle States Association survey on this Standard:

**Our students:**

- Gaithersburg is old and dirty and in many ways a health hazard. It needs to be remodeled ASAP!
- The school really needs to be rebuilt. The heating and air conditioning are broken and the restrooms are filthy.
- The school is rundown, old and many modern facilities are unavailable.
- [It is a] bad school in bad condition.

**Our parents:**

- The building is a disgrace. It is falling apart, moldy, [and] the roof leaks, causing dangerous puddles in the halls – it is really terrible.
- [The school is] badly in need of immediate renovation – unfair to students and staff.
- The school needs to be rebuilt. The facilities are not conducive to learning.

**Our teachers:**

- [The] portables smell and the ... heating and AC often do not work. I think they truly hinder learning.
- The building is out-dated and a terrible building for teaching purposes and for learning.
- Facilities are out-dated and run down. [It] takes away from school pride, and [makes it] hard to foster a sense of respect for the school and its facilities.
- Deteriorating building conditions present [a] morale problem for staff and students.
- The age and physical condition of the building negatively impacts learning.
- This school is much too old and a new facility is needed to meet the needs of the staff and students.
- The building is in need of modernization/replacement. The facility was not built to accommodate all of the needs of our students, our many programs, and our student enrollment. We have outgrown this facility.
- These students deserve a new school soon!!!! There is mold growing everywhere and there are major leaks. The building service workers do an amazing job, all things considered.

The consensus is overwhelming. Our parents are embarrassed by the condition of the building. Our teachers uniformly reported that the current facility hinders learning and negatively impacts student and staff morale. Our students agree, illustrated by the student who declared Gaithersburg to be a “bad school in bad condition.” With the

school in the shape it is in, the student's negative attitude is understandable, but that negativity can translate into disinterest, lack of respect and ultimately, poor performance.

**3. Gaithersburg High Is Limited in its Ability to Implement the “Learning Academy” Model without the New Building.** Over the past several years, Gaithersburg High has implemented an All-Signature Academy environment. Gaithersburg's four substantive academies, and its Ninth Grade Academy for entering students, are designed to create smaller schools within a larger school body. The academy structure nurtures the academic and career interests of students as they work toward graduation. The academies are inclusive and are designed to incorporate all learning styles. Moreover, all students, regardless of which academy they choose, take core courses required for a Maryland High School Diploma and have the opportunity to participate in Honors and Advanced Placement programs.

However, our current facilities do not permit GHS to obtain the full benefit of the academy approach. In the newest addition to the building (which essentially is phase 1 of the replacement building), Gaithersburg inaugurated a first-of-its kind NASDAQ board to allow students in our Academy of Finance to track and trade actual stocks as part of their instructional program. Unfortunately, GHS cannot move forward with many new initiatives housed in the old building because of the lack of adequate facilities available. For example, our Science and Technology Academy needs additional computer labs, our Broadcast Media program in the Academy of Arts & Communication needs a modernized TV studio, and our Auto Technology and Auto Body programs in the Academy of Business Studies desperately need new equipment to expand their programs. None of these projects are feasible in the existing building. None realistically would be funded before modernization.

**4. The Old Building is Crumbling and Increasingly Hazardous.** The MCCPTA has made it a priority to ensure that every student in the county will attend school in a safe, secure and modern facility. MCPS is failing in that charge at Gaithersburg. Gaithersburg has had chronic problems with its HVAC systems, problems which will only get worse over the next five years. GHS regularly submits scores of HVAC-related maintenance requests each year. The problems have affected classrooms and programs of all types, including math and science, computer labs, ESOL classrooms, special ed and guidance facilities. Particularly persistent problems are affecting the “H” hall (ironically, the most recent (1985) wing prior to this year's addition). We understand the reluctance to spend money on a facility that is going to be torn down in six years. However, even an old car sometimes needs to be repaired. It is not too much to ask that every classroom have working heating and air conditioning.

We heard Dr. Weast's warning at the November 8 work session that FY 2010 funding will be a stretch. Therefore, we ask that you commit, as a Board, to full funding of the recommended CIP – not just this year, but in the “out” years as well. And, we encourage you to begin working this year to find solutions for 2010 and beyond. Gaithersburg does

not want to be next year's Paint Branch (we've been there before), nor do we want to be the cause of a delay for Wheaton, Seneca Valley, Wootton and the other schools behind us on the modernization schedule. I've been at these schools (and I graduated from one): they all need the modernization. The Board needs to find a way to make it happen.

Once again, thank you for allowing me to testify on behalf of the Gaithersburg cluster schools.