



The Montgomery County Council of Parent-Teacher Associations

Testimony on the FY 2011 Operating Budget for Montgomery County Public Schools

Before the Board of Education

January 13, 2010

Good evening, President O'Neil and Members of the Board of Education. I am Kay Romero, President of the Montgomery County Council of PTA's. We appreciate this opportunity to testify tonight on the MCPS Operating Budget. Again we face a year with extreme fiscal challenges - with perhaps more uncertainty about the state of school funding than we are used to seeing. It was encouraging during our operating budget forum to hear everyone talking about working together to minimize adverse effects of these economic challenges on our children. We take seriously our responsibility to help parents understand the effects of possible budget tightening, and to help you understand community priorities for the budget.

With approximately 50,000 members, MCCPTA represents a broad base of parents, teachers and students in Montgomery County. The budget priorities we are talking about tonight were developed through a careful and inclusive process. We began gathering information about parents' priorities and concerns in local area meetings over the summer, and conducted an on-line survey of clusters to discover issues and funding priorities around the County. Using this information, we developed a list of possible MCCPTA funding priorities, which were incorporated in the MCCPTA Operating Budget Compact and Operating Budget Priorities Resolution. These were introduced at the September Delegates Assembly so that they could be discussed at local PTA meetings and voted on in the October Delegates Assembly. These documents have guided my participation in budget meetings with MCPS management and other stakeholders. They are included with my written testimony.

The priorities we are presenting to you this year are similar to those from last year. They were developed specifically with an understanding that rather on new initiatives, it is necessary to focus on retaining the most important basics. One significant addition to our priorities resolution is in the following sentence:

“Be it resolved that the MCCPTA Delegates approve the following operating budget priorities for the organization to concentrate on this budget year, *each item to be given due consideration in relation to the others.*”

The addition of the explicit notation that no one priority is more important than any of the others reflects a concern among parents that many of the crucial supports for meeting the needs of a variety of students appear to be at risk in the upcoming budget year. With this in mind, I'll briefly describe each of our priorities.

Minimum possible class sizes. Small class sizes have long been a major priority for parents and teachers. We continue to urge that class sizes be kept as small as possible, but recognize that it may not be possible to retain the current class sizes in all grades and all subjects. In the event that it becomes necessary to increase student teacher ratios, we urge that this be done in a way to minimize adverse impacts in key educational areas. We note that especially with the possibility that some class sizes could be increased, it is crucial to retain other supports that reduce their impacts, as reflected by our other priorities.

Well-maintained, safe, secure, mold-free facilities: As we have noted repeatedly, schools are not currently maintained as well as they should be. This poses a health risk. We urge you to avoid cuts in the Division of Maintenance and the Division of Plant Operations. A tight economy will not prevent roofs from leaking, boilers from breaking down, air filters from getting dirty, toilets from clogging, locks from breaking, or mold from growing in our classrooms. With an already colder-than-usual winter, and the emergence of the H1N1 virus, adequate heating, ventilation and hygiene are more important than ever. Similarly, security in the form of adequate control of building entrances is a basic safety issue that cannot be ignored despite the economy. We cannot sacrifice our kids' safety, security, or health to budget concerns.

Empirically based, developmentally appropriate, fully supported curriculum implementation: We've noted in previous testimonies that in recent years major curriculum changes have been rolled out at a pace that has out-stripped staff development, instructional materials, and other student supports. We continue to request that new curriculum not be rolled out if the school system cannot afford to provide the necessary training and instructional materials to make it work.

Adequate and effective staffing for special education students: With the phasing out of learning centers and the possibility of class sizes drifting upwards, the provision of adequate support for special education students becomes increasingly critical. MCCPTA continues to support the hours-based staffing model to ensure that increased mainstreaming is accomplished smoothly. MCCPTA also continues to support a full continuum of services and placement choices for children in special education.

Focus on adequate school-home as well as home-school communication: Parental involvement is critical to our kids' education. The on-line grading, reporting, and homework tracking systems are tremendous advances in this area for many families. But we need to improve the ability of all families to communicate with their own kids' schools. We have asked before for school-based community outreach in communities where language and cultural

barriers are especially problematic, but this request has not been funded. We need to on exploring other ways to enhance two-way communication and parent involvement.

Academic support for all students, including those needing assistance and/or enrichment.

Academic supports suffered many cuts in the FY 2010 budget, ranging from reduced positions at signature and magnet programs to reductions in academic intervention teachers, alternative teachers, and high school literacy coaches. We cannot afford any further cuts in these areas, and are disappointed to see so many possible cuts for supports in the list of “potential budget reductions.” In particular, we are concerned about the possible reductions in academic intervention teachers, special program teachers, counselors, transportation for “optional regular education programs,” focus teachers, reading initiative teachers, paraeducators, and middle school consortium teachers.

Our main message to you is that we will work with you to make the Superintendent’s Recommended Operating Budget work for our children, but we have to hold the line against further cuts in the areas of our operating budget priorities. We pledge to work with you to secure funding as we promote a cooperative relationship with state and county officials, and ask that you hold firm in promoting full funding of this request and our budget priorities.

Again, thank you for this opportunity to testify.

Kay Romero, President

Montgomery County Council of PTAs (MCCPTA)



Resolution on FY2011 Operating Budget Priorities

Whereas, MCCPTA's mission is to speak for children and without question our highest budget priority is education;

Be it resolved that the MCCPTA Delegates approve the following operating budget priorities for the organization to concentrate on this budget year, each item to be given due consideration in relation to the others.

Minimum possible class sizes,
Well-maintained, safe, secure, mold-free school facilities,
Empirically based, developmentally appropriate, fully supported curriculum implementation,
Adequate and effective staffing for special education students,
Focus on adequate school-home as well as home-school communication,
and
Academic support for all students including those needing assistance and/or enrichment.

Back Ground on Operating Budget Priorities:

MCCPTA officers visited PTA leadership in each area of the county in June and July, 2009. The list of priorities represents the most frequently mentioned concerns. Below are further details on each item.

Minimum possible class sizes- MCPS has made progress toward reducing class sizes in recent years. In a period of tight budgets it is important to protect this progress. It is especially important to target staff resources in subject areas and classrooms of highest need. This would include strategies such as:

- Hours-based staffing for special education students
- Caps on class-sizes in pivotal courses such as Algebra I

Well-maintained, safe, secure, mold-free school facilities - Devoting resources to the classroom includes devoting resources to ensuring a classroom environment that facilitates learning. Components of a good learning environment include:

- well-maintained classrooms free of mold, vectors, and other contaminants
- freedom from bullying and gang activities
- reasonably limited access to school facilities

Sensible, fully-supported curriculum implementation- Parents around the County continue to have concerns about the way major curriculum reforms are implemented, especially the accelerated math curriculum. Adequate supports would include:

- more assistance to students in filling in gaps in their background
- more teacher training BEFORE introducing the changes
- adequate instructional materials

Focus on adequate school-home as well as home-school communication - Parent involvement needs to be more of a two-way communication process. Unmet needs include:

- school based interpretation services for parents who have limited English skills
- ongoing feedback to parents on their expressed concerns

Academic support for students needing assistance and/or enrichment The high stakes nature of HSAs emphasizes the need to make sure every student has help in filling in the gaps in his education. Enhanced supports include:

- in-school tutoring opportunities
- after school programs
- summer programs

In addition, the diversity of interests and goals in the MCPS student body requires that enrichment support be provided for students who are working toward accelerating their learning.



MCCPTA FY2011 OPERATING BUDGET COMPACT

The Montgomery County Council of Parent-Teacher Associations (MCCPTA) believes that an Operating Budget for the Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) must provide funding to make progress towards the fundamental requirements described in this budget compact. This compact will provide the basis for testimony before the Board of Education and the County Council and in other forums concerning the MCPS Operating Budget for FY 2011. MCCPTA will not support any budget, MCPS Strategic Plan, or other planning or policy document, that does not make progress towards the requirements of this compact.

Goal 1 of the MCPS Strategic Plan: Ensure Success for Every Student.

MCPS must focus on raising academic performance of all students so that all may reach their full potential. There is a need for uniformly high expectations that all students, including Special Education, ESOL, and Gifted/Talented students, will succeed and will have their needs met. There must be sufficient funding for programs to raise the performance of under-performing students. There must also be adequate funding to enhance the performance of students who have attained satisfactory levels of performance but who can do better, and to challenge students who exceed satisfactory levels of performance but are able to perform at even higher levels. In order to further these goals, MCCPTA supports the following initiatives from the former years and encourages continued support for these initiatives:

- Reduced class sizes throughout the County
- Reduction in the use of substitute teachers in the classroom for teacher training
- Math content coaches
- Educational facilities officers and other security measures

In addition, the budget should provide for the following:

- Certification in the appropriate content areas for middle school teachers teaching high school courses and specialty courses offered in signature programs
- More staffing for art, music, and physical education
- Academic intervention/support such as summer learning opportunities for all students based on needs of the students throughout the County, not limited to Title I schools
- Adequate and equitable allocation of elementary school resources and staffing based on school enrollment

Goal 2 of the Strategic Plan: Provide an Adequate Instructional Program

As adequate educational staffing is achieved, it will become even more important to provide staff with the tools necessary to assure success. In order to further this goal, MCCPTA supports the following staff initiatives from the past several years and encourages continued support for these initiatives:

- Reform of the middle school curriculum to increase rigor and ensure instruction appropriate for each student.
- Expansion of accelerated and enriched programs into more secondary schools
- Improvements to technology and support for improved technology use
- Implementation of on-line achievement and reporting systems in all secondary schools
- Move toward hours based staffing for special education students in order to ensure the success of a

move toward promoting education in the least restrictive environment

In addition, priority should be given to providing for the following academic and developmental supports for students

- Increased support for high school literacy
- More emphasis on providing a well-rounded curriculum including a rich science, social studies, and arts curriculum
- Improved staffing ratios for LAD
- Increased academic intervention/support resources, including:
 - o Specific action/intervention plans for students not meeting standards under the grading and reporting policy
 - o Specific action/intervention plans for students not meeting extracurricular activity eligibility requirements.
 - o Consistent funding and implementation of special programs across the county
- Timely provision of new materials and textbooks when new curricula are introduced
- Improved vertical articulation to ensure students receive the foundation for future curriculum options.

Goal 3 of the Strategic Plan: Strengthen productive partnerships for education.

In a system with sufficient teaching resources in adequate buildings, other supports will still be needed to ensure a quality education for all children. We support continuation of the following former initiatives:

- Enhanced translation services
- Expanded study circles
- Parent access to on-line achievement and reporting systems in all secondary schools

However, there is a desperate need for enhanced communication and outreach at the local school level, especially in light of the growing number of families with limited knowledge of English. There is also a need for more general support for students and families. Therefore, we request more support for the following:

- Local school based resources for communications, especially with non-English speaking parents, and increased translation services
- Additional guidance counselors, pupil personnel workers, and other staff to address social/emotional/developmental needs at all levels
- Comprehensive countywide plan to grow the school volunteer base

Goal 4 of the Strategic Plan: Create a Positive Work Environment in a Self-Renewing Organization.

Development, retention, and recruitment of talented educational, administrative, and support staff are fundamental to maintaining a high quality of education in Montgomery County. The following initiatives are needed:

- Reduction in high turnover rate for staff from Principals to building services staff
- Increased diversity in hiring
- Focus on providing timely teacher training BEFORE the roll-out of new curricula
- Adequate training for all staff, including supporting services.

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

MCCPTA recognizes that the supporting services, including maintenance, plant operations, transportation, and other central office functions play a key role in student achievement. Outcome measurement should be used to rigorously evaluate programs for effectiveness and efficiency. It is imperative that the business model for delivering all MCPS services include accountability to parents. We support the following initiatives in prior and current plans:

- New budget document: *Superintendent's Recommended Operating Budget in Brief*
- Program to improve school building security through increased surveillance in secondary schools and

around elementary school entrances

We urge attention to the following:

- Assessment of new programs and curricula before and after implementation, to ensure that sufficient course materials, guidebooks, and implementation documents are available
- Evaluation of the use of new technology to ensure that it is the most cost-effective way to increase student performance
- Improved nutritional value for school lunch and a la carte menu selections

Finally, the setting in which education takes place should not be neglected. For optimal learning our schools, including portable classrooms, must provide an environment where the children feel safe and their health is protected. The following issues need to be addressed:

- Increased recess supervision
- More attention to addressing discipline problems, especially at the middle school level, including the problem of gangs, bullying and risk to student safety
- Adoption by MCPS of objective standards for portable conditions and installation, routine building systems maintenance, and prompt response to unanticipated repair and maintenance needs
- Revision of salary structures or increased outside contracting for positions that are persistently vacant, such as HVAC mechanics and speech and language therapists
- More maintenance and repair personnel, particularly HVAC mechanics
- Expanded indoor air quality staff, with training in building envelope issues
- Increased staffing of building services
- Reassessment and adjustment of traffic patterns around schools to promote pedestrian safety
- Reassessment of bus stop placement to promote safety
- More activity buses to promote participation in after school programming as well as a safe return home from after-school programs
- BMPs (Building Maintenance Plans) for all new schools and increased implementation of BMPs for all other aging MCPS schools

The MCCPTA recognizes that an Operating Budget that satisfies all of these requirements will necessitate a continued strong commitment to education by Montgomery County. Such a commitment and investment, however, is more than justified by the benefits a well-resourced educational system provides to the community.