

Quince Orchard Cluster of Montgomery County Council of Parent Teacher Associations

Brown Station Elementary
Diamond Elementary
Fields Road Elementary
Jones Lane Elementary
Rachel Carson Elementary
Thurgood Marshall Elementary

Lakelands Park Middle
Ridgeview Middle

Quince Orchard High

Testimony before the Board of Education January 13, 2010

President O'Neill,
Dr. Weast,
Members of the Board of Education

On behalf of the students attending Montgomery County public schools in the Quince Orchard cluster, and their parents, we appreciate this opportunity to testify before you tonight in support of the Superintendent's Recommended FY2011 Operating Budget.

We do appreciate the efforts the members of the Board of Education make in maintaining Montgomery County Public Schools as one of the best school systems in the nation. We recognize the challenges ahead of you as you serve as our guides and partners in this process. We have witnessed most of your installations on the Board in the past four years, and from our interactions with you, we have little doubt that you all share our concerns and goals for the education of the children of Montgomery County.

We recognize that the Superintendent's budget is in line with the MD State Maintenance of Effort requirements. We do support this and share your concern about the last minute manipulations in last year's budget, manipulations that have not yet been fully resolved.

Our list of operating budget priorities this year is consistent with those we have communicated to you of previous years, and it aligns with the MCCPTA Operating Budget Priorities. For this year we can express them as

- Minimize class size increases
- Retention of the best staff and continue to develop them professionally
- Retention of counselor staff and resource teachers
- Offer intervention and support for all students who need it
- Continue to offer a wide range of enrichment opportunities
- Equitable based allocation of resources, especially at the elementary level
- Recognize needs in plant maintenance level

We offer these priorities while fully recognizing that this year, with current revenue projections, many of these priorities may lose some ground.

In the Operating Budget in Brief FY 2011 are listed a Summary of potential budget reductions. We would like to share our perspective of these priorities amidst the shadows of these reductions and the looming budget revenue shortfalls.

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We feel strongly that the MCPS class size guidelines are among the most significant factors in the quality of education our children receive. We understand that increased class sizes are a strong possibility, and recognize that the other budget items have been squeezed significantly to hold this line. Acceptance of this kind of budget cut is a matter of degree. We are talking about an average increase, and parents with students in classrooms with greatly above average increases will obviously be less supportive. Discussions with parents indicate a grudging acceptance for an increase of one student, and taper off as the numbers increase. The MCPS guidelines describe class sizes that are smaller for elementary and increase through the secondary level. We feel the implementation of any increase in class sizes should maintain similar tiering.

We recognize that increases in class sizes equates to staffing reductions. We are hopeful that any consequent and unavoidable staffing reductions can be limited to natural attrition or be managed through reassignments to accommodate enrollment growth. Nobody wants to resort to layoffs. MCPS benefits and salary structures have attracted some of the best teachers in the country, no parent doubts that they are the most significant component of the quality of education in the County.

We know that intervention for students at risk and students that are struggling is a key to a school's success. Reductions in this category will be among the hardest to accept; where any student is left struggling an increased burden is realized in later years. Parents know that when a student falls, and is not helped up, the consequences can to spiral to academic failure or to dropouts. Counselor staff and resource teachers are the backbones of the intervention infrastructure. We feel that intervention, especially at the elementary levels, supports the entire school system, and that cuts in this area are not cost effective in the longer term, academically or societally.

While it is evident that MCPS is actively improving the academic curriculum and its delivery to our students, we feel strongly that other opportunities for enrichment continue to be supported. In QOHS, our parents are holding their breath about the music and arts programs and the variety of opportunities available to our students in those areas, as well as other extra-curricular clubs and sports. Parents see these opportunities producing well-rounded students, imbuing a memorable high school experience that prepares their children well for their next step in life. While no such cuts have been specifically articulated, these kinds of programs are frequently among the first to be targeted, and we feel that their loss would have costs out of proportion to the money saved.

We understand that MCPS resources are distributed to each school by formula that allocates funds according to enrollment. We have observed, for the most part, application of this formula continues to maintain a consistent proportion of resources for any given student population. We hope the proportions the formula delivers are not unduly tweaked without proper consideration by the Board and exposed to community input.

One area of allocation that appears to be a notable exception to an enrollment based formula is elementary counselor staffing. In our cluster we have an overpopulated elementary school, Rachel Carson ES, currently at 900+ students, that is allocated but 1.5 counselors. This student population is busting its facility at its seams, with 5 lunch periods and 7 portables. It is under served by this kind of allocation; I ask for your help in determining if this is dictated by a "building" based formula or is, or should be, enrollment based.

Plant maintenance, at a level that sustains buildings for their planned life spans of more than sixty years in most cases will not just manage itself. Cuts in this area are clearly a loan we are making to ourselves, borrowing against a future filled with buildings in disrepair. We hope we can minimize any further stress to this budget area.

Outside of our priorities, cuts to transportation for optional educational programs seem drastic and disruptive. Parents and students have already rearranged life around these kinds of choices. Any withdrawal of transportation should at least be phased in based on the nature and time span of the program it serves to give parents and students a fair chance to adjust to a change of this magnitude.

We note from other interaction with the BOE and the County Council that this budget, even with the suggested cuts, expresses an optimistic viewpoint. We recognize that funding from the state of Maryland at the level expressed is in doubt, and that revenues for the County are stressed and more limited than last year. The MD Maintenance of Effort law will likely be changed. We note the 42 million in suggested cuts, but can do the math on the back of a napkin and realize we have no cause to be surprised if the number ends up at 150 million.

We hope further cuts and realignments can be avoided, but recognize the grim reality of dealing with them. We urge you to consider the priorities outlined above, those in the MCPS Strategic plan and the MCCPTA Operating Budget Compact as you wrestle with the numbers.

We further recognize the importance for interaction with the Maryland state legislature for residents of Quince Orchard Cluster and the entire county. We are planning a number of methods to reach out and touch our legislators, and to try to influence the governor's office. We further urge that the BOE, the directors of MCPS and the County Council strive to maintain the most amicable and productive relations with all levels of our state government.

We look forward to working with you and the County Council to allocate the funds necessary to maintain the tradition of excellence in Montgomery County education.

Thank you for all that you do for our children's education.

Sincerely,

The PTSA's of Quince Orchard Cluster

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 - Diamond Elementary
 - Fields Road Elementary
 - Jones Lane Elementary
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 - Ridgeview Middle
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