

Watkins Mill Cluster
Watkins Mill High School.
Montgomery Village Middle School; Neelsville Middle School
South Lake ES; Stedwick ES; Watkins Mill ES; Whetstone ES

Good evening Dr. Weast, President O'Neill, and members of the Board of Education,

Let me start by saying that the Watkins Mill Cluster fully supports the Operating Budget testimony delivered by Kay Romero, and that we thank her for her leadership as we all work to advocate during these difficult times.

I would also like to thank you, the Board of Education and the MCPS staff members for giving us this dedicated opportunity to speak for the schools we represent, each and every year. This is the last time I will testify here, as my four years as Cluster Coordinator are finished this spring. As I've mentioned before, I sure picked a tough time period to jump into the advocacy business, and a tough year to leave it. But the Watkins Mill cluster is in excellent hands with my colleague, Martha Crews, and whoever steps forward to continue our efforts.

I've thought about this testimony for a long time. But, unlike every other time I've stared at the blank screen, this time nothing came to me. Really. Nothing. I attended the Operating Budget forum last week where you, along with several members of the County Council, made it clear just how painful this year—and next—will be for our schools and the county in general. Of course I knew things were bad, but the news seems to become more grim each time I hear it.

So, really, what can we say tonight? I could certainly name the things we don't want to have cut, but I can offer nothing that would be more palatable to place on the chopping block. I do not envy you the agonizing decisions that you must make in the coming months.

So, even though I know it is not necessary, given your commitment to ALL children in Montgomery County, I will ask you to please remember the least fortunate students as you deliberate.

It's been an education, serving these last 4 years as an advocate for the Watkins Mill Cluster schools. That's because, in a world with haves and have-nots, I have been blessed beyond reason. I am a "have". But the majority of families I represent have not been as lucky. For example, Watkins Mill High School has the highest mobility rate of all MCPS high schools at 20 percent, and Montgomery Village Middle School has the highest mobility rate of all middle schools at 24 percent. That means that nearly one in

four students leaves or enters the school at some point during the school year. Frankly, I think our staff and administration are miracle workers for being able to educate kids in a revolving door. And my heart really breaks for the kids who must keep starting over at new schools.

WMHS also has the highest FARMS rate in the upcounty area, at 36 percent. So when only a handful of parents show up for a PTSA meeting, I am hard pressed to nag anyone about it. After all, no matter how compelling our speaker, or what crucial business we have to conduct, it can't compete (and probably shouldn't compete) with an evening at home with your kids after a tough day working, or working multiple jobs, or looking for work. That is reality for many of our parents.

Let me finish with a story. About 3 months ago, I attended a workshop in Virginia to learn how to start an educational foundation for our schools, as I knew these were becoming common in some schools around the county. At the end of the day, I was completely overwhelmed. As I left the session, I approached the speaker to ask about less daunting options for high schools. As I was waiting, I listened to the conversation he was having with another MCPS parent. This woman was telling him about the success their *elementary school* had had with its foundation. I was floored: there are elementary schools with their own foundations?? But she went on to share the example of one thing the foundation had been able to do. It seems that the school's cafeteria had a fussy oven, and that food came out either overcooked or undercooked. When MCPS decided not to replace the oven, the foundation did it. I was green with envy.

I absolutely do not begrudge those parents their right to use their resources, whether time or money, to make their school the best it can be. That is not my point at all. My point is that, in times like these--dare I say desperate times?—many schools will have parents both able and willing to pick up the slack, make sure the extras are still there, and even heat up the chicken nuggets.

But many will not. Thank you for always having those schools in mind when you are called upon to make choices that were unthinkable when I first stood here 4 years ago.

I wish you luck, and I thank you for listening.