

Dear President Praisner and Members of the County Council:

My name is Mark Adelman and I am testifying before you as Chair of the Civic Federation Education Committee, with specific reference to the portion of the FY 2008 County Budget that will be allocated to MCPS. We reiterate our strong support of MCPS as it works to provide the highest quality education possible to all of our children. At the same time, we repeat our concerns about how the money expended by MCPS is justified to the public and how wisely it is in fact spent. While public education is a critical element in assuring a high quality of life in Montgomery County, there are many other needs that must be met. Despite what some seem to believe, there is NEVER enough money to do everything that is necessary, much less all that is desirable. The overly exuberant growth of our County in recent years has created many unfunded mandates and - as you know - it now falls to you and the County Executive to find a way to meet all the demands. We believe that the County Executive has proposed a number of reasonable modifications to the budget requests he has received. If you agree with his proposed budget - as we urge you to do - all entities, including MCPS, will receive quite significant budget increases (in fact greater than the rate of inflation), but not as much of an increase as they have requested.

We disagree with those who have argued that the budget the Executive has proposed is unreasonable and will seriously damage our school system. In our past testimonies before you on such matters, we have attempted to argue for balanced changes to MCPS budgets. In essence we have proposed a mix of increases and decreases that would be largely offsetting, so that the same number of dollars could be more wisely used. Implicit in our recommendations has been the notion that small adjustments could be made to either increase or decrease the total expenditure without causing serious disruption of our public school programs. Others have chosen to argue either for every single dollar requested, or have suggested massive but targeted cuts. In the list that follows, we make a number of suggestions as to how the differences between what MCPS has requested and the Executive has proposed can be reconciled. You will note that most of the elements in our list are variations on recommendations we have made before.

Whatever changes are required based on your decisions, there are now a number of suggestions on the table. We repeat our offer to help in the process by which choices are made amongst all the options. We understand that you, the Board of Education, and the County Executive have all been elected as independent entities, each charged with certain authorities and responsibilities. We understand that it is not within your power, nor would it be appropriate, for you to dictate the changes by which the Board and MCPS should effect the expenditure adjustments that will be necessary if you approve the budget as recommended by the Executive. But we hope - and expect - that you will work with your colleagues on the Board to find the least disruptive means of implementing changes that your approved budget will require. We ask that you do this not simply because it CAN be done with minimal harm to our children, but because it MUST be done so we can teach them a number of important realities. Help us explain to them that one is not entitled to everything one wants. Help us show them the kind of fiscal restraint

and wisdom of collaboration that we - as adults and parents - MUST teach them if they are to become responsible citizens of a democratic society. And help us minimize the risk we run, in our efforts to do so much for them, that we leave them the legacy of having overreached our capacity and having left them a burden that they will come to resent - and we will regret.

Some specifics:

1. In the discussion over the proposed reduction by some \$20 million of the budget that MCPS has requested, it appears forgotten that both the requested budget and the one proposed by the Executive will include an additional amount of expenditure (roughly \$100 million) for service on debts incurred because of funds borrowed to fund school construction projects. We do not object to this expenditure (although we could suggest ways in which the future level might be reduced somewhat). But we do wish to remind all concerned that the true level of support for our school system is nearly \$2.1 billion; hence the proposal by the executive recommends funding more than 99% of what MCPS has in fact requested.

2. We have repeatedly argued that money spent by MCPS on its budget documents and other publications is not wisely spent. To borrow from our testimony before the BoE in January: "You can offset the cost of the additional staffing we are recommending, by reducing the amount of money you allocate to the production of materials such as the "Citizens Budget" and other documents that are intended to communicate with citizens but are not cost effective. Communication is effective if it is clear, free of jargon, and honest. A community bombarded by massive amounts of confusing and/or misleading information is NOT likely to become engaged in a dialogue with the school system, nor to believe it is being asked to be a true partner in a complex set of tasks. We urge that you reduce the staffing responsible for the writing of such documents, by eliminating two staff positions from the Department of Management, Budget and Planning (in the Office of the Chief Operating Officer), as well as two staff positions in the Public Information Unit (of the Department of Communications)." We are thus suggesting not only a reduction in the materials used to produce such documents, but also in the staffing positions used to write the documents.

3. The question of staff positions which might be reduced is especially thorny because the budget documents with which you and the Executive must deal are so opaque. One issue that has generated much concern is the large number of category 3 positions in offices that appear to have very little to do with actual classroom instruction. Sorting this out is going to take some time, as well as effort directed at rebuilding community trust. We would not recommend eliminating the entire Department of Communications. But category 3 positions in the Public Information Unit should be carefully scrutinized. As you work to understand the details of the MCPS budget, we are hopeful that the staff positions you have already added to OLO and your own offices will be helpful. We are also pleased that the BoE, recognizing that it needs more help in understanding the MCPS

budget, has requested funding for one additional staff member to serve as a budget analyst. We urge that funding for this requested position NOT be cut.

4. Since so much of the MCPS budget goes to staffing, it is natural to look at the cost effectiveness of such expenditures. Reducing the number of positions that do not seem to be critical to classroom instruction may be achievable by attrition (not replacing staff that choose to leave the school system), but more information is needed before the efficacy of this approach can be evaluated.

5. Although we recognize the immense importance of classroom teachers (and support staff) to our public schools, we are concerned about the long-term impact of recent contract negotiations. Again borrowing from our testimony before the BoE in January: "Finally, recognizing the importance of the major contracts you will be negotiating this year, we join others in requesting that you hold public hearings on these negotiations and provide open input into County Council Committee sessions on the benefits and long term cost implications of these contract agreements. The community understands the importance of attracting and retaining qualified and dedicated teachers and support staff. But many citizens are concerned that contract negotiations have already lead to unsustainable cost increases. You must do everything possible to control inflationary wage/benefit increases, especially those that manifestly exceed what individual citizens are experiencing in their private sector jobs."

6. Given the intensity of reaction to the proposed closing of Secondary Learning Centers, as well as the numerous questions that have been raised as to the process, we urge that no funds be expended to move this action forward unless/ until there has been a more extensive and less heated discussion of the pros and cons.

7. We question the educational value of funds used to train students how to pass externally-mandated tests. If the funds are really being used to re-inforce learning of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that citizens of Montgomery County value, some funding for review sessions seems wise. However, expending limited funds that will be used to have classroom teachers enable our children to score well on tests that have no linkage to the educational objectives of our school system seems very hard to justify.

8. Lastly (for now), we urge that the value of funding for "technology" be very carefully scrutinized. While technological advances are popular and often very useful, every one of us knows that they are extremely costly - and not just in terms of dollars. The newest technology is often very hard to implement smoothly and may require an inordinate amount of staff time to bring it to the level of "easy use" required so that teachers are not burdened (rather than helped) by it. And while students (for the most part) seem to enjoy the newest computers and other digital devices, we have yet to see a cost/benefit analysis of funding of systems (and system upgrades) that consume a growing percentage of our resources.

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