

**Montgomery County Board of Education
Public Hearing on the Proposed FY09 Operating Budget**

January 16, 2008

**Testimony of
Bonnie Cullison, MCEA President**

Good evening President Navarro, members of the Board and Dr. Weast. Thank you for this opportunity to testify on the Superintendent's Recommended Operating Budget for Fiscal Year 2008/2009. My name is Bonnie Cullison. I am president of the Montgomery County Education Association. The 12,000 teachers and other non-supervisory professional educators represented by MCEA are committed to working with you to ensure that our schools get the funding and supports they need to be successful.

I would like to express our support for the proposed budget. We recognize that these may be challenging fiscal times. As a result, the proposed budget represents the smallest percentage increase in the budget in many years. With just a 5.6% increase, excluding the county-mandated increase in funding for GASB Trust Fund, the proposed budget increase is indeed lean.

As a result, there are many needs that are going unmet in this budget, but we believe the priorities are right. All the best programs and initiatives in the world will not make the difference for students; what does make the difference is having the most highly motivated, highly trained, and well supported teachers and other educators in place to work with them. We believe the Superintendent has made the right choices in this proposal by focusing on supporting, motivating, training, and retaining a high quality workforce. We are indeed a people business – and it is the people of MCPS that are the essential ingredient of its success.

Praiseworthy Budget Process

I believe the Superintendent is to be lauded for his inclusive approach to budget development. Nowhere else in the nation that we know of includes the PTA and the employee organizations as partners in the detailed review and development of the annual operating budget. There is no doubt in our mind that this inclusive process not only results in more support for the ultimate proposal, but also results in better decision-making. Each stakeholder brings unique information and perspectives to the discussions, which contribute to thoughtful and strategic decisions. We urge you to ensure that this inclusive process continues into the future.

Middle School Reform

Of the limited funds available for expanded initiatives in the proposal budget, more than half is devoted to improving instruction in middle schools. We fully support this focus. In particular, we want to express our support for the recommendation to continue, and expand, the Middle School Magnet Consortium. The data from the first two years is very clear; students in the MS Magnet

Consortium schools are achieving at much higher levels than they were previously. MCEA is convinced that the Magnet Consortium model is good for students. It is also good for teachers.

The proposed budget also includes funds to add nine (9) additional schools to “Middle School Reform.” However, we are troubled that the use of these funds is restricted to a particular model. As you know, this year MCPS implemented a Pilot MS Reform Model in five schools. This model was designed under the leadership of the Office of Curriculum and Instructional Programs, with the involvement of a wide range of others on advisory work groups, including MCEA. However, the data for this model is not yet compiled. While we believe that these five schools will show increases in student achievement due to the initiatives, we just don’t have the data thus far.

Yet the additional nine middle school reform schools are being restricted to implementation of this Pilot School Model. We believe that the nine schools selected for phase two of middle school reform and given additional resources to improve instruction should be given the choice of implementing either the Magnet Consortium Model or the OCIP Pilot School Model. We would urge you to consider giving local schools this flexibility.

Again, let me restate the facts: MCPS has two years of demonstrated improvement in student achievement in the MS Magnet Consortium schools. MCPS does not yet have data on the implementation and effectiveness of the OCIP Pilot School Model. Local schools should not be forced to choose the unproven model and be precluded from choosing the Magnet Consortium Model that is showing positive results with students.

Other Positive Initiatives

There are other proposed initiatives in the budget that we believe are worthwhile, even in these challenging fiscal times. The expansion of lunch hour aides in elementary schools is a safety issue that is long overdue for being addressed. The increase in the number of focus schools is a necessary response to the increasing number of schools with increasing at-risk student populations. The provision of additional school counselors in the largest elementary schools is essential to providing an equitable, minimum level of services to all elementary students. Increased funding for “hours-based staffing” will make a critical difference in the success of greater inclusion of special education students. The Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports program is proving to be a highly successful behavior management program and should be expanded to additional schools as quickly as possible.

MCEA is deeply committed to the work of the Professional Learning Communities Institute. We believe it is a core element of a well designed school improvement strategy.

What’s Missing

Unfortunately, there continues to be a number of unmet needs within MCPS. Of most concern to MCEA is the problem of class sizes in secondary schools. Based on last year’s data (06/07), there were close to 600 classes in core academic subjects in secondary schools that exceeded the

Board of Education's own recommended class size maximums. This simply is not good for students, or for teachers.

Over the past eight months, a Joint Work Group of teachers, principals, and central office staff have examined the staffing guidelines for elementary art, music, and physical education. They have made a series of recommendations; including increasing instructional time in those areas in early childhood grades, especially in response to the implementation of full-day kindergarten, and to correct the omission of staffing for elementary chorus classes in the staffing formula. Again, we would hope that as we look towards the following year's budget, we can find a way to support these improvements. Let's not forget that learning isn't just about test scores – we want to educate “the whole child.”

We also share the concerns of Pupil Personnel Workers and School Psychologists that their staffing levels have not kept pace with the increasing expectations of their jobs and needs of their students. This too, we hope, can be the subject of attention in upcoming budgets.

We continue to hear concerns from schools all across the county about inadequate and malfunctioning heating and air conditioning systems. We know there is a regional shortage of HVAC mechanics. However, we urge MCPS to continue to do whatever it can to train and hire more HVAC mechanics in order to ensure that these critical school needs can be met. Learning, and teaching, is difficult when the classroom is either 90 degrees, or 60 degrees.

Finally, as we look toward the future, I want to emphasize our belief that MCPS must continue to invest in the professional development of its workforce. We believe that the existing Professional Growth Systems have been integral to the increasing student success within MCPS. We believe that continuing support for those systems is essential to sustain improvement in student learning. Because of the need to find non-school based savings, the proposed budget includes some significant cuts in staffing in the Office of Organizational Development. There should be no doubt that the loss of these positions will have an impact on the extent of professional development provided within MCPS. Therefore it is critical that we prioritize the professional development needs of the system and re-organize existing resources to meet those needs.

We know that the county's investment in our schools is making a difference in the lives of tens of thousands of children. We look forward to working with you to explain to the public and to the county government why that continuing commitment is so important. Indeed it is important not only to our students, but to the economic well-being of our county.

Working together, with funding that provides for the recruitment and retention of a highly skilled workforce and the appropriate program resources, we believe we can continue to narrow and ultimately close the achievement gap and support achievement for all students at high levels. Indeed this is the imperative that we felt as we worked together to create this budget.