

Testimony of the Walter Johnson Cluster

MCPS Operating Budget

Montgomery County Board of Education

January 5, 2017

President Durso, Members of the Board, Dr. Smith:

My name is James Bradley and I am testifying on behalf of the Walter Johnson Cluster of PTAs. Please also find attached Operating Budget requests submitted by the Ashburton Elementary School PTA.

Before beginning our testimony on the Operating Budget, I want to express our sincerest gratitude for the actions that the Board took at the November 21<sup>st</sup> Work Session in response to the Superintendent's Recommendations to address overcrowding in the Walter Johnson Cluster. Thanks to your efforts, the WJ Cluster is now set upon a path that, we believe, will ultimately address overcrowding throughout our region. We stand ready to work with you to make this a reality, by addressing our capital needs as well as the needs of every MCPS school community.

We also want to again express our gratitude that thanks to the Board, last year's operating budget provided for an additional half-time counselor for elementary schools whose populations exceed 800 students such as the Ashburton and Garrett Park ES communities. The additional counseling support for students at these schools may be, in some cases, the difference between a student who falls through the cracks and a student who gets the help that he or she needs to thrive. So, we thank you on behalf of students who will never know that without your actions their lives would have turned out much to the worse.

Overcrowding is indeed the foremost issue facing the Cluster, and that issue's impacts are not just felt on the capital side of the budget, but also permeate the operating budget. If you were to boil down our thoughts into a key phrase it would be this: Staffing as well as buildings must keep pace with growth. Many of our schools exceed, or soon will exceed, the MCPS recommended school size. These schools must be staffed appropriately.

That is why the Cluster has grave concerns with elements of the Superintendent's budget that appear to be reducing staffing, particularly at the elementary school level. Given the large influx of students that has our schools bursting at the seams, proposals to reduce staffing worries us. We discuss our concerns in more detail, below.

As our school population has grown, the need for qualified teachers, for support and administrative staff, for special needs staffing, and for qualified substitutes has grown at least as much if not more. We ask that as the Board evaluates the Superintendent's Strategic Priorities, particularly those focused on Improving Teaching and Learning, Learning, Accountability and Results, and Human Capital, that the Board consider whether or not schools facing substantial enrollment pressures are staffed adequately to meet this challenge.

But first and foremost, we ask, we beg, please do not cut further positions in our schools. Over the last several years, many of our schools have lost staff that have not been replaced, while enrollment has grown and needs have increased. While we have areas of staffing that we would like to see increased, we ask that you first do no harm and do not cut further the people necessary to run our schools therefore helping every student to succeed.

As I noted in my written comments within the WJ Roundtable Report from last spring, good schools are not just bricks and mortar. Good schools are dependent upon talented, dedicated, hardworking, caring and committed teachers, paraeducators, support staff, building services staff, principals, administrators, volunteers, and ultimately, all of you. In Montgomery County we are fortunate to have the best staff of any school district in the nation, and we are grateful to each and every one of them.

### **Cuts in the Superintendent's Budget Request**

**The Elimination of the Instructional Data Analyst Position:** The WJ Cluster does not support the elimination of the IDA position. While we appreciate, and even share, the Superintendent's goal of improving the collection and analysis of data by focusing on improved systems, we have a collective sense of skepticism about better technology reducing the time and effort necessary to adequately collect and analyze the data necessary to meet the Superintendent's laudable goals of individualized tracking and a results-oriented and accountable MCPS. If only it were a universal truth that more technology led to more efficiency. Further, IDAs not only analyze the data, they also oversee its collection; IDAs monitor and assist in administering tests. Elimination of this category of staffing may ultimately lead to a greater burden being placed on the classroom teachers and remaining administrative staff in administering data collection and analyzing the results. In overcrowded schools, where class sizes remain large due to space limitations and the sheer number of sections, adding more burdens to classroom teachers and support staff is in our opinion a mistake.

**Virtual Elimination of the Reading Initiative Program:** The WJ Cluster opposes cuts to the Reading Initiative Program. Our school communities have found the program to be of great assistance to our elementary students; not only does the Reading Initiative help to improve the reading performance of students entering school who struggle with reading or who cannot yet read, but it also reduces the student/teacher ratio in those grades. This cannot be overstated - without the Reading Initiative Program, such a large a portion of the classroom teachers' time would be spent supporting struggling students that students currently at or above grade level in reading may not continue to progress. In fact, based on the success of the Reading Initiative at several of our schools, the WJ Cluster would like to see if a similar type of program could be created with a focus on mathematics. To summarize, the WJ Cluster opposes the virtual elimination of the Reading Initiative, and instead recommends considering a pilot Math Initiative Program based on the existing model.

**Busing and Transportation:** Several of our schools have reported that not only are the schools overcrowded, but so are the buses. Parents have reported that children are boarding buses that do not have enough seats for all students; children are standing or sitting on the floor of buses. We

cannot understand how it is possible that given this situation, increasing enrollment throughout the system, and particularly greater enrollment within our Cluster, that the Superintendent is recommending eliminating several bus driver positions. For example, due to increased population in one neighborhood, a bus stop that had less than a dozen children 5 years ago now has 28 children each morning. We urge the Board and MCPS to carefully look at busing allocations to ensure the safety of our children and that each school has an appropriate number of buses.

**Preschool Education Program (PEP) Home Community Consult:** The WJ Cluster opposes cuts to the Home Community Consult component of the PEP Intensive Needs Class. Cutting the Home Community Consult will be devastating to children and families in the program. The Home Community Consult program allows the teacher to go to the family's house, or to meet them out in the community, and work with the parents directly on helping their children. Another vital element of the program allows PEP staff to help in a child's before school or after school care center. PEP staff have reported many incidences where children would have been kicked out of child care facilities if this program did not exist; had that occurred parents would've had to stop working if it were not for PEP staff there to support their childcare situation. There have also been situations where the children were being unsafe with their younger siblings and needed emergency help from the PEP teachers. These dedicated staff work with parents on strategies for decreasing the aggressive behavior and increasing sharing and playing behaviors with siblings. PEP staff are able to help parents recognize potentially dangerous situations and behaviors and model strategies in real time to teach more appropriate behavior. On paper the changes to create staffing efficiencies for cost effectiveness may look good. In practice, the Home Community Consult develops the social-emotional foundation for the well-being and future success of these most vulnerable students and has a huge impact on the students and their families.

**Areas We Would Like the Board and MCPS to Consider Prioritizing:**

**Student/Teacher Ratios:** As noted, above, the Reading Initiative teacher has helped to reduce Student/Teacher ratios in elementary classrooms. We believe that such efforts that increase the number of teachers and assistants in classrooms are hugely beneficial to students, particularly students in overcrowded schools, which by their nature have both large class sizes and physical plant challenges. While the Cluster appreciates the focus on elementary school class size reduction, we believe that at the elementary school level, lower student/teacher ratios would have far more benefit than a reduction in class size of one or two students per class. Therefore we ask that MCPS and the Board consider a student/teacher ratio metric, as opposed to the more traditional class size, as the metric by which adequacy in school staffing is judged. To that end, we ask that the Board and MCPS consider whether the formula for allocating paraeducators to schools may need to be modernized to take into account the larger class sizes that naturally come with increased growth in schools. The WJ Cluster believes that if there is to be an increased focus on Human Capital, that an increase in qualified paraeducators at the elementary school level is essential.

We would note that at the secondary school level, there is simply no substitute for smaller class sizes. We note with some concern the size of Advanced Placement classes at Walter Johnson High School. We ask that every effort be made to increase staffing at schools, such as Walter Johnson, that have seen sharp increases in enrollment.

**Recess and Lunch Monitors:** We want every child to have a safe experience at school. Yet with grade levels that exceed 150 students, there is a severe need for more recess monitors to ensure that children are safe at recess. Recess space is overcrowded as well as classroom space, and without proper supervision outside, we fear that children are truly “playing at their own risk.” Likewise, you have heard much testimony during the capital budget hearings about overcrowded lunch periods. As a cluster, we want to do everything we can to make sure that all children have the opportunity to actually eat their food during lunch periods, especially children on free and reduced lunch plans. Moreover, the number of paraeducators required to ensure a safe lunch and recess necessarily means that these vital staff are not in the classroom, where they are most needed. More staffing could improve the efficiency of lunch periods, thus helping to ensure that the children who have the misfortune to be at the back of the lunch line on any given day still have a chance to not only get their food but also eat it.

**Extension of Chrome Books to Second Grade:** Many of our Elementary School communities have asked about the potential to expand the Chromebook program to second grade. This is especially important to those schools that have had their computer labs dismantled due to capacity concerns. However, many parents have expressed concerns about how Chromebooks are being used in classrooms, and whether students’ privacy is being adequately protected as well as whether or not students have access to inappropriate materials. We urge that as part of the training component of the Superintendent’s Focus on Human Capital, training on the use of Chromebooks in the classroom be included. Further, we ask that as part of the Superintendent’s Focus on Operational Excellence, attention is paid to IT system support to ensure security and privacy protections throughout the MCPS network and to limit access only to educational appropriate websites.

**Qualified Substitutes:** At all levels, our communities are worried about the lack of qualified substitutes. Stories of substitutes for Spanish class who do not speak Spanish, tone deaf substitutes for music class, substitutes for AP Physics who, like me, never actually took the subject themselves raise serious concern about whether or not children are receiving proper instruction when their primary teacher is out. This is of particular concern in the case of long term subs, filling in for teachers on medical or parental leave, on jury duty, or in other circumstances whereby they are not going to be in the class room for an extended period of time. We urge the Board and MCPS to look into improving the quality of the substitute pool, and we hope that will be a result of the Superintendent’s intended Focus on Human Capital.

**Administrative Staff, Assistant Principals, and Assistant School Administrators:** As enrollment continues to increase, so does the administrative burden of running a school. We urge the Board and MCPS to staff our schools in order to meet the challenges of running schools that in many cases in the Cluster exceed the MCPS recommended school size. Specifically, we ask that in the case of Walter Johnson High School, the Assistant School Administrator job be

upgraded to a 12-month Assistant Principal position and that at Ashburton Elementary School, an Assistant School Administrator be added as soon as possible. With 919 students, Ashburton is as large as some MCPS Middle Schools and an ASA is desperately needed to staff the office while the Principal and Assistant principal attend IEP meetings and conduct other vital roles.

**Media Center Staffing:** Many of our schools have had their Media Assistant positions cut. As our schools' populations increase, so does the pressure on our remaining staff to deliver on programmatic needs, including those provided by the media center.

**Resource Teachers in Special Education and Special Education Staff-High School:** Walter Johnson HS hosts both the countywide Gifted and Talented/Learning Disabled program and the countywide Asperger's Syndrome program, both with rapidly growing student populations. It maintains Learning for Independence and Learning & Academic Disabilities programs, while serving numerous students with a great variety of disabilities. Other schools with large separate disability programs have 2 Resource Teachers in Special Education; WJHS has only one. We ask you to allocate a second educator for this position, so that WJHS can send a RTSE into classrooms to observe students, as well as handling all the special education meetings and IEPs required.

We also want to thank Superintendent Smith for proposing an increase in special education staffing – both teachers and trained paraeducators – to meet the full needs of the increasing population of students with disabilities. Without added staff, these students will face an increased opportunity gap. As Superintendent Smith says in the cover letter for the operating budget, “We must act now to create a school system where academic success is not predictable by race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, language or disability”.

**Psychologist and Counselor Staffing:** While Walter Johnson technically has a full-time psychologist, who is doing a tremendous job I might add, she is pulled away from WJ one day a week to cover duties at another school. Given the growth in the school population, and the needs facing the school, we recommend that the maximum degree practicable, staffing be adjusted in order to ensure that the psychologist be able to be present at school full time. In addition, WJ is in need of additional counseling and Pupil Personnel Worker positions, to meet the student's needs.

As you know, Tilden MS stands as an outstanding example of how students with special needs can thrive in a public school setting when provided with an appropriate support system. The number of Tilden students with special needs including Asberger's Syndrome continues to grow and an additional counselor to focus on these students is sorely needed.

**Division of Long Range Planning:** We get to spend a lot of time with Mr. Gallihue and his excellent staff thanks to the substantial growth and capital needs of the Cluster. We know that DLRP has many large projects, not just ours, in the coming months and probably the coming years. We urge the Board and the Superintendent to make sure that DLRP has the resources it needs to meet all of the obligations that you, that we, and the circumstances of growth and development in the County have placed upon them.

### **Conclusion:**

While this may seem like a laundry list of “I want more!” it is actually a list of needs our schools are facing due to overcrowding. And WJ Schools are not unique in facing overcrowding; schools to the east, south, west, and north of us are all experiencing record growth due to neighborhood turnover but also due to substantial development and building. You only have to follow the forest of cranes in Bethesda, Rockville, Silver Spring, Wheaton, and everywhere in between to understand. And with the upcoming buildout of the White Flint, Lyttonsville and Kensington Sector Plan, as well as new plans being considered by the Planning Board and the County Council, such as the Grosvenor/Strathmore Minor Master Plan Amendment, the White Flint 2 Rock Spring and Bethesda Plans, as well as the development plan for the WMAL property, more growth is coming upon the WJ Cluster fast.

But why is that growth happening? In no small part, it’s because of the quality of education children receive in Montgomery County. That’s why my wife and I chose to live here and not in DC or Virginia. That’s why people are choosing to move here and to build their families here. As I noted above, schools are not just bricks and mortar but it’s the people within the walls that make our schools what they are today. And what we have within those walls is an economic asset that is driving people to want to move themselves and their businesses here. We need to preserve that asset. But we also need to ensure that, as Dr. Smith has so eloquently said, every student is reaching his or her potential and is graduating with the ability to get a 21<sup>st</sup> century job and find their path. And that takes a sufficient investment of resources to get the job done.

In his seminal 1838 speech, “The Necessity of Education in Republican Government,” the education reformer and public education pioneer Horace Mann made what is still to me the best argument for the need for a robust system of public education. Mann’s thesis is that education is not only the single best solution posed to the challenges of American society, but also that education is essential to the existence of the American Republic; without a universal system of education that is accessible to all children from their earliest ages, the American experiment is doomed.

Mann spoke at a time of great social turmoil, when commentators rightly said that the nation had never been more divided. When changes to the economic structure of the young nation tore at its fabric. When new technology shrunk time and distance. And yet, or perhaps because of that, his words ring true down to our time.

Montgomery County embraces the concepts expounded by Mann in the summer of 1838 in my home state of Massachusetts. That’s part of what makes this place different and it’s in large part what is drawing people here from all over the region, the nation, and the world. People want to live in a place that values education and here that is what we do. As you craft a budget for FY 18, you are playing in no small way a part in ensuring the continued function of the American experiment and you are making decisions that will impact the lives of not just the 159,000 students in MCPS, but also their parents, neighbors, and everyone who makes up the communities they live in today and will ultimately live in the future.

Thank you for the work you do, the burden you have taken on, and for the opportunity to testify before you today.

Testimony of the Walter Johnson Cluster – Appendix (Ashburton Elementary School)  
MCPS Operating Budget  
Montgomery County Board of Education  
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President Durso, Members of the Board, Dr. Smith:

In addition to the written and oral testimony you will have from James Bradley on behalf of the Walter Johnson Cluster, we want to briefly urge you to address specific issues at Ashburton ES. As you know, our school is the largest ES in the WJ Cluster. As of this morning after a new student enrolled, our school now serves 918 children – more than 150 students more than is recommended.

Because we are such a large school, and growing every year, we have certain needs that since we are short on space, only staff can mitigate. We are built for approximately 650 students so we thank you for going forward with our planned addition and use of modular classrooms addressed in the CIP this fall. But along with the need for more space, Ashburton's size warrants the following additional staffing:

- \*an ASA
- \*a 1.0 School Secretary
- \*additional Paraeducators (to help with our 6 lunch periods)
- \*increasing our .5 counselor to a full 1.0 counselor

Our administrative staff are working tirelessly to fulfill the daily needs of 918 students but are finding the task increasingly difficult. For example, our school secretary has had to become a catch all for numerous tasks. She is our business manager, our office manager, and secretary to our principal and vice-principal all while addressing the concerns of students and parents who come to the front office.

As parents who witness the heroic effort of Ashburton's staff, we worry that without relief, we will lose dedicated educators to fatigue. In fact, our staffing deficiencies have prompted a group of parents to volunteer every morning to help our front office manage the hustle and bustle of 918 children arriving at school. While parental volunteers are appreciated, it's not a sustainable model.

Lastly, we are concerned about Dr. Smith's proposal to reduce the number of Reading Initiative Staff. Currently, Ashburton, receives a RI allocation of 1.2 and we ask that you keep our current allocation next year.

We are ever cognizant of the growing list of needs the Board is required to address with the Operating Budget you will present to County Council. We ask that the priorities you highlight with that request reflect the growing student population at Ashburton.



Thank you for your consideration,

Sara Cortes and Shannon Ross  
Ashburton Cluster Representatives