

County Council Operating Budget Testimony

Richard Montgomery Cluster

Beall ES, College Gardens ES, Ritchie Park ES, Bayard Rustin ES, Twinbrook ES,
Julius West MS, and Richard Montgomery HS

April 19–21, 2022

Dear President Albornoz, Vice-President Glass, and the Montgomery County Council,

Thank you for the opportunity to present written testimony on the FY23 operating budget. My name is Amy Ackerberg-Hastings. I serve MCCPTA as this year's Richard Montgomery cluster coordinator; I am the parent of a Julius West 8th-grader; and my family has enjoyed living in Montgomery County since 1997, chiefly in the Twinbrook neighborhood of Rockville.

Thank you also for your historical support of the county's children through the provision of public education and for your willingness to consider the County Executive's recommendation to fund 98.9% of the FY23 operating budget request from MCPS. We appreciate the size of this portion of the county's overall operating budget and the scope of the staffing, services, equipment, and other resources that will be made possible by this appropriation. Some of the new and continuing initiatives announced in MCPS's plans for this funding that we believe will be especially beneficial for our cluster include:

- A commitment for a **full-time staff development teacher in every school** and a **full-time reading specialist in every elementary school**.
- Development of **career pathways** that encourage staff to stay in the system while they work and learn their way into new responsibilities and challenges.
- Attention to **mental health** through the addition of support staff and restorative justice coaches, training opportunities for teachers and staff, and implementation of the curriculum for social and emotional learning.
- The continuation of the **Virtual Academy** and a willingness to consider expanding virtual and hybrid instruction so that students in all schools have access to all courses.

At the same time, the families in our cluster are concerned about **reductions in staffing allocations** for the 2022–2023 school year that MCPS has announced at many of our schools. Some of these, such as the loss of 2 classroom teachers at College Gardens ES and 3 teachers at Beall ES, are understandable adjustments to the decrease in the official enrollment for 2021–2022. However, **43%** of the drop in enrollment that occurred between 2019 and 2021 **has already been made up** in the first three quarters of this school year. We would not be surprised if over 50% of the decrease has disappeared by the time classes resume in August. Basing staffing projections for next year on an artificial low engendered by the pandemic strikes us as shortsighted.

Meanwhile, the new role of **classroom monitor** created in response to the myriad stresses experienced by students throughout the past two years has been a huge help with classroom management and student social-emotional health in all of our schools. Perhaps their greatest assistance has been provided to some of the most vulnerable student populations: special needs, FARMS, and ESOL. We are grateful for the ESSER funds that helped make these positions possible as well as increased allocations for paraprofessionals and lunch hour aides. Even though

the monitors, in particular, were designed as temporary supports, we would like to see MCPS explore how the improvements these employees have provided to school climates and academics could be made permanent. Instead, Twinbrook ES, our cluster's Title I school, is unable to renew the positions held by 6–7 recent hires, and Beall is among the schools also dealing with reductions of support personnel including specialists, ESOL, Focus Teacher, Special Education, Paraeducators (variety of classifications), and Lunch/Hour aide.

While all of our principals have done a fantastic job of inspiring their staffs to effectively re-acclimate students to behavioral expectations in the school environment and to address learning loss, unfortunately the impacts of COVID-19 have not yet come to an end. For instance, Julius West MS has reported that it is only now, in April, that all 1400 students have settled into anything approaching the rhythms of a “normal” school year. The **additional human resources** provided by federal, state, and county funds remain essential for overcoming academic needs and creating safe and supportive spaces for learning, but reductions in support staff that require school communities to adapt to a new set of changes in class sizes, schedules, teaching strategies, and the like will further test the resilience of students, families, and staff who have already dealt with unprecedented experiences.

Thus, our cluster has two asks for the County Council:

1. Please **fund MCPS's FY23 operating budget request** at least at the level recommended by the County Executive. Should the Council decide to exceed the request, we would like to see members strongly encourage MCPS to apply additional funds toward **maintaining 2021–2022 staffing allocations** in 2022–2023.
2. We understand that BOE is afforded discretion to determine the most appropriate manner to deliver educational services within its recommended budget allocation. Nonetheless, we ask the Council to **exercise oversight** by holding MCPS accountable for wise stewardship of its human resources. For example, our families have struggled to understand precisely how much is budgeted in which areas for each school because the format for the FY23 operating budget presentation lacked the detail and transparency of the reporting provided in previous years.

Thank you for taking the time to read this testimony. I have written it from my hometown of Essex, IA, whose tiny public school graduates about 13 students each year. Admittedly, there are many differences between it and our sprawling system of 162,000 students. However, one of the strengths that I believe can be exported from Essex Community Schools to MCPS is its guarantee that every student from preK to grade 12 is genuinely known by at least one adult. Montgomery County boasts a talented, dedicated, caring group of teachers, specialists, support staff, principals, and administrators; with adequate staffing, they too can ensure that every single student is mentored by at least one trustworthy adult during the school years that have formed all of us.

In closing, our cluster sends its best wishes as you make difficult decisions in a challenging budgetary environment.

Sincerely,
Amy Ackerberg-Hastings, PhD
MCCPTA Cluster Coordinator, Richard Montgomery Cluster