

Whitney Ellenby -- founder of Autism Ambassadors and attorney -- whose attention was brought to the issue regarding the effort by MCPS to dilute the autism services at Darnestown Elementary School.

I realize that educational decisions are the domain of MCPS, not Council, but the Board of Ed is requesting an increase of 7 Million for special education – in the interest of economy, I think you should know where that money is going, and where it isn't going. The difficult reality with which all must contend is that Autism is the only disability worldwide that's on a staggering rise and we don't know why, but it's not slowing down or stopping. The stress this is going to put on County is impossible to quantify, but we know for certain there will be more and more children on the spectrum coming who need specialized support.

What you may not know is that Darnestown program is the only Autism-Specific diploma program of its kind, serves a subset of kids that no other County program can. And now MCPS is weakening it by removing 7 paraeducators and redistributing them to other Learning Centers throughout the County in the name of equity. But nothing about this is equitable – the other LCs are diploma-bound but serve a diverse population of special needs, so these paras will be managing multiple, often conflicting, demands. The autistic children will command the attention of the paras bc their needs are intense and unique. And the students at Darnestown who depend on these paras will be deprived of the level of supervision they need to succeed. These students are diploma-bound, in a highly structured program, and now they have to do more with less at an early intervention stage that is critical to their futures.

At a time when Autism – unlike any other disability in this country – is climbing, our funding should go towards expanding the Darnestown model. I have a son who's 23 with Autism, so I've been immersed in special education matters for over 20 years and it's not hard to see where this is going – students at Darnestown will flounder without enough paras, and the students at LCs will consume the paras there. Multiple parents will start demanding one-to-one aides for their children, which is their legal right to achieve IEP goals, at the County's expense.

As you consider the budget, I respectfully encourage you to consult with the Board of Education and Darnestown Elementary to understand why it's indispensable, and how weakening the autism-specific program will cost the County more than you know. Thank you.