

Testimony of the Walter Johnson Cluster
Regarding the Removal of the Woodward High School Auditorium

April 8, 2024

President Friedson, Vice President Stewart, and Members of the Council, thank you for the opportunity to testify tonight. My name is Emily Beckman and I am honored to testify on behalf of the Walter Johnson Cluster of PTAs.

First, let me thank President Friedson, Vice President Stewart, and Councilmember Mink for communicating your support for Woodward's needs to the Board of Education and to your Council colleagues. We are grateful. Nine of you represent districts where all or part of the district will be impacted by Woodward's reopening. We need all of you to help.

The Walter Johnson Cluster is outraged by MCPS' proposal to open Woodward High School without the full amenities available at every other Montgomery County high school – specifically, without an auditorium.

Phased construction is far more expensive than building a school in a single phase. The \$20 million currently required to build an auditorium at Woodward High School in Phase 2 will undoubtedly increase if it is relegated to a third phase of construction. We have no confidence in MCPS assurances that this proposed Phase 3 will ever happen; they've provided no timeline or funding in the proposed CIP. MCPS has recently and repeatedly failed to provide transparent and accurate information to the community on a wide range of issues, so assurances without funding are meaningless to us.

An auditorium is a necessary facility for an MCPS high school. Fall plays, spring musicals, choral, orchestra, and band concerts are essential offerings of every single Montgomery County High School. This month, WJ will use its auditorium to hold a student production of *Les Miserables*, which I cordially invite all of you to attend. Where will Woodward hold its musical? At the spring concert, which I also invite you to attend, it is a WJ tradition for seniors in the choral music program to sing their final numbers in tribute to their parents, teachers, and each other in the auditorium. It is always a standing room only event. Where will Woodward's singers and artists develop similar traditions?

The auditorium is the epicenter of music and drama departments. Those programs provide community and connection; they are a place where many kids find their people. At a time when attendance and student mental health are top concerns, we should not be cutting back on programs and spaces that make kids want to go to school; that make them feel accepted and celebrated. What happens to the mental health of the Woodward theater kids if there's no theater? Where do they go? What happens to them?

High school auditoriums are not only used for artistic productions. They are also used for a wide range of assemblies, to address whole grade levels or the whole school, for testing with state mandated tests, for AP exams and MCPS provided SAT testing, for parent meetings, for

orientation meetings for 9th grade students, and for community events. The WJ auditorium is also used by our elementary schools for 5th grade promotion ceremonies and instrumental music concerts and by our middle schools for seasonal student concerts and 8th grade promotion ceremonies. And when a student brought a loaded firearm to school, it was in the auditorium where anxious WJ parents met with administration staff, MCPS security, and MCPD officers.

The County is about to embark on a boundary study to determine which students will be re-assigned to Woodward High School. This boundary study will be of a scale never before attempted by MCPS. It will include communities from 8 existing high schools, comprising thirty-six percent of all MCPS students. It is both unwise and counterproductive to enter into this boundary study allocating students to 8 schools that have auditoriums and one that does not. This boundary study will be challenging enough without adding a major reason for families to fear that a change of school assignment to Woodward will leave their child without access to the performance spaces and performance opportunities available to students at the other 8 high schools.

There were good reasons for splitting the construction of Woodward High School into two phases – despite the inevitable added costs of phased construction. There are not good reasons to further splinter the Woodward project into an additional Phase 3. We understand that difficult choices need to be made in difficult budget years. But to deprive the future Woodward artists of the facilities enjoyed by every other County school is wrong. If you vote to move required facilities at Woodward to a new “Phase 3” you do so knowing that you are voting to open Woodward High School without an auditorium, reversing the long-standing commitment that Woodward High School would be built with facilities equal to those of every other Montgomery County High School.