

Public Hearing on Fiscal Year 2025 (FY25) Operating Budgets – April 8, 2024

Richard Montgomery Cluster PT(S)A Testimony

RICHARD MONTGOMERY HS * JULIUS WEST MS * BEALL ES * COLLEGE GARDENS ES

RITCHIE PARK ES * BAYARD RUSTIN ES * TWINBROOK ES

Presented by Amy Ackerberg-Hastings (RM Cluster Co-Coordinator and RM HS parent)

Good afternoon, President Friedson, members of the County Council, and staff. Thank you for the opportunity to testify about the FY25 Operating Budget allocation for MCPS. My name is Amy Ackerberg-Hastings, and I am the parent of a Richard Montgomery High School sophomore as well as one of the MCCPTA cluster coordinators for the 7 RM cluster PT(S)As. This written testimony highlights the need for Twinbrook Elementary School to finally be included in the Linkages to Learning Program and outlines the operating budget priorities for our entire cluster.

First, the Twinbrook community in Rockville is delighted that County Executive Elrich has taken an interest in bringing Linkages to Learning¹ to this Title I school. I am here today to ask the County Council to **direct the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) to move forward with establishing Linkages to Learning at Twinbrook ES.**

In case you are not familiar with this fantastic program, for over 25 years MCPS and DHHS have partnered with nonprofits in the county to bring family and health services as well as community education and development to high-needs school communities. Participating schools receive 2–5 additional staff, including case managers, family therapists, and community school aides or coordinators. Although Twinbrook’s FARMS and Emergent Multilingual Learner (EML) rates are higher than those at 6 of the 24 current Linkages elementary schools (4 of which are not Title I schools), and although its FARMS rate has steadily increased over the past 20 years from about 50% to over 70%, Twinbrook is one of 18 Title I schools left out of Linkages.

Thanks to the Maryland Blueprint, Twinbrook has held the **new designation of Community School** for the past two years, which includes a Community School liaison and nurse. The liaison has worked hard to build a network of resources and partnerships, such as a youth and family counselor on loan from the City of Rockville who is in the school two days a week. However, some of the nonprofits offering job counseling and English-language classes are in Wheaton and Silver Spring, a long bus ride away for the families who need these services, and none of these supports are the same as having multiple full-time staff on site. When families move into Twinbrook’s service area from schools with Linkages, they immediately notice and comment on the difference in support. At least one new student has mental health needs that are so severe that their Linkages counselor volunteered to continue meeting them in our neighborhood, even though the student’s official Linkages placement has ended.

Additionally, having Linkages could potentially lead to reinstatement of the **after-school tutoring in English Language Arts (ELA) and math that was offered to students at**

¹ MCPS’s webpage: <https://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/community-engagement/linkages-to-learning/>.

DHHS’s webpage: <https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/hhs-program/cyf/cyflinkagestolearning-p225.html#apply>.

Twinbrook during the 2022–2023 school year, which had an immediate, measurable, positive impact on student performance; the cessation of that program in the 2023–2024 school year has had an immediate, measurable, negative impact on student performance. This program is an example of the targeted approach to tutoring that MCPS’s research has shown to be effective. What long-term planning has MCPS done to offer continuity for students as they pass from these key years for early intervention—when elementary schools form the longest-lasting relationships with families—into middle and high school where tutoring services are more readily available?

We have had difficulty ascertaining why bringing Linkages to Twinbrook is taking so long; for instance, we are hearing conflicting information about **whether newly-constructed vacant space is still a prerequisite** for the program. Given that multiple PTA leaders advocated unsuccessfully last year with MCPS’s Division of Capital Planning to keep at least 2 of the 4 portables that were used for special education and other services for many years, and given that Twinbrook’s renovation is continually pushed back or removed from the Capital Improvement Plan (CIP), you might not be surprised to hear that we feel trapped in a Catch-22—our portables were taken, but Twinbrook’s physical structure has not been enlarged. Nonetheless, we are patient and persistent people, so this testimony represents an opening salvo in the advocacy efforts we are putting together in cooperation with the entire RM cluster. Also, the Latino Civic Program is starting a class at Twinbrook tomorrow (April 9), so you can expect those parents to begin appearing before you in coming months.

We are aware that MCPS’s **changes in the process for identifying Title I schools** have been heavily reported by local media, and we are concerned that this designation might increasingly rely on the discretion of central office rather than concrete, transparent criteria such as the data on FARMS forms. Another unanswered question I personally have is: What happened to the Focus schools program? Why does MCPS now seem to be telling communities that they will either get Title I resources or nothing? Twinbrook was actually a Focus school for most of the time that my child was a student there, and those funds provided supports such as reduced class sizes until Twinbrook’s demographics finally were consistently safely within whatever Title I threshold was set by MCPS in a given year.

In the second main component of this testimony, the RM cluster wants to reiterate the points we made to the Board of Education on January 25. Our priorities for implementing MCPS’s proposed FY2025 operating budget are mainly focused on how **staffing ratios, allocations, and formulas continue to prevent schools from being successful and are not equitable. MCPS has significant needs, and we urge the County Council to foster the success of all students by funding these needs.** For instance:

- Our schools are not all the same size, so having one position per school or basing staffing solely on percentages shortchanges schools with larger enrollments. Formulas need to consider *both proportions of students and total numbers of students*. For example, Bayard Rustin ES’s 806 students require a very heavy lift from staff in addressing student behaviors and conflicts, holding parent meetings, offering support for families and students in crisis, furthering staffing and retention efforts, and conducting many, many observations and evaluations. All of these duties pull the staff away from being highly effective instructional and operational leaders. This large school needs an Assistant School Administrator (ASA) to share the load carried by the principal and assistant

principal. A bilingual paraeducator is currently helping the Spanish-speaking secretary to communicate with the school's many EML families; a second bilingual office support person would allow the paraeducator to return to their main role, fostering students' academic progress.

- The *50:1 ratio for lunch and recess supervision* at elementary schools creates unsafe situations and makes it difficult for adults to build relationships with students that nurture their emotional and physical well-being.
- Increased mental health staffing in secondary schools has demonstrated the effectiveness of these supports. At the elementary level, *one psychologist should not be asked to serve multiple schools*. Further, the *600:1 ratio for counselors* makes it impossible to provide the essential care and attention every student deserves.
- *Allocations for specialists* (e.g., reading, focus, and staff development teachers) *need to be 1.0* for each position and school, and the allocations need to be set at 1.0 throughout the staffing process, not cut and then restored after principals spend valuable time fighting for what we already know students need. As noted above, large schools such as Bayard Rustin should have allocations of 2.0 or higher.
- Our growing population of *Emergent Multilingual Learners* is underserved. For example, Richard Montgomery HS's EML student enrollment has grown by 75% over the last three years; a full-time counselor and at least one additional teacher are urgently needed. Conditions are similar at Julius West MS, the largest middle school in Montgomery County. As you are probably aware, EML students who are placed in English-language classes because there is nowhere else for them to go are overrepresented among students who are chronically absent.
- *Enrollment planning in the spring has to anticipate the surges of late enrollment that occur in the fall*. We know what the patterns are with respect to international arrivals, special education needs, family mobility, and the like, so we need MCPS to stop making summer preparations more difficult for our schools than they have to be. The best candidates already have jobs when positions removed in the spring are reinstated in the fall. More flexible strategies are imperative for effectively managing fluctuating student populations and ensuring that every student, regardless of their enrollment timing, receives the necessary resources and support for a seamless educational experience. The current approach to enrollment planning also too frequently results in elementary and middle school classes that significantly *exceed MCPS's maximum class size guidelines*. These large class sizes make it exceedingly difficult for teachers to provide differentiated instruction that effectively addresses the multiple levels of need that exist in every classroom.
- Schools need *dedicated testing coordinators* so that staff are not juggling this ever-growing responsibility on top of their other duties. As our middle school staff pointed out, the testing schedule is year-round (MAP 3 times per year, MCAP, WIDA, Maryland School Survey, and more) and involves scheduling, determining student testing groups, offering lessons in test prep, analyzing data, and so on. Additionally, if students are increasingly assigned to the Home School Model (HSM), then Alternate Learning Objectives (ALO) testing will have to be administered more often.
- Secondary schools need *full-time restorative justice coordinators* and/or additional security assistants to support administrators and enable them to focus on instruction. The

ratio for grade-level administrators at Julius West MS is over 400:1, while other schools are less than 250:1.

- Our schools are community hubs that are used at all hours every day and thus are subject to heavy wear and tear. *Building Services staff must be sufficient* to maintain the properties. Bayard Rustin ES needs an additional half-time employee, and we pointed out last year that Richard Montgomery HS needs at least one more staff member—none were added as the number of portables grew to 9. Further, as of a month ago, RM had two vacancies in addition to being understaffed in its number of allotted positions.

We are also concerned that MCPS's Human Resources office is taking steps backward in **treating every staff member as a professional** who has options for advancement.

- Opportunities for paraeducators to participate in professional development over the summer are too limited. Paraeducators who have been formally trained to deliver research-based interventions in reading or math can start serving students from the first day of school.
- Temporary Part Time (TPT) Workers should become Permanent Workers after 6 months or have some type of incentive to keep them employed in their positions after 6 months. These are often the staff who work with the most challenging students in the building (hitting, kicking, spitting, eloping, and other negative behaviors) that require various de-escalation strategies. These students need repetition and consistency in their daily schedule and having the same TPT is part of that equation. However, TPTs often transition to another position because of the low level of pay and lack of benefits, forcing the student being served to start over with a new TPT repeatedly during the course of their Individualized Education Program (IEP) plan.

Further, while the ideals behind the Home School Model (HSM) for providing special education services are laudable, **its implementation needs improvement.**

- Many of our cluster's schools are understaffed according to MCPS's own guidelines. Then, when needs increase throughout the school year as new issues emerge or new students arrive, all of the students are underserved or some students fall through the cracks.
- Students are getting stuck in HSM when it is not an appropriate instructional setting for them, as documented by their IEP or Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) records. It is not conducive to academic or social progress for either these students or their peers to assign them a TPT paraeducator and place them in a general education setting containing stresses and triggers that too often lead to dysregulated or disruptive behavior. Schools need the special education office to partner with them more productively in these situations.

Finally, so that you are aware of these conversations, we have provided a couple of **suggestions and requests about curriculum:**

- We urge MCPS to bolster the middle school English-Language Arts (ELA) curriculum to better support teachers in providing differentiated instruction. In the near term, *we are pleased that MCPS is in the process of providing each middle school with above-grade level ELA texts*, so that teachers can provide more difficult readings to students who are ready for those texts. Over the longer term, *we urge MCPS to obtain and implement a*

curriculum that provides for an enriched ELA course in middle school, similar to the Enriched Literacy Curriculum (ELC) implemented in MCPS elementary schools in the fourth and fifth grades. It is very difficult for teachers to provide the same enriched curriculum in a heterogenous middle school class of 30 or more students as in a class that is focused on an enriched curriculum. Students would benefit greatly from an ELC-type curriculum that is offered in middle school.

- We also think that MCPS should consider offering curriculum-supporting tools that are popular with many schools, such as Brain Pop, Pebble Go, or Book Breaks, as *centrally-purchased subscription services*. These are often paid for through materials funds or by PTA grants, and not all schools are able to tap these financial resources.