

MCEA

Bonnie Cullison, President

Testimony for the Board of Education's FY'08 MCPS Operating Budget Planning Process

Good evening, Dr. Haughey, Mrs. Cox, members of the Board and Dr. Weast. Thank you for this opportunity to speak to you early in the planning process for the FY '08 operating budget. I am speaking on behalf of the more than 11,000 MCEA members who have dedicated their professional lives to the highest quality education of all students in our county. My members are very interested in the development of the budget, as your decisions impact their work lives directly.

I appreciated being included in the community forum on September 21. The questions were thought provoking and led to putting issues and concerns in the context of how the system is operating as a whole. As was recommended at this forum, I sent these questions out to my representatives for their ideas. Their responses were insightful, and clear themes arose. Many of the themes are familiar, but in all cases their motivation was to help every student under our care achieve at high levels.

What's working in MCPS?

The overwhelming response to this question was that the amount and types of professional development opportunities are of great value. My members expressed appreciation for the job-embedded programs provided through the Professional Growth Systems.

Many teachers stated that the system is doing right by students by setting high standards and providing for rigorous curriculum. They are proud of the achievement of the students we serve and they are committed to the work of closing the achievement gap between groups of students.

What needs improvement in MCPS?

Many responses to this question focused on concerns about time, testing and balanced instruction.

With the increased demands for individualization and differentiation in classrooms where the range in skill levels is greater than ever, teachers need more time to plan instruction that will meet the student demands. Planning does not mean simply figuring out the lesson for the next day or the next week; it is determining the strategies that will work for all students to achieve the learning objectives. And there will be a need for more than one strategy in each lesson, even if that lesson only last 20 minutes. "Planning" means gathering the materials for the lesson. It means assessing if the students achieved the objective and, if not, how it should be re-taught.

And it means communicating with other staff and parents when individual students are struggling. I assure you that this takes much more time than the currently guaranteed five hours per week. And the demands created by higher levels of accountability encroach significantly on those five hours. I believe the clear message from educators is that if we want to continue to improve the quality of education, we must find more time for teachers to plan and we must protect that time from encroachment by the myriad of other demands that are being placed on teachers.

You probably saw it in The Washington Post this week—teachers feel that they are spending more time testing than instructing. MCPS educators agree with their colleagues nationally. It is noteworthy that even our newest teachers feel this way. This past August, during New Educator

Orientation, MCEA surveyed close to 800 new teachers. When asked what they felt would be their biggest challenge, they overwhelmingly said, "pressure to prepare students for testing." And these new teachers hadn't even started work yet!

Tests are an essential part of a strong instructional program, but if they are not providing useful information back to those who are developing the programs, then the tests themselves are a waste of time. What teachers have asked for is an evaluation of the tests themselves, which ones help student learning, and which ones just take up time that could be better spent just learning. Teachers clearly believe that MCPS needs to moderate its over-emphasis on testing.

The third theme which emerged from the feedback was concern over the narrowing of the curriculum. Middle school teachers report a steady erosion of music programs. All secondary teachers report that the increasing use of double periods for math and reading are limiting students' ability to take elective courses. Elementary teachers report reduced instructional time in art, music and physical education. We are even hearing about schools where two classes are being combined into single PE sections: doubling the number of students and lessening their active engagement.

Elementary schools are also reporting a significant reduction in instructional time in science. The focus on extended time blocks for reading and math are squeezing out time for science.

Especially with the onset of Maryland State Assessments in science, this erosion of elementary science instruction is troubling. Some elementary schools have managed to create 'science specialists' to provide focused science instruction in all classrooms. Perhaps the time has come to think about providing all elementary schools with that kind of resource.

If the County gave MCPS significantly more money, what should it be spent on?

Teachers responding to my survey had a clear consensus on the need to lower class sizes. In recent years, we have seen significant improvements in student success in elementary schools. At the same time, MCPS has made meaningful reductions in elementary class sizes, especially in our highest needs schools. We should learn from that success. As we move into middle school reform, teachers clearly feel that lower class sizes should be an integral part of an overall plan to improve student success.

Not surprisingly, our members also place a high priority on adequate compensation to attract and retain a quality workforce. We have been hiring more than 1,000 new educators a year. While that may moderate some in the next couple of years, the aging of our teaching workforce is leading to a growing number of retirements and a growing need for new hires. The reality is a new teacher can no longer afford to live in Montgomery County. And if they end up having to commute from Frederick or beyond, they have less time to focus on instruction and they are less likely to stay in MCPS over the long term. Simply keeping salaries at pace with inflation is not going to solve this problem.

Other areas of concern that educators placed a priority on for future investments include:

- increased time for teachers to plan for differentiation
- increased supports for the inclusion of special education students
- expansion of paraeducator staffing to support classroom instruction
- improvements in indoor air quality

I can also say that there was a strong sense that we need to stop adding new initiatives and programs, but rather work on getting better at what we are currently doing.

There are a growing number of educators who believe it is time to lengthen both the teacher work year and the school year if we are truly to meet the growing expectations on our schools. More than even before, I heard from teachers supporting an 11-month work year that would expand both instructional time for students and time for teacher planning, collaboration and professional development. If we really want to be thinking long-term about the future of our school system, this concept should be on the table.

Thank you again for this opportunity to provide input on the FY08 Operating Budget. We look forward to working with you as the budget process moves forward.