

Testimony of Milena Garfield
Before the Montgomery County Board of Education
Public Hearing on the Strategic Plan October 12, 2006

My name is Milena Garfield. I live in Potomac.

America is a kid-centric country, obsessed with the safety, welfare, self-esteem and 24-hour-a-day contentedness of its children. From birth we try to protect them from all the threats we can imagine. From sharp edges on the tables, to choking hazard, to strangers, to guns. We never let them out of our sight to protect them from all evils, from stray animals to too much Sponge Bob.

And then at the age of five ... we send them to schools, thinking there, above all, they will be safe. But as I've discovered, to my shock, that the opposite is true.

--Playgrounds with no fences.

--School doors unmonitored and, incredibly, unlocked.

--Recess monitors responsible for hundreds of children, whom they don't know and have no head count on.

--Main offices with front desks unattended, and office personnel too overwhelmed with other duties to keep track of traffic in and out.

My daughter is five and has just started her school days this year. I looked around at the scene and was immediately appalled. Embarrassed at my own negativity, I nonetheless approached the PTA and school staff with my concerns. They told me, "Oh, nothing bad has ever happened here before." But what kind of answer is that? It had never happened at Columbine before, or at Beslan. Since then we've had North Carolina, Vermont, Wisconsin and Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania. If it can happen in an Amish schoolhouse, it can happen here.

"We have the emergency plan," they said. And to that I say emergency plans are used after a tragedy. I am talking here about preventing tragedy --not with extreme measures but the most basic ones. I am talking about securing our kids environment as much at least as each of us would secure our own homes, by locking the doors and putting up gates and questioning strangers at the door.

Perhaps you think I'm paranoid. I don't care. We can choose to wear rose-colored glasses and see all the world as safe and good. We can live in denial about the threats all around us. But the events contradict such optimism every day.

Or we can be realistic and take action now, as a first step talking to our schools and our PTAs, our teachers' unions demanding they dedicate resources to basic security for students and teachers alike. It is good to have more computers and after-school programs for our kids. But it's more important to have our kids.