



COMMISSION ON CHILDREN AND YOUTH

**Testimony Before the Montgomery County Board of Education
on the
Montgomery County Public Schools Strategic Plan and
Fiscal Year 2009 Operating Budget Priorities
October 11, 2007**

Good evening. My name is Emma Ross. I am a youth member of the Commission on Children and Youth, and I'm here tonight to provide comments on behalf of the Commission. Thank you for this opportunity to have input in the school system's strategic plan and fiscal year 2009 budget priorities.

We appreciate that this forum is an opportunity to share thoughts about aspects of Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) that are working well and those areas needing improvement. First, the Commission applauds MCPS' many efforts and successes in reducing the achievement gap by race/ethnicity, disability and limited English proficiency. For instance, the Commission is encouraged by the initiative offering stronger early elementary literacy programs and the resulting 81 percent of kindergartners in 2005 that met or exceeded reading targets by the end of the school year, compared to 39 percent in 2001. We also recognize the school systems efforts to expand publicly supported pre-kindergarten in Montgomery County.

The Commission views increased support for and partnerships with out of school time (OST) programs as other important strategies in closing the achievement gap. Research shows that quality OST programs can lead to (1) increased achievement in math, reading and academic subjects; (2) enhanced reading ability and greater self-confidence in reading; (3) improved school attendance and reduced drop-out rate; (4) completion of more and better quality homework; and (5) reduced in-grade retention and placement in special education. There is also evidence to suggest that OST programs offer decreased risk of teen parenthood, decreased likelihood of substance abuse, enhanced nutrition and wellness and increased opportunities to engage in fitness activities. OST programming appears to provide "more bang for your buck," which is critical in this time of budget shortfalls.

The Commission is also pleased that the MCPS Strategic Plan emphasizes the importance of productive partnerships between schools and the community to promote student success as a tactical goal. However, the Commission would like the Board of Education to specifically include MCPS – OST program partnerships within this school system goal. Both entities share a common goal of "increased learning and positive development of youth in their care." A collaborative effort could promote improved use of school space, transportation coordination, professional development and program standards development. Moreover, enhanced, clear communication between school personnel and OST program staff can help ensure the recruitment, progress and retention of students. Specifically, if teachers are aware of what is

going on before and after school hours in onsite OST programs, they can convey the information to students during school hours and parents during school-sponsored events. The latter is particularly important because parental engagement can often lead to increased opportunities for student participation. This is especially valuable in engaging minority and at-risk populations that tend to be underrepresented in OST programs. Parental engagement is also a critical factor in reducing the achievement gap in the educational process.

In addition to MCPS – OST program partnerships, the Commission encourages the Board of Education to participate in ongoing efforts with the Collaboration Council for Children, Youth and Families, the Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Recreation and other community partners to develop a county-wide OST system that expands beyond the traditional extracurricular and athletic programs to include comprehensive programming that considers the “whole child.” This systematic programming must meet the social, emotional, recreational and developmental needs of young people. This is essential for the low-income and at-risk youth who are the most vulnerable to school failure. A centralized and coordinated OST system allows for the oversight and accountability necessary to provide a wide range of diverse, quality programming.

When crafting an OST system, it is important to remember that academic eligibility requirements must not punish the very students who would benefit most from participation. We support additional funding for academic interventions and supports for at-risk youth, including students who do not meet the 2.0 eligibility requirement for extracurricular activities. Students need to be able to achieve academic success so that they are eligible to participate in school sponsored extracurricular activities, thereby being exposed to more opportunities for pro-social exploration and development and increasing their bond to the school.

In conclusion, in an effort to close the achievement gap, the Commission on Children and Youth encourages the Board of Education to include MCPS – OST program partnerships as a part of its strategic plan, give top priority to the development of a county-wide OST system and provide resources for academic interventions and supports for at-risk youth, including students who do not meet the 2.0 eligibility requirement for extracurricular activities.

Thank you for your time tonight.