

Comments for Strategic Planning Forum  
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Good evening, my name is Joanne Vanderhorst. I am a cluster coordinator for the Walter Johnson. I have been a parent volunteer in Montgomery County Public Schools for seventeen years. I appreciate the opportunity to provide comments on the MCPS strategic plan.

Following the suggested format, I'll first talk about what works. We were happy to see the reduced class size initiative, and the initiative to increase the number of counselors at the secondary school level. We encourage you to continue to support these initiatives, and to consider greater increases in counselors, especially at the high school level.

Another welcome recent innovation is the major improvement in communication achieved by Edline. During my many years of involvement as a parent and school activist, I have felt that two-way communication between the schools and parents is the key to a successful school experience.

This brings me to what needs improvement. Although Edline represents a major leap forward, it is not enough by itself. For one thing, it doesn't reach all parents. And the parents it misses are many times those that need the most help. Like most other clusters, the WJ cluster is home to a significant number of low income, minority, and non-English speaking families. We need to improve the ability of these families to communicate with their own kids' schools. We hope to see some site-based parent outreach coordinators. We'd also, generally, like to see more emphasis on two-way communication and parent involvement.

One of my sons is a graduate of the WJ Learning Center-Community Based Program. While more mainstreaming may be a good option for some, the learning centers have worked very well for many students and we have concerns about their phase-out. As host to one of the largest learning centers in the county, Tilden Middle School will be on the front lines. We encourage more focus on providing supports for both the special education and the general education students during this period. We also hope to see serious evaluation of the impacts of the phase-out, and adjustments where indicated.

Similarly, there has been some concern in our cluster about changes to the math curriculum. While we welcome the move to make sure accelerated instruction is available to all students, we have seen gaps in support for students and teachers in this area. Teachers need more instructional materials, lead time and training (not during school hours) to implement changes. Parents and students need more guidance in determining the best course for each student, and more help when catch-up is necessary.

Finally, many school buildings in our cluster and throughout the county are old and in need of repair. Mold is a continuing challenge in many schools and their portables. We would like to see more emphasis on providing a safe and healthful physical environment, with more resources devoted to maintenance and indoor air quality.

Again, thank you for this opportunity to comment.