

Community Forum Budget Testimony by Penny Veerhoff, Parent
To Dr. Weast and the Montgomery County Board of Education
October 16, 2008.

My name is Penny Veerhoff. I am the parent of five sons who all attended or are attending Montgomery County Public Schools. I am also an MCPS graduate. I am here tonight to talk about the value of computers and other technological supports for all students but particularly for student in special education. Please note that I am a member of and support the testimony of the Least Restrictive Environment Access Group of Montgomery County as well as the presentations of other members of our group.

I have twin 17 year-old sons with developmental disabilities who attend Walter Johnson High School. They enjoy taking a mixture of classes according to their academic needs, interests and schedules. Some courses are general education courses and some are special education classes. Their courses have covered topics as diverse as Ceramics, Citizenship, Reading, World History, and Chorus. I am concerned that there are not enough computers, peripherals, learning applications and technological support available to make curriculum appropriate and accessible for students in special education and other non-traditional learners.

Although the budget for 2009-2010 is extremely tight, it is imperative that technology access and use be kept up-to-date in order to meet the Strategic Plan's first goal, "To ensure success for every student." It states that students be "provided with *ACCESS* to rigorous curriculum and *SUPPORTED* toward successful educational outcomes." Every student should learn and be supported in the most individually accessible manner and in the least restrictive environment. Technology is absolutely a basic requirement for meeting that goal the 21st century.

The ability to use computers and other technological innovations is essential in our society for academics, business, communication and leisure. I use a computer daily in order to do my work in a more efficient and timely manner, as I'm sure most of you do too. However, students and educators, particularly in special education, are doing a great many tasks in time consuming, inefficient and obsolete ways because of limited access to technology. There is not enough to go around. Computers are a great resource for special educators in customizing assignments to make them accessible to all students. But supports for learning such as picture symbol programs, reading and writing devices and educational software are only as useful if they are available and accessible,

My sons saw their older brother use a computer for research, study, assignments and transmittal of his work to teachers. They would like to have the same opportunities as their brother and other students but they need opportunities to learn and practice the skills at school in order to achieve as much mastery as possible. Students with disabilities are not unable to use computers and other technological equipment. However, they do need access to adaptable hardware and software appropriate for their needs. Students with disabilities would benefit from learning how to access, complete and submit more

assignments online, especially when handwriting or dictation becomes so arduous that it interferes with learning and task completion. Nothing puts a teenage student off more quickly than not being able to convey what he knows! Learning to ask a teacher a question via email is also a valuable skill and later that ability will translate into greater achievement in the workplace. My sons regularly use a computer at home, sometimes with our assistance, for researching a wide variety of topics, ranging from jazz to civil war generals to homecoming activities but accessible computer use at school is severely limited by availability. There is an inadequate supply of computers and peripherals and which results in the necessity of limiting students' time to use and receive instruction on the available equipment.

Both educators and students would benefit from laptop computers. Laptops' portability can expand access and allow more creative use for students with disabilities. One-size-fits-all computer stations do not meet every student's needs. Some would benefit from a laptop that could be placed on a wheelchair tray; at a more ergonomic height to avoid eye, neck and wrist strain; on a student's desk; or even on a lap for quiet, individualized instruction.

Technological resources need to be available for access to textbooks and curricula in varied formats. Will benefits from downloaded recordings or CDs of the required chorus music. He relies on presentations with computer generated picture symbols. Jamie used alternative tech formats for two general education history courses, but one audio-text was not consistent with the one being used by the class. That textbook publisher did not make its textbooks available in a CD or DVD format, so he was given a different one. Every textbook that is purchased should come with alternative formats for different means of access. My sons also benefit from technology for accessing and understanding quality, age appropriate literature not only for school but also for their own enjoyment.

In your 2009-2010 budget, I urge you to at the very least, maintain the current technology support specialists, including the High Incidence Accessible Technology Team, also known as HIATT. Find a way to expand the availability of state-of-the art computers and other technological curriculum supports for both staff and students. Their future, and the reputation of Montgomery County Public Schools depend on it.

Thank you for your time.

Penny Veerhoff