

Montgomery County Board of Education
Community Forum
October 16, 2008
Submitted by Mary Griffin

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on an issue that is of great importance to our community and my family – education. We entered the public school system five years ago and in that short amount of time, we have seen several changes and many pressures put on the system.

My son attends Rosemary Hills Primary School, part of the BCC cluster; I am one of the cluster representatives for the school. The school, like so many in the County, has faced many challenges with an increasing student population, including more demands on the teaching staff, meeting the benchmark and testing requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act, and addressing educational needs with dwindling resources. The County and the Board of Education must be open to suggestions for how to address these challenges and focus resources where they are most needed.

Our school is overcapacity – the capacity level is listed at 494 students but the current enrollment tops 600. There are eight kindergarten, eight first and eight second grade classes along with prekindergarten and special needs classes. Most of these classes in K-2nd grade have 24 or 25 kids – that number represents a small but steady increase over the past five years. The specials teachers - art, music and physical education, so important for kids of these ages - see 600 kids every week, that's more than 100 different children each day! We can hardly expect them to learn each child's name let alone give them individual attention in the subject areas. And one only needs to have lunch with their child, along with almost 200 others, to understand the impact of overcapacity at the school.

The school functions well given the current stressors but we are concerned that the increasing class sizes and overall increase in school size will undermine the ability of the school to maintain high standards and achieve the County's goal of providing high quality, world class education that ensures success for every student.

We understand that budget cuts require sacrifices but we hope the County directs its focus on the classroom. We urge you to devote resources to three priorities in the classroom that would help every student at Rosemary Hills achieve success:

- Class size reductions: The strategic plan lists as one of the initiatives to foster student success reduced class sizes. We agree that this should be a priority. We appreciate the County's reliance on benchmarks to quantify success but according to the county's own recommendations, class size reductions in grades K to 2 are necessary to ensure success.
- Continued support for the reading initiatives in grades 1 and 2. At Rosemary Hills, this initiative brings the class sizes down to 16 to 18 students during reading instruction time to ensure students get the appropriate attention during these critical years when they are first learning how to read. Maintaining this initiative furthers the reduced class size initiative.
- More paraeducator support for our teachers and students. As class sizes swell and budget cuts do not allow for more teachers, the County should use paraeducators more. While not a substitute for smaller class sizes, the effective use of paraeducators can help offset the impact of higher student-teacher ratios by helping to ensure more individualized attention is available when needed. Children especially need more individualized attention in K-2 when they are first learning reading, writing and math skills.

In addition, the strategic plan acknowledges the need to strengthen partnerships and collaboration with the community, including promoting greater parent and community outreach partnerships. We agree and we urge you to capitalize on the resources available in the community, including from parents, while maintaining equitable balance among the schools. Harnessing additional resources will help achieve the goal we are all working towards – ensuring success for every student. Those resources should go to reduced class sizes and support in the classroom.

Thank you for this opportunity to provide input into how our financial resources should be deployed during a time of budget cuts.