



Maryland Community Association for the Education of Young Children

**Testimony for the Board of Education at the
September 18, 2008 Community Forum**

Thank you, President Navarro and other members of the Board. I am speaking tonight on behalf of the Maryland Community Association for the Education of Young Children, which represents about 400 early childhood professionals in Montgomery County. We care for and about our County's youngest citizens, as we educate them.

The question you posed us for tonight, *"During difficult economic times, what priorities in the Montgomery County Public Schools strategic plan should we focus on for FY 2010 to improve achievement for all students?"* is easy for us to answer. We feel that your number one priority should be additional investments in early childhood education.

We are well aware of the fiscal environment in which you are considering the Budget for next year, and we hope, with you, that the County Council will find a way to finance your request. As always, high priorities should matter in budget decisions. What's vital comes first. We think, based on research and experience, that early childhood should be your highest priority.

We hope that you are mindful that your investments in the public schools' youngest children are likely to be the most cost-effective of all of your expenditures, especially if you focus them on building the foundation of a positive attitude toward school and life among those children. At early ages children learn far more by moving, feeling, and playing than they do by the kind of didactic instruction found in much of public education. Developmentally appropriate, high quality instruction requires a significant investment in teaching and support staff that tends to be neglected. The outcomes in academic achievement are significant, but abundant research shows that even greater returns on investment in early childhood come from the dramatic improvements they make in social and emotional skills, attitudes toward learning and life, problem-solving abilities, and creativity. These result in less crime and social problems and more successful, stable adults.

Specifically, in the Budget for FY 2010, we hope that you will preserve and expand your investments in early childhood. These investments include:

Early Childhood Staff: Staff, such as family service workers for preschool students, Pre-K teachers, and specialists in early identification and preventative treatment of disabilities among infants and toddlers must be preserved, and expanded if possible. If it is possible for you to waive the hiring freeze in these categories, we urge that you do so.

To empower those who care for and educate young children

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Family service workers help Pre-K students become ready for school by removing needless barriers at home to their progress. Your staff who identify and treat disabilities as they emerge in infants and toddlers can prevent or mitigate lifelong disabilities at that age with much less costly interventions than would be required later. Low Pre-K and K student : teacher ratios help to eliminate the achievement gap that persists from Kindergarten through the rest of life. In all of these areas, existing MCPS staff struggles heavily to meet the legitimate educational support needs of far more students and their families than they can or should handle. With more investment now in these services you would turn lives around immediately and save MCPS millions of dollars in special education costs for years into the future. Please do so.

Eligibility for Early Childhood Programs: In bad economic times you may expect further increases in your Pre-Kindergarten class loads. Children eligible for FARMS now have entitlement to Pre-K, but children equally at risk from families with incomes marginally higher than the FARMS maxima are denied that benefit. The most at risk 3 year olds who had their problems dealt with until their third birthday cannot find spaces in MCPS Head Start until their fourth birthday, which puts you and them behind the curve during one of the highest-growth years of life. The full-day Head Start programs, whose Title I funding was cut recently, need to be maintained for the gains they make to persist.

Interpreters and Translators: At a recent Child Find clinic, 7 of the 18 children served needed interpreters (for 4 different languages). But the staff of interpreters and translators is being reduced at a time when the number of families needing these services is increasing. This needs to be reversed.

Collaboration with other Agencies: At all levels of public education, but especially for early childhood, far more investment of staff time and leadership support is required in working with parents, government agencies, and other partners in the educational process to help each child reach his or her potential. This approach produces amazing results in the Judy Centers and other programs, and it should be replicated to a far greater degree than it is now. Additional staff positions to facilitate coordination are worthwhile.

ELO Summer Program: Finally, the ELO summer program, including meals, for low-income children needs to be retained and enhanced, so that these children can reduce the achievement gap and maintain the benefits of school-year advances for the next school year.

Each of these specific investments is likely to save MCPS and all other governments much more in future years. But the real savings is in terms of children who grow up and become positive, productive citizens, rather than failures who are dependent on governments to keep them going. In brief, cut the expenses that you have to cut, but please keep the investments in your youngest students positive, for their benefit, yours, and ours.

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