

Testimony before the Maryland County School Board

"During difficult economic times, what priorities in the Montgomery County Public Schools strategic plan should we focus on for the 2009-2010 school year to improve achievement for all students?"

Nadine Gabai-Botero,
parent of a second grader at Westbrook Elementary School
On behalf of the Westbrook Elementary School PTA
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Thank you for providing this forum for me to speak today. My name is Nadine Gabai-Botero and I am the parent of a second grader at Westbrook Elementary School in Bethesda, part of the Bethesda-Chevy Chase cluster. I am here tonight both as a concerned parent speaking before the School Board for the first time as well as a representative of the Westbrook PTA. I came because I strongly believe that class size must be one of the School Board's top priorities in the coming year and I feel I need to do all I can to ensure this issue is part of your discussions as you determine how to spend limited funds during these challenging economic times. The issue of class sizes is inherently linked to preserving quality performance and a community of caring, two priorities of the Montgomery County Public Schools strategic plan. I urge you to focus on those two issues as you work with next year's budget. They need to be, in my opinion, at the top of your priority list.

The reason I speak tonight is related to my experience with my son's class this year. I want to preface my comments by saying I believe Westbrook's principal, teachers and staff are extremely committed to educating our children and they are doing their very best with limited resources to provide a nurturing environment and encourage excellence among students.

While my son has had a very positive experience at Westbrook these past two years – our first in the Montgomery County school system – the budget constraints, coupled with dramatic changes in demographics in the area, have begun to negatively impact the school. Specifically, classrooms are overcrowded, teachers are stressed, and children are showing behavioral changes – all issues that must be addressed in the 2009-2010 school year or we risk impacting student achievement.

This year, my son's class has 30 students in it, while the other second grade class has 29 kids. In order to provide for smaller instructional groups in the face of a limited budget, two additional part-time teachers were hired to instruct the second graders. By breaking kids out into smaller groups for reading and writing in the morning and math, science and social studies in the afternoon, the school has created "smaller" class sizes for our children. But, in creating ad hoc classes in this manner, our seven year-old children are being treated like middle-schoolers, expected to gather the correct materials and supplies each day and find their way to other classrooms throughout the school. This style of instruction has been difficult for many in the class, and even the teacher admits it is "chaotic" and "challenging." I believe this is a slippery slope with dangerous implications for the future. This year, we are dealing with added stress for our kids and behavioral issues, but it is not too far of a leap to see a time when school principals will have to come up with other stop gap solutions and either hire less qualified part-time teachers or allow 30 or more children per class as a matter of course.

I am representing a school that is ranked 20th in the state today as evaluated by test score rankings. We recognize that as a top performing school our needs can often be seen as less critical on a county level. But this performance level is not guaranteed and indeed, it is threatened. The trends we are experiencing at Westbrook are not unique and mirror a larger trend impacting schools across our cluster and the county. Across the seven Elementary Schools in the BCC Cluster, only one school currently has the physical capacity to meet projected student enrollment for the next five years. Increased numbers of students, aggravated by inadequate physical space, are affecting places beyond the classroom, with issues in the

lunchroom and during recess. Fewer teachers and more students have an impact on the way the kids behave and the way our teachers and para-educators respond to them.

There is a great deal of research that has examined class size and its link to student achievement and behavior. In the Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning's 2001 study entitled *Reducing Class Size: Choices and Consequences*, they found that "classroom management is often reported as less challenging for teachers of small classes so teachers can spend more time teaching." The study also showed that "this additional teaching time may enable teachers to cover more material, either by going deeper into a given subject or by covering more subjects" and that "students are more engaged in smaller classes and less likely to drift away from lessons or disrupt others who are completing academic tasks."¹

As I said at the beginning of my testimony, I am here both as a parent and as a member of the Westbrook PTA. On behalf of the PTA, I want to close by saying that we appreciate the creative way our school approached the budget challenge for this year and we know we have a strong partnership in dealing with any obstacles that come our way for the coming year. I hope you will stay focused on class sizes as you consider funding for the 2009-10 school year so that we can provide our children the very best teachers and the kind of education Montgomery County is known for, and we don't end up shortchanging them and their future.

¹ Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning, *Reducing Class Size: Choices and Consequences* by Robert Reichardt, Ph.D., April 2001, p. 3.