



## **Maryland Community Association for the Education of Young Children**

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### **Testimony at the MCPS Community Forum, September 18, 2009**

Thank you, President Brandman and other members of the MCPS Board. The Maryland Community Association for the Education of Young Children, which has over 400 members in Montgomery County who work with and for young children, has the following comments on both the Call to Action and the Budget in light of your question about priorities in these difficult times.

State Superintendent Grasmick has been heard to comment that if she had been given a choice between putting the taxpayers' money into early education or the 12<sup>th</sup> grade, she would choose the former. Children learn much more in their earliest years than they do later, and the effects on success in school and in life of early experiences have been proven to last much longer than later attempts to remedy problems created earlier. Your mandate as a Board and as a school district has expanded significantly in the years since the Bridge to Excellence legislation, but the spending practices and priorities of MCPS still need to catch up with that new perspective. Just as you can't build a strong house without a solid foundation, you can't produce excellent high school graduates without having given them a great start when you first met them in Pre-K, Head Start, or Kindergarten.

In our view, early education should come first in your list of priorities for planning, implementation, and spending. It is one of the weakest components of the system, partly because educators focused narrowly on academic performance because of their K-12 experience often neglect the vital non-academic components of early education. Daniel Goleman and other researchers have shown abundantly that early childhood is the time when efforts to improve emotional and social intelligence will yield optimal results in later academic performance and success in life. That component of education, as well as early cognitive development, grow best through play, not through sitting around listening to a teacher lecture. Early education must be based on strong, positive, trusting relationships, not on performance and testing. Early education in MCPS does require small classes with teachers who really understand the important adaptations in teaching techniques that are needed for young children as their brains and bodies grow rapidly in those early years.

This year I am told that there was an unexpected burst of additional pre-K students in MCPS without any increase in teachers, leading to class sizes larger than the State's maximum of 20, and to a deterioration in the supportive services connecting their families with the students' success. I am certain that MCPS will have to spend much more in later years to remedy the educational, emotional and social deficits that this situation creates, unless some shift in resource allocation can be made in time.

The stimulus money for Title I schools that was used to create and extend to full day the Head Start programs in County schools is being used very wisely, but we worry about the budget crunch you will face when the stimulus money runs out. We do hope that you and the State will continue to support this very worthy, cost-effective intervention as a matter of priority.

Two years of cuts to the staff who implement the early education efforts of MCPS have reduced the capacity to help families of students at risk of school failure and the ability of MCPS to deliver intensive special needs services at a time in life when those interventions can eliminate or substantially ameliorate the special needs. These supportive services are a necessary component of a “whole child” approach that can eliminate achievement gaps before they grow insurmountable.

The priorities indicated above are linked to every other part of the early childhood integrated services in Montgomery County, conducted by a wide array of public and private agencies. If MCPS cuts funding for its part of those services, the whole structure of services by everyone else will be adversely affected. If a stressed-out pre-K teacher can't take the time to help a troubled child with social skills when it could change his life, or if a family services worker can't refer a troubled mother to the appropriate agency, or if a burdened special needs teacher can't be with a slow language learner long enough to make a difference, we all will suffer. Please do what you can to preserve the progress that we have made.

The Gaithersburg and Silver Spring Judy Centers still shine a light of integrated and child/family sensitive services that needs to be seen and applied in other locations. Individual teachers and other staffers are making heroic efforts to help the children in their care when and how that help will have the greatest effect. Please support that which works best.