

**Written Testimony of
Steve Augustino
On Behalf of the
Gaithersburg Cluster**

**Montgomery County Board of Education
Community Forum
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Good evening. My name is Steve Augustino and I am pleased to testify on behalf of the Gaithersburg Cluster of schools.

For years, you have heard me testify about the importance of modernizing our schools, particularly the next four high schools on your modernization list: Paint Branch, Gaithersburg, Wheaton and Seneca Valley. These schools – which we have affectionately termed “the elephants” – are precisely the schools where MCPS is trying to increase its effectiveness. These schools have some of the county’s highest percentages of minority students, of non-English proficient students, of high poverty students and of special education students. For example, of the 25 high schools in the county, these four schools have the 1st, 8th, 9th and 11th highest poverty levels according to 2007 data. This group also includes the 1st, 3rd and 7th highest ESOL populations in the county, according to the same data. And, I’m sad to say, each of these schools had average SAT scores below both the county average and the nationwide average. It makes it extremely difficult for MCPS to “raise the bar and close the gap” when it handicaps its neediest students with its most inadequate facilities.

Normally, this is the point where I would illustrate just how bad the conditions are in our schools. But I don’t think I have to do that this year. MCPS, the Board and the County Council have all shown in the past year that modernizing our schools is a priority. We truly appreciate that commitment and we urge you to keep that priority. Facilities issues directly impact Goal No. 1 of the Strategic Plan: “Ensuring Success for Every Student.”

I will note that this economy may prove to be a very good environment for large projects such as the school modernizations. Last year, modernization of Yorktown High School in Virginia was approved at close to \$20 million below the original budget due to more competitive construction bids. I have heard that MCPS is experiencing substantial reductions in the cost of projects that have gone to bid in the past few months. The Board should keep these potential cost savings in mind when setting funding priorities this year.

The Board also should consider the recurring cost savings that come from modernizing our schools. Like an old car, the high schools on the modernization list have high maintenance costs and guzzle a lot of fuel. Replacing the car with a fuel efficient vehicle often is the best option, even if it requires some belt tightening to make the initial investment. Similarly, in considering the value of the modernizations, the Board should consider the improved savings from a LEED-certified building. How much does MCPS

spend in maintenance to apply band-aids to outdated HVAC systems, leaky roofs and deteriorating infrastructure at the schools on your modernization list? How much could MCPS save by replacing these high schools with energy efficient schools? At Great Seneca Elementary School, MCPS estimates that it reduces potable water usage by 43% with low-flow fixtures, saves \$0.50 per square foot per year in energy cost through the use of geothermal energy and reduces utility costs by \$50,000 per year due to a white Energy Star roof. How much would MCPS save through similar measures at the schools on the modernization list? In the long run, moving forward with the modernizations clearly is the smartest choice.

Finally, I want to end with a comment about a small action that has made a huge impact. Recognizing that even as we plan for a new building we have students, teachers and parents who must use the old building, MCPS gave Gaithersburg High School a new paint job this summer. The cost was nominal, but the impact has been tremendous. Our lockers are a deep Trojan blue, the walls are a bright white and the entire school looks so much better. As one of our teachers stated: “This is my eleventh year at GHS and I have never walked [into the building on] the first day back, feeling pride in our school the way I did this year.” Another teacher commented that, “The new paint gives the school a physical appeal that I believe is driving students to be more respectful of their environment.” Now THAT is value for the money.

As you look at the other schools waiting behind us, I urge you to consider what can be done in a cost-effective way to make the school a little more enjoyable for the current students. We owe our current students – not just their younger siblings – a classroom that is safe, secure and conducive to learning.

Thank you.