

Downcounty Consortium / Northwood Cluster Testimony
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My name is Mary Abe and I am here representing the Northwood Cluster of schools. As you know, we share with the rest of the Downcounty Consortium a very diverse student body including a high percentage of students who live in poverty. We feel that one of the successes that we have in the cluster is our ability to serve all of our students – those who struggle for any reason, those who excel because of advantages that they have and those who are right in the middle. In order to continue to serve the huge span of student needs that we see in our schools, we need the best teachers in our classrooms. We all know that the place where the most learning occurs is in the individual classroom and we appreciate the sacrifices that all of MCPS and especially the teachers have made to make sure that we maintain manageable class sizes to focus our resources on our students. However, there is more than class size to effective teaching. Our teachers need constant help in accessing all of the educational tools that will allow their students to be successful.

When speaking with principals from the cluster about their successes, the thing that I hear over and over again is “teacher capacity”. Our teachers cannot work any harder than they are working, but they can use more effective techniques and tools in their teaching. Classroom teachers have a hard time doing the research and work to find innovations for their teaching. That is why non-teaching but highly skilled staff development teachers, literacy coaches and math specialists have been so effective in multiplying our teachers' effectiveness. Special program coordinators and resource teachers who use an extra release period to provide curriculum and teaching method support also contribute to raising our teachers' capabilities. Different principals use different staffing models to promote training, common planning time and exchange of best practices for their teachers. We ask that you make a priority of providing principals with staffing and staff release periods to continue the important work of building teacher capacity.

Special programs like the International Baccalaureate Middle Years Program, language immersion and dual language programs, communication arts and science focuses and high school academies are critical to the success of the Northwood cluster and the Downcounty Consortium. This is part of what allows our schools to attract the high performing students that keep the bar high for our struggling students. These programs also offer amazing opportunities for our less affluent students to expand their horizons. We have seen some of these programs downplayed as we focus our attention on the important basics of reading and math. We cannot afford to focus solely on our lowest performing students any more than we can afford to ignore them. Please continue to fund the programs that help us to provide our students with enriching opportunities. The success of the Northwood Cluster and indeed all of the Downcounty Consortium Clusters is dependent on maintaining a diverse population.