

Testimony of Jeanne Philbin

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On behalf of Montgomery Blair High School, I'd like to report some good news and some bad news. First, we made AYP this year! 100% of our seniors in the class of 2009 completed the HSA requirements, despite the fact that as of September 2008, more than 130 had not yet fulfilled requirements. This was accomplished due to countless hours of many people: Staff who spent extra hours providing review sessions and tutoring, as well as mentoring the bridge projects; magnet students who gave up lunches to tutor other students struggling in math, and French and Spanish Honor society students who gave up lunches to help ESOL students. But most importantly, we had a team of teachers and administrators whose job it was specifically to monitor and make sure all of these students succeeded. We had Literacy Coaches who assessed each incoming Blair student for literacy issues and then worked with identified students both individually and in groups to build literacy skills, designed lesson plans for use in all classes to enhance literacy skills, and monitored the students' progress. We had an Algebra Lead Teacher who worked to make sure all students succeeded in math. We had an administrator who served as a testing coordinator. In addition to her other duties, she kept track of every student who needed to complete HSA work, met individually with each student and made sure they had adequate instruction to pass the HSAs on a subsequent try or were paired with a teacher or staff member who could mentor them through a bridge project. Unfortunately this year we are set to tackle a similar problem with 94 students in the class of 2010 who still need to complete HSA requirements. Only this year, we will not have the Literacy Coaches, the Algebra Lead Teacher, or the administrator serving as Testing Coordinator to help them. All of these positions were cut in this year's operating budget. And that's bad news.

In more bad news, this year Blair posted a graduation rate of 82.61%. For Latinos, that number is 65.84%. More than one third of our Latino students are not graduating from high school. In contrast, 6 years ago, in 2003, Blair's graduation rate was about 96% and for Latinos it was about 92%. There are a myriad of reasons students leave school. Some must work in order to help support their families. Others at Blair simply "age out"—although they have the drive and desire to earn a high school diploma, once they have turned 21 they must leave the school. Some simply become disaffected with school. We posit that the dropout rate may be exacerbated by high stakes testing. By the summer of 10th grade most students will have received their scores on the 4 HSA's and will know whether they have made the scores required to graduate. What happens when they don't? How easy is it for these kids to give up at this point, rather than go back to school and try again and again to pass those tests? For a kid on the fence about staying in school, this may just be the push they don't need to make the decision to drop out.

In order to help these students stay in school and earn a diploma, we need several things to happen.

First, we need better preparation in Middle School so that students who come to high school are ready to do high school level work. Every year we see many students

enter high school who lack basic reading and math skills, skills they should have acquired in elementary and middle school. They flounder in high school, end up on academic probation and become disaffected. After failing a few classes, and being asked to repeat a grade, these students become more likely to drop out of school.

Second, we need a strong support network in high school that can catch those kids who are failing and help them realize their potential. At a minimum, this should include literacy coaches, an algebra lead teacher and a testing coordinator.

Finally, the board needs to explore alternative high school. I'm not talking about a building where we warehouse our disciplinary problems, but a more flexible approach to high school that recognizes some of the challenges our students face. For many students, a traditional block schedule of classes 5 days a week is just not working. We need to look at on-line classes, early morning classes, weekend classes as alternatives. These would allow a student to work, or deal with family issues and continue his or her education. We should also look at giving students the flexibility to graduate in 3 years or maybe 6 or 7. We should be providing opportunities for the hard working immigrant who wants to earn a diploma, not showing them the door when they turn 21. There is already a task force working on developing a strategy for alternative high school and we ask the board to carefully consider and implement their recommendations.

In addition, we ask that if further cuts to the operating budget are made, the schools be given some leeway to determine what positions should be cut. Each community and school faces different challenges. For example, we were devastated when the Literacy Coaches were eliminated, but can understand that at other schools the need for such a position was not as apparent as it was at Blair. Allow the administrators, teachers and PTSA the flexibility to work together to determine budget priorities on a school by school basis so that the needs of the children at each school in Montgomery County are adequately met.

Thank you.

Respectfully submitted on behalf of the Montgomery Blair PTSA,

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