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Improving the Quality of Teaching and Learning. It's Union Work!

Montgomery County Board of Education
FY2025 Budget Hearing
January 25, 2024

Testimony presented by
Jennifer Martin, President of the Montgomery County Education Association

Good evening, President Silvestre, Vice President Harris, members of the Board, and Dr. McKnight,

This current year's budget was a step forward to make up for more than a decade of underspending on our schools. Only now are we returning to levels of per pupil funding in Montgomery County that in inflation-adjusted dollars meet what we were spending in 2009. The resulting wage increases made movement toward closing the wage gap that educators experience versus other similar professions. We're grateful for those decisions to address recruitment and retention, but we're still far from where we need to be.

The abrupt freeze on the current year's budget is creating additional anxiety among educators and community when we're already struggling to retain and hire enough staff. We call on you to make a formal request to the county council for a special appropriation to address the benefits shortfall. The council has previously said they would be open to such a request.

As you deliberate on the FY25 budget, we ask you:

Will the mass exodus of educators continue, or will MCPS once again be a destination employer for highly qualified and committed individuals seeking a teaching career?

We educators continue to experience crushing workloads due to ever-increasing demands and a failure to attract and retain staff. We still struggle to be respected and valued as professionals in making decisions in our daily work. We lack confidence we are safe from harassment and bullying. And our students' needs are growing each year.

We are grateful that the current budget proposal fully honors negotiated wage agreements for FY25. However, we ask that you remove the proposed budget cuts that will hurt our students. We urge you to reverse the cuts to our speech language support services. Our students deserve to have dedicated MCPS professionals rather than temporary workers who receive supervision from a private company, often provide services only virtually, and are allowed to abandon their contract anytime during the school year.

Please restore the money dedicated to substitutes' salaries. We rely far too often on unpaid staff coverage when substitutes are not available. MCPS should be figuring out how to put more

money toward substitutes' wages, not cutting those funds. Any lapse and turnover savings should be earmarked to pay educators who must cover for vacancies and unfilled substitute positions.

Our biggest request is one that we believe parents and county leaders will support: Please add \$21.3 million to the budget to fund an additional "special" (I like to call them "essentials") at all elementary schools and the five special schools. Our younger students deserve more time for classes that address the state requirements, more time with subjects and skills that can lead to college and career readiness, and more time for learning that fosters their creativity and wellbeing. These enhancements to the elementary program will support their natural curiosity, their social and emotional development, and their academic success. While families of means spend private dollars for such learning opportunities outside of school, most of our children lack access to these important experiences.

The county's strong financial position gives us the opportunity to invest in our schools. This is not a time to practice fiscal austerity. Although the extra federal funding provided to MCPS has expired, new Blueprint money is coming from the state. Moreover, the county's general fund reserves are expected to be far above the target level, and we expect county revenues to be \$225 million more than earlier projections.

We call on you to send forth a budget that reflects the true needs of our students and relieves staff of the overwhelming burdens that are driving so many away from the education profession. Demand adequate funding from the county so that we can ensure stable, safe, and productive teaching and learning environments in all our schools in 2025.