

Fairfax County School Board
Public Hearings on FY2010 School Budget
May 12, 2009

Testimony of Judith F. Harbeck, Chair, Education Committee, Mount Vernon Council of
Citizens Associations (MVCCA)

Good evening. I am Judy Harbeck, and I am speaking to you tonight on behalf of the Education Committee of the Mount Vernon Council of Citizens Associations.

We have closely followed the developing financial situation and budget impacts on both County services and resources available to support Fairfax County Public Schools, whether from the County, Commonwealth or other sources. While we applaud the serious efforts to work collaboratively with the County, to engage the public and to include, very importantly, school-based instructional and administrative staff in identifying the best—or least destructive—ways to address shrinking resources, we are painfully aware that those resources are not adequate and that every suggestion we may make tonight essentially robs Peter to pay Paul. But that is where we are.

We likewise recognize that, in tandem with a quality teaching staff, class size is critical to the practical ability of teachers to meet each student's needs through differentiation of instruction given the wide variety in life experience, ability and family circumstances each child brings to the education table. Thus, trying to minimize class size increases, as this budget does, is of paramount significance.

As you try to conform this budget however, we also remind you of your commitment to the truth that, in order to reach their full potential some students—those living in poverty, minority, limited English speakers-- need more resources in terms of staffing consideration. Schools with high numbers of such disadvantaged students have special challenges as well, and not just instructionally but also administratively and in support staff needs. They are in fact “disadvantaged schools”.

Thus every reduction or adjustment made on a system-wide basis—per capita or percentage—which does not consider the special needs of such “disadvantaged” schools, does disproportionate harm to those schools and students in them. Paperwork and record-keeping, communication with families, discipline, social services caseloads and all the other support services which permit instruction to proceed smoothly are issues in every school. However, these challenges are multiplied exponentially in disadvantaged schools with high mobility, scanty records from prior schools, language issues, families in financial crises or needing help with medical or social problems, and all the panoply of

issues which can stand in the way of student progress. To be brutally honest—just trying to contact one parent or verify one student’s records can be an all-day commitment.

For example, the loss of an assistant principal or a counselor or a secretary is difficult for any school. For a school like Mount Vernon High School it is a disaster. It will destroy the sub school system which has addressed for more than 20 years one of the most important identified factors in reducing student alienation, truancy and discipline problems while increasing achievement and graduation rates: consistent long term relationships with responsible adults. Students enter as freshmen, are assigned a sub school assistant principal and counselor, and those adults rise with the student as he moves to graduation. That staff, including secretaries, become very familiar with each student as an individual with unique circumstances, much more than a name on a roster. All students, but particularly those at-risk and their parents derive comfort and significant benefit from being in a place where they can say with accuracy that “everybody knows my name.” We understand this crisis may have been averted at Mount Vernon by moving scarce resources around but that Hobson’s Choice need not have happened if the special need had been recognized with some flexibility in staffing ratios. And, Mount Vernon is by no means the only school in need of administrative staffing consideration.

Similarly, imposition of fees, whether for IB/AP tests or activities, may be tempting, but such fees would disproportionately harm disadvantaged students and disadvantaged schools. Beyond those qualifying for free and reduced lunch, there are many students and families for which even a minor expense would be impossible. Besides having more students adversely affected, disadvantaged schools also lack the compensatory fund-raising ability of schools with more families with both disposable time and resources. Fewer students will take advanced courses, fewer will participate in extracurricular activities (which also teach important team-building skills and provide intangible benefits like self esteem and school pride) and we will all be the poorer for it.

We must also address the unfulfilled promise of universal full day kindergarten. Abbreviated kindergarten in an era of greatly increased academic expectation is not acceptable: it does not work well for schools, for parents and most importantly for kids. We know kids arriving with less-developed skills need more instructional time to catch up and all kids deserve a positive first school experience. Pity particularly kids assigned to afternoon kindergarten—certainly not an optimal time for young children to absorb a highly academic program.

We know you support full day kindergarten but funding has been an issue for several years. We understand the value of early foreign language instruction but we are constrained to point out that the new promise of FLES should not have been made while the promise of full day kindergarten is not a reality. Given our financial circumstances, FLES needs to be withdrawn completely and progress needs to be made on County-wide full day kindergarten, even one school at a time. Moreover, new full day kindergartens should be awarded solely on the basis of the existing priority list, as amended to include new schools and/or reflect changed circumstances. Fairness dictates that result, and schools waiting for years deserve progress.

As we make these comments we know that there is little flexibility in the budget this year, and perhaps even less next year when we will also likely not have the cushion of the stimulus package. We know there is a limit to how long we can ask our dedicated staff to forego step and MSA. We therefore encourage you to continue searching for efficiencies, including areas of potential overlap with County activities, especially in support service functions such as procurement, maintenance, communication systems, technology and human resources. We also urge you to continue to explore transportation efficiencies including changes to service parameters.

We also approve looking at new ways to meet program or support needs both internally or in cooperation with the County, but urge both caution and involvement of the public, “grass roots” service providers and local staff to fully evaluate potential benefits or consequences (intended or unintended) of any program redesigns.

Difficult times and difficult decisions lay ahead. We stand ready to support you as we seek together to assure both that FCPS has adequate resources to support its mission of providing a world class educational opportunity for each child, and that those resources are appropriately directed. It is our priority; it should be the priority of government. Our children deserve it and the future demands it.

Respectfully Submitted;

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