

Montgomery County School Psychologists' Association (MCSPA)



April 6, 2021

Dear Montgomery County Councilmembers,

My name is Julia Fenner, and I am writing to you on behalf of the Montgomery County School Psychologists' Association (MCSPA). I am co-President of MCSPA, the local organization representing school psychologists within our school district. I am also the school psychologist working at Eastern Middle School in Silver Spring.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony with regards to the budget for fiscal year 2022. MCSPA strongly supports Superintendent Smith's recommendation to add additional ten and twelve month school psychologist positions to the budget, along with specialized positions to support school psychologists and coordination of mental health services. I understand that these unprecedented times may likely impact decisions made regarding funding for all programs within Montgomery County. However, I am reaching out in order to highlight the vital importance of fully funding the positions for school psychologists within the 2022 budget, and to emphasize the need for continued investment in school psychologists moving forward to support the social-emotional well-being and academic development of MCPS students.

Across our county schools, depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts have been on the rise since the beginning of the pandemic. Due to the length of the pandemic and unfolding social unrest, students and families have dealt with a long term crisis that has led to trauma, longstanding mental health needs, and other untold consequences. Research suggests that the effects of trauma stay with children and adolescents long after the traumatic event concludes. Effects include an increased risk for psychological, behavioral, or emotional problems, substance abuse, low academic achievement, social maladjustment, and poor physical health. Supporting students and families with these challenges and providing intervention requires trained mental health staff. School psychologists are uniquely qualified to provide these supports, and much more. Our specialized training in mental health, education, learning, and human development and behavior ensures that we are well-versed to provide a myriad of services. This includes: direct intervention to students; consultation with teachers and families; social-emotional learning; crisis support; threat assessment; counseling; identifying signs of mental health distress; and identifying learning strengths and needs.

While these tasks can provide invaluable support to students and staff, school psychologists are limited in their ability to effect change to more than a few students each day. Before the pandemic, school psychologists spent a large portion of their day attending meetings, testing, or writing reports to meet state and federal mandates. This is due to the low school psychologist to student staffing ratio. The National Association of School Psychologists recommends a ratio of 1:500 in order to provide comprehensive psychological services. Based on the fall 2020 enrollment numbers, the MCPS school-based ratio is 1:1574, more than triple the recommended ratio. Unlike other positions in the MCPS budget, the number of school psychologists is not linked to student enrollment or school/program needs. Many school psychologists work at two to three schools, and others support a multitude of schools and specialized programs. Every year new positions are not added to the budget, school psychologists are stretched further to provide services to more students, but with no increased support. Too often this means prioritizing legally mandated assessment requirements over other supports we can provide. We can do so much more and effect much more change, but this can only be achieved through decreasing our ratio.

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Throughout the last twelve months and to present day, school psychologists have been instrumental in multiple initiatives to support the well-being of our students. These include developing and teaching social-emotional learning and psycho-educational lessons, counseling students, providing needed community resources to families, providing crisis support, conducting suicidal risk assessments, and participating on student well-being teams and return to school workgroups. School psychologists, under the leadership of our director, helped to move the annual mental health fair online and created the bulk of the content for this event. We need to continue providing these services along with new initiatives in our county, including trauma informed schools and a county-wide social emotional learning curriculum. We need to continue building positive relationships with our students, families, and staff. I hope that once students and staff are able to safely return to school that there will not be a "return to the way things were." It cannot be, as it will not adequately support students in a proactive and preventative manner.

I fervently hope that all Councilmembers share MCSPA's vision for comprehensive school psychological services becoming our "new normal" in MCPS. However, this is unobtainable with current staffing ratios. We have 208 unique schools and specialized programs across the county. Each student at every one of these schools and programs deserves to have a school psychologist accessible to them and dedicated to that school building every day. The need for our services is high. The need for our services has always been there, but has been highlighted by the past twelve months. School psychologists want to do what is best for children. We simply need the manpower to provide it. Not just during this next fiscal year, but every year moving forward.

Thank you for this opportunity to voice MCSPA's input.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Julia K. Fenner". The ink is dark and the signature is fluid, with a long, sweeping underline.

Julia K. Fenner
Supporting students and families at Eastern Middle School
MCPS School Psychologist
Co-President of the Montgomery County School Psychologists' Association