

Testimony of the Fair Access Committee for the Western County
Wellness Centers for All High Schools
April 11, 2022
Link Hoewing, Chair

We commend Council Member Nancy Navarro for her dedication to making Wellness Centers mandatory in all high schools in Montgomery County. Wellness Centers or School Based Health Centers have demonstrated that they offer significant benefits for the health and learning outcomes of our students.

The unique characteristics of Poolesville High School – particularly its distance from mental health and counseling support services and the lack of county services such as community centers that other schools have nearby – strongly supports the case for inclusion of a Wellness Center or School Based Health Center in the plans for the construction of our new high school. The “services desert” the Fair Access Committee has pointed to when it comes to the residents of the western county also affects our youth and basic fairness demands that the county Health Department develop a plan for building and supporting such a center as the new high school is constructed. Since it is scheduled to be completely rebuilt by the end of 2024, plans should be made now to incorporate the Center into the construction process so the Center is ready when the school reopens.

The county’s own policy statements have repeatedly emphasized the importance of mental health and wellness and the increased pressures facing students in today’s schools. “MCPS recognizes the impact that a student’s mental health has on learning and achievement. All schools and classrooms provide curriculum, programs, and strategies that foster the academic success and physical, social, and psychological well-being of all students, grades PreK-12. (emphasis added).”

MCPS recognizes that mental health and well-being is a serious problem that significantly affects learning outcomes for students and the learning atmosphere within a school. A recent (2018) study by the State of Maryland as part of the Safe Schools Act provides a snapshot of the variety of mental health problems affecting children in the state that bears this concern out:

“Of the 1,063,206 school-age children and youth in Maryland in 2017, 1,021,054 were enrolled in school, 43,759 were suspended or expelled. A self-report survey assessing the risk behaviors of Maryland middle and high schoolers indicated 7.4% of high school students reported carrying a weapon on school property, 7.8% of high school students reported having been threatened or injured by a weapon while attending school, 18.2% of high school students reported being bullied, and 29.9% of high school students reported feeling sad or hopeless. It is estimated that approximately 22% of school-age children and youth in Maryland experience mental health or substance abuse challenges serious enough to require treatment.”

While the Pandemic has added to these pressures due to the resulting social isolation in particular and hours tied to online classes, the reality is that the mental health of our youth has been at risk for a very long time. A recent Washington Post Magazine report written by noted children's mental health author Judith Warner stated it bluntly **"We have essentially turned a blind eye to our own children for decades"** (emphasis added). In the article, Warner notes that some experts blame the pandemic for the bulk of the mental health problems facing our youth today. But as she notes:

"That's an explanation that feels right, particularly if you're one of the millions of parents trying to balance back-to-normal work expectations with the continued chaos of your school-age children's lives. It feels especially right if you're someone whose child, pre-pandemic, seemed basically fine (or fine enough) and then just ... wasn't. But — as the shrinks say — feelings aren't facts. The front-line providers who work with children have a different explanation: The pandemic hasn't created a children's mental health crisis out of nowhere; rather, it's shone a spotlight on a catastrophe that has been hiding in plain sight for a very long time."

Part of the challenge is related to the substantial lack of mental health professionals focusing on the youth in our country. But Warner also makes the case that we have simply not treated mental health and wellness as a vital and integrated part of our educational system. It has been seen as an "add on" with few resources and not an ongoing and vital part of our educational programs.

In the case of Poolesville High School, all of these factors are compounded by the complete lack of nearby county support services and the distances involved in accessing professional mental health support services. Poolesville is unique in this regard as the Fair Access Committee has repeatedly emphasized.

The county has promoted Wellness Centers because they work and because they provide much more robust programs to help support students and staff on a daily basis as problems emerge. A partnership with Montgomery County Public Schools and the Department of Health and Human Services, the Centers offer a continuum of programs and services that are designed to improve students' cognitive, physical, social and emotional development. The Centers provide the students with a variety of extra-curricular opportunities, mentoring and case management services, mental health counseling and on-site health screenings and care. Any student enrolled in these high schools is eligible to enroll in the school's Wellness Center.

Staffing at a Wellness Center typically includes at least a school nurse, a certified nursing assistant, a site coordinator, a nurse practitioner, a pediatrician, a case manager, and a licensed mental health counselor or therapist. In some centers, other specialists are involved including nutritional experts, family counselors and program managers who develop and run programs to enhance the ability of students to cope with the pressures of school life.

The county's commitment to Wellness Centers is evident from the fact that it has a special capital project focused exclusively on supporting and building such centers. For FY 22, the program included funding of \$7 million. The project overview for the program notes that the Wheaton Wellness Centers was completed in FY16, that Seneca Valley's Center was scheduled for completion in FY21, that the construction of the Kennedy Wellness Center is scheduled to be completed in FY22. These centers will be added to those already existing at Gaithersburg, Watkins Mill, Northwood and Wheaton.

All of the criteria that have traditionally been used in deciding where to put Wellness Centers are unclear but it appears that a major factor has been the number of low-income students at a school. While low income families face serious inequities, there is no evidence that income alone is the most significant predictor that a student will have mental health problems. Immediate and ongoing access to supporting services is vital to helping ensure all students can cope with stresses and emotional problems they are facing. Again, in the case of Poolesville High School, isolated many miles from any county services and nearby access to mental health professionals, the challenges for teachers and administrators are compounded.

The County has recognized the unique aspects of the Poolesville Cluster in the past. For example, there was a proposal to close Monocacy Elementary School citing low enrollment in the 1980's. The county created an advisory committee to study the problem and the rural nature of the Poolesville Cluster, its less dense population, and large distances from population centers helped support a recommendation to allow Monocacy Elementary School to continue operating.

These same issues are central to the arguments the Fair Access Committee has made in supporting the case for the construction of a new high school and the need for a community center. During the consideration of the proposed project to build a new Poolesville High School, numerous comments from government officials acknowledging the unique problems facing the Poolesville Cluster make it clear that the county understands the need to address the lack of equity in providing county services to western county residents. It also evident that the failure to understand these unique problems and ensure that they were considered as decisions were made in the past has led to ongoing neglect of the western county's needs for fair access to county services.

In the case of Poolesville High School, the importance of a Wellness Center to the school's success is clear but the distance and lack of services issues already noted affect not just high school students, but many nearby residents who do not have a car, live alone and are indigent, or are simply unable to drive the long distances needed to get to a health professional.

The Fair Access Committee has been advocating the idea of collocating a community center and clinic as a part of the new high school. In many elementary schools, School Based Health Centers which not only serve students but also their families in providing basic health care services exist. These centers are in effect special purpose clinics that serve not only students but the broader community. This model may well be adaptable and work well for the western

county. It should be considered in assessing how to address the issues raised by this white paper.

After many years of neglect and the failure to provide equitable access to needed county services and investment, the western county is finally beginning to see progress on some of its key issues. The final approval of a capital improvement program to rebuild Poolesville High School is a very important start. Given how long it has taken to get to this point, we cannot afford to leave out of the program any improvements that will ensure the new school is as ready as possible to address the needs of all students for many years to come.

Council Member Navarro's effort to institutionalize Wellness Centers into our high schools as a vital and important part of their programming is a welcome and very important step in helping all of our youth thrive. The Fair Access Committee has supported incorporating Wellness Centers into all high schools since its inception in 2018. As we have demonstrated in this paper, we think Poolesville High School's reconstruction offers a unique opportunity to incorporate a full-fledged Center and clinic as the school is rebuilt.