



Montgomery Knolls Elementary School

“Where Learning is Magic”

807 Daleview Drive

Silver Spring, MD 20901

(240) 740-0840

Office of the Principal

Name: Arienne Clark-Harrison

Testimony: FY24 Operating Budget

Position: Support Full Funding of MCPS Budget including the tax increase

My name is Arienne Clark-Harrison and I am proud to be here today as a Montgomery County resident and elementary school principal with Montgomery County Public Schools. I have served Montgomery County Public Schools for 15 years, the last 7 of which as the Principal of Montgomery Knolls Elementary School. I serve on the Montgomery County Association of Administrators and Principals (MCAAP) Board of Directors as the Elementary Cabinet Vice Chair. While I have lived in Maryland since 2002, I have been a proud Montgomery County resident for the last 15 years, residing in Wheaton, MD with my husband. I testify here today in support of the tax increase for Montgomery County residents to fully fund the school system's FY24 budget.

Having lived and worked in many different cities and states - Jackson, MS, Providence, RI, New York City, and Washington, DC - as well as lived in other Maryland jurisdictions - Prince George's County and Arundel County - I have a sense of how the appropriate use of taxes can positively impact the well-being of a community as well as how it can adversely affect the livelihood of residents. When I moved to Montgomery County 15 years ago, there was a noticeable difference. I could see that my taxes were working for me. I am incredibly proud to live in a County where I have felt supported by the Montgomery County Police Department, where I knew that I could depend on Montgomery County Fire and Rescue if and when I needed them, where roads are paved and my vehicle is not being damaged by poor road conditions, where snow removal has allowed me to be able to move around safely during inclement weather, where I felt safe during the pandemic (much safer than other communities that I saw struggling on the news) and depended on County leadership to make decisions in the best interest of our collective well-being.

But perhaps the most important draw to Montgomery County for me was the public school system that I have now been committed to as an employee for the past 15 years. I have never been more passionate about living and working in a County that champions education the way that Montgomery County has. For decades now, Montgomery County Public Schools have been a symbol of the great potential of public education, recognized nationally for its achievements. Yet, just like everyone else in education, we are feeling the impact of the pandemic and are working to devise strategies to ensure successful recovery efforts for our students that include 1) their academic success, 2) their safety and security while attending school, as well as 3) their mental and emotional health and well-being.

As a principal leading during these challenging times, I am fully aware of what it takes to ensure that our great school system comes out of these challenging times on top. We need funding to ensure that our students are safe and secure while in school. Any principal will tell you that we have seen an uptick in domestic abuse cases, difficult child custody arrangements, as well as other societal stressors that fall on our doorstep. I have managed many difficult and sometimes rough family situations this year, a significant increase from years past, without the backing of security because our elementary schools are only allotted a roving security detail.



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We have seen a significant increase in students dealing with mental and emotional stressors, self-medicating with the use of legal and illegal substances. We have all heard this on the news. What you don't see are the student cases that don't get reported. I have spent hours of my day helping to calm and develop behavioral plans for a number of dysregulated students in order to ensure the safety of other students in my building. We have referred an unprecedented number of students for therapeutic resources this year and have a waiting list for the family therapist that we are provided through Linkages to Learning. We must take proactive steps to tackle our youth mental health crisis. But we need the resources to do so.

Safety and security as well as mental health and well-being are critical to ensuring that our schools are nurturing places in which students can get a world-class education. But we know that we have some recovery work to do in order to ensure that all of our students are meeting their highest educational potential. In her proposal, the Superintendent has outlined the school system's data, where we have succeeded and where we continue to struggle. She has specifically outlined the funding needs of the school system to ensure that we get ahead of this curve and ensure that our students are on track for academic progress. Yet, in order to do this, we must be fully staffed and ensure that we have the highest quality staff members to take on this work. With the teacher retention concerns and teacher shortages, principals must look to recruit staff members from outside of Montgomery County to ensure that our school's are fully staffed. In my recruitment efforts, I have discovered that more often than not, teachers and teacher-leaders in surrounding districts would have to take a pay cut in order to come to Montgomery County. This often leads to potential educators turning down the offer to work for MCPS, resulting in an inability to increase the talent pool in our school district. Additionally our school system is bleeding talent to other jurisdictions as teachers and administrators are electing to leave MCPS for places where they are not only compensated at higher rates for their commitment to serving students and families, but they can also afford housing. As a current resident, what keeps me from simply purchasing a home in another jurisdiction at a lesser price point as well as being able to make the same or more money? And we know that educators are in great demand and need to be hired everywhere right now. How do we ensure that we keep our talent in Montgomery County and not lose out to other jurisdictions?

In order to keep our school system at the highest threshold of public educational institutions, we must fully fund the proposed school system budget! One of the reasons that people move to Montgomery County is because our school system is of such high quality. To be able to purchase a home in Montgomery County and feel safe and sure about sending your children to public school ensures that families have more to spend on their children's livelihoods and their futures. Additionally, Montgomery County Public school students most often become contributing citizens of this County, an integral part of our skilled workforce, eventually sending their own children to our schools. The unprecedented budget proposal by the Superintendent is not simply a suggestion, but it is rather an imperative on how we want to see Montgomery County continue to evolve as an outstanding place to both live and work. The safety and security of our schools, the mental health and well-being of our students, and the academic success of all is not negotiable. As our County Executive has told us, "Slipping in these categories will hurt the County's property values far more and far longer than a property tax increase."



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As a resident, I am in favor of this tax increase as I want to continue to see my County, Montgomery County, be great! I am in favor of a tax increase that will continue to allow all other public works to continue to be fully funded. These services are imperative. We cannot offset the cost of the school system while detracting from other public agencies that support how the County effectively functions. Yet, ensuring that our school system is fully funded is equal to ensuring that Montgomery County has a bright and prosperous future.