

Teresa M. Cleary

Written Testimony

County Council Meeting 4/13/2023

My name is [Teresa Cleary](#) and I am a Montgomery County resident and special education teacher in MCPS currently working at one of three special schools, Regional Institute for Children and Adolescents (or RICA). I am here to ask that you fully fund the budget request and pass County Executive Elrich's proposed revenue enhancement measure to provide adequate funding of our public school system. When County Executive Elrich proposed a 5-cent tax increase a few years ago, a few of you on this very Council voted unanimously to reject that proposal. Had you approved that measure, maybe we could've begun the work of rebuilding the epicenter of our communities then. Maybe we wouldn't find ourselves in this position.

Special Education is in crisis in Montgomery County and the revenue enhancement measure is the first step towards rectifying years of underfunding.

At RICA, a lack of adequate staffing has resulted in us having to turn down students for admission. That means that the County's most vulnerable children are not receiving their legally mandated services. Councilmember Albornoz, you recently spearheaded legislation to create the county's first Commission for individuals with disabilities, to try and coordinate services and identify gaps. You are welcome to come to RICA to identify gaps. The skeleton crew we operate with cannot meet many of the intense behavioral issues some of these students exhibit. We have students that have experienced multiple suicide attempts, suicidal ideation, self-harm, physical and sexual abuse and organic mental health issues like schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, personality disorder, and explosive disorders. If our children were not in one of our Special Schools, then the next step is a very expensive out of MCPS placement. This usually goes through the County's local care team, which is currently housed within the Montgomery County Collaboration Council. That is an organization that Councilmembers Glass and Friedson are very familiar with: given your familiarity with their work I find it alarming that in meetings with our members, Councilmember Friedson, you said that you had no idea the special education crisis was so dire. I hope my testimony is especially illuminating for you.

We need to be staffed based on the needs of the students, not a generic state/county staffing number. Federal guidelines suggest a 1:4 ratio for special education programs, and yet special schools like we have in our County are staffed at a 1:10 ratio. This has routinely put students and staff at risk.

Special education teachers across the county and most definitely at special schools are required to work off the clock to complete mandated legal documentation for IEPs, Behavioral Intervention Plans, and Functional Behavioral Assessments. There is almost zero substitute coverage at these schools and teachers are required to cover classes for missing coworkers. The small staff at RICA has covered over 600 classes this year; it is impossible to complete the work required without adequate planning time. For many teachers, enough is enough. Related Service

Providers are also leaving for jobs that pay them for services rendered. *Unmanageable* caseloads due to lack of staffing is leading to staff departing. Our children cannot make progress without these critical services.

Many staff who are leaving feel unsupported, under compensated for actual hours worked and frustrated trying to meet impossible demands. Those that remain will have an even more difficult job next year. How long they stay will remain to be seen.

We need your resolve to provide our most vulnerable students with the best possible resources. We need you to be united for our kids, communities, and future. We are part of a coalition of 50,000+ workers here in the County who want what is best for our children and communities.

The real question is do you?