

02/06/2025

To: Montgomery County Council

Cc: Montgomery County Board of Education; Kate Stewart (District 4 Councilmember); Dr. Thomas Taylor; Mr. David Adams

Dear Montgomery County Council,

Thank you for accepting my written testimony related to the Amendments to MCPS' CIP.

I am in support of the amendments to the FY25 MCPS CIP, which includes funding for the continued renovation (including an auditorium) of the Charles E. Woodward HS and additional funding to address urgent capital needs across MCPS' schools. However, the pressing space concerns at Ashburton Elementary School (Ashburton ES) was not addressed.

As a parent of a 1st grader at Ashburton Elementary School, as well as a 3-year-old who will be attending Ashburton in a few years, I am writing to implore the Council to work with MCPS (and in consultation with the Office of Planning and Development) to craft a solution to address the overcrowded current state of Ashburton ES that has been created by structural inequities and unchecked development in the elementary schools' service area. These conditions are translating to diminished academic outcomes, safety and well-being concerns, and equity implications.

I want to be clear that myself and other parents TRULY appreciate and value our wonderful teachers, staff, and administrators, who are such integral parts of our kids' lives. However, it is clear that the overcrowding of Ashburton ES *has been* a problem (identified as far back as 2012), *is* a problem now, and will *continue to be* a problem as more buildings and housing are developed in the community. Given that I am relatively new to the school system, I am just starting to understand the ins and outs; so this letter will be brief. There are several other Ashburton parents testifying before you who have done admirable amounts of research, and I am lending my voice to fully support their efforts and asks. And, there are several aspects of particular concern that I want to highlight.

The Problems

- Ashburton has been reliant on modular classrooms for years, and all indications are that we should not expect them to go away in favor of a more sustainable solution. Concerning the long-term use of modulars, in Dr. Taylor's own words (*Letter to Bethesda Elementary school parents; 12/16/24*) he states "...we are exploring configurations that include adding modular classrooms to provide extra space. **However, this solution is not optimal for the long run** because the temporary structures of modular classrooms are not designed for long-term use. **When modular classrooms are added, the size of common areas does not change,**

resulting in the school still feeling overcrowded with limited operations.” If other elementary schools are not expected to view modulars as a long term solution to their space constraints, why is Ashburton ES?

- Since 2019, Ashburton’s capacity has been 789 (which is exceeded each year; in the FY 2024 School Test, the 4 year projection for utilization was 121%)¹. The decision last year to increase class sizes by one student, had the (unintended?) impact of INCREASING our capacity *artificially* to 822, therefore *artificially* changing our utilization rate to not only be significantly lower, but also move us out of “Tier 2 UPP” status into “no UPP status”.² All with enrollment rising and not a single square foot of space added. This is very “fuzzy math”.
- Our community has seen a **surge of major residential development** within the Ashburton school district (including Amalyn, the Rae, the Astrid, and the Rock Spring Development). We are absorbing new families and children at a rate far beyond what is being asked of our neighboring schools. In fact, while we are chronically above our capacity, many of our neighboring schools seem to actually have EXTRA capacity.³ I am unclear what, if any, consideration is given to school enrollment impacts when development is approved, and what, if any, monetary investment developers are required to put into school districts and communities that will bear the impacts of their profits. As County Executive Elrich noted in his amendment recommendations to the County Council, school impact taxes have significantly decreased, and if the Council continues to reduce such taxes further, it will exacerbate funding gaps for MCPS and stress the public infrastructure.

The Impacts:

- **Safety and well-being:** Although we are often reminded that our school has a larger comparable footprint, our kids have less physical space on a per-child basis, than most other MCPS elementary schools, which directly impacts safety and well-being.⁴ Another implication of the schools’ size is that lunch runs almost all day long, and is too short. My 1st grader eats at 10:45 am and has complained he doesn’t have time to finish his lunch. Paraeducators are helping with lunch and recess almost all day long and don’t have time to help in the classrooms where they are needed. And, if there is a safety or security issue, teachers are for the most part alone in their classroom with almost 30 children.
- **Academics:** Ashburton’s Grade 3 Reading and Grade 5 Math/ELC scores are SIGNIFICANTLY lower than our neighboring schools.⁵ It is hard to imagine that teachers are able to give each child the attention they need to succeed with the large number of children in each class, and limited (if any) classroom assistance.

¹<https://montgomeryplanning.org/planning/countywide/growth-and-infrastructure-policy/schools/annual-school-test/>

²<https://montgomeryplanning.org/planning/countywide/growth-and-infrastructure-policy/schools/annual-school-test/>

³ <https://gis.mcpsmd.org/Dashboard/Dashboard2.html>

⁴ <https://gis.mcpsmd.org/Dashboard/Dashboard2.html>

⁵<https://app.powerbi.com/view?r=eyJrIjoibWVzYTUwMzMtYzlmMy00ZDkxLWFmNjMtZDk0ZjUyYmMyZjM5IiwidCI6ImRkZjc1NWU5LWJjZDYtNGE1ZS1hNDcyLTdjMzc4YTc4YzZjNyIsImMiOiF9>

- **Equity:** Although the application of an additional student per class was effectuated *equally* amongst MCPS schools, it was not *equitable*. Smaller enrollment schools will always have an advantageous position. For example (hypothetically), if a small enrollment school with two 28 child 1st grade classes gets enrollment of 57 students, they will get another class- leading to 19 kids per class in 3 classes. If Ashburton has five 1st grade classes of 28 and gets enrollment of 141, an additional class would still leave us with a class size of 24 in 6 classes.

In closing, I have in my own personal experience, known community members to cite Ashburton's overcrowded conditions and comparably lower test scores as reasons to either 1) move their family to another (sometimes adjacent!) neighborhood or 2) consider private school. We are a wonderful community with wonderful educators and neighbors. And while Ashburton has admirably done what it can with its resources up to now, **surviving is NOT thriving**. Please **put capital investment in Ashburton Elementary into your planning goals, as well as increased coordination with MCPS and the Office of Planning and Development in order to better understand how our elementary schools are being utilized**. Our community needs you take a holistic and action-oriented approach in ensuring that all students are given the opportunity to learn in a safe and supportive environment.

Thank you for your time and your support of our community. I look forward to fostering collaborative relationships focused on finding a sustainable path to create brighter futures for our children.

Melissa Mulholland

Parent and Community Member