

**Public Hearing on Fiscal Year 2026 (FY26) Operating Budgets – April 7, 2025**  
**Richard Montgomery Cluster PT(S)A Testimony to the Montgomery County Council**

RICHARD MONTGOMERY HS \* JULIUS WEST MS \*  
BEALL ES \* BAYARD RUSTIN ES \* COLLEGE GARDENS ES \* RITCHIE PARK ES \* TWINBROOK ES

*Presented by Jonathan Thessin (RM Cluster Co-Coordinator and Beall ES parent) and Amy Haddad (RM Cluster Co-Coordinator and Ritchie Park ES parent)*

Good afternoon, President Stewart, members of the Council, and staff. Thank you for the opportunity to testify about Montgomery County’s Fiscal Year 2026 operating budget. My name is Jonathan Thessin, and I am the parent of three children who have attended Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS or the System) schools, including a third grader who currently attends Beall Elementary School. I also am one of the Montgomery County Council of PTAs’ cluster coordinators for the seven Richard Montgomery Cluster PT(S)As (RM Cluster). Along with my cluster co-coordinator Amy Haddad, who is the former president of the Ritchie Park PTA and parent of two current Ritchie Park students, we present the following testimony.<sup>1</sup>

Budget proposals are moral documents, reflecting the community’s values and priorities. The funding we provide to our schools will impact our children’s personal growth into adulthood, their ability to succeed in college and careers, and the broader trajectory of their lives. Families choose to live in Montgomery County in part because we believe our leaders will devote the resources necessary to provide a world-class education to our children.

Superintendent Thomas Taylor and the Board of Education (BOE) have proposed an FY26 operating budget that addresses the district’s extensive needs. The proposal would help create safe and welcoming learning environments, enforce systems and processes for continuing school improvement, invest in differentiation in instruction, and return the system to academic excellence. We urge the Council to fully fund MCPS schools.

Specifically, full funding for MCPS would strengthen the System’s ability to fund important priorities, including the following, which are of particular interest to the RM Cluster:

- Ensure MCPS can maintain existing class sizes and avoid a harmful increase in class size;
- Fulfil Superintendent Taylor’s request to provide 500 additional paraeducators; and
- Fulfil Superintendent Taylor’s plan to ensure staffing formulas consider both proportions of students and total numbers of students, so that schools like Bayard Rustin ES—whose population has ballooned to over 800 students in recent years—receive the staffing they need.

Separate but related, we also urge the Council to direct the Department of Health and Human Services to establish the “Linkages to Learning” program at Twinbrook Elementary School.

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<sup>1</sup> Amy and I are indebted to Amy Ackerberg-Hastings, who previously served as RM Cluster Coordinator and is now an Area Vice President for MCCPTA. She prepared our Cluster’s testimony for the past three years, and this testimony builds on her prior testimony. We also appreciate the feedback we received from our Cluster’s principals on the topics covered in this testimony.

## **I. Full Funding for MCPS Would Avoid a Harmful Increase in Class Size**

Small class size is a necessary foundation for an outstanding learning experience in the classroom. Small classes allow teachers to differentiate their instruction and facilitate effective classroom management and the minimization of disruptions. It is imperative that MCPS receive full funding so that it need not consider an increase to class sizes. Over the medium term, we urge the Council to provide robust funding so that MCPS can reduce class sizes.

Regretfully, MCPS increased class sizes by one student-per-class across all grade levels last June in response to a shortfall in the FY 2025 operational budget. This increase in class size has detrimentally impacted those schools that were compelled to reduce the number of classes in a grade to meet MCPS's new class size requirements or had to "let go" of teachers. In the RM Cluster, one elementary school lost a kindergarten teacher. Consequently, four kindergarten classes were reduced to three classes. For kindergarten students at that school, the size of their class is *several students larger* as compared with the school's kindergarten classes last year. Our cluster's high school, Richard Montgomery, lost seven teachers as part of the class size increase.<sup>2</sup> In response, the school experienced significant increases in class size and was compelled to cut course offerings, such as the Latin Program and other electives.

We need to decrease, not increase, class sizes, which are already too large—and ensure MCPS policy does not obfuscate the true size of classes. For example, current class size guidelines list maximums of 25 students for kindergarten, 26 students for first and second grade, 27 students for third grade, and 29 students for fourth and fifth grade. Significantly, under current MCPS policy, all classes must have at least one student above the maximum class size and one class must have at least two students above the maximum class size in order for the school to request additional staffing. Therefore, a kindergarten class may have as many as 27 students in a class, and a fourth or fifth grade class may have as many as 31 students in a class. This policy undercuts the concept of a stated "maximum" class size. We have urged MCPS to rescind the policy. Full funding for MCPS would allow the System to more fully consider making this policy change.

Studies demonstrate that smaller class sizes result in higher achievement.<sup>3</sup> Most elementary classrooms are heterogenous, and the needs of students in these classrooms vary significantly, from students needing remedial instruction, to students who are on grade level, to students who qualify for enrichment. The existing large class sizes at the elementary level make it exceedingly difficult for teachers to provide differentiated instruction. An increase in class size has made it even more difficult for teachers to meet the needs of all students in their classrooms.

Although not a replacement for lower class sizes, we support Superintendent Taylor's proposal to fund 500 additional paraeducator positions.<sup>4</sup> Paraeducators play a critical role in providing

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<sup>2</sup> The teachers that RM lost were reassigned to other schools within MCPS.

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Matt Barnum, *Does Class Size Really Matter? A Chalkbeat Look at the Research*, Chalkbeat (June 10, 2022), <https://www.chalkbeat.org/2022/6/10/23162544/class-size-research/> (observing that studies conducted in Tennessee, California, Minnesota, New York City, North Carolina, Texas, and Wisconsin "have shown lower class sizes boost test scores").

<sup>4</sup> Montgomery County Public Schools, Recommended FY 2026 Operating Budget 4 (Dec. 18, 2024), [https://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/siteassets/district/departments/budget/fy2026/fy2026\\_operatingbudget\\_final.pdf](https://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/siteassets/district/departments/budget/fy2026/fy2026_operatingbudget_final.pdf) [hereinafter, Superintendent's Recommended Budget].

support to students receiving special education services and to other students. Moreover, the presence of a paraeducator in the classroom may allow the primary teacher to meet with a smaller group of students. Paraeducators are particularly helpful in kindergarten and other lower elementary grades. We have asked MCPS to consider placing at least one paraeducator in each kindergarten classroom to help those students transition to elementary school, particularly kindergarten students who did not attend preschool or pre-kindergarten or Head Start programs. As MCPS considers more broadly how it can reduce class size across all grades, it should evaluate, as a short-term solution, the expansion of its corps of paraeducators. Full funding for MCPS would strengthen the System's ability to provide adequate incentives, including pay and benefits, to recruit and retain paraeducators.

In sum, our public schools are a leading reason many residents choose to live in Montgomery County. Last June's increase in class size has tarnished our schools' reputation and degraded the quality of education our children receive. The Council should be confident that the political will exists to fund a reduction in class sizes. As MCPS was implementing last June's class size increase, over 2,600 County residents signed a petition – with most signing within 2-3 days of the petition becoming “live” – that urged the Board of Education not to increase class size.<sup>5</sup> We urge the Council to fully fund MCPS's budget so that MCPS can maintain class sizes in the 2025-2026 school year and, over the medium term, provide a reduction in class sizes.

## **II. Full Funding Would Allow the Board of Education to Address Inequities in Staffing Ratios, Allocations, and Formulas**

Full funding for MCPS would support the System's efforts to evaluate how staffing ratios, allocations, and formulas continue to be inequitable and prevent schools from being successful. For instance, our schools are not all the same size, so having one position per school or basing staffing solely on percentages shortchanges schools with larger enrollments. MCPS's formulas need to consider *both proportions of students and total numbers of students*. As one example, Bayard Rustin ES's student population—which has ballooned to over 800 students in recent years—requires a very heavy lift from staff in addressing student behaviors and conflicts, holding parent meetings, offering support for families and students in crisis, and conducting observations and evaluations.<sup>6</sup> All of these duties pull the staff away from being highly effective instructional and operational leaders. This large school needs a second assistant principal (AP) to share the load carried by the principal and existing AP. We support Superintendent Taylor's recommendation that elementary schools with more than 750 students receive a second AP.<sup>7</sup>

We commend Superintendent Taylor for proposing a significant increase in MCPS's operating budget. But that budget does not address all of MCPS's needs. Full funding in this FY 2026

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<sup>5</sup> Action Network, *Urge Montgomery County Board of Education Not to Increase Class Size*, [https://actionnetwork.org/petitions/urge-montgomery-county-board-of-education-not-to-increase-class-size?source=direct\\_link](https://actionnetwork.org/petitions/urge-montgomery-county-board-of-education-not-to-increase-class-size?source=direct_link) (last visited Jan. 11, 2025) (reflecting that 2,645 individuals signed the petition in opposition to the June 2024 class size increase).

<sup>6</sup> Bayard Rustin's enrollment was as high as 806 students in recent years. MCPS currently lists the school's enrollment as 758. *See* Superintendent's Recommended FY 2026 Capital Budget and Amendments to the FY 2025-2030 Capital Improvements Program: Keeping Our Major Projects Whole, 4-51 (Oct. 24, 2024), [https://gis.mcpsmd.org/cipmasterpdfs/CIP26\\_EntireBook.pdf](https://gis.mcpsmd.org/cipmasterpdfs/CIP26_EntireBook.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> Superintendent's Recommended Budget, *supra* note 1, at App. C-1.

budget is necessary so that, in succeeding fiscal years, Superintendent Taylor can address additional needs. We have identified the following areas where additional funding is needed:

- The *50:1 ratio for lunch and recess supervision* at elementary schools creates unsafe situations and makes it difficult for adults to build relationships with students that nurture their emotional and physical well-being.
- Increased mental health staffing in secondary schools has been proven effective. At the elementary level, *one psychologist should not be asked to serve multiple schools*. Further, the *600:1 ratio for counselors* makes it impossible to provide the essential care and attention every student deserves.
- *Allocations for specialists* (e.g., reading, focus, and staff development teachers) *need to be 1.0* for each position and school, and the allocations need to be set at 1.0 throughout the staffing process, not cut and then restored after principals spend valuable time fighting for what we already know students need. As noted above, large schools such as Bayard Rustin should have allocations of 2.0 or higher.
- Our growing population of *Emergent Multilingual Learners (EML)* is underserved. For example, Richard Montgomery HS's EML student enrollment has grown by 75% over the last three years. The growth of EML students requires additional EML teachers, as well as additional sections of courses taught by general education teachers. RM is grateful to have this past year received a full-time counselor and additional EML staffing. However, the loss of seven positions in general teachers staffing has created class sizes for EML students that do not serve their unique needs. Conditions are similar at Julius West MS, the largest middle school in Montgomery County. As you are probably aware, EML students who are placed in English-language classes because there is nowhere else for them to go are overrepresented among students who are chronically absent.
- Schools need *dedicated testing coordinators* so that staff are not juggling this ever-growing responsibility on top of their other duties. The testing schedule is year-round (MAP three times per year, MCAP, WIDA, Maryland School Survey, and more) and involves scheduling, determining student testing groups, offering lessons in test prep, analyzing data, and so on. Additionally, if students are increasingly assigned to the Home School Model (HSM), then Alternate Learning Objectives (ALO) testing will have to be administered more often.
- Our schools are community hubs that are used at all hours every day and thus are subject to heavy wear and tear. *Building Services staff must be sufficient* to maintain the properties. Bayard Rustin ES needs an additional half-time employee, and we pointed out two years ago that Richard Montgomery HS needs at least one more staff member—none were added as the number of portables grew to nine.

### **III. The Council Should Direct the Department of Health and Human Services to Establish Linkages to Learning at Twinbrook ES**

We appreciate the attention that the County has paid to Twinbrook Elementary School, a Title I and Community School whose FARMS rate (students who qualify for free and reduced-priced meals) has steadily increased over the past 20 years from about 50% to its current rate of 88%. This past Monday, Community School Liaison Tanya Aguilar organized a “Community Care” day at Twinbrook, which Councilmembers Sayles, Fani-Gonzalez, and Katz attended, among other County and City of Rockville officials in attendance. We also thank MCPS for its role in enabling Twinbrook to share Maryvale Elementary School’s “Linkages to Learning” case manager beginning this past fall. Additionally, the teamwork between the City of Rockville-supplied part-time social worker and the school counselor is fantastic, and the community is incredibly grateful for everything the social worker, counselor, and Community School liaison do to care for students and families.

Despite this attention, Twinbrook continues to need substantial assistance so that its students have the supports necessary for them to thrive academically. We reiterate the request that our Cluster made last year that the Council direct the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) to establish Linkages to Learning at Twinbrook. We still believe that the County’s insistence that newly-constructed vacant space be a prerequisite for a full roll-out of the Linkages program (i.e., a complete complement of full-time staff members<sup>8</sup>) is inequitable and unreasonable. Twinbrook’s renovation has been pushed back or removed from MCPS’s Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) again and again over the past 20 years, and there is no guarantee that it will be one of the elementary schools whose capital project is moved forward in the upcoming FY 2027-2032 CIP. However, Twinbrook families do not have the luxury of delaying the struggles they face. These challenges are exacerbated by the fact that many of the families with highest need live outside of the City of Rockville (and thus are ineligible for City programs) but find that County resources are inaccessible from their apartments on Twinbrook Parkway. For example, some of the nonprofits offering job counseling and English-language classes are in Wheaton and Silver Spring, a long bus ride away for the families who need these services. Further, none of these supports are the same as having multiple full-time staff on site. When families move into Twinbrook’s service area from schools with Linkages, they immediately notice and comment on the difference in support.

### **Conclusion**

We urge the Council to fully fund the Board of Education’s FY 2026 operating budget request. Full funding would allow MCPS to address its extensive needs. We appreciate the Council’s consideration of this request.

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<sup>8</sup> Participating schools receive 2–5 additional staff, including case managers, family therapists, and community school aides or coordinators.