



## COMMISSION ON CHILDREN AND YOUTH

April 12, 2018

The Honorable Michael A. Durso  
President  
Montgomery County Board of Education  
850 Hungerford Drive, Room 123  
Rockville, Maryland 20850

President Durso and Members of the Board of Education:

On behalf of the Montgomery County Commission on Children and Youth, thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Fiscal Year 2019 Operating Budget. Like you, the Commission believes that a budget reflects the values of our community, and we appreciate the Superintendent's emphasis on ensuring that our school system works for every child, regardless of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, disability, religion, gender identity, or national origin.

The Montgomery County Commission on Children and Youth, comprised of 27 committed volunteer members including youth, parents, and child-serving professionals, promotes the well-being of Montgomery County's children, youth, and families so that all young people may realize their full potential and become contributing, productive adults. To help inform our work, the Commission hosted its 11<sup>th</sup> annual *Youth Having a Voice Roundtable* on February 8, 2018. A diverse group of students from local secondary schools joined us for a profound discussion on mental health, school climate, and the experiences of youth who are undocumented in Montgomery County. Perhaps most importantly, student members of the Commission led the discussion. While adults were permitted to listen, they were asked not to participate or interject, allowing for a true fishbowl experience for the adults in attendance.

Many youth in the room bravely shared their sources of stress, and while talking to a trusted adult emerged as a method to alleviate their stress, the students unanimously reported a perceived inaccessibility of mental health support staff at school. Mental health can be defined as a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to the community. Some students reported that their school counselors were overwhelmed and often unavailable. Others noted discomfort sharing personal problems with teachers or other staff without having an established level of trust. No students even identified other school-employed mental health professionals, such as school psychologists or pupil personnel workers, as resources available to them, as students likely remain unaware of their existence. Further, the students highlighted the many logistical and financial barriers to accessing mental health supports outside of school, despite an interest and desire to receive such services.

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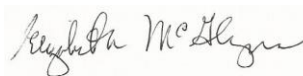
A prevailing theme emerged through the remainder of the evening that students do not feel the sense of safety and trust with school staff that would enable them to receive mental health support or comfortably report personal problems or disruptions to their school's safety or climate. When asked by a commission member how school staff could build that trust, several students noted the need for those mental health staff to be regularly present, familiar, and demonstrate care in knowing the students before a problem arises.

Herein lies a notable concern; while the Montgomery County Board of Education has continued to work toward improving access to school-employed mental health professionals (e.g., school counselors, school psychologists, and pupil personnel workers), the gap between needed ratios and existing ratios remains significant. The American School Counselor Association, as well as the School Social Work Association of America, both recommend a ratio of 1 professional to every 250 students. The National Association of School Psychologists recommends 1 school psychologist for every 500 to 700 students. Meeting these ratios requires a significant financial and strategic commitment, however, our students have spoken quite clearly. We believe that the Montgomery County Board of Education is in a position to plan strategically, over multiple years, toward full realization of these recommended ratios, beginning with a clear commitment in FY 19 to increase access and the presence of these critical support personnel.

Not only does promoting mental health and wellness align with the mission of the Commission; it provides a necessary condition for effective learning to take place. We believe that Montgomery County Public Schools must make a commitment toward providing appropriate access to mental health services and striving to meet national recommended ratios.

Thank you for your time, service and consideration. We look forward to implementation of a budget that is reflective of the needs of the children and youth in our community.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Elizabeth McGlynn".

Elizabeth McGlynn, Chair

c: Dr. Jack Smith, Superintendent, Montgomery County Public Schools