

MONTGOMERY COUNTY BOARD OF EDUCATION

850 Hungerford Drive ♦ Rockville, Maryland 20850

April 15, 2010

The Honorable Valerie Ervin, Vice President
The Honorable Roger Berliner
✓ The Honorable Marc Elrich
The Honorable George Leventhal
The Honorable Nancy Navarro
The Honorable Duchy Trachtenberg
Montgomery County Council
Stella B. Werner Council Office Building
100 Maryland Avenue
Rockville, Maryland 20850

Dear Councilmembers Ervin, Berliner, Elrich, Leventhal, Navarro, and Trachtenberg:

Thank you for your letter dated March 23, 2010, regarding the Piney Branch Elementary School Young Activist Club's proposal to install a dishwashing machine at Piney Branch Elementary School. We appreciate the students' enthusiasm and tenacity in advocating for this issue. This proposal has been extensively considered and analyzed. In spite of the sincere advocacy of the students and public relations actions of the group's sponsors, we do not believe the request to install a dishwasher is in the best interest of Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS). We are not persuaded that there are sufficient environmental benefits from this proposal to justify the additional costs and staff efforts associated with implementing the proposal.

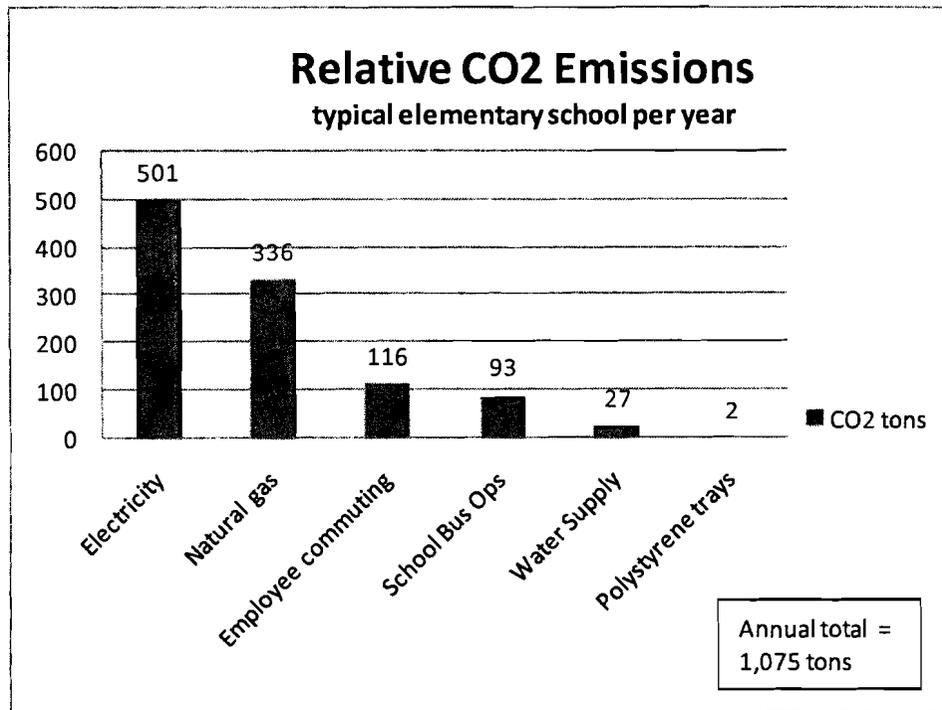
It appears that there are two separate issues that have become intertwined by the sponsors of the Young Activists Club—eliminating polystyrene trays and installing a dishwashing machine. Eliminating polystyrene is a much larger issue than disposable trays at one elementary school. Polystyrene food packaging and serving materials are regulated by the United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and are approved for use in restaurants across the county, state, and country. MCPS operates over 200 food service facilities and relies on the use of FDA-approved materials to provide more than 30,000 nutritious and economical meals each school day. Any discussion about eliminating the use of polystyrene items from the food service industry should not be limited solely to school cafeterias.

The installation of a dishwashing machine as a means to eliminate polystyrene trays is not viable. MCPS has determined the actual costs of the dishwashing machine proposal and compared them to the costs developed by the Young Activist Club's sponsors. We have offered to explore options to discontinue the use of polystyrene trays at Piney Branch Elementary School. The Young Activist Club's sponsors chose not to pursue other options but persisted in their quest to install a dishwashing machine as the only means to eliminate polystyrene trays. We believe that decision has placed everyone, including the students, in a difficult situation.

MCPS has demonstrated its commitment to sustainable practices in its operations. We have attempted to concentrate limited resources to produce the greatest return on investment, ensure a

healthy environment for students and staff, and reduce the system’s overall carbon footprint. MCPS has focused its resources on reducing energy consumption and increasing recycling rates through its School Energy and Recycling Team (SERT) program; installing solar photovoltaic panels on eight schools; having 18 schools (occupied, under construction, or in design) that will be Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certified, and implementing “green” cleaning practices throughout the system.

Our staff has evaluated the various components that comprise the carbon footprint of Piney Branch Elementary School. As seen in the chart below, polystyrene represents approximately 0.2 percent of the carbon footprint. However, small as this is, this figure still overstates the carbon impact from the polystyrene trays. All polystyrene cafeteria trays are incinerated in the Resource Recovery Facility. Because polystyrene is composed of hydrocarbons, all of the energy content of the polystyrene is released in the incineration process and is used to produce electricity. Because the polystyrene is incinerated at very high temperatures, typically between 1,800 degrees to 2,000 degrees Fahrenheit, the products of combustion are primarily carbon dioxide and water—the same as the products of combustion from the majority of other fuels used to generate electricity. Therefore, the carbon footprint from polystyrene is effectively recycled into useful electricity and the environmental impact is relatively small.



Given this data, we are not convinced that the elimination of polystyrene trays would have significant environmental benefits relative to what could be achieved with investment in other measures. If we are going to invest staff time and funding, there are many more opportunities to pursue in regard to energy efficiency and conservation that will deliver a positive return on investment and have a much greater impact on carbon emissions.

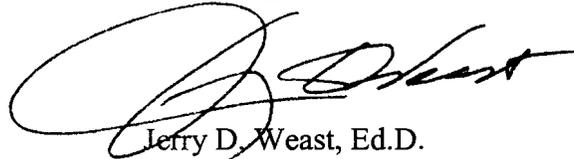
While we enjoy the support of the County Council on many efforts, we believe we have given the Young Activist Club's proposal thorough consideration and must respectfully disagree with the councilmembers' urging to proceed with the proposal to install a dishwashing machine at Piney Branch Elementary School. MCPS believes the elimination of polystyrene requires a much larger dialogue that would involve all food service establishments in the county. MCPS would be happy to participate in such a dialogue if the Council chooses to take the lead in this effort. However, it needs to be clearly understood that the cost to the MCPS Food Services program would be at least \$1 million annually.

With limited resources and staff time, we must make choices about how to invest in initiatives that will make the most difference for our mission and benefit to our community. I hope that with the above information you can understand the reasons for our decision. We appreciate your understanding of the various issues that must be considered in the selection of cafeteria trays and utensils. Should there be additional questions, Mr. Joseph Lavorgna, acting director, Department of Facilities Management, is available to speak with you by telephone at 240-314-1060.

Respectfully,



Patricia O'Neill, President
Board of Education



Jerry D. Weast, Ed.D.
Superintendent of Schools

PO:JDW:jlc

Copy to:

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