

Thank you all for coming out today. We all know how precious weekend time is so thank you for sharing some of your time with me. I am Laura Berthiaume, and I am running for the Board of Education because I am ready to serve with firm resolve and a strong, fresh voice to be sure that the Board of Education does what is best for all of our children. I will be a dedicated, resourceful and smart Board Member, unafraid to fight the status quo to make improvements, relentless in asking the hard questions. Many of you who came today already know me, but for those of you who don't, I will bring some important qualities to the school board: first, my perspective as a parent. Every day, I see what our parents experience at the ground level of the school system - and if it isn't working at the ground level, then it isn't working. Second, my background as a lawyer give me the tools to do an outstanding job representing you on the Board. A lot of what the Board of Education does is really planning. To plan well, you've got to do three things: gather information, listen well, and think. I know how to dig into massive amounts of information, cut out the chaff, and get to what's actually relevant. And anyone who knows me knows I know how to listen - and I promise you here and now that isn't something I'm going to forget once I'm in office. And finally, I spend a lot of time for my clients thinking strategically, considering the "what ifs" in their lives. I can bring that same approach to a school system that needs, right now, to think very strategically about the next ten to twenty years.

When I do that, I will be measuring each and every proposal against a single standard: Is this what is best for the children? If it isn't, I will never hesitate to say why I think it is the wrong choice, even if it ruffles some feathers, and I will always strive to make the right choices and to enact policies that are the best for kids.

Now, we are all proud of our school system. We have fantastic, dedicated teachers, a

hardworking staff, and the most committed parents in the nation. We have a solid foundation. Yet we do have room for improvement, and I believe that fiddling around the margins is not going to be sufficient to keep up with the changes that are coming our way. While there are a number of issues highlighted on my website at www.laura4boe.com, today I want to focus on three of them: first, swinging the pendulum back towards a rich, engaging curriculum that means our children will enjoy school and will be ready not just for an exam, but also for life; second, a common sense capital budget; and third, a revolutionary approach to how we communicate in and about our schools.

So let's talk about priorities in our children's time at school. You know, far too often these days we sacrifice long term investment for short term gain. We have to be sure that is not the approach we take with our children's education. We hear a lot about numbers from our schools these days - often some really great numbers. Numbers are good things if they are used wisely, but the pendulum has swung too far. For example, we can boast about the numbers of students taking Advanced Placement courses, but tell me, what good all of those AP's will do if one third of the class of 2008 risks being dead or disabled twenty years from now from diabetes, stroke, or heart attack, as the recent series in the Washington Post on our children's health suggests? When we start to sacrifice our children's health and perhaps their natural love of learning in a push toward ever better and higher test scores, then we run the risk of valuing short terms gains at the expense of long term ruin.

Our children in elementary school receive one physical education class a week, and thirty minutes of recess per day. Some would say physical well being of our kids is not within the mission of our schools. I vehemently disagree. Is there anyone who thinks we will not all ultimately bear the cost of an unfit and overweight generation? Yes, it will cost money and

take time to get our children active and to ensure the health of their bodies as well as the growth of their minds. And I, for one, believe the two are interconnected. Like good nutrition in our school lunches, and good air quality, and anti-bullying initiatives, time spent on fitness may not show up in this year's test scores, but all of those things do have real impacts on kids' ability to learn. We ignore them and push them aside at the peril of our children's physical and mental well-being.

So where do I suggest we get the money for something like four days a week of PE? I will be strong advocate to reform the Maryland State Assessments and scrap the High School Assessments. I have a third grader. She is only in school for ten months of the year, from 9:15 to 3:30 every day, and an hour of that is lunch and recess. Yet she spent the entire month - one tenth of the school year - reviewing things she already knew so that she and her classmates would score well on the MSA's. It was a waste of her time in school, and a waste of the teacher's time and of your money. That test did not tell her teacher anything about my daughter that she did not already know, it did not tell us as parents anything we did not already know, and most importantly, it did not teach her anything. A month gone, for what? A good statistic. Multiply that by tens of thousands of children and what you have is massive waste. Take that experience and double or triple it for the amount of money and time that are going to be wasted on the HSA's. We can do better for our children.

We can do better in a lot of ways. Just look around and see what wonders Montgomery County can create. I look over and I see this wonderful library, which I am so very proud to have in Rockville. Strathmore Music hall, the new downtown Silver Spring - we can do amazing things and create amazing places when we come together to accomplish worthy goals. Yet when I look at our schools, I and far too many other parents see leaking roofs,

crumbling asbestos tiles, dilapidated playground equipment, and far, far too many portables. We know that mold and air quality concerns have been issues with the portables. Air quality concerns extend to our permanent buildings - just ask Poolesville High Schools students about their long struggle to breath clean air. The deferred maintenance backlog for our schools is in the billions of dollars. We are not doing a good job managing and maintaining our basic infrastructure. I call today for a common sense capital budget that is transparent and that does not neglect our schools by forever pushing maintenance and rehabilitation back and back and back again, leaving our far too many of our children in buildings that are old, outdated, and unhealthy.

Finally, we need a revolution in how we communicate. Right now in our schools, we have too little communication, and too much. What do I mean by that? First, that the world is changing. It is changing so rapidly that most of us cannot keep up, and at the heart of the change is how we communicate with each other. Twenty years ago, almost no one had a computer, much less a cell phone. Today our children text each other constantly, do their research for school online, and learn through long distance education courses. In the face of this revolution, we cannot expect to teach the same old way, and we cannot expect that the impact of this revolution will stop. It has opened doors, broken down barriers, and allowed networking and information exchanges that we never could have imagined just a few years ago. That means we face new challenges, but also new opportunities. Yes, we need to teach our students how to use these new tools responsibly. New dangers - cyber bullying, and internet predation - are on the rise. But what an opportunity! What if - what if our children had the opportunity to provide immediate feedback on their educational experience? What if the second graders had the chance, not just once every year or two, but through an open

communications link, to tell us that the bathrooms in their school aren't getting cleaned properly and that there is never any toilet paper? What if the middle school student had a forum in which he could state that he wished he had the opportunity to take French, or Arabic? What if our high schoolers could conduct an online poll about whether we need honors levels classes, and then blog about why or why not? What if we not only allowed but encouraged an MCPS version of YouTube? Scary? Sure, if you are an administrator who always wants message control and never wants any publicity about anything other than the good news. But if we can learn how to make this new world of communication work for us, to bring our school communities together to identify and fix problems, to generate new ideas about how to improve our schools, and to make our system better and more responsive, then we will all profit.

The alternative, of course, is to fight a rearguard action against the proliferation of communication, because that world is here now, and I know and you know that parents and students WILL make use of it. Everyone now has a megaphone, including our children. Just ask the wife of the Fairfax County school employee whose response to a snow day phone call was posted on the web a few months ago. Our children will not hesitate to use these megaphones, and neither will our MCPS parents. Our school system can be a partner and a leader, or it can attempt to stand in the way. I say we cast our fears aside and lead the way.

I also said we have too much communication. By that, I mean, do we really need those expensive glossy twenty page puff pieces that were mailed out to us last year? Let's take some of the millions of dollars spent what amounts to an ad campaign and instead of closing doors, let's open some new ones for our special education students.

That's not to say there's not a place for strong messages from the top down, but let's make sure they are the right ones. You know, if I had to identify the strongest school-wide message

that our family received this year, it would be this: The Maryland State Assessments are really, really, really important - do all of the review packet, make sure you get a good night's sleep before the MSA's , and get a good breakfast before the test each day. Again, we can do better. Let's try this sending message to our kids: You are a proud member of Montgomery County Public School System and of its culture, one in which every person is respected, no one is bullied, learning is the highest value, and each child has the opportunity to go as far as his or enthusiasm, hard work, and native ability will take her. Once you step foot on school grounds, you have a new identity, one that is separate and apart from whatever from whatever identity you may have outside this school, and you are to bring the best of yourself. Know that in this place, your family background, the color of your skin, or the language you speak at home are not and will not be barriers to your success - you as a student are valued and respected -- not only by other students but by every adult from the Principal to the janitor -- each and every day and throughout each day. That's a message that can be communicated every day, and it doesn't need to cost a penny.

Let's also focus our communication efforts on making our schools accessible. The tremendous opportunities MCPS holds should not be limited to that set of children whose parents are connected enough or smart enough to spend a few hours on the MCPS website teaching themselves about our school system. We need to provide one simple clear roadmap to our school system so that all parents know even before their children register for kindergarten about how to access our special education programs, how to access our gifted and talented programs, how to enter our immersion programs, and where when and how they can get their children started down the path to an IB program or to AP calculus.

I realize we cannot fix all of these issues in a single year or even a single four year term.

I do not claim it will be easy. We must, however, bring new thinking and a fresh vision to our schools. The key way in which we will accomplish this is to recruit and hire an innovative leader as our Superintendent when Dr. Weast leaves us in a few years. Who to hire is going to be the single most important decision this next Board makes. Dr. Weast has accomplished the vast majority of what we hired him to do, and I give him tremendous credit for that. The new challenges, however, will be categorically different from the old ones, and change is always an opportunity to go in bold new directions. I believe we can find the right person who has the skills and the vision to take us in new directions. I want to hire a Superintendent who is not afraid to shake up things as basic as our school calendar or the time school starts for high school. And I will look for a Superintendent who will welcome the Board of Education as strong leaders in their role overseeing the administration of the school system.

You may say this is a lot to reach for in this era of budget cuts and economic downturn. And I say to you, we can afford no less. WE CAN AFFORD NO LESS. Our schools are the mixing bowl out of which come American citizens, with respect for the law, a love of country, commitment to the fundamental ideals of equality and opportunity and personal responsibility, and commitment to a free and self-governing people. If we are to see the survival of the American Experiment, we must supply our children with the tools, the courage, and the knowledge to help them become passionate defenders of our country's ideals.

Before I close, I again want to say thank you to everyone here - it represents the depth of your commitment to our schools and our children that you would give up time when you could be doing so many other things. And thanks to Jennie, Tiffany, Bob, and Fred for their wonderful messages and for speaking here today. I would also like to thank Bridget Newton, my campaign manager, for all her incredible work in bringing us to this point. And most of all,

thanks to all of my family for giving up so much of my time and attention so that we can all have a better school system. I particularly want to thank my husband, Dave.

Let me close with this thought: This is Montgomery County, and we have a wealth of resources, both financial and human, that we can tap if we only choose to do so. I am convinced that we can come together, as we have in the past, united in our resolve not to follow, but to lead the way to innovative and fearless approaches to education - to ensure a world class education for our children. But to do this, I need your help. If you can only spare two hours, those two hours will go a long way on election day if you can volunteer to be a poll worker. If you can open your home and invite your neighbors to meet me at a coffee, you can go a long way towards spreading the word. If you can contribute \$25 or \$100, that contribution will help us buy lawn signs and stickers and ultimately your money will be a good investment in the future of our kids. God bless you, God bless Montgomery County, and God bless our children.