

As teachers, we know the dangers of stereotypes. Stereotypes are easy to hold, hard to break. The children who enter our classrooms have faced them daily, based upon skin color, poverty, gender, or special needs. And children are susceptible to internalizing what the larger culture tells them about who they are. We teachers look past the stereotypes, and see promise and powerful opportunity in each and every one of them. We build relationships, so that each child's unique potential can be realized.

Once again, the Washington Post editorial board defaulted to stale anti-union stereotypes in their recent editorial about school funding in Montgomery County. Their narrative creates the misperception that teacher salaries are to blame for large class sizes and a persistent racial opportunity gap, and that the teachers' union is standing in the way of reducing class sizes and closing gaps. Just six years ago, we as school employees sacrificed \$89 million in pay increases to balance the budget. Local per-pupil spending has been cut by more than \$1,400 per student.

We hope the editorial board will talk with folks on the Board of Education, the County Council, the County Executive, the PTA, and leaders of the African-American and Latino communities. In doing so, they will learn that the teachers' union (MCEA) actually has partnered with community groups to help lead the advocacy for lowering class sizes and addressing racial opportunity gaps.

Our union has been leading efforts to diversify our workforce, train staff on restorative practices, and disrupt the School to Prison pipeline. Race and poverty matter. The daily work educators do to achieve social justice matter now more than ever in a community that is majority minority, with a rising poverty rate. We know history has its eyes on us for how we act in this moment.

We applaud the Board of Education for responding to the concerns of both teachers and parents that class sizes have grown too large, and that gaps have been too big for too long. We pledged our support to the County Executive in his bold plan to provide the largest increase in school funding in more than a decade. And we have worked diligently with members of the County Council to secure their unanimous support for the first property tax increase in more than a decade to pay for it.

In the end, is the budget everything that everyone wanted? Of course not. It's still \$44 million less than requested by the Board of Education. That's disappointing, but we appreciate the significant increase in school funding by the County Council that this budget represents, and we are thankful to the public for its support of public schools.

We have been working productively with the Board of Education to ensure that the funding received still lowers class sizes, adds more para-educators to our classrooms, and fairly compensates its employees. We have a shared interest in those outcomes. And the anticipated budget seeks to strike a balance. However more will need to be done on both fronts.

To address student enrollment growth and teacher turnover, and to decrease class sizes, MCPS will be hiring more than 2,500 new teachers in the next three years, with a focus on diversifying the workforce. Where will these educators come from, and where will the best and brightest go? This year, the starting teacher salary in MCPS is \$47,106, an increase of only \$696 from 8 years ago. And salaries of many supporting service employees have decreased following numerous cuts in hours.

Today, the starting teacher salary in MCPS is lower than in DC, Howard, Loudon, Baltimore City, Arlington, Falls Church, and Alexandria City. Our community understands the implications this has for recruitment. Over the next three years of teacher hiring we will make significant progress in diversifying our teaching workforce to better reflect our students – if we ensure that MCPS is a desirable place to work. The challenge we face as a county is how to continue to reduce class sizes even further and address significant racial achievement gaps, while also maintaining a competitive salary and benefits package to attract – and retain--thousands of the best new teachers.

More than at any time in recent years, the school board, the county executive, the county government, and yes – the teachers' union – have a shared commitment to reducing class sizes, addressing racial and economic disparities, and compensating employees fairly. Our community is not well served by those who would pit those interests against one another.

Indeed, we believe that community “takes its identity from the gifts, generosity, and accountability of its citizens,” as author Peter Block writes. Our identity is built not on stereotypes, but on relationships that transform the public narrative we choose to write together.

Christopher Lloyd, NBCT
Weller Road Elementary School
President, Montgomery County Education Association