

TO: Washington County Board of Education
RE: Public Comments for the Business Session
DATE: October 15, 2024

Good evening President Williams, Dr. Sovine, and members of the Board of Education. I am Carol Mowen, President of the Washington County Teachers Association.

As the WCTA president, I have the opportunity to go to meetings of Washington County's elected officials, support our WCTA members in our schools, and serve on committees with WCPS staff to make decisions and improve educational outcomes for our students. I also represent our county's teachers at the state level at the various activities and meetings of the Maryland State Education Association. I am now in my second year in this role, and I appreciate this regular opportunity to provide you with my comments about the various topics you deliberate and update you on the work of WCTA.

Just as you are working on determining your budget priorities for the FY 2026 budget cycle, WCTA is already talking with our members about their priorities for our negotiations with you for our next contract year. In September, we surveyed our members, and the results were not surprising. At the top of the list is competitive salaries for our mid-level and veteran teachers. Negotiating for more support for student behavior ranked second, and the need for increased and protected self-directed planning time ranked third. Other priorities include more staffing to support students' needs, and additional contract language to ensure we have the appropriate support for social emotional learning, safety, and mental health. Since the entire contract is open this year, we are also identifying a number of articles to bring to the table. The WCTA negotiations team looks forward to working with the Board's team this year, and we hope that we can come to an agreement quickly. Our team this year includes Colleen Glenn, Tara Myers, Pam Abston, Kristy Gross, Beckie Higgins-Arey, Emily Hartman, Sandy Newton, Allison Wadding, John Wilson, Shelby Wallace, and Amber Karkan.

As WCTA president, I served on the WCPS Calendar Committee this year. The committee carefully considered multiple scenarios before coming to consensus regarding our recommendations that are before you this evening. It's difficult to please everyone with the school calendar as many competing priorities and needs must be considered. I hope that you will approve our recommendations for the next two years as well as our recommendations for the additional two-hour early dismissals that we agreed to add to the calendar during negotiations last year. I want to thank WCTA members Libby Baumgardner, Stacey Yost, Dr. Henry, Kristy Gross, and Jessica Lindstrom for representing WCTA on the committee.

I also want to applaud the work that has brought a Memorandum of Understanding with the Washington County Educational Support Personnel Association adding Juneteenth as a holiday to the WCPS calendar to the agenda this evening. Juneteenth has been designated a federal holiday since 2021. The State of Maryland has recognized the holiday for a decade,

beginning in 2014, and made it a paid state holiday in 2022. Adding it to the list of paid holidays in the ESP Negotiated Agreement makes sense, and I support the recommendation to do so.

I am also serving on the Elementary Planning Task Force to come up with recommendations for how to provide more planning time for our elementary teachers. We have met once, and while we don't yet have a workable plan to address the need to make a change we can implement in 2025-2026, I am hopeful that with creative thinking and collaboration, we find solutions. In addition to myself and the WCTA UniServ Director Mary Heeringa, WCTA members Molly Adams, Amy Hildebrand, Tara Myers, and Danielle Wantz are also representing WCTA on this important work group.

Yesterday, the WCTA Board of Directors met with Dr. Sovine and members of his leadership cabinet to discuss our common concerns at our first WCTA-WCPS Quarterly Meeting scheduled for this year. At the meeting, we noted our appreciation of the Focus Now, Phone Later campaign - so far, it is making a positive difference in classroom and school environments. We also were able to share some concerns related to the new ELA curricula at the middle and high school levels, specifically related to pacing, lack of creativity and teacher agency, and the need for additional diversity in some of the units.

On Thursday afternoon, I will travel to Ocean City, Maryland, with four other WCTA delegates to represent our members at the Representative Assembly of the Maryland State Education Association. This year, WCTA members Steve Schawalter, Harley Smith, Jaime Bowden, and Giovanna Grimm are serving as our local elected delegates to this annual state meeting.

By the way, I am hearing mostly positive feedback about the WCPS Health Clinic operated by Everside. I hope that it brings the system the significant savings that have been projected. We need more of this kind of creative approach to long standing challenges - like planning time for teachers, class sizes, staffing approaches, school schedules, busing, and even school configurations. We need to constantly ask "why" we are doing the things we are doing in the same ways that we've been doing them - and to ask ourselves what can we stop doing so that we have the time we need to do the things that we know need to be happening to improve student achievement. The strategic plan's four key priority areas, six core values and four essential abilities students need to be prepared for life beyond graduation can provide the impetus for this shift in our thinking. Through our engagement in work groups and committees, together we can reimagine the school day, work day, and even the school calendar to better meet the needs of students and families in the coming decades.

With September gone and October half over, it's been a busy two months. I look forward to continuing the collaborative relationship that WCTA has worked to establish with our administrative leaders and Dr. Sovine to continue to do the work needed for a successful 2024-2025 and together ensure an even brighter future for our schools.