

**Testimony before the Montgomery County
Board of Education Strategic Planning Forum
by Diane Vy Nguyen-Vu, Executive Director
Maryland Vietnamese Mutual Association (MVMA)
Thursday, October 15, 2009**

Dear Members of the Montgomery County Board of Education:

My name is Diane Vu and I am the Executive Director of the Maryland Vietnamese Mutual Association (MVMA). I am privileged to appear before you today on behalf of Vietnamese American Students in Montgomery County Public Schools and would like to thank the Board for supporting linguistically and culturally appropriate programs and services that include ESOL, bilingual MCPS staff, and translators for parents at PTA meetings.

I understand that this coming year will be a difficult budget year for the County and that you will have to make some tough decisions. With that being said, I stand here before you today to ask that you keep in mind the linguistic and cultural needs of student “minorities” and specifically, Vietnamese American students.

As the Board is already aware, the Asian and Pacific Islander (API) population in MC has increased rapidly at a rate of 62% from 1990 to 2006. In our schools, roughly 14% of students are API, more than three times than that of the national average. API students traditionally have been lumped together into one group even though APIs are the most diverse group by religion, culture and language, with 40 ethnicities represented and hundreds of languages and dialects spoken.

This “lumping” of API students has been troublesome, especially when looking at aggregate numbers that suggests that the performance of API students in MC are performing at the Advanced levels. Looking more closely at the figures, there is a disproportionately large number of API students performing below proficient levels, especially among Southeast Asians like Vietnamese and Cambodian students.

APIs who are struggling tend to be immigrants who are limited-English-proficient (LEP). Many people don't know that more than half, 60% in fact, of all APIs are immigrants and

39% of APIs are LEP. Therefore, similar to other immigrant minority groups, API students still have needs for bilingual education that is also culturally sensitive to their immigration experiences and family situations.

One of MVMA's programs, the Vietnamese Parenting Enrichment Project (VPEP) works specifically with at-risk Vietnamese families and encourage parents to be more involved in their children's education by bridging the cultural gap and enriching parenting skills. Numerous research shows that when parents are involved, students have higher grades, increased motivation and self-esteem, decreased use of abused substances, and greater enrollment rates in post-secondary education. However, according to MCPS bilingual counselors, even though parents highly value education, participation rates among low-income Vietnamese parents are low.

Most parents work long hours, speak and read very little English (some are even illiterate in Vietnamese), face serious problems with basic needs, and have little confidence and time to be involved with their children's educational and social development. Because of this it's imperative to these children's futures that organizations like MVMA and Asian American Lead, and MCPS continue to provide support to these families in every and any way possible.

It's critical that the BOE recognizes that even in a difficult year of budget cuts, it's vital that MCPS programs and services like ESOL, bilingual staff, and after-school programs targeted at API students be maintained to help close the achievement gap for this disproportionate number of students who are still struggling and isolated. This is the only way that together, we can help these students make successful transitions that will guarantee them a brighter future and a better life than that of their parents.

ATTACHMENT

Letter to Members of the Montgomery County Board of Education



Hội Ái Hữu Người Việt Maryland

Maryland Vietnamese Mutual Association, Inc.

8121 Georgia Avenue, Suite 503

Silver Spring, MD 20910

Phone: (301) 588-6862 Fax: (301) 576-4502

Web: www.mdvietmutual.org Email: info@mdvietmutual.org



*Selected as one of the
best small charities in
the Greater
Washington Region*

Board of Directors

October 14, 2009

*Hoan Dang
President*

*Frankie Blackburn
VP of External
Affairs*

*Huy Bui
Treasurer*

*Cuong Van Dinh
Secretary*

Wilbur Friedman

Nguyet Lam

Xuan Nguyen

*Shanya
Purushothaman*

Thang Tran

Board of Advisory

Duc Duong

Ngoc Chu

Hong Ly La

Thanh Tran

Tuyet Tran

Cuong Du Thinh

Loan Vo

Dear Members of the Montgomery County Board of Education:

I am privileged to appear before you on behalf of Vietnamese American Students of the Montgomery County Public School System and would like to thank the County and Board of Education for supporting programs and services that include ESOL, bilingual MCPS staff, and translators for parents at PTA meetings.

My name is Diane Vy Nguyen-Vu and I am the Executive Director of the Maryland Vietnamese Mutual Association (MVMA). Selected as **“one of the best small charities in the Greater Washington region,”** MVMA is the oldest Vietnamese American community-based organization in Maryland. We advocate for social and economic equality by building awareness, capacity and solidarity within the community and we empower low-income families and seniors through direct services and providing access to government and private programs.

I understand that this coming year will be a difficult budget year for the County and I do not envy your job. I know that you will have to make some tough decisions. With that being said, I ask that while you are making these tough decisions, you keep in mind the linguistic and cultural needs of student “minorities,” and specifically, Vietnamese American students.

As the Board is already aware, the Asian and Pacific Islander (API) population in MC has been increasing rapidly, growing at a rate of 62% from 1990 to 2006. In our schools, roughly 14% of students are API, more than three times than that of the national average. API students traditionally have been lumped together into one group even though API are the most diverse racially diverse group by religion, culture and language, with 40 ethnicities represented and hundreds of languages and dialects spoken. This “lumping” of API students has been troublesome, especially when looking at aggregate numbers that suggests that the performance of API students in MC performing at the Advanced level (this is known as the Model Minority Myth). Looking more closely at the figures, there is a disproportionately large number of API students performing below proficient levels in areas of higher concentration of poor and low-income students.

A good example: in 2000, Census data showed that 25% of APIs aged 25 and over held bachelor’s degrees or higher, compared with 16% of Americans overall. In contrast, among the various Southeast Asian American groups (Vietnamese, Laotians, Cambodian, Khmer) the percentage with bachelor’s degrees ranged from 6% to 15%—proportions that more closely resemble those of African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans.

APIs who are still struggling tend to be immigrants who have limited English proficiency (LEP). Many people don't know that more than half, 60% in fact, of all API are immigrants. Some are relatively fluent in English but a large portion are not. In fact, according to data from the 2000 Census, 39% of APIs were limited English (LEP) compared to 8% of the U.S. population. Among API subgroups, 61% of Vietnamese reported that they are LEP. Therefore, similar to other immigrant minority groups, API students still have needs for bilingual education that is also culturally sensitive to their immigration experiences and family situations.

My experience with API students has been through one of MVMA's programs, the Vietnamese Parenting Enrichment Project (VPEP). VPEP works in partnership with at-risk Vietnamese families to encourage parents to be more involved in their children's education. VPEP's objective is to empower the parents by teaching them various types of school involvement, to bridge the cultural gap and to enrich parenting skills. Consequently, students' academic performance will increase, and parents will strengthen their relationship with their children as well as teachers. Numerous researches shows that when parents are involved, students have higher grades, increased motivation and self-esteem, decreased use of abused substances, and greater enrollment rates in post-secondary education. However, according to MCPS, participation rate among low-income Vietnamese parents is low due to the lack of understanding of the American education system, cultural differences in the role of parents between the Vietnamese and American cultures, different child rearing practices, and language barrier.

Due to the nature of being immigrants and refugees, families have little support. Parents, most of whom work long hours, speak and read very little English (some are even illiterate in Vietnamese), face serious housing problems, and have little confidence and time to be involved with their children's educational and social development. All of the VPEP families value education and see it as a way for advancement but are unsure of how they can get involved. Because of this it's imperative to these children's futures that organizations like MVMA, Asian American Lead, and MCPS continue to provide support to these families in every and any way possible. MCS programs and services that include bilingual staff, ESOL, and after-school programs targeted at API students can help close the achievement gap for this disproportionate number of students who are still struggling and isolated.

It's critical that the BOE recognizes that even in a difficult year of budget cuts, it's vital to maintain services to those among us who are most vulnerable because they are the ones who are most harshly affected when they fall through the cracks. Therefore, I ask the for continuing support of MCPS ESOL programs and other services to language minorities so that our API children can make a successful transitions that will guarantee them a brighter future and a better life than that of their parents.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Diane Vy Nguyen-Vu', with a stylized, flowing script.

Diane Vy Nguyen-Vu
Executive Director