Subject: Concerns Regarding Changes to Darnestown Elementary Learning Center

Dear Members of the Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) Board of Education, Central Office Staff, and the Montgomery County Council:

We, as parents of MCPS Students, write to express our deep concerns regarding the recent decision to convert the Darnestown Elementary Learning Center (Darnestown ELC) from its specialized focus on autistic students to a traditional learning center. Many of us were taken aback by this unexpected announcement and we are perplexed as to why MCPS believes altering the Darnestown ELC program is in the best interest of the children it serves. We implore the decision makers and those tasked with oversight of the school system to reconsider this decision. We encourage revision of the processes governing programmatic alterations that will enable greater transparency and accountability to the parents, students, and taxpayers served by MCPS.

The conversion of Darnestown ELC to a traditional learning center comes with a significant reduction in staff and a marked increase in the scope of the program’s responsibilities. Leadership within Darnestown ELC informed parents that the school would lose seven full-time equivalent paraeducator positions because of the conversion; yet the school would be open to a broader array of special-needs students despite the loss of staff. Presently, Darnestown ELC is the only learning center in MCPS focused specifically on autistic students and it delivers instruction and services uniquely tailored to those students’ learning profiles.

We are very concerned about the compliance implications of transitioning these students to a new learning environment. Accordingly, we kindly request more details in writing about the factors underlying MCPS’ decision to shutter the autism specific focus of Darnestown ELC including but not limited to academic, operational, budgetary, and policy considerations. Please provide details of the analysis MCPS staff conducted prior to its decision to ensure that students presently enrolled in Darnestown ELC will continue to receive the services outlined in their Individualized Education Programs (IEP) with fidelity.

While we acknowledge that some autistic students attend traditional learning centers, we reject the premise that Darnestown ELC and traditional learning centers are functionally equivalent. In accordance with the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act’s requirements for public schools to provide a free appropriate public education, MCPS placed students at Darnestown ELC instead of traditional learning centers because it was the least restrictive learning environment for those children. Accordingly, many Darnestown students have IEPs that rely upon the availability of higher paraeducator ratios, specialized staff, and autism-specific supports.

We are dismayed by the lack of transparency in the lead-up to the decision to discontinue the autism specific focus of Darnestown ELC. MCPS central office staff misled the public when it made representations in both the FY 2025 Special Education Staffing Plan and a February 22, 2024 joint MCPS and xMinds “Primers on Placements” presentation that Darnestown ELC would remain an option for autistic students in FY 2025. We are disappointed that a decision of this magnitude is being made so late in the budget process without the benefit of public input. Therefore, we respectfully ask that you reconsider these changes and collaborate with the community to find solutions that prioritize the well-being and educational success of all students at Darnestown ELC.

Sincerely,

[Your Names]

Parents of students at [INSERT MCPS SCHOOL]

—----------email addresses—----------

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