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## written testimony, CR 179-2016



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Legislative Public Hearing, 11/21/16, CR 179-2016

Vicky Cutroneo

Good evening Dr. Ball and members of County Council. My name is Vicky Cutroneo, I live at 15005 Scottswood Court in Woodbine. The Howard County Public School System has undergone various audits over the past 18 months in response to increasing and unresolved concerns over transparency and communication. All of the audits have one thing in common: the school system's lack of cooperation in providing requested documents and access to staff for interviews. Every single audit. It is becoming obvious that we cannot assume the HCPSS is interested in acknowledging weaknesses or mistakes or working towards correcting them. We cannot assume they are providing all of the documents requested or that they are acting in the best interest of stakeholders. Rather, it has become clear that they are acting in the best interest of their public image and unfortunately, that precludes open and honest dialogue with auditors.

In my own experiences advocating on behalf of students and staff regarding mold and air quality, I have witnessed emails forged to explain a mold outbreak. I have been told that documents requested via public information request didn't exist when they did because they show the superintendent knew about health issues. I witnessed moldy items cleaned prior to submission to lab for testing. Risk management staff was even instructed to remove the word mold from annual reports when workman's comp lawsuits were filed. I have 2 binders of emails between staff and central office detailing the health issues and pleading for the community to be told. Their duplicity was intentional and they refuse to acknowledge this. Even results from the independent investigation commissioned via an MOU with the County Executive's office were minimized immediately by the HCPSS. I questioned the integrity of the investigation when I learned that HCPSS building and maintenance staff were instructed to change stained ceiling tiles at several schools just prior to their inspections and that rooms to be tested were dictated to the contractor in at least one of the schools. If the HCPSS were truly interested in improving the air quality in our schools, they would not have interfered with the integrity of an independent investigation.

In the past year, HCPSS has not been cooperative with the Citizens Audit Committee, the County Auditor, the Office of Legislative Audits and the Environmental Sustainability Board. HCPSS has provided excuses and blame in the place of satisfactory answers to County Council and the community at large. This has led to this legislation for a performance audit by MSDE. Given the continuing lack of transparency, I believe this performance audit is necessary.

If the leadership of our school system is ok with intentionally hiding health issues and interfering with investigations that could improve the air quality in our schools, we must ask, what else are they hiding? After all, what is more important than health? Auditors must begin to assume that they are not being presented with complete and accurate information in all facets, whether it is a financial or performance audit. For this reason, I ask that you support this legislation but that the language of the resolution does not assume honesty and cooperation or that the HCPSS is providing auditors with all relevant information. The County Council should be notified immediately by the MSDE if there is lack of cooperation from HCPSS and I also ask that language of the resolution provide for this.

I have learned with my own experiences that what is missing or denied to exist says much more than what is willingly provided by the HCPSS.

Regards,  
Vicky Cutroneo