Dear Members of the Montclair Board of Education,

It is with dismay that we recently learned that the Montclair Board of Education is considering merging elementary schools in order to meet their budget this year. As parents and taxpayers, we believe this decision is misguided and damaging to our children. Before you make your decision, please consider the benefits of Edgemont School and the impact of school closings not just on Edgemont families but also on the entire school community, property owners and the Township. We have proposed alternative ways to cut costs and provide revenue streams to the district without having to close schools. We ask that you look hard at other ways of closing the budget gap.

Although Edgemont is the smallest of the six elementary schools, it contributes to the overall health of the magnet system in many ways.

WHY EDGEMONT IS CRITICAL TO MONTCLAIR’S MAGNET SYSTEM

Montclair is well esteemed for the choices it provides through its magnet system. Edgemont, as the only publically funded Montessori School in the state, offers a defined and time-tested curriculum. Its student-centered classrooms and differentiated teaching appeals to many parents. One of the top reasons home-buyers select Montclair is the reputation of the school district. Families choose Montclair for solid performing schools, a wide range of choices and a diverse and interesting student body. Edgemont offers all of these.

Edgemont does more with less and consistently performs academically. It succeeds at this, while at the same time being one of the most racially, ethnically and socioeconomically diverse schools in the district.

Edgemont is in demand. It is consistently at capacity or above; and is not underutilized. Parents at Edgemont have chosen to forgo the bells and whistles found at other schools. We have chosen a small physical environment with Montessori trained teachers and, until last year, our assistant teachers.

IMPACT OF CLOSING SCHOOLS

Closing Edgemont significantly dilutes the magnet system. Parents should have the opportunity to choose a small elementary school. Young children, in particular, need small, familiar surroundings. Every other elementary school in the district has at least 150 more students than Edgemont.

Many Edgemont families chose this school because it is the smallest. These families cannot just be switched to the largest schools. Handling the movement of these children in a fair manner would disrupt the entire district.
Parents should have the opportunity to choose a school their children can walk to. There is presently a school within walking distance of every elementary student in Montclair. If Edgemont were to close, many families would be required to bus their children to other neighborhoods.

Studies have shown that school closings marginalize students through social dislocation. They lose contact with caring teachers and peers. Displacing 300 students will certainly have an impact on academic performance.

Closing an existing school may preclude the district from the flexibility to establish a special needs program that could generate revenue. As taxpayers and parents, we believe closing schools is a poor way to raise money. We all know that the Board of Education just built a $35 million school to replace one it sold for $1 million. Once you’ve closed a school, it will take far more resources to open it up again. We believe it is fiscally irresponsible to put short-term cash flow initiatives above long-term fiscal health.

WHAT ARE THE REAL COST SAVINGS?

Before making a decision that will impact not only Edgemont families and teachers, but all Montclair residents, we urge you to consider the following.

Unless you absorb Edgemont students into existing classrooms and consequently increase class sizes across the district, you will not realize the cost savings of 12 fewer teaching positions. Our students will still need related arts staff, administrative oversight and resource room support.

Is there demand in the current real estate market for a building of Edgemont’s size and location? How carefully have you measured the costs associated with closing Edgemont? Certainly, a thoughtful market analysis is necessary. Perhaps the building would need renovation before offering it for rent or sale or require additional parking. These expenses would offset short-term revenue gains. Would a potential tenant/buyer require a zoning change and how long would that process take? Neighborhood opposition is a factor that should be considered.

Finally, while the building stands vacant, the district will remain responsible for some level of maintenance.

PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

Cost cutting proposals: Please ask our District Employees to defer raises and contribute towards their health care this year. It is no more than most of us, as Montclair taxpayers, have to do these days. This may well be a way for all of us - teachers, students, parents and taxpayers - to hang in for another year without resorting to drastic measures we may all regret later.

While we know that the board has already cut many “extras” from the budget, the announcement just last week of a new hire at the Board of Education was certainly ill-timed given the current discussion of school closures. Please consider a hiring freeze, as many companies who face budget deficits do. In addition, let’s examine and put aside all non-critical capital projects, even if they have already been earmarked, for a few years.
Review the school calendar to maximize energy efficiency. Can we have a full week off in February and no April break? Could we cluster teacher workshops during colder months and keep some buildings closed. Are there ways to maximize our energy efficiency in general by lowering the heat? Could there be innovative ways to leverage our buildings with alternative energy sources like wind turbines or solar panels?

Just as the Montclair Township is looking at shared services with other districts, could the BOE grounds keeping and general maintenance be shared with the Township? Are there other services that could be shared?

Finally, we ask that rather than closing one school and having the impact of that decision be felt by one group of families and not others, we suggest that you calculate how much money closing the building will save and then ask each of the schools to cut a corresponding amount per student enrolled. Every school should feel the pain by cutting ancillary programs.

Increasing revenue: We are 100% behind the idea of “in-sourcing special education.” This is one of the most significant cost cutting measures the district can do that will affect both short term and long term financial stability. To further reduce the cost of this to the taxpayers, perhaps there are parents who are willing to donate their services “pro-bono” to help with startup marketing and outreach.

If the district goes to a half-day kindergarten model, as has been proposed, perhaps a full day option could be offered on a sliding scale. To that end, open up our schools to kids from other districts and charge them tuition.

Look critically at all the available real estate owned by the Board of Education. Perhaps it makes more sense to relocate the offices at 22 Valley Road, and make that building available for rent. It is already built as office space and is centrally located. The positions on Valley Road could move to space in the new Bullock School or be spread around the district.

Before making a decision that will impact not only Edgemont families and teachers, but all Montclair residents, we urge you to consider the above. The Edgemont Montessori School works. It does more with less and consistently performs at high academic standards. Closing Edgemont will not reduce costs without significantly impacting class size, and the market for the Edgemont building is questionable. Finally, there are other cost cutting measures that actually improve the fiscal stability of the budget while reducing overall expenses. Let’s make smart changes, not quick fixes that we will regret later.

We hope you will choose to keep Montclair’s magnet system intact and not merge elementary schools. Thank you for considering our position.

Sincerely,

The Edgemont PTA Executive Board