Edgemont Montessori School
2010-2011
November 22, 2010

INTRODUCTION – Tori
I am the co-President of the Edgemont Montessori School PTA and on behalf of our school and the PTA Executive Board I would like to thank all of you for the hard work you are doing. We appreciate the thoroughness and transparency of this process.

The Edgemont PTA Executive Board has prepared a statement that we would like to read in several parts. We have a section about Edgemont specifically, a section on the impact of closing schools in general, and then several income-generating or cost-cutting suggestions. Each of us will keep it to less than two minutes.

Out of respect for your time and the time of everyone in the audience, we have consolidated the feelings of many Edgemont parents into this single statement. But we want you to understand that we are speaking on behalf of many people. I would like to ask all the Edgemont Montessori teachers, aides, and parents who are here to stand up now.

You won’t hear 100 people come to this podium to tell you why Edgemont is special, and why you shouldn’t decide to close it. But when you do hear the next few speakers say that, please remember those sentiments are multiplied by everyone standing here tonight.

Thank you.

WHY EDGEMONT IS CRITICAL TO MONTCLAIR’S MAGNET SYSTEM – Asa
I have three children and my youngest is in the fifth grade at Edgemont Montessori. When she graduates this year, my family will have been at Edgemont for fifteen straight years, so I think I am very qualified to tell you what is so special about that school and why you should not consider closing it.

Academically Edgemont consistently shows scores among the highest in the district on standardized tests. We have closed the achievement gap. We are one of two schools that offer an alternative to Everyday Math. We are one of two ESL schools in the district.

Each time there is a new district initiative in elementary education, we’re already there. Differentiated learning? Hands-on learning? Blocked time, classroom enrichment, math manipulatives? We’ve got them all. And have had for one hundred years, thanks to Maria Montessori.

But we are not only about academics. At Edgemont, we like to say we educate the whole child. We are not afraid to voice our values to the children. Courtesy and grace, manners and respect, social activism and respect for the environment. Under the direction of our strong principal, these are things our teachers openly discuss and model.
Being the smallest school in the district makes a difference to us. Every single adult who works in our building knows the name of every single child, and every kid knows each other. The spirit of inclusion prevails everywhere.

And we are the only public Montessori school in NJ. Take that away and you have turned a magnet system into a busing system. Each year during school tours, we see many families who have chosen our community because of the Montessori elementary school.

And finally, our Montessori-trained teachers. Edgemont is not just a building where a group of teachers work. Each one of our classroom teachers, and many of our aides, are Montessori-certified, a rigorous multi-year program which, by the way, does not move them up on the pay scale. They share a common belief in a philosophy that respects each child’s inherent gifts as a learner and as a good human being. They treat our children accordingly and the children respond in kind. That has created a culture and a family at Edgemont, and we ask that you not destroy that.

**IMPACT OF CLOSING SCHOOLS IN GENERAL** - Gerthy

Closing schools is one of the most controversial decisions a school district can make. Usual reasons for closing schools are chronic underachievement on the part of the students and low enrollment relative to a school’s capacity. In our district’s case, we are considering closing schools in which neither of these situations occur. Edgemont Montessori School consistently scores highly on standardized tests, has closed the achievement gap, and is quickly filled each year with families who have made it their first choice in our district lottery system. Folding our 300-plus students into each of the other elementary schools in the district will raise each of their already-large class sizes by more than two students per classroom.

Studies of school closings stress the disruption that those closings create for the students who attend those schools and for the schools that receive the displaced students. Research has shown that student mobility is associated with lower subsequent achievement, higher retention rates, and higher numbers of referrals to special education.

Closing schools is bad publicity. As taxpayers, we know the value of our homes is in large part predicated upon the quality of our school system. Imagine the scenario – a young couple moving to Montclair from NYC, checking out the school system. They find that we, like most other towns, have lost our state aid and are having a problem balancing our budget. Our solution – shut down some schools. Not so good.

As taxpayers and as parents, we believe closing schools is a poor way to raise money, as evidenced by building at $38 million school to replace one sold for $1 million. Once a school has closed, it will take far more resources to open it up again.

We understand that we are looking at a potential $6 million budget gap and we know we need big solutions. We are one hundred per cent in favor of “in-sourcing special education”. We know that we will not be able to reap the financial benefits of this far-sighted plan immediately,
so we need a menu of income-generating, cost-cutting options that will see us through for a year or two. Closing a school is not that short-term solution. Closing a school is a drastic decision that we will soon enough regret.

The next speakers will present Edgemont’s proposals to generate income and cut costs.

**PROPOSED SOLUTIONS**

**Sale of the Pre-K Center Building and the Building Housing Central Office** - Jessica

_Jessica did not have a written speech. However she did present the following information....._

The Board of Ed building located on Orange Rd (Block 1404, Lot 18) is assessed at $9,430,700. The Pre-K Center which is adjacent (Block 1404, Lot 17) is assessed at $3,431,400.

Commercial properties in Montclair have been selling on the average of 75% of assessed value.

Based on 75% of assessed value, Lot 18 might be worth $7,073,025.
Based on 75% of assessed value, Lot 17 might be worth $2,573,550.

**Equipping the Schools with Solar Panels** – Susan

1st Light Energy, one of the earliest solar energy providers operating in the state of New Jersey, was kind enough to look at the Montclair School District for potential solar installations and cost savings. Through a preliminary remote site survey, they have determined that Montclair has, in aggregate, approximately 150,000 square feet of usable roof space across its school buildings (not including the Bullock school which already has solar panels). Some of the roofs are better than others for solar, based on their southern orientation, surrounding trees, complexity of surfaces and peaks, etc. and there may be some initial work required by the district to trim trees or otherwise make the roofs ready for installation. If parking lots or other locations where ground mounted panels could be installed were taken into account, an additional 50,000 square feet is possible. If the school district were to utilize the 150,000 square feet, a 1.8 mega watt system could be installed that would generate approximately 2,000,000 Kwh per year of electricity.

Typically, municipalities, churches, school districts and corporations enter form a Power Purchase Agreement (PPA) with a finance company like Tioga Energy. Tioga is one of the partners 1st Light works with but there are several in the industry. An installer like 1st Light would be contracted by the finance company to install and manage the power system. The finance company would own the solar energy system and provide electric power to the school district through a multi year agreement at approximately 1/2 the cost of electricity from PSEG (currently $.08 per kwh vs estimated $.16 per kwh). There would be no cost for installation to the school district. These finance companies get their return by selling the SREC units (Solar
Reopening Contract Negotiations

As private citizens, over the past few years we have been faced with layoffs, furloughs, skyrocketing health-care costs, no raises, and ever mounting taxes. We plan, budget, and tighten our belts to continue to live in Montclair and to send our children to this special school system. Our teachers, aides and staff join us in making this system what it is. We need them to continue to stand with us and sacrifice with us in getting through these painfully tough times.

With all due respect, and in the spirit of partnership, we ask that the Union of district employees reopen their contract negotiations. The district needs help to make a dent in the budget gap without having to resort to closing schools. Contributions to health-care programs or foregoing raises for another year would provide tremendous help in closing the budget gap.

Closing schools would result in layoffs of teachers and staff. Cutting back to half-day

Reopening Contract Negotiations – Maria
kindergarten in just a few schools would result in layoffs of teachers and staff. Parents and teachers alike don’t want to see that happen. If all of these terrible scenarios could be prevented with small contributions to health-care or by foregoing raises for another year, we ask that the district employees seriously consider it.

We also ask that the district consider a hiring freeze, as many companies facing budget deficits have done.
We ask that we examine and postpone all non-critical capital projects, even if they have already been earmarked.
We ask that we cut back on all spending and purchasing in general; we could survive for a year without buying any new technology.
And finally we ask that we look again at a line-item edit of the budget. We know that last year’s cuts were deep, but just as in a household that must tighten its belt, there’s usually something else that can go. We are willing to cut back to just the basics if that’s what it will take to save our schools.

**Lobbying Trenton - Dene**

*Dene did not present a written speech. However, she did ask.....*

If we have adequate representation in Trenton as that is the big unknown at this point. She also encouraged the BOE to make sure that our representatives in Trenton know about our concerns regarding state funds this year.