

Superintendent pledges to dramatically cut down on portable classrooms

By Dena Levitz
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Not only is it important to have a great teacher in every Montgomery County classroom, but there also needs to be a great classroom for every teacher, superintendent Jerry Weast said Monday as he pushed an initiative to reduce the number of portable classrooms by 68 percent in the next six years.

Even though the county has spent a staggering \$1.1 billion on school construction over the past seven years, Weast said, his district has the highest number of outdoor trailer classrooms in the state at 719.

"We know that these are not made to a standard that we are happy with for a permanent basis. We know that we have got to do better," he said at Takoma Park Elementary School, which has eight trailers. "[The portables] are not conducive to the educational opportuni-

ty, they're not wired for technology ... and they're not as safe when you have a sniper situation."

That's why he pledged, along with County Council President George Leventhal, to find the money for his plan no matter what.

The first phase — involving building one new school, reopening another and modernizing 16 others — has already been approved and would reduce the number of trailers from 719 to 373.

It's the second phase, which would cost about \$40 million, for which he urged state legislators to increase Montgomery County funding. That portion of the plan calls for the removal of another 155 portables after a series of classroom additions and building modifications at Takoma Park, East Silver Spring Elementary and other institutions.

Leventhal, whose son attends Takoma Park Elementary, said the portable classroom issue is one the council specifically asked the school system to tackle aggressively and



Inside a portable classroom at Takoma Park Elementary School in Takoma Park, Md., Superintendent of Mont. Co. Schools Jerry Weast addresses the media about the County's plan to reduce the number of portable classrooms by 68%. — Jay Westcott/Examiner

that the council will now do everything possible to get funding.

"We are very publicly sticking our necks out, but this is an important issue," he said before adding that the state must now do its part.

Using bar graphs, Weast pointed out the state is contributing less and less in construction funds to the county. Despite the fact that the state is supposed to provide 50 percent of school construction money, between 1994 and 2000 the state's share was 32.5 percent, and from 2001 to 2007, a much smaller 18.5 percent.

In response, House of Delegates member Charles Barkley insisted that "you do have an education delegation."

The challenge, according to Barkley and fellow delegate Nancy King, is convincing the legislature of such a wealthy county's financial needs. The good news, Barkley said Monday, is that both gubernatorial candidates have promised to allocate close to \$400 million to statewide school construction, which would ease the funding problems.

King also said she's drafting legislation to require statewide standards for portable classrooms.

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