

Magnet students make waves to save funding

■ Weast has recommended teaching cuts to the Blair, Richard Montgomery and Poolesville programs

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Holding signs aloft and chanting, more than 100 students and parents marched through Rockville Monday afternoon in protest of budget cuts they say will weaken magnet programs by cutting teaching capacity.

The boisterous group, predominantly comprised of students from the science, mathematics and computer science magnet at Montgomery Blair High School in Silver Spring, began rallying in front of the Stella B. Werner Council Office Building and made their way down Rockville Pike in the rain to Montgomery County Public Schools headquarters at 850 Hungerford Drive.

The protestors also represented the International Baccalaureate program at Richard Montgomery High School and the Global Ecology Studies Program at Poolesville High School.

County Executive Isiah Leggett (D) has recommended a public schools budget that is 3.8 percent more than last year's but still \$51 million less than the \$2.1 billion requested by the school board.

To help close the gap, school Superintendent Jerry D. Weast has recommended cutting teaching positions, or the equivalent, from the Blair, Richard Montgomery and Poolesville magnets.

In a memo to the school board on April 18, Weast explained the reductions.

"As a result of the school staffing process in February, the reduction was divided among programs by—reducing 3.4 FTE [Full-time-equivalent positions] at Blair, reducing 1.4 FTE at Richard Montgomery High School, and reducing 4.2 FTE at Poolesville High School," he wrote.

Weast added the school system remains "committed to magnet programs."

"I understand that some people in the community do not want these changes to be made, but we are making them in the best interest of the program today, and ensuring they are on solid footing for future success amidst tightening budgets," he wrote.

But parents and students still hope the cuts will not be made. The County Council, which has the final say on budgets, will vote in May.

Jacob Hurwitz, a sophomore in the Blair magnet and organizer of the protest, said he organized the march to draw attention to their cause.

"Hopefully, when MCPS and the County Council see how



Jacob Hurwitz, a student at Montgomery Blair High School, uses a megaphone to lead students and parents protesting against proposed funding cuts in the magnet programs at Blair, Richard Montgomery and Poolesville high schools during a march to county school headquarters on Monday.

many people actually care about the Magnet and want to keep its current funding level, they will finally listen to us," he said.

The group attracted the attention of County Council members Philip M. Andrews (D-Dist. 3) of Gaithersburg, George L. Leventhal (D-At large) of Takoma Park and Marc Ehrlich (D-At large) of Takoma Park who came out and spoke with the group.

"We vote on an overall amount for the school budget and then the school system decides how to make that fit their programs," Andrews said. "They decide what programs specifical-

ly to fund, which not to fund and at what levels. We write a check for what we think is supportable and needed for that year and the school system decides how to spend it."

Andrews said he thought it was "terrific" the students came out.

"They're active in support of what they think is needed for their education," he said.

Marie Cohen, a Chevy Chase resident, said she brought her son Michael, a sophomore at Blair, to the protest because she felt it was important that he advocate for his program.

"I just feel like these kids are

so productive and they're such a source of prestige for our whole county and our whole nation," she said. "We need people who can do math and science jobs and the county needs a program like this. I just don't get the logic of cutting this program."

The students finally made their way to the school system's headquarters around 5 p.m., with one teenager beating a large bass drum while the rest chanted "Fund us, Weast."

But they were disappointed to hear from a security guard that Weast and members of the school board were gone for the day.

"I think the Board of Education left early to avoid talking to us," Hurwitz said. "I hope one day they will sit down and talk to us and give us more funding than what they've proposed."

Joel Wasserman, a sophomore in the pre-International Baccalaureate program at Richard Montgomery, said he felt the rally went well. His brother Louis is a senior at Blair and has spoken before the council in support of magnet programs.

"We got people from the County Council to come out and talk to us, so that was good," he said. "Hopefully, they'll help us."

In the meantime, Hurwitz said he and his fellow students would continue advocating.

"This is not the end of the fight," he said. "This is the end of today, but we'll keep on fighting."