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New PTA Council president is schools' biggest fan

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By Linda Strowbridge

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After spending years helping a few hundred parents bolster Owings Mills High School, Susan Katz wants to muster the power of 50,000 parents to improve Baltimore County's school system.

Katz, an Owings Mills resident and planning and regulatory affairs director for the Kennedy Krieger Institute, took office as president of the PTA Council of Baltimore County this summer.

"I want to be the biggest cheerleader for the school system, but I'm not going to be a patsy," she said. "I want to get the voice of parents out there."

To accomplish that, Katz said the council must work more closely with the 158 PTAs and PTSAs across the county, and with county officials.

The council, she said, is about to convert its monthly bulletin from paper to electronic form. So instead of delivering four printed copies to each school, Katz expects to e-mail the bulletin to thousands of parents across the county.

She has drafted a list of people and groups with whom she needs to meet and partner. They range from Joe Hairston, the



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superintendent of Baltimore County Public Schools; to County Executive Jim Smith; County Council and school board members; child advocacy groups; and businesses and community leaders.

That network, she said, is needed to muster essential resources for public schools.

Class sizes, she said, have been creeping up across the county. The average age of county schools has reached 45, so many school buildings need new roofs and bathrooms, upgraded science labs and state-of-the-art instructional equipment.

The overall quality of education in the county could improve, she said, especially for average children and children who won't be going to college.

"I think the school system does very well with their honors kids and with the kids with special needs," Katz said. "It's the big 75 percent of the kids in the middle that I worry about the most because their schooling will make or break these kids.

"They need to be able to connect with one teacher or a coach to help them be successful. Those are the kids who could fall through the cracks, or they are the kids who could become the president of the United States with the proper direction from home and at school."

Katz acknowledged that many PTAs have difficulty convincing parents to get involved with their child's school. She said she hopes the council's expanded communications and partnerships will convince more parents that PTAs can noticeably improve the quality of a child's education.

She predicted an upcoming change in school regulations will prompt more parents to get involved.

Beginning in 2009, Maryland high school students will have to pass the High School Assessment tests to graduate. In 2006, about half of all high school students in northwest Baltimore County passed the algebra exam. At Franklin High School, 52.1 percent of students passed. At Randallstown High School, 26.3 percent passed.

"They will need to pass these tests in order to graduate," Katz noted. "Parents are suddenly going to start getting involved if they find out their kids are not passing."

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