

March 21, 2011

Christopher Barclay, President
Board of Education
Montgomery County Public Schools
850 Hungerford Drive, Room 123
Rockville, MD 20850

Dear President Barclay,

Recently, the Board has heard testimony on the so-called “No Label, No Limits” campaign advocating an end to the practice of identifying gifted and talented (GT) students in the MCPS student body. I am writing today to remind the Board of MCCPTA’s established position in favor of identifying and providing accelerated and enriched instructional programming for GT students, as articulated in the following resolutions:

- Resolution on Accelerated and Enriched Instruction (March 24, 2009).¹
- Resolution on Middle School Advanced Courses (April 27, 2010).²

We oppose the proposal to end identification of GT students. While the exact term used to identify students who require advanced, accelerated and/or enriched instruction is less important than the identification itself, the term “gifted and talented” is required by Maryland law,³ and is a nationally used and widely accepted educational term of art applied to students who have atypical learning abilities. It does not, or should not, mean simply that a student is prepared to work above grade level in one or more subjects, although that is also an important quality that should be identified and served.⁴ We believe that MCPS must continue to identify and serve students who are not merely above grade level but are gifted and need different programming than that appropriate for their age peers. The Board’s long recognition of these special needs is why Policy IOA appropriately requires both the identification of gifted students and the development and delivery of a curriculum that will serve their needs.

Opponents of the GT label observe that approximately 40% of MCPS students are identified as GT as a result of global screening, and that in some demographic groups a disproportionately high or low percentage of students are identified as GT. They also suggest that there is no meaningful difference in ability between students on either side of the cut-off line for GT identification, but that students who are identified as GT are afforded opportunities denied those who are not so identified.

We agree both that the overall identification rate is much higher than national average, and that as a result students clustered on either side of the cut-off line for GT identification are within the middle third of the MCPS ability spectrum (just above, or below, the 60th percentile). We agree that there is not a lot of meaningful distinction between students on either immediate side of that cut-off, and that programming directed at the 60th percentile would also benefit the 59th percentile, or the 58th. But

that does not mean that students significantly above the cut-off line can be adequately served in one-size-fits-all classrooms in which all students are encouraged to meet identical “high” expectations.

We also agree that more needs to be done to identify and nurture gifted minority students who are under-represented in magnet programs and local school Advanced Placement classes that afford the opportunity to do genuinely advanced work. But we disagree that limiting gifted minority students to the hope of differentiated instruction in heterogeneously grouped classrooms where they have few or no academic peers will do anything to improve their achievement levels. In a budget climate in which class size and stresses on teachers are growing, we believe there should be more, not fewer, opportunities for such high-ability and highly motivated students to do high-level work with a critical-mass cluster group of their academic peers, starting in the primary grades where the skills necessary for eventual success in a magnet program or AP classes are first identified and nourished.

We disagree with other contentions made in opposition to the gifted label.

We disagree that all children are fundamentally the same and can be equally successfully challenged within a one-size-fits-all curriculum as long as it is “rigorous” enough for most.

We disagree with those who use “on grade level” as a derogatory term. Most students should be on grade level, by definition. An on grade level curriculum can be rich, challenging, and rigorous – and still not have appropriate content or move fast enough to challenge a GT student. An on grade level student excelling in a challenging on grade level curriculum is an excellent student achieving his or her full potential, and if the on grade level curriculum is properly designed and implemented, that student will be ready to succeed in college.

We disagree that most students need to complete “advanced” work in order to be prepared for success in college or work. Any class or program that is appropriate for all or most students cannot, by definition, be “advanced,” but all students should leave MCPS prepared to succeed in college or work.

We disagree that students of widely different ability levels can be successfully taught in a mixed ability classroom using differentiated instruction.⁵ We disagree that providing on- or below-grade level students “access” to higher-level work by placing them in a classroom with students prepared to work several years ahead of them will afford those students a meaningful chance to actually learn the advanced material.

We also disagree that MCPS can eliminate ability grouping without limiting the achievement of high-ability students.⁶ Students who are placed in on grade level classes designed to be appropriate for 80% of students will learn the on grade level curriculum, even if MCPS names those classes “Advanced” and makes optional advanced differentiations available to the teacher of a heterogeneously grouped class. This is especially true in classes where small numbers of gifted students are mixed in with large numbers of students who are two or more years behind them in content mastery.

We disagree that flexible cluster grouping by ability is harmful to on- or below-grade level students. Multiple studies have shown that ability grouping, coupled with appropriately matched curriculum and regular re-evaluation of individual placements, benefits students at all ability levels.⁷ All students, at every ability level, benefit from the opportunity to master material they haven't yet learned in the company of other students learning the same material. Flexible ability grouping is an appropriate and effective tool for narrowing the range of material a single teacher is expected to

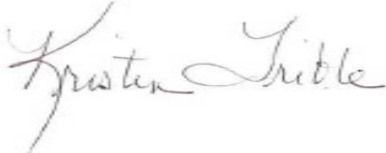
prepare and deliver within a single class period, while also affording students the opportunity to demonstrate exceptional ability and move between ability groups.

We disagree that the bestowing of the GT label affords any genuine enrichment opportunities to GT identified students that cannot be “accessed” by other students. There are few if any genuine GT programs offered outside the magnet programs, which serve a very small percentage of the most profoundly gifted students. Local schools have been systematically dismantling any programs that cluster GT students for advanced or accelerated instruction, with the result that either the entire class gets a watered-down implementation of a formerly GT-appropriate curriculum such as William and Mary language instruction, or the program isn’t implemented at all. The one exception to this rule has been accelerated math instruction, in which students are placed in homogeneously grouped classrooms working above their grade level for math instruction. As the November 9, 2010 report of the Math Working Group has illustrated, however, placement in accelerated math classes was not correlated with the GT label at all, and in fact many students were accelerated despite being unprepared for advanced work.⁸ This is not a function of the label.

We disagree that students who are not identified as gifted fail to access magnet programs because of the existence of the gifted label; this confuses correlation with causation. Any student who is prepared and/or motivated to try these programs can apply for them, but it is not surprising that students identified at or below the middle of the ability spectrum in second grade are less likely to be selected for programs designed to serve the unusual needs of the top 3-4 percent of the ability spectrum. We further note that every magnet program for the highly gifted has a waiting list every year; if students who would thrive in such programs aren’t getting access to them, it is because those programs are oversubscribed.

We look forward to a day when Policy IOA is fully implemented and the GT label becomes less important. Until that goal is accomplished, however, we believe that parents need to be alerted to the fact that their gifted students need their active support and advocacy to ensure that they, too, can achieve their full potential.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Kristin Tribble". The ink is dark and the signature is fluid and legible.

Kristin Tribble, President
MCCPTA

Enclosures

Notes:

1. http://www.mccpta.net/resolutions/AEI_Resolution.pdf
2. http://www.mccpta.net/resolutions/MS_Advanced_Courses_Resolution_final.pdf
3. Title 8 of the Maryland Annotated Code, section 8-201 et seq., calls for the development and implementation of programs for students who are “identified by professionally qualified individuals” as gifted and talented students, and The Bridge to Excellence in Public Schools Act, section 5-401 requires the annual reporting of goals, objectives, and strategies regarding the performance of students identified as “gifted and talented” pursuant to section 8-201.
4. For that reason, we support the SIPPI program and applaud its expansion of ability screening to fifth and eighth grades as well as second grade. Placement decisions are not the same as a determination of giftedness, however. While placement must take into account ability, it is primarily focused on preparation (mastery of the prior level content.) and while these are often related, they are not the same. A gifted student may not be prepared for above-level work in early grades but have the potential for advancement in the future, if properly nurtured. We urge MCPS to use and expand the SIPPI tool to make placement recommendations for students prepared to do advanced work regardless of the determination of giftedness. We also urge MCPS to populate the SIPPI tool with programming to which advanced students can be recommended, beyond the limited GT options currently available following the second grade screening (above grade level math placement, and William and Mary language instruction in the third and fourth quarters of grades 3, 4, and 5) .
5. While the theory behind differentiated instruction is undeniably attractive, there is little evidence that most MCPS teachers, or anyone else, actually can and do differentiate among wide ranges of ability. Anecdotal evidence collected from parents of students enrolled in heterogeneously grouped middle school reform science and social studies classes in several MCPS middle schools suggest that no little or no differentiated *instruction* is taking place in these classes, although advanced students sometimes experience differentiated testing and grade expectations. Similarly, the Office of Shared Accountability’s Final Report on the Phase Out of Secondary Learning Centers found that while teachers reported using differentiated instruction to address the needs of transitioned students, little actual differentiated instruction was observed by the evaluators. *See Evaluation of the Phase Out of the Secondary Learning Centers: Final Report*
<http://montgomeryschoolsmd.org/departments/sharedaccountability/reports/2009/LC%20Transition%20Final%20Report%20Feb%2009%2009.pdf>, at 9.
6. See, e.g., National Association for Gifted Children Position on Grouping, <http://www.nagc.org/index.aspx?id=4450> (“Grouping gifted children is one of the foundations of exemplary gifted education practice.”) and numerous internal study citations.
7. See, e.g., Kulik, et. al., *An Analysis of the Research on Ability Grouping: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (1992),
<http://www.gifted.uconn.edu/NRCGT/reports/rbdm9204/rbdm9204.pdf>
8. http://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/boe/meetings/agenda/2010-11/2010-1109/3%200%20Memo%20-%20Update%20on%20the%20K-12%20Mathematics%20Work%20Group%20_final_.pdf