



February 7, 2007

Ms Nancy Navarro, President
Board of Education
Montgomery County Public Schools
850 Hungerford Drive
Rockville, MD 20850

Dear President Navarro:

On behalf of the Montgomery County Council of PTAs I would like to thank the members of the Board of Education for delaying final action on Policy IEB: *Middle School Education* and the Report on Middle School Reform. MCCPTA was pleased to see that several of its recommendations were incorporated into the most draft of Policy IEB brought before the Board of Education on January 9, 2007.

Our members have had the opportunity to review the report as well as attend the presentation on middle school reform that Ms Linda Ferrell, Director of Middle School Education, gave at our January 23, 2007, delegate assembly. These opportunities have given rise to further questions and comments from our delegates which follow below.

Goal 1: Ensure effective leadership that promotes shared ownership for students and staff success and establishes a culture of high expectations.

- MCCPTA believes that all stakeholders, including community partners, should be involved in middle school leadership.

Goal 2: Engage all students in effective and differentiated instructional practices using a rigorous, standards-based curriculum and challenging assessments.

- The first action in goal 2 is to align mathematics and English curricula with the College Board standards and use formative and benchmark assessments. The report states that MCPS will review the curriculum in these areas and make adjustments to align with the College Board standards. Does this mean that the math and English curriculum will be rewritten? What will this alignment involve in terms of work, substance, and evaluation? Was there community input regarding the decision to adopt these standards? How do the College Board standards relate to state requirements and the MSA and HSA exams? MCCPTA is not in favor of this alignment leading to another layer of assessments. Are there choices for students not suited for a College Ready pathway? We know that

many students become uninterested and disengaged in school at the middle school level. Will there be a process for identifying and supporting students who wish to follow different pathways?

- The second action is to identify explicit accelerated pathways within the middle school curriculum areas. MCCPTA would like clarification of what these accelerated pathways are and whether they would involve content areas beyond math, reading, and English. What support will be provided to schools for students who wish to take more rigorous courses? Ms. Ferrell reported that some schools may discontinue GT classes and that this decision will be locally based. How will the decision process work? Ms Ferrell indicated that each school will have a group of people making these decisions; will parents be part of this group? Can you cite the research which suggests that heterogeneous grouping aids student achievement for all students? In schools where all students are placed in GT level classes, what is in place to support students in this placement and how will differentiation be provided in these courses? MCCPTA would like detailed clarification on what parts of the middle school program will be under local control and which parts will be centrally decided. We would like a broad release of the Middle School Magnet Consortium data and analysis to understand its broader use in all middle schools.

Goal 4: Implement organizational structures that maximize time for teaching and learning, cultivate positive relationships, and promote increased student achievement.

- MCCPTA would like more information on what it means to establish and require schools to use system-wide criteria for selecting a schedule model. Will schools still have the flexibility to select seven period scheduling or block scheduling? What specifics are involved here and what implications does this have for schools with activity periods?

Goal 5: Ensure that middle school staff has the knowledge, skills, and content expertise to meet the learning and developmental needs of middle schools students.

- Where will the funding come from to support the increased professional development to build staff knowledge, skills, and content expertise?

Goal 6: Engage parents and the community as partners to promote school and student success.

- There is no money budgeted for the parent academy. Does this mean that staff will volunteer their time? Will MCPS rely on community partners to run this academy? Or will funds come out of money already in the budget? If the latter, what departments will head this effort and how much money will be allocated for this?
- MCPS needs to enhance its objective of two-way communication between the schools and parents by providing multiple opportunities for parents to be both involved in their child's education and to be included in the local school's educational decision-making processes. Ms Ferrell discussed the importance of parent involvement in the SIP process. However, the middle school report does

- not incorporate parent participation in such critical work groups as the SIP and Instructional Leadership Teams. There is vast inconsistency among middle schools in the school's outreach of parents and parent involvement on these teams. MCCPTA has made several efforts recently to determine what written instructions or guidelines exist regarding parent participation in SIPs. We have been unable to find anything in writing which states explicitly that parents must be invited to and attend local school SIP reviews. There are still schools where the only parental involvement is to ask the PTA president to sign a statement that he/she participated in the SIP development. There should be explicit written guidelines for schools and parents regarding parent involvement in these teams.
- With the exception of the reference to the six National Standards for Parent/Family Involvement, all the items in Goal 6 involve one-way communication, that is, MCPS or the local schools providing information to parents. Given the lack of meaningful two-way communication in the report, Policy IEB should be strengthened to require every school to work with parents as partners.

MCPS has not provided information on the source of the \$1.6 million of realigned funds to support middle school reform. MCCPTA cannot fully comment on the plan until we know the source of the funds and how the realignment affects other programs.

The work group reports are on file in the Board of Education office and have been provided in hard copy format to MCCPTA. Our members would like these reports made available through the web site. Parents and the broader community should have access to these reports to enable them to better understand the work and the intent of the Middle School Reform committees.

Again, MCCPTA thanks the members of the Board of Education for delaying final action on Policy IEB and the Middle School Reform Report until the February 13, 2007 Board meeting.

Sincerely,

Jane de Winter
President