


Update

Office of the Superintendent of Schools
MONTGOMERY COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS
Rockville, Maryland

April 18, 2008

MEMORANDUM

To: Members of the Board of Education

From: Jerry D. Weast, Superintendent of Schools 

Subject: Support for Magnet Programs

The purpose of this memorandum is to respond to concerns regarding the potential impact of the prudent staffing reductions recommended for secondary magnet programs in the Board of Education's Adopted Fiscal Year (FY) 2009 Operating Budget. I want to make sure you have all the facts so you can respond to any questions. I also want to assure you the reductions will not impact the quality of these world-class programs. The planned changes are necessary in these austere times and will provide a solid foundation for these programs in the coming years.

The primary concerns voiced in the community are coming from the Montgomery Blair High School (Blair) community and magnet program staff who believe the quality of the program will be diminished because of the staffing reductions. The net effect of the reductions will require most of the magnet program staff to teach five classes instead of four and have only two release periods instead of three. As you know, we require all other teachers in the system to teach five classes with two release periods. We believe this is a reasonable request that will not negatively impact the quality of the program.

Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) is committed to supporting magnet programs that provide appropriate instruction for students who demonstrate needs that cannot be easily met by the local school program. Maintaining the high quality of these programs is paramount to fulfill the Board's vision that "a high-quality education is the fundamental right of every child." The Board has established funding support for secondary magnet programs including additional transportation, teacher stipends, additional professional development, paid summer planning days, unique instructional materials and equipment, facilities, and an administrative level magnet coordinator. To help maintain the high level of service expected from these programs, all of this funding will remain in place.

Teacher staffing for magnet programs is provided through a combination of allocations based on student enrollment plus additional positions for the special programs. All schools receive staffing based on the projected number of students in the school. This calculation includes the out-of-area students enrolled in programs like the Blair Science, Mathematics, Computer Science

magnet. Secondary magnets also receive additional staff allocations above and beyond the student enrollment. For instance, Blair receives approximately 129 (117 classroom teacher plus 12 resource teachers) full-time-equivalent (FTE) staff to teach all the subjects for 2,549 students in the school (this includes magnet students, but not students receiving more than 15 hours of special education services). This calculation is based on the expectation that teachers will teach five classes and resource teachers will teach four classes. For FY 2009, Blair will receive an additional 8.4 FTE positions for the magnet and the Communication Arts Program beyond the base enrollment. Blair also receives additional staffing for the Grade 9 academies, downcounty consortium programs, special education, English Speakers of Other Languages, one algebra lead teacher, and two literacy coaches. A FTE position can be used in a number of ways, including the full release of a teacher for specific duties or partial release in 0.2 increments for each class.

Each year, MCPS reviews the staff allocations for all special programs, including magnet, language immersion, International Baccalaureate (IB), consortia, and early college programs. The FY 2009 review showed highly effective staff making the most of their additional allocation, but also revealed inconsistencies in staffing allocations from school to school and sometimes unclear position roles, responsibilities, and requirements. An area of particular concern were the extra teacher release periods which were provided for a few staff members in some programs and not provided for the vast majority of MCPS teachers with similarly challenging student populations. These concerns, combined with a restricted budget, led to the recommendation in the FY 2009 Superintendent's Operating Budget to partially reduce staffing in special programs, specifically reducing high school special programs by 6.0 FTEs.

As a result of the school staffing process in February, the reduction was divided among programs by—reducing 3.4 FTE at Blair, reducing 1.4 FTE at Richard Montgomery High School, and reducing 4.2 FTE at Poolesville High School. This adds up to more than six positions because the Poolesville High School allocation included staffing to support its schedule in a small school. The overall reductions are proportional to the number of total magnet positions a school had to begin with, therefore, the Blair magnet lost more positions than the Richard Montgomery IB because it had more positions. Overall, Blair continues to have more special program staffing than any other school. Other areas also had significant reductions: 9.0 positions in elementary and middle special programs; 5.0 middle school computer lab assistants; 7.7 ESOL positions; 11.75 positions in special education; and, 19.2 central office positions. As you are well aware, the current funding gap with the Montgomery County Council means that many more positions will likely be cut from the FY 2009 budget.

Guidelines are being developed to ensure consistent staffing allocations for special programs and central office staff are working with schools to document and clarify purpose and use of all additional program staffing. School and program administrators are working to ensure that program quality does not diminish with the additional staffing reduction for FY 2009. In meetings with staff and parents, administrators have shared that core program requirements will

remain available to all students in all magnet programs, and that MCPS remains committed to providing a world-class education to all students, including those several levels above the MCPS norm.

The reduction in additional staffing has been difficult for teachers accustomed to the additional planning period. Program administrators continue to work with teachers in all schools to establish the most conducive schedule for student success, as well as to identify the most effective use of the additional teacher staffing. An expected outcome of this year's planning is targeted use of the additional teaching staff to help meet the goals of the program. For example, the Grade 9 team in the Blair magnet will receive their release period so they continue to help students adjust to the rigors of the program. The remaining additional staffing will be used to continue the extended day, or 8th period, for the Communication Arts Program and magnet, and to maintain small class sizes in program courses. There has been no reduction in the core offerings or popular electives of the programs and there are no plans to reduce these offerings. However, elective courses with historically low enrollment because of a lack of student interest will be discontinued. As you know, if enough students do not express an interest in an elective course, it is not financially feasible to offer the course.

Much has been made of the issue that Blair will lose distinguished teachers as a result of our decision to reduce the number of release periods and require staff to teach the same number of classes as other teachers in the school. We have confirmed that two teachers in the Blair magnet have announced their retirement and that one has requested a year of leave while another has been placed on the involuntary transfer list. Let me assure you that I am confident that these sought after positions will attract many highly-qualified applicants who would relish the opportunity to teach in such a distinguished program. We will certainly do all we can to ensure that we have high quality instructors teaching the courses in this program.

Montgomery County Public Schools remains committed to magnet programs and the success of students who demonstrate a need that cannot be easily met by the local school program. 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.

JDW:smw

Copy to:

Executive Staff

Mr. Creel

Ms. Williams

Mr. Ostrander