

MCPS Strategic Planning Forum October 12, 2006

Brian Roberts

**Member, Montgomery County Education Forum NAACP Parents' Council Representative,
Rachel Carson ES**

As parents of a 5th grader at Rachel Carson and a junior at Quince Orchard, my wife and I want to make sure our children get the most rigorous, challenging education they can get to prepare them for enrollment in a competitive college, to prepare them for a competitive career after they finish school.

We chose to live in Montgomery County when I got a job in this area a couple of years ago, and the quality reputation of the school system here was one very important reason. We moved to Gaithersburg from Larchmont, New York where the school system also has a great reputation.

One thing learned in Larchmont is the dirty little secret of the success of the schools there. The teachers have confidence to do more to enrich the students experience in school – and the quality of education is better for ALL students.

Here in Montgomery County the experience is different. We are screening all children in 2nd grade to determine whether they are eligible for the G&T programs, magnet schools and other enriched instruction opportunities. The recent Testing Brief of the MCPS Department of Shared Accountability gives us the results of Global Screening in spring of this year. Here, the screening process essentially limits access to the vast enrichment opportunities available at MCPS.

The dirty little not so secret here in Montgomery County is that the screening process almost literally mirrors the income and racial makeup of each school community. As a result of this process, more students from wealthy and more often, white, families get access and the advantages of the enrichment programs. We find, for example, that Westbrook ES in Bethesda had 80% of its students identified as G&T ready. Wow. Weller Road ES in the Wheaton Cluster, on the other hand, only identified 14% of its students as G&T ready. Ouch.

With all due respect, that's just not a reasonable conclusion. The screening process simply ratified that the children attending Westbrook are from higher income families than the children from Weller Road. Let's face it: the children from Westbrook already have a lot of advantages over their counterparts at Weller Road. Why should MCPS compound their plight? Do we really intend to say that the children of wealthy parents are the ones most deserving of enriched programs?

With the number of outstanding programs available at MCPS, the teachers have a tough job. They have to identify students as "gifted" and then determine how to differentiate instruction in their classroom for the different groups of needs in the class. This is a tough job for any teacher. This challenge also acts as a disincentive to broad access to enrichment programs.

Wouldn't it be better for the students, and easier for the teachers to raise the overall quality level of the education offered in each grade? Wouldn't it be easier for the teacher, if the entire curriculum were enriched? That's essentially what the students in Larchmont get. That's what they're essentially getting at Westbrook, with 80% of the children identified as G&T ready. I think enrichment of the entire curriculum is a very reasonable conclusion.

We won't bridge the achievement gap before we raise the level of the overall quality for all students. We won't increase the HSA scores until we take this step, either. It starts with a simple

premise. ALL of our students deserve the most rigorous and challenging education they can handle. And we're not going to find out whether they can handle it with a test in the 2nd grade. We have to believe in ALL of our students from the start, and provide them with the right tools to succeed -beginning in pre-school.

Let's get to work.