

Montgomery County Education Forum

Every child is born a genius. – Albert Einstein

Testimony on the GT Policy Review and its Implications Montgomery County Board of Education Community Forum October 11, 2007

Before the Gifted and Talented (GT) Policy is reviewed during this school year, we wanted to share our thoughts on the direction this policy should take, especially in light of the FY 2009 budget discussions that are about to begin. Implications of the GT policy will certainly have an impact on the budget; not so much on the size, but on the allocation.

We believe that the decision to review current GT policy is sound, since this policy hasn't been reviewed in many years. However we think the review should take place in a better defined context. We believe that all good policy should be informed by best practices. We also believe that good policy is meaningless when it is not effectively implemented across the MCPS system. **The implementation of the GT policy has never been evaluated.** We cannot in good faith support the review of a policy without having evaluated its implementation over a 25-year period. We believe the current implementation of the GT policy has not helped MCPS achieve the first goal of Our Call to Action: Ensure Success for Every Student; in fact we believe it hinders the goal.

Advocating a separate higher set of education standards and expectations for one group of students labeled "gifted" and a lower set of education standards and expectations for another group of students labeled "not gifted" has left that second group of students behind and done them a disservice. Further, many students labeled "gifted" are not getting gifted services, particularly in elementary school, leaving the label a negative on one hand and meaningless on the other.

MCEF wants all children to get an excellent, high quality education with high standards and expectations that prepare students for college and for work. Today, we see two distinct paths through MCPS schools. There is one for those who are provided gifted identification and services in elementary school, those students who are taking GT sections of math and English and accepted in magnet programs in middle school, and go on to magnet programs and take Honors, AP and IB classes in High School. There is another path for the rest of the students; they take "regular" classes.

It appears from all available measures that the students in the first path are better prepared for MSA, HSA, SAT and other high stakes standardized tests, and are also better prepared for college and work. These students are predominantly white, Asian and have higher socio-economic status. The students on the "regular" path are not as well prepared; labeled as "not gifted" early on, they are then overrepresented in Evening High School, have high suspension and ineligibility rates in secondary school, and at risk of dropping out. These students are predominantly black, brown and have lower socio-economic status. Many are unprepared for college and work.

MCEF, and its Equity in Education Coalition partners, including the Montgomery County teachers and administrators unions and the NAACP, applaud MCPS's continued commitment to close the achievement gap between these two groups. We are excited about proposed changes by the Division of Accelerated and Enriched Instruction in the Global Screening Process to an assessment tool and not the determinant of a GT or not GT label.

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We are especially excited about the Race Initiative under Jamie Virga's leadership (which needs a new name immediately if not sooner and I have some suggestions if you're interested) and the Kennedy Cluster project, sponsored by a partnership between both the County and MCPS.

MCEF also believes that more work should be done before the current GT policy is changed. First we think the Board should to redirect its attention to all students, not just those who are identified as GT or those students receiving GT services. **To us, this means MCPS needs an Equity Policy, not a GT policy.**

To that end, MCEF proposes that the education of every child will include:

- **Freedom from the stigma attached to a label** that attempts to quantify intelligence. End global screening for "giftedness".
- **Development of critical thinking skills** not to be delayed based on level of reading or math literacy, for example gaps in de-coding, memorization, English proficiency or other basic skills.
- **Gaps in basic skills** filled as quickly and effectively as possible to allow for full access to:
- **Rich and culturally relevant curriculum** that will engage and motivate students toward a lifelong love of learning
- **Best practices in methodology and equitable resources** that will develop and nurture every child's potential within their "zone of proximal development".
- **High expectations** for all students – a commitment to do whatever it takes to communicate the expectation that all children can learn at high levels.
- **Heterogeneous grouping and differentiated instruction** as the norm in classrooms.
- **Intra-classroom grouping practices to be flexible** and based on multiple facets of a child's intellectual makeup, including: skill, interest, learning style.
- **Authentic assessments** that genuinely measure students' mastery of standards, using multiple measures diagnostically to inform and improve instruction and not to punish children or schools.

An equity policy must also include references to the conditions which make high quality learning for all children possible such as working conditions and professional development of teachers, equity-committed leadership, cultural competence throughout the system and family and community engagement, collaboration, and integration.

MCEF believes that best practices should always inform policy development. We are aware that many schools within MCPS are successfully making changes in instruction and professional development to improve the preparation and performance of students from minority groups and of lower socio-economic status. We are working with members of the Equity in Excellence Coalition to survey all MCPS schools, beginning with elementary schools, to document those best practices and to help spread those practices throughout MCPS. We welcome your support on this initiative, and in any case will be glad to share what we learn with you. We expect that these best practices will inform the development of an Equity Policy.

We also believe that the Kennedy Cluster Project presents a great opportunity to test and model the implementation of an Equity Policy before rolling it out to the rest of the county system.

All of these suggestions have implications to the FY 2009 strategic plan and the allocation of budget money. We look forward to working with you to make this endeavor a success.