

Comments for Strategic Planning Forum

Montgomery County Public Schools

Board of Education

October 16, 2008

Good evening. My name is Sue Katz Miller. I am a former PTA President, and I write a schools column for the Takoma Voice, but I speak tonight as a parent of a 9th and 6th grader in red zone schools.

I want to call your attention to the crisis in writing instruction in our schools. Why is there a crisis? First, the MSA tests reading and math, but not writing. So there is little external pressure for writing instruction. Second, our School Improvement Plans in the red zone focus on proficiency, or if we're lucky, on shifting from Proficient to Advanced, but ignore the growing cohort of diverse students who begin each year reading in the "Advanced" category, and are thus ready for writing instruction. Third, we have been shifting elementary and middle school English classes to heterogeneous grouping. In the red zone, even when these classes are labeled "GT," they contain wild extremes of academic levels, and thus students virtually never write essays in these classrooms, even in middle school. My son learned to write a paragraph in kindergarten, thanks to MCPS. But then in first grade, and in second, and third, and fourth, and fifth grades, he was assigned single paragraphs, over and over. In 6th grade, in a "GT" English class, he just received his first writing assignment of the year—to write a single paragraph on a world leader.

I have been given a number of other reasons by MCPS staff for why we are not teaching and assigning more writing. One is that there is so much "stuff" in the thick curriculum guides that they can't possibly teach it all, so that even if there is an expectation somewhere in that thick binder that they assign an essay, it becomes optional. I have been told by four different middle school teachers that they have too many students and can't read and correct all those essays. In elementary school, I was told that they don't assign writing as homework because some parents will help their children and this would be unfair to students who don't have parents who can help. So instead, there were years without writing homework. I have also been told that we have no data points for writing, so it's hard to track what's happening and enforce any kind of accountability.

We cannot afford to accept any of these explanations for the dearth of writing in our schools. The SAT contains an essay, and MCPS now finally plans to "backmap" writing skills into middle and elementary schools. This will take years, and perhaps involve the development of yet more curriculum and testing and data points. In the meantime, please consider some quick, no-cost, no-testing solutions. First, require elementary and middle schools in the red zone to provide vocabulary-building programs such as Wordly Wise for all students who test as Advanced readers, just as they do in the Highly Gifted Centers and at the Eastern Magnet, and in the green zone. Second, require teachers to teach the art of essay writing and assign a particular number of essays in English and Social Studies to students at that Advanced reading level. Third, preserve "homogeneous" Honors English classrooms in the red zone, where teachers

struggle with differentiating across a vast range of reading levels. Otherwise, students who are ready to learn to write are left to teach themselves.

It is not equitable to offer appropriate writing instruction only to students in test-in programs for the gifted, when we have a diverse and growing cohort of students who are ready to learn this essential skill. If MCPS wants more students taking AP and IB courses, we must prepare and support them with more and better writing instruction in every local elementary and middle school. This year, I have had the painful experience of watching my 9th grader and her peers getting slammed in AP and pre-IB courses, because they spent the past six years making posters and dioramas and putting on skits, when they needed and wanted to be writing an occasional essay.

Please take action on this crisis before another class of ill-prepared students must face AP, and IB, and the SAT. Thank you.