

Board of Education Community Forum
John F. Kennedy High School
Thursday, October 15, 2009

Written Testimony of Dan Shepherdson

Good evening. Thank you for giving me this opportunity to testify this evening, and thank you for your service on the School Board. My name is Dan Shepherdson. I live in Bethesda, and my son is a sophomore at the Blair Math, Science and Computer Science Magnet. I would like to recognize and thank Blair Principal Darryl Williams for his leadership at Blair and for his support of the Blair Magnet.

I would like to associate my testimony tonight with the testimony of Kay Romero, President of the Montgomery County Council of PTAs, before the School Board on September 17, 2009. As Ms. Romero testified, "It is the great challenge of Montgomery County Public Schools to try to meet the needs of not just all, but EACH of our students."

All students deserve a rigorous, challenging education. All students should face high expectations. All students have great potential to be fully successful in school, in college and beyond. But not all students are in the same place. Performance data reveals that some students need extra help learning to read, or learning their basic math facts. Some students need a double-period of algebra, geometry or English to master the on-grade level curriculum. On the other hand, some students are ready to take an advanced algebra class in 6th or 7th grade that will prepare them to take multivariable calculus and differential equations in high school. These students can take and pass the algebra HSA in middle school. Similarly, some students are prepared to study Shakespeare in depth, read a complex novel, write a lengthy essay or research paper, or take an AP social studies class successfully in ninth grade.

These are just some illustrations of the wide variation in the student population in MCPS. Actually, it is unsurprising that there would be such wide variation in student preparedness in a diverse school system of 140,000 students. Our Call to Action recognizes this variation by stating as one of its Core Values that "Every student is a unique learner and MCPS will tailor instruction to meet the learning needs of each student." The Blair Magnet meets the unique learning needs of a selective group of highly-able students whose student performance data demonstrates that they need to be provided a rigorous, advanced and extremely challenging instructional program.

MCPS has recognized the wide variation in student preparedness by offering many special programs that are targeted to certain groups of students based on data and other considerations. MCPS does not offer the exact same instructional program to all students because one size does not fit all. There are intervention programs, after-school programs, Saturday programs and summer programs. These initiatives are intended to meet the particular needs of particular students.

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There also are centers for the highly gifted, selective middle school magnets, and selective high school magnets like the ones at Blair, Poolesville and Richard Montgomery. These County-wide selective and competitive programs are like varsity athletic teams, serving the needs of highly-able students from across the County. Unfortunately, unlike our varsity athletes who are celebrated in school-wide pep-rallies and special sections of the Washington Post, programs for highly-able students do not generally get such community accolades.

Even if MCPS extends the curriculum from the highly-gifted centers to all elementary schools, and even if all middle schools become whole-school magnets, I believe that it will still be necessary for MCPS to provide selective, competitive magnet programs for highly-able students in elementary school, middle school and high school. Based on performance, testing and data, some highly-able students need to be challenged by the advanced instructional program that is offered at Blair, and at Pooleville and Richard Montgomery. These programs fulfill MCPS's Core Value of tailoring instruction to meet the learning needs of EACH student.

It is great that MCPS is raising expectations for all students. But in a system with 140,000 students, there will always be wide variation in preparedness. There will always be a need for selective, competitive programs to meet the instructional needs of highly-able students whose instructional needs cannot be met in their home school. Please do not cut funding or resources for the Blair Magnet or the other selective magnets.