

Office of School Performance
MONTGOMERY COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS
Rockville, Maryland

June 23, 2000

MEMORANDUM

To: Dr. Jerry D. Weast, Superintendent of Schools

Through: Dr. James A. Williams, Deputy Superintendent of Schools

From: Joseph I. Headman, Jr., Community Superintendent

Subject: Findings and Recommendations from an Investigation of Testing Violations
at Potomac Elementary School

Serious test security violations affecting some classrooms during the Maryland School Performance Assessment Program (MSPAP) this year at Potomac Elementary School have been identified and confirmed as the result of an intensive investigation involving interviews with staff members, students, and parents of students. Although at this time the violations appear to have affected only a few testing groups, there is no way to differentiate the overall impact on the outcome of the testing. Therefore, the third and fifth grade exam results for the 1999-2000 school year should be invalidated. An investigation into concerns about the previous year's testing were unsubstantiated, and no invalidation of the testing results is being recommended for the 1998-1999 school year. Appropriate disciplinary action is being recommended where necessary regarding test security violations, student coaching, and extended time violations, and those recommendations are being forwarded separately to you.

At the outset, I want to emphasize that the findings do not implicate the entire staff of Potomac Elementary School, nor do the findings suggest a widespread violation of testing administration protocol and procedures. Indeed, the investigation identified numerous instances in which individual staff members acted correctly and steadfastly in maintaining an appropriate test-taking environment in their classrooms.

The findings are that two staff members at the school during the May 2000 testing violated state requirements for test security. No other test security violations were substantiated. Students were not implicated in the violations because they were acting at the behest of an adult. Indeed, students at the school and their parents are to be commended for alerting state and county authorities to the testing violations.

Specifically, a staff member was implicated in test security violations during the May 2000 testing in three major areas: having students resume work on a test during recess; prompting students to expand, correct, or finish answers; and coaching students during the test administration. In at least two instances, this staff member removed students from classrooms, gave extended time to complete tests in unsupervised areas, reviewed testing booklets, and

brought students back to complete unfinished sections. There also were instances of testing materials not being secured. The other staff member was involved in a test security violation in which testing booklets were reviewed and given back to students to complete unfinished sections.

The exams in question are the third and fifth grade tests of the MSPAP given in May of this year. The tests were taken over the standard period of five days for each grade level, for 105 minutes each day. In typical tasks for this test, students are required to work both alone and in groups. Students are tested on their ability to compare and contrast ideas, characters, and events; develop a plan to solve a problem; carry out the steps necessary to provide a solution; figure out the answer; and explain how and why they arrived at an answer. The tests are designed to examine what students know about reading, writing, language usage, mathematics, science, and social studies. Each student takes one-third of the total test, with the results of all students being tabulated to form a performance score for each grade level. A school meets the state's satisfactory standard if 70 percent or more of the students score at the satisfactory level. The excellent standard is met if a school at the satisfactory level also has 25 percent or more of students reach the excellent level.

Potomac Elementary School, one of five elementary schools in the Winston Churchill cluster, had an enrollment of 634 students in Kindergarten through Grade 5 for the 1999-2000 school year. The school employed 36 instructional staff members, plus instructional assistants and other support staff. In the 1998-1999 school year, the school was the highest performing elementary school in Montgomery County and the third highest in the state on the MSPAP, with almost 82 percent of students meeting standard.

The investigation began on Thursday, May 25, 2000, when the Maryland State Department of Education conveyed allegations of adult misconduct provided by parents of students at the school. Allegations were relayed by six parents based on conversations with their children, who were then students in the fifth grade and who had participated in the May 2000 administration of the MSPAP tests. The investigation was expanded to the third grade tests on May 31 and to the previous year's tests for both grade levels on June 1. A concurrent personnel investigation also was initiated. Given the breadth of the inquiry, the investigation was divided into two stages. Phase I was focused on test improprieties this year, and Phase II focused on issues related to last year's testing. Both inquiries have been completed.

Investigation Parameters

Information was collected by teams of central office staff members acting as investigators under the direction of Mr. Joseph I. Headman, Jr., community superintendent for the Winston Churchill, Richard Montgomery, Rockville, and Thomas Wootton clusters. The investigation was organized and implemented by the Office of School Performance, the Office of Shared Accountability, and the Office of Human Resources, in consultation with legal counsel. Other central office staff assisted in the investigation. Investigators interviewed parents, students, teachers, administrators, and other staff. The interviews of students included all grade levels from Grade 3 through Grade 5, plus more extensive interviews with students where specific concerns were raised. Sixth grade students from Herbert Hoover Middle School who took the

MSPAP last year as fifth graders at Potomac Elementary were interviewed also. Classroom teachers in Grade 2 through Grade 5, in addition to former staff members from the school, were interviewed at least once. The interviews employed standardized questions and a common format in each instance, with more than one investigator present at all times.

The investigators used the following statement from the “Code of Ethics and the State Board Security Regulations” from the MSPAP *Test Administration and Coordination Manual* as the basis for developing questions and identifying areas of inquiry:

“It is a breach of professional ethics for school personnel to provide verbal or nonverbal clues or answers, teach items on the test, share writing prompts, coach, hint, or in any way influence a student’s performance during the testing situation. A breach of ethics may result in invalidation of test results and LEA [local education agency] or MSDE [Maryland State Department of Education] disciplinary action.”

It is noteworthy that the security of the statewide testing process employed for the MSPAP is protected by state law. Violation of testing security can result in charges being brought and the possible imposition of penalties by the Maryland State Board of Education and/or the state superintendent of schools in accordance with COMAR 13A.03.04 and 13A.12.05.

Findings

The following items represent a summary of findings from the investigation of the third and fifth grade MSPAP testing at Potomac Elementary School for the 1999-2000 school year:

- Student performance was influenced by coaching, prompting, and additional time allocations, including significant extended time in at least two cases.
- Test security in the school for both third and fifth grades was lax and, at times, non-existent. Test booklets with student answers were reviewed by staff in some cases and left unsecured for unknown periods of time.

Examples of Violations

The following examples reflect events that occurred at Potomac Elementary School during the 1999-2000 school year:

- The test booklets of several students were reviewed following a testing session, and these students were recalled from recess to continue working on the test.
- A student who initially refused to take the test was removed from the classroom and placed in an unsupervised setting for an extended period of time to work on the test.
- Another student who had not completed a previous day’s testing section was removed from class to continue working on the test.

Conclusion and Recommendations

There were serious test security violations at Potomac Elementary School during the 1999-2000 school year on MSPAP. Many students and staff found these actions unacceptable. In fact, it was information provided by several fifth grade students to their parents that brought these violations to light. Since that time, many current staff members who were aware of the violations have expressed sincere regret in not reporting the violations in a timely and professional manner. Most staff members refused to participate in activities that breached testing protocols. No evidence was found of violations involving other standardized testing programs (outside of the 1999-2000 MSPAP tests) at the school, nor was there substantiation for concerns about the previous year's administration of the MSPAP.

The following recommendations are made in response to the above-identified findings.

1. The MSPAP test results for the 1999-2000 school year for both Grade 3 and Grade 5 should be invalidated for Potomac Elementary School.
2. Appropriate personnel actions should be taken as necessary for violation of testing protocol and procedures.
3. All current Potomac Elementary School instructional staff should undergo a training program in testing protocol and procedures prior to the next standardized testing.
4. For the next two years, the administration of the MSPAP at Potomac Elementary School should be monitored by school system staff from outside the school.
5. All school-based staff in the school system should review testing procedures and protocols and be provided information on the results of this investigation for their professional development.
6. Training in testing protocol and procedures should be emphasized among all newly hired teachers and principals in the school system.

These recommendations are submitted for your review and consideration in forming a response to the allegations presented to the Maryland State Department of Education regarding Potomac Elementary School.

JH:kmy

Copy to:

Dr. Arons

Dr. Hoffler-Riddick