

Since the Start of School -- Meetings/Calls/Events:

- 8/23 Meeting with BOE Member on Data Elements in Strategic Plan
- 8/23 Meeting with AEI supervisor on Feedback Council, Pending Issues
- 8/24 Back-to-School Fair
- 8/28 MCCPTA Executive Committee Meeting
- 8/29 BOE Meeting – Opening of Schools
- 9/10 BOE Meeting – Public Comment on PARCC/Bridge Concerns
- 9/13 Meeting with Curriculum Committee/OCIP & OSSI
- 9/14 MCCPTA Fall Training
- 9/16 Meeting with Superintendent – Bridge Projects, Family Engagement
- 9/16 MCCPTA Executive Committee Meeting
- 9/19 HS Presentation – Richard Montgomery HS
- 9/23 BOE Meeting
- 9/24 State BOE Meeting – Graduation Requirements/Bridge Exemption
- 9/24 MCCPTA Delegates Assembly
- 10/1 Meeting with Curriculum Committee/OCIP & OSSI
- 10/3 Conference Call with GCC committee chair/vice chair
- 10/4 Communications Meeting – MCPS/MCCPTA

Key Activities/Concerns:

While impossible to outline all the things that I focus on during the course of the month, here are a few key issues I hope our membership will be watching with me! I'm going to give you a lot of detail but hopefully then can just give you a bullet point in the coming year when referencing these issues and I'll keep sending you back to this tome for background!

- 1) **Graduation requirements.** The Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) has a set of graduation requirements codified in Code of Maryland Regulations (COMAR) that spells out what is necessary to earn a diploma in the state of Maryland. Most of those requirements are repeated in the MCPS requirements (though there are a few slight changes). <http://mdrules.elaws.us/comar/13a.03.02>
 - a. Last year, I wrote repeatedly about concerns surrounding “bridge projects” – the alternative offered to meet the assessment requirement outlined in the COMAR for students that are unsuccessful in passing the required HS graduation PARCC or HSA assessment after 2 attempts.
 - i. We made some progress last year. The general concern -- explaining the bridge projects to students/parents, creating the staffing models, ensuring students are well supported, creating a process/timeline to ensure these projects are completed and graded in time for graduation – all those facets are left to the schools to decide how to proceed. We know not all schools are created equal and not all parents work well with “oral traditions” – which is how most of this information is often communicated. (Central Office tells the principal which students are eligible to do a bridge project, the principal tells the designated administrator who tells the counselor who tells the student who tells the parents – what could possibly go wrong??) Last year, we really felt the pinch as this was the first graduating class that had to “pass” (not just participate in) the English Language Arts (ELA 10) assessments in order to graduate. It was stressful. Students working to complete bridge projects are often giving up an elective during their senior year to work on the project(s) and as the graduation date gets closer, the pressure of knowing the family is

making plans for the “big event,” creates a tremendous amount of stress for some students and parents who, just weeks before the graduation date, are still unsure if they have met the requirement, even though they finished the project months earlier! We can do this better... I’ve seen OSSI make some concerted efforts to work with our High Schools to codify the process and I’ve seen some plans posted to help families navigate this experience.

b. This year, I will probably continue to write about the assessments and bridge projects, though there are some twists in this road.

i. MISA – the science assessment requirement that was to roll out this year with the requirement of “passing” (not just participating, as has been the case for the last couple of years) was set to take effect with the current day Juniors. Happy to say, this has been postponed for two additional years. (I sent this news out over the summer through the e-list.) This is good news as the “cut scores” haven’t yet been released so our advocacy centered on postponing the implementation until we have time to assess the alignment of our current curriculum (this integrated exam will cover biology, chemistry, and physics). In December, we will know how our students performed on the last few years of field tests and MCPS will have time to adjust the curriculum, as needed, based on that feedback.

<http://www.marylandpublicschools.org/stateboard/Documents/07232019/TabH-13A.03.02GraduationRequirementsMISA.pdf>

1. While I’m pleased with the postponement, I still have an additional MISA Concerns -- In the written comments I sent on behalf of MCCPTA, I included a request for the State to engage in a conversation about this practice of having students take a high-stakes exam on content students have not accessed in several years. More on that soon, I hope. I want to pursue further once we see the results of the field tests!

ii. Algebra 1 and English Language Arts 10 (ELA10) – At the September 24 State Board of Education (SBOE) meeting, MSDE asked the SBOE for a one year waiver, exempting the students slated to graduate in 2020 (so our current day Seniors) from having to complete bridge projects for Algebra 1 and ELA 10 if they have met all other course requirements but haven’t successfully passed the PARCC after two attempts. I think the concerns/crises I outlined above were likely felt in lots of parts of the state. Stay tuned.

iii. AND FURTHER – when PARCC went into effect, the SBOE gave the local districts 4 years wherein a score of “3” (approaching expectations) or higher was considered a “pass.” For students entering 9th grade for the first time for the 2020-2021 school year (so our current 8th graders), those students must now achieve a “4” (met expectations) or “5” (exceeded expectations) to pass the assessment.

1. While this is all under the heading of HS graduation requirements, in MoCo, most of our students actually take Algebra 1 while in middle school. Current 8th graders (those that took the Algebra 1 assessment in spring 2019 as 7th graders) had a lot of students that did not achieve a 4 or higher. So, while these students are considered 2 years ahead in math (and may have done really well in the course), they are not getting the required scores on the assessment. YIKES! It doesn’t matter they took the exam last year – they are tied to a performance standard based on when they will enter high school. More background on this and my request for more information/materials to share with the families is available through my BOE testimony here --

[https://go.boarddocs.com/mabe/mcpsmd/Board.nsf/files/BFUQK96917BA/\\$file/Cy nthia%20Simonson.pdf](https://go.boarddocs.com/mabe/mcpsmd/Board.nsf/files/BFUQK96917BA/$file/Cy nthia%20Simonson.pdf)

2. This particular issue is further complicated because with PARCC going away this year and the State issuing a new assessment tool, MCAP (which has all the rigor of PARCC but is shorter), there are just lots and lots of questions.
3. I'm watching this closely, looking for the state to figure this out quickly... I'll keep you posted on any progress!

- 2) **One Size Never Fits All and Quite Frankly, Rarely Fits Most:** This conversation has probably been one of my most consistent points since I started as the MCCPTA VP of Educational Issues. In fact, I'm sure this is what drew me into this whole "advocacy" gig! But, three years later, we still have a lot of work ahead of us...
- a. **High Schools** – My recurring conversation is still surrounding the "honors for all" discussion. Our MCCPTA Area Vice Presidents (AVPs) had numerous conversations with the Office of School Support and Improvement (OSSI) folks about this trend. I provided testimony before the MCPS BOE in February 2019 and at that meeting, Dr. Smith mentioned the analysis that was underway and committed to reporting back to the board and community. I will continue to press OCIP and OSSI to look at this and help us understand this trend. My testimony and what we were seeing in the HS course bulletins that led to this concern can be accessed here for those interested -- [https://go.boarddocs.com/mabe/mcpsmd/Board.nsf/files/B9RJK84D82A6/\\$file/Cynthia%20Simons on.pdf](https://go.boarddocs.com/mabe/mcpsmd/Board.nsf/files/B9RJK84D82A6/$file/Cynthia%20Simons%20on.pdf)
 - b. **Middle Schools** – Two primary issues here – Math and everything else. Of course, if you go back through my years of VP of Educational Issues reports, you'll see lots of time spent on tech options in our middle schools, access to foreign languages, electives... but, for now, let me stay on just the "mandatory subjects."
 - i. **Math** -- I'm still concerned about the schools that have no options other than "IM for all" and "Algebra 1 for All" regardless of how the student did in the prior year course. How a student performs in Math 6, on PARCC, on MAP M– should inform whether the student is better suited to go into Math 7 or move to an accelerated course "IM" that compresses 2 years of math content into a single year. Likewise, if a student struggled in 7th grade with IM, are we setting that child up for success advancing directly into the HS course? Algebra 1 IS a high school course. GAH!! So, why are we allowing schools to decide everyone in a middle school is ready? How is that possible? What are the effects a couple of years later when kids that struggled through Algebra in middle school now find themselves in Algebra 2? How's that working out? If it were good, I'm sure we'd be talking about it! I expect us to continue this conversation especially leading up to next year's course selections.
 - ii. **Everything else** -- My second middle school focus is seen in "one size programming" that occurs in English, Science, and Social Studies. As of this year, all middle schools have additional programming (similar to what is offered at the magnets) for the cohort that meets the magnet admission requirements but due to space/cohort within the local school, will have their needs met at the home school. We are watching this closely as last year, we had some middle schools that made those expansion courses the "one size" offering for all students.
 - c. **Elementary Schools** – Interestingly, we hear much more positive reporting on differentiation at the elementary schools, in part because of the natural opportunities with using specialists and natural grouping exercises. However, we know there are still areas where we need improvement. The newly purchased curriculum does have opportunities – how those are being used, it is probably too early to really tell! MCPS is planning to have community meetings on the curriculum so we'll know more in the coming months!
- 3) **Data Sets:** If you've followed me on my VP of Educational Issues journey, you know that I tout the usefulness of a lot of the reports available through the MCPS Office of Shared Accountability (OSA).

<https://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/departments/sharedaccountability/> I love this site and can get lost for hours reading posted reports, looking at various “glances” and using many of these tools to inform advocacy positions. I use these often to identify what questions would be prudent to ask to better understand what these reports are telling the gentle reader. Now, I’m very concerned! Many of the useful resources are being discontinued and instead, MCPS will make the information available through the “dashboard” – this is not printable (so you can only see it on your screen), many pieces use infographics instead of numbers (so keeps things much more generalized), it’s not downloadable (so you can’t keep and reference against prior year/future year), not sortable/comparable (you can’t look at school against school unless you have multiple monitors or a large enough monitor to do a split screen – and even at that, you probably couldn’t see more than 2-3 at a time). This is the link to the calendar of reports we expect from OSA this year – all these places where it states “OSA website” and/or “Dashboard” are areas of concern. <https://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/uploadedFiles/departments/sharedaccountability/Reports%20Released%20for%20Web.pdf> Further, I am increasingly concerned we have a site posted called “MCPS Open Data” that is EXACTLY what we want (if you define Open Data as many of us talk about it in our “other than MCPS” circles) <https://data.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/> -- but this is not sortable data sets that allow the gentle reader access to data that fosters meaningful analysis.

- 4) **Centrally-Designed Programs --- The Obvious and Not-So-Obvious Oversight Challenges** – Over the last number of months, I’ve participated in numerous meetings with other MCCPTA Board members, weighing in on elists, providing testimony at BOE meetings, addressing issues with MCPS senior leadership – about the challenge of MCPS promoting certain opportunities but then leaving the implementation of those opportunities to the discretion of the on-site administration. We have many centrally-designed programs (Highly Gifted Magnets, Career Technology Education (CTE), IB, Special Education, English Language Learners), but how those centrally-designed programs are managed/implemented is often left to the principal’s discretion. In some cases, parents feel they are being “sold” on one program by central office and then when their child is in the program, the actual offerings might differ because the principal wasn’t aware of the expectations or perhaps what Central Office outlined isn’t actually the direction the principal wanted to go with that program.

It came to my attention this summer, Central Office does not have a hand in how those centrally-designed programs are staffed – that decision is left to the principal. Central Office does not have a hand in how coordinators/supervisors/administrators for these programs are selected – that decision is also left to the principal. As a result, the principal (giving the benefit of the doubt, let’s assume with no ill-intent) can hire staff that may, or may not, have the background/experience for the students to get the opportunities promoted during the application/decision process. The principals (again, perhaps without ill-intent) can reshape these programs such that programs that are supposed to be “the same” and offered on both sides of the county bear little resemblance to one another. I’m concerned that as we near the dates when current 8th graders are deciding where they want to consider for next year. We are doing a lot of expansions – opening Seneca Valley to offer many of the same programs already at Edison, opening 3 new regional IB magnets, expanding/promoting other opportunities throughout the county and there are still a number of unanswered questions about how MCPS is going to oversee these programs to ensure there is parity. My concern is MCPS continues to take the position -- “we’re building the plane while flying it.” I hope this year we will collectively urge MCPS to have clear, transparent plans for all of these programs and Central Office will be very clear with the expectations of our principals that have responsibility for housing the centrally-designed programs.

- 5) **PSAT Prep, SAT Prep, and Other Prep Stuff that Some HS Do and Others Don’t:** This month, I feel like I’ve focused a lot on high school. Sorry about that – but that seems to be where the most of my conversations have centered in recent weeks. If “one size” programming started my advocacy journey, I’m sure what has fueled my journey is seeing the obvious differences when you have students at two MCPS high schools concurrently. In the coming days, MCPS will be administering the PSAT to all 10th graders, free of charge. What opportunities are available for 9th graders and what is getting communicated to 11th graders about

the PSAT are really at the discretion of the local administration. Why do some high schools mandate every 9th grader uses that same time period to participate in a “practice” PSAT and/or encourages 9th graders to take the actual PSAT while other high schools barely mention the PSAT opportunity to 9th graders? Why do some high schools heavily promote/encourage 11th graders to take the PSAT and pay the fee as an opportunity for scholarships and/or good prep for the SAT and others give it nary a mention?

I committed to write up something on these tests and available prep and what is happening across the county in this month’s report so, here goes! On a HS elist a few weeks ago, a parent asked “should my 9th grader take the PSAT?” After doing this three times (my fourth child is still in middle school), each with varying abilities, backgrounds, and temperaments I can firmly say without hesitation -- “it depends.” When people ask me what I would do, I tell them if the 9th grader is 2 years ahead in math (so is already in Algebra 2 in 9th grade), the PSAT (either practice or real) can be very useful in identifying any gaps in their middle school math experience. The printout from the PSAT correlates to specific Kahn Academy lessons and your child might learn “I should read these paragraphs more carefully” or “huh, I must have missed that day we covered factoring in Algebra 1!” This is the kind of detail parents never see with PARCC or MAP testing. I also ask parents, does your child need to just “practice” taking tests? I think test taking is a skill – pacing yourself and staying focused. Reading and answering the questions being asked (not the ones you think they are asking). Some kids are naturally good at it, others aren’t. Those skills are incredibly valuable. Obviously, if the child hasn’t completed Geometry, there is going to be a lot of new material in the math section so you just have to balance those expectations.

In my oldest daughter’s HS, everyone took the PSAT or the PSAT practice in 9th grade. Hard Stop. I thought that was MCPS practice. My second daughter (different HS), 9th graders were not allowed to take the PSAT that year – they had a mandatory Naviance lesson that day. Parents raised this as a concern at our quadrennial BOE meeting asking why our students were denied this option and by the time my third daughter was in 9th grade, paying the PSAT fee was offered as a choice for 9th graders. A few years ago, to help advocate for allowing our 9th graders the option, I had a chart that detailed what each school was doing with PSAT – it isn’t updated, opportunities are different now as principalships have changed. Do I think every HS should be the same? No. But, I think it is important to acknowledge we have some schools that spent a decent amount of time/energy on “test prep strategies” and practicing for these kinds of test while other schools may not spend any time on that kind of skill building.

Related, we have some schools that heavily promote 11th graders taking the PSAT – recognizing that is where the National Merit scholarship funds are distributed and there are colleges that use the 11th graders scores to seek out specific students. There are certainly students that report getting scholarship opportunities from that experience. There are also students that report the 11th grade PSAT was a great primer for taking the SAT in the following months as they saw exactly what they missed and could use Kahn Academy to revisit concepts. Some schools bring in outside testing firms to run practice SAT/ACT testing over weekends or on half days; other schools don’t expend effort that way.

Bottom line – the PSAT for every 10th grader is a system-wide opportunity. Access to the SAT-Day for every 11th grader (or voucher to take the ACT or other test) is a system-wide opportunity. Access to Kahn Academy to self-prepare for these tests is a system-wide opportunity. But, many of the other preparatory options that are available are really at the discretion of the principal. If the principal places high value on the preparation, then the principal may use discretionary funds to support certain programming (and/or will make requests for support from PTAs, foundations, or other entities). If there is something you don’t think is happening at your high school that you believe is available elsewhere in the county, the place to start the conversation is with the principal. And, if you need help understanding what to ask for, holler.