

Welcome to the new MCEF Newsletter, designed to keep you up-to-date with our activities and our progress. Last school year was an exciting year for us. We kicked off another successful series of well-attended Equity and Excellence Best Practice and Policy Breakfasts last fall, with such notable speakers as differentiated instruction expert Carol Ann Tomlinson from the University of Virginia and equity and excellence education leader Gene Chasin from Accelerated Schools Plus and the University of Connecticut. We concluded the year with a three-forum series of “Student Voices” where policymakers and other county leaders could hear directly from students about their experiences with (de)-tracking, testing, and teaching that works. **(For full synopses of last year’s breakfasts, please scroll down.)**

We have seen our relentless work fighting tracking —by creating opportunities for dialogue, leveraging our relationships at MCPS and serving on standing committees -- payoff as gifted and talented policy is moving closer and closer toward equity. We have sowed the seeds of a statewide coalition on assessment reform which is advocating a strong alternative to the Maryland HSA so that no child is unfairly denied a diploma AND every child is guaranteed engaging and challenging instruction. The biggest news is that MCEF has received two grants, one from the NEA Foundation and another from the Mid-Atlantic Equity Center. We’re on our way!

Best Practice and Policy Forums: We’re looking forward to a new series of Best Practice and Policy Forums, more commonly known as our “Breakfasts.” In order to allow more people to attend, we will move these meetings to the evening and serve pizza, generously provided – as is the meeting space -- by our partners at MCEA. The first Policy, Practice and Pizza Forum will be on October 20th, where we will discuss what still needs to be done in elementary school in order to make MCPS’ Middle School Reform effort successful; Board of Education member, Judy Docca, Impact in the Schools parents, and elementary school teacher, and Community Superintendent, Ursula Hermann will be our guest panelists. We hope our “pizzas” will be as informative and influential as our “breakfasts” of the past two years.

Grassroots Meetings: Our Best Practice and Policy “Breakfasts” have generated a lot of interest and opened up opportunities to influence policy to increase equity in Montgomery County Public Schools. These forums were designed to create discussion among senior county leaders, and the effort has succeeded. But we know we also need to be able to hear the views of more

students, parents and teachers and we want to share what we know with them. We also want to move this meeting around the county, into neighborhoods, to hear from people where they experience MCPS. So we are going to start a series of meetings in local schools or community centers, in co-sponsorship with local PTAs and local community groups. Our first meeting, in November, will be at Piney Branch Elementary School in Silver Spring in collaboration with Impact in the Schools, the parent organizing arm of Impact Silver Spring.

Replace the HSA Initiative: As many of you know, this school year is when passing the Maryland High School Assessment exams becomes a requirement for graduation. Recently MCPS estimated that as many as 800 students – disproportionately students of color -- are in danger of not graduating, solely because of this new requirement. To say this is unfair is an understatement. We are working with a team of people from around the State of Maryland to modify the use of the HSA and create an additional focus on Performance-based Assessments; we are being assisted by Monty Neill of the National Center for Fair and Open Testing (FairTest), a national organization fighting the overuse of standardized tests. The Montgomery County Education Association is a key partner with us, in addition to the MD NAACP and the MD Multicultural Youth Centers - LAYC.. The goal is to change state policy on this crucial issue with a three point program: using the HSA as an end of course exam counting 20% of the course grade; adding state approved “authentic” assessments that really measure what students learn; and making school systems accountable for preparing students .

MCPS’ Accelerated and Enriched Instruction Advisory Committee (AEIAC): MCPS’ Accelerated and Enriched Instruction Advisory Committee (AEIAC): We have been attending the monthly meetings of the AEIAC since early 2006. A major charge of this committee is to prepare a revised version of Policy IOA (on Gifted and Talented Education) for approval by the Board of Education (BoE). As the name of the committee suggests, much of our work has been to review and comment on policies in accelerated and enriched instruction. The committee has focused on a continuum of services enabling students to progress from the 'on-grade' curriculum to more challenging courses, with as few barriers and as much support as is possible. In addition, committee members have been wrestling with concerns about inconsistencies in delivery of enriched instruction across the school system, as well as how to make the system more accountable to its various stakeholders. The expectation is that the committee will send the proposed revised policy to the 'new' BoE sometime after it is elected in

November. It is the hope of MCEF members of the committee that - once the BoE has evaluated, modified, and adopted a revised Policy IOA - the result will be a deletion of the “gifted” label and an emphasis on high quality instruction for ALL children, including the opportunity for parents to “track” the services their children are receiving, without the children themselves being “tracked”. Once the new policy is in place, the committee is expected to focus on preparing a draft of the regulatory document (IOA-RA) by which the school system maps out 'how' the vision of Policy IOA is to be achieved.

Strategic Planning: One of the most important initiatives we are working on is a strategic planning process supported by a grant from the NEA Foundation. We are conducting stakeholder consultations to learn about how MCEF is perceived in the community, to learn about the equity issues most important to our constituents, to find out what we are doing well and what we can do better. Our stakeholders are community, education and legislative leaders, as well as parents, teachers and students. We are also conducting an environmental scan to understand how the political and economic climate will affect MCEF in the next few years. We are planning to consolidate this information and use it to fuel our draft strategic plan in two retreats with our Board in November and December. Our goal is to submit a final plan to the NEA Foundation on February 1, 2009.

Web-Site upgrade: Our web-site is being upgraded and should be available for viewing in early October. We will begin to use the web-site as a way to communicate our activities and accomplishments. You will find synopses of our Best Practice and Policy and Grassroots Meetings, links to Equity in Education Coalition (EEC) member organizations and other MCEF partners and like-minded groups and maybe even a blog! Eventually, we'll have a password-protected area where we will do most of our communicating with each other. For now, the web site will introduce MCEF to potential new members and funders, as well as keep you informed. We'll send a notice out when the upgrade is available for you to see.

New office: In November, MCEF will have a new office space in the new MCEA building in Rockville on Taft Road near Gude Drive and Norbeck Road. Long time members and followers know we have never had a formal office, so this is a very exciting milestone in the history of MCEF. We'll celebrate with an open house so you can all see it and enjoy it with us.

Equity in Education Coalition Best Practice and Policy Breakfasts, 2007-2008 School Year

Last year, we had a very successful series of Best Practice and Policy Breakfasts, held at MCEA's conference center on Gude Drive in Rockville on various equity issues in education. Below is a list of each of the meetings, with the topic, featured speakers, a short recap, and direct action as a result of this meeting. Take a look at how much great information was shared and the action the discussions started:

Date: October 2007

Topic: The HSAs: What Should be Done?

Featured Speakers: ►Rosa Garcia, Maryland State Board of Education Member
►Ana Sol Gutierrez, Maryland State Delegate

Recap: The discussion centered on the unfairness of the HSA graduation requirement to a large number of minority students in Montgomery County and the state as a whole.

Action: A movement was started to bring together a statewide coalition of organizations to stop the HSA graduation requirement from going into effect for the class of 2009. A sub-group of this coalition is also working on an alternative assessment process, modeled in part on portfolio assessment programs similar to what is being done in Nebraska.

Date: November 2007

Topic: Differentiated Instruction

Featured Speakers: ►Dr. Carol Ann Tomlinson, Professor, Curry School of Education, University of Virginia;
►Dr. Helen Chaset, Principal, Burning Tree Elementary School

Recap: Professor Tomlinson defined differentiated instruction, how it ensures equity in the classroom and described how it has been implemented successfully in many school systems. She also conducted a ½ day workshop for interested principals and staff on differentiated instruction. Dr. Chaset discussed the success of differentiated instruction while teaching all students at a GT level at Burning Tree Elementary School over the last three years.

Date: December 2007

Topic: Equity-Related Best Practice: What's Working? National and Local Insights

Featured Speakers: ►Gene Chasin, Director, National Center for Accelerated Schools Plus, Neag School of Education, University of Connecticut;
► Joseph Sacco, Principal, Lakelands Park Middle School

Recap: Dr. Chasin described the philosophy and success of the Accelerated Schools program in lifting minority student achievement in schools across the country. Mr. Sacco talked about successful programs at his school in lifting minority student achievement, including the Hidden Gems program, which selects students not identified as GT and placing them in GT classes.

Action: Mr. Sacco is working with his staff, students and parents on a Model Middle School initiative for the coming school year, based on the principles of the Accelerated Schools model, and is working with MCEF and MCPS central office on securing founding for the initiative.

Date: February 2008

Topic: Reflections from a De-tracked High School Class: A Discussion About High Quality Education and High Expectations for All

Featured Speakers: ►Vicky Adamson, English Resource Teacher, Montgomery Blair High School;
►Students from Ms. Adamson's American Studies Class (English 12)

Recap: The meeting began with a film of students talking about their experiences with tracking, the negative perceptions of on grade level students, the assumptions of grade level students that they couldn't compete at a higher level and the desire of all students to see this situation changed.

After the film, the presentation and discussion by Ms. Adamson and her students centered on the experiences of students in an honors class that admitted students who normally take honors course and those had previously only taken regular on-grade level courses. The honors students learned that their counterparts in grade level classes were also intelligent and were able to contribute positively to class discussion. The on grade level students gained confidence in their abilities as they demonstrated that they could contribute a unique and relevant perspective to class work and discussions. For some students, misperceptions and myths were dispelled, and a greater respect for all students by all students was accomplished.

Action: Teachers and administrators in the audience discussed opportunities to do the same at their schools. Principals who saw the film wanted it shown to all principals at the next MCAASP meeting.

Date: March 2008

Topic: “High Stakes Testing: Students’ Perspectives”; A Discussion About the Impact of HSAs on Instruction and Learning

Featured Speakers: ► Judith Browne-Dianis, Co-Director, The Advancement Project;
► Students from the NAACP Youth Leadership Council

Recap: The discussion centered on the incongruence of the pressure of high-stakes tests and their inability to properly measure what many students know about a topic or allow students to demonstrate what they know. There was a lot of discussion about the passion and enthusiasm students brought to specific projects that excited them – and how they learned much more from those few experiences.

Date: April 2008

Topic: *“Teaching Strategies that Work”: What Helps and Hinders Successful Learning for African American Male Students?*

Featured Speakers: ► Brenda Eisenhauer, Assistant Principal, Quince Orchard High School
► Students from Montgomery Blair and Quince Orchard High Schools

Recap: Dr. Eisenhauer shared highlights from the findings of her dissertation studying the in-school experiences of African-American males. She studied A & B students and C & D students and found that each group was treated very differently by teachers and administrators. Dr. Eisenhauer began by asking members of the audience to share their top three things that helped them succeed in school, and three things that hindered them. The answers were almost identical to what the students found.

Date: May 2008

Topic: “Setting Priorities: What Are the Conditions Necessary to Create Equity and Excellence”

Featured Speakers: ► George Vlasits, Resource Teacher, Montgomery Blair High School
► Ben Moskowitz, Montgomery County Board of Education Member

Recap: Mr. Vlasits discussed his recent article published in the Montgomery County Gazette where he detailed the frustration teachers feel as they are bombarded with new initiatives to improve student performance, increased emphasis on the scores of high-stakes test and their increasing use as tools for measuring school and teacher performance (such as

AYP), the increased incentive to teach students what they need to learn to pass the test without regard to whether the students are learning what they need to become productive citizens after high school. Mr. Moskowitz talked about the challenges of implementing policies meant to help improve the performance of all students, support teachers and administrators and make all of this work effectively in a school system as large as MCPS.

We're excited about our newsletter and want it to be helpful to you. We'd love to get your feedback on the newsletter and we also welcome questions about any of the activities presented here, and we truly welcome your participation with these activities.

Just let us know at brian@mcef.org

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