

Office of the Superintendent of Schools
MONTGOMERY COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS
Rockville, Maryland

March 23, 2009

MEMORANDUM

To: Members of the Board of Education
From: Jerry D. Weast, Superintendent of Schools
Subject: Eastern Middle School Schedule Decision



This memorandum is to update you on the current situation surrounding the change of schedule at Eastern Middle School from an eight period modified block schedule to a seven period schedule, which is the most common schedule used in our secondary schools.

Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) does not require all schools to follow the same schedule format. Individual schools must meet the state requirements for instructional offerings, but there is flexibility for local decisions to be made about additional class offerings, organization of time, electives, homeroom/advisory periods, and other features of the school schedule. These decisions are made in collaboration with stakeholder groups at the school. The Montgomery County Education Association (MCEA) contract has provisions allowing teachers to ask for a review of any school's schedule.

Last year, at the request of MCEA, all schools with a 6/8 schedule, an eight-period schedule for students, with teachers assigned to teach six classes, engaged in a planned review process. The appropriate language in the MCEA agreement was followed as the basis for this process:

"A request to study alternative schedules can be initiated by the school leadership team, a supermajority (58%) of all MCEA unit members in the school, or through a major MCPS initiative. Decisions to change the structure of the school day may only be made after a formal process is undertaken to determine best appropriate instructional practices by a multi-stakeholder group, including parents and students, under the direction of the School Leadership Team. The faculty representatives to this workgroup will be selected by a vote of MCEA unit members conducted by the Elected Faculty Representative. This process is to take place over the period of a calendar year. A majority of the multi-stakeholder group must reach agreement on any recommended change. If the process results in changes to the structure of the school day, a majority of the school leadership team must also reach agreement in order for the recommended changes to be sent to the Office of School Performance (OSP) for approval. Disputes over OSP decisions on such proposals will be referred to the Joint Senior Staff/Association Leaders Collaboration Committee for resolution."

At the end of this process last year, the only school that changed to a traditional seven-period day was Sligo Middle School.

This year, MCEA polled members at all of the 6/8 schools again to see if there was support to engage in a schedule review process. As a result of this survey, a super-majority (more than 58 percent) of the unit members at Eastern Middle School and Forest Oak Middle School indicated an interest in studying their schools' schedules again this year.

Leaders of the three MCPS' employee unions worked with Mr. Larry A. Bowers, chief operating officer, and Dr. Frieda K. Lacey, deputy superintendent of schools, to specify the process that Eastern and Forest Oak middle schools should follow.

Under the leadership of Mrs. Charlotte W. Boucher, principal, Eastern Middle School, a multi-stakeholder committee that included parents was established. This committee made its recommendation to the Instructional Council at Eastern Middle School and, ultimately, the principal forwarded the recommendation to reestablish a seven-period schedule to Dr. Heath E. Morrison, community superintendent. It is important to note, during the first decade of the Humanities Program at Eastern Middle School, there were only seven periods each day and the program was delivered with a high level of excellence and received national recognition. The upcounty Humanities Program at Roberto Clemente Middle School successfully operates with a seven-period schedule.

During this review process, the principal collaborated with the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) president and sent a letter home to parents. Articles were published in the school newsletter, and the topic was discussed at PTA meetings. It should be noted that Forest Oak Middle School came to a similar decision to return to a seven-period day.

After the decision was made, a meeting was scheduled with parents to inform the Eastern Middle School community. Mrs. Boucher, Dr. Morrison, and Mr. Marty Creel, director, Department of Enriched and Innovative Programs, discussed the schedule and parent concerns. The principal planned a follow-up meeting with parents two weeks later to consider options available within a seven-period schedule.

A number of parents, especially those with students in the Humanities and Communication Magnet Program, have expressed concerns over the process used at Eastern Middle School and the decision to return to a seven-period schedule. Several parents have discussed with Mrs. Boucher the absence of students as members of the stakeholder group. The three employee association presidents, Mr. Bowers, and Dr. Lacey agreed with the decision not to include students on this committee. Middle school students are not always included as members of decision-making committees. All other primary stakeholders were involved in the schedule change process.

The main concern voiced by parents is that the Humanities Program students will no longer be able to take both orchestra (or band) and a foreign language. Eastern Middle School staff is committed to serving the needs of all students. Dr. Morrison and Mrs. Boucher have been working on the concept of a “flex schedule.” A period would be included after school, which would allow students in the magnet not to have to choose between music and foreign language offerings. A decision is forthcoming about this option and parents will be informed next week.

Another concern expressed by parents is the need to “block” English and social studies classes together to truly implement the Humanities Program. Mrs. Boucher and her staff are examining options to allow the Humanities team to develop a block schedule for English and social studies during a seven-period schedule, as in the past.

Recently, concerns have been expressed that students have not been allowed to voice their views about the schedule change. School administrators were concerned that posters and flyers posted throughout the school had not been preapproved. After discussing the situation with a group of students, Mrs. Boucher provided an area in the school cafeteria to allow students to express their concerns and opposition to the proposed schedule change.

A number of parents are now requesting that MCPS provide additional staffing to Eastern Middle School to allow for a 5/8 schedule, similar to the Middle School Magnet Consortium schools. I would caution against this course of action, especially in our current budget environment. The 5/8 schedule is significantly more costly. I am confident that the “flex schedule” option will address the concerns of parents and provide options for students at Eastern Middle School. Staff members at the school and at central services are working together to ensure that this will continue to be the case.

If you have any further questions, please contact Mr. Stephen L. Bedford, chief school performance officer, Office of School Performance, at 301-517-8258.

JDW:lgp

Copy to:

Executive Staff

Mrs. Boucher