

MCCPTA Calendar Committee Report September 18, 2008

The MCCPTA Calendar Committee (Jane de Winter, Kristin Tribble, Suzanne Weiss) met with the following MCPS staff:

Robin Confino—Executive Assistant to Chief Operating Officer Larry Bowers
Rosie Ramirez—Assistant to Associate Superintendent Jody Leleck
Donna Hollingshead—Executive Director to the Deputy Superintendent Frieda Lacey
Andrew Miller—Assistant to the Associate Superintendent of the Office of Organizational Development
Karen Crawford—Coordinator of Student Affairs

on Monday, September 15, 2008, and gave input on the draft 2009-2010 calendar based on feedback received from MCCPTA members via the Bulletin List Serv. Although representatives from other parent groups had been invited to attend, none were present.

The MCPS calendar faces many constraints including state laws, the need to equalize length of quarters and semesters, and the technical capacity of the transportation department and computer servers. Some of the issues that these constraints present are:

- Students must attend school at least 180 days each year; there are additional requirements for the number of hours of attendance which play a role in the length of the school day.
- Half days of school do count toward the 180 day total as long as the requirement for total hours of attendance is met; as a consequence combining two half days into one full day off lengthens the school year by one day.
- Maryland State Law (COMAR) designates Easter Monday and Good Friday as public school holidays.
- By contract teachers receive ½ day at the mid-quarter point of first and third quarters to prepare interim reports.
- By contract teachers receive one professional day at the end of each quarter to prepare grades plus at least one additional day before grades are required to be entered electronically.
- By contract teachers have one day of the Maryland State Teachers Association annual conference off. (This year October 17th).
- School cannot be held on general election day due to parking, security, and space issues. In addition, teachers want to be free to work the polls.
- Due to server capacity and other demands on the central computing system, the time frame for running and printing report cards must always span a weekend and then include time for review of printed report cards by local school staff before distribution.
- The department of transportation requires at least one full work day between the MS and HS orientations and the start of school to make bus route corrections

therefore these orientations for 6th and 9th grade students and new secondary students may not take place the day before school starts.

- Aside from religious holidays dictated by COMAR, the decision whether or to not hold school on a religious holiday is driven by the extent to which student and/or staff absences will disrupt the instructional day for the entire student body.
- The Maryland State Department of Education does not finalize testing windows (for HSA, MSA, and make-ups) until summer which prevents the release definitive school calendars more than one year in advance. MSDE may also make late changes to the testing schedule which may cause changes in the current year calendar.

Other issues which drive the school calendar from the MCPS perspective are the desire to have as many instructional days as possible before the administration of the MSA and HSA exams in the spring; the desire to not have the school year end on a Friday which would require the professional day to be on the following Monday; the desire that first semester be scheduled to be one or two days shorter than second semester since snow days are more likely to fall during second semester; desire to have the timing of interims err on the side of preparing them before mid-quarter rather than after the mid-quarter point if mid-quarter is not possible; and that the schedule of holidays and professional days not encourage excessive teacher and student absences.

MCPS presented a draft calendar based on the draft calendar released by the Board of Education in December, 2007, which can be found at:

<http://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/boe/meetings/agenda/2007-08/2007-1113/4.0%20School%20Calendar.pdf>

The calendar committee made comments on this draft calendar based on the following feedback received from MCCPTA members:

- By an overwhelming margin parents preferred a Tuesday start day to a Monday start day. A significant number of parents continue to prefer to start school after Labor Day. Many parents questioned why MS and HS orientations were held on Friday rather than Monday. These orientations have been held two days before the start of school for at least 15 years to allow time for bus route changes. Some parents informed us that despite the shift to a Tuesday start, their Elementary Schools continued to hold the open house the week before on Thursday or Friday and asked that schools be required to hold the open house on Monday if school is to begin on Tuesday.
- Most parents like the change to a half day before Thanksgiving although some felt it should continue to be a full day of school and some felt there should be a full day off. Many parents commented that while the half day is nice, this is not their highest priority.
- Most parents want professional days to be linked to weekends and even four day weekends although several brought up the problem of students missing weekly specials or special education services when days off consistently fall on Mondays or Fridays.

- Several parents asked that Columbus Day and/or Veteran's Day be professional days.
- Several parents questioned why we had October 17th off and not Columbus Day.
- Most people prefer that half days be the day before a weekend or non-school day although many commented that the Monday half day before the full day off for the general election seemed poorly planned.
- Many people commented that they would prefer two half days be combined into one full day off so the year could be shorter.
- Monday half day is better than a mid-week half day.
- Half days are hard for working parents, many end up taking a full day off of work.
- Ending the school year early in the week (eg Tuesday) is hard for working parents who then have to find 3 days of child care.
- Several people called for a shorter school year.
- Several people commented on the idea of shortening the school year if there are unused snow days. The general opinion was that this would make planning extremely difficult for both schools (final exams, ES graduations, end of year activities and field trips) and parents (having to scramble at the last minute to find childcare after camp schedules were set).
- Several parents mentioned they like having the day off after Halloween.
- Several parents asked for a longer winter break.
- A couple of parents mentioned the difficulty of their students missing school for Eid Al Fitr and wanted schools to have a better understanding of the Muslim calendar.
- Several parents mentioned their desire to have no changes in the calendar after it was released and many supported the idea that the calendar be planned out more years in advance.
- A parent suggested having MCPS release the calendar in Google or Outlook format so it could be easily downloaded to electronic calendars.

Based on the comments that MCCPTA received and the discussion regarding the draft calendar, MCPS made some tentative changes. These changes will now go to the MCPS Executive Leadership Team (which includes representatives of the three unions) and then to the Board of Education. The BOE is scheduled to approve the 2009-2010 calendar on November 11, 2008.

The items discussed at the calendar meeting included:

- A tentative change in the start date to Tuesday, September 1, 2009. However, it was noted that this would push the end of school to a Thursday and a Thursday end is not particularly liked by teachers due to deadlines for submitting grades.
- The tentatively scheduled early release day for Monday, October 5, 2009 might be changed to Friday, October 2, 2009.
- They will continue to hold teacher conferences on Veteran's Day so that parents who have Veteran's Day off can attend a conference w/o having to take off from work.

- MCPS will have an early release day on the Wednesday before Thanksgiving but will evaluate to determine if this will continue in 2010-2011. Because the calendar is slated to go to the BOE for approval before Thanksgiving, MCPS will not have data to inform them whether this half day led to excessive absences. Based on data comparing student and teacher absences in November, 2008, to earlier years, they will make a determination for 2010 on.
- There is a half day tentatively scheduled for Tuesday, March 2, 2009. We believe that parents would prefer this half day fall on Friday, February 26, 2009. However, MCPS felt that moving another item to a Friday would then cause students to miss specials which we had also told them was undesirable. WE SEEK INPUT ON WHICH DAY PARENTS PREFER.
- Spring Break was tentatively scheduled to coincide with the beginning of Passover and Easter. We suggested that a professional day scheduled for the Thursday before break (with school on Friday) be delayed until the Tuesday after break (extending the break for students by one day.)
- We urged MCPS to think of a way to make sure that all students are getting services and specials on equal number of days rather than leaving it up to individual principals to reshuffle schedules.
- MCPS sends a letter to each school every year with religious holidays noted (eg Ramadan, Lunar New Year). We suggested that this letter be more widely released so that parents and students have easy access it and can refer to it if they need to when requesting accommodations for student absences due to religious holidays which fall on school days.
- MCPS thought that the suggestion to release the calendar in an Outlook file or something similar was doable and would be appreciated by their staff as well.

It was strongly emphasized that the calendar is still tentative and must pass through the Executive Leadership Team for their comments.

Other comments: Karen Crawford, representing students, informed us that students have similar concerns to parents. In 2010-2011 Easter and Passover are separated by one month. If break coincides with Easter, it will be at the end of April.