

MCCPTA Curriculum Committee Report

Please provide feedback

to committee co-chairs Ted Willard and Sharon Schulman at twillard@aaas.org and sharon29@comcast.net

The **MCCPTA Curriculum Committee** has three functions:

1. To initiate discussion of **curriculum issues** in the schools, bring these to the MCCPTA Delegates Assembly to consider possible action, and advocate to MCPS on curriculum issues that have been agreed on by the MCCPTA delegates.
2. To represent MCCPTA and all parents at four yearly **MCPS Curriculum Advisory Committee (CAC)** meetings. Twelve CAC subcommittees, each for a different subject area, meet simultaneously, as mandated by School Board policy, to review and provide feedback on curriculum as it is developed or revised.
3. To represent MCCPTA and all parents at four yearly **MCPS Curriculum Advisory Assemblies (CAA)**, as mandated by School Board policy that explain and provide feedback on curriculum issues that are not limited to a single subject area.

The following is a **report** on the **third** of the four **CAA** meetings. Please **send this report** out on your **school listservs**. Parents who read this should send their **questions and comments** to the MCCPTA Curriculum Committee co-chairs, Ted Willard and Sharon Schulman, at twillard@aaas.org and sharon29@comcast.net.

REPORTS TO MCCPTA CURRICULUM COMMITTEE ON MCPS CURRICULUM ADVISORY ASSEMBLY (CAA) MEETING - FEBRUARY 20, 2008

The meeting focused on two items, **grammar instruction** and **feedback to students on writing**. This was in response to the discussion of writing at the last CAA meeting where these issues were raised. Sophie Kowzun, MCPS Elementary Reading/Language Arts Supervisor, and Jim Fliakas, MCPS Secondary English/Language Arts Supervisor, presented information and responded to questions. They will provide written responses to additional, written questions and feedback comments at the next CAA meeting.

The main goal for **teaching grammar** is to ensure that students become better writers. Teachers focus on the writing process, sentence fluency, and writing conventions. Each time these are taught, the students learn them in a developmentally appropriate way for their age. Research shows that grammar is learned best when it is connected to “authentic writing.” Many parents have trouble accepting this research. The curriculum aims to teach grammar within the context of writing so that students see how the grammar applies to their own work. Teachers should use every stage of the writing process (pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing) as an opportunity to teach grammar. Instruction includes lessons and mini-lessons to explain how common writing mistakes can be improved, teacher discussions while students are working on their writing assignments, and peer discussions that point out errors for the writer to fix. Teachers use checklists and rubrics so that students see what elements are required in their writing and will be assessed, especially in middle and high school. A teacher may teach a grammar point to the whole class or to a small group or to an individual student. At the elementary level, for example, a teacher may teach about how to combine two

sentences with simple subjects into one with a compound subject. Then before the students turn in their work, he might ask them to look over their papers and see if there is any place they could take two simple subject sentences and combine them. Because the students are asked to set goals, these can be used to help focus improvement. The main point of writing at the kindergarten and grade 1 level is to make the kids feel good about their work and their ability to write; therefore, correction is minimal. They are not looking for mastery; rather they want the children to feel like writers, whether they are drawing pictures, adding words to pictures, or writing paragraphs. Gentle correction is appropriate at higher grades. Assessments include writing assignments, practice in revision (changing, deleting, or adding ideas), using checklists and rubrics, conferring/feedback, and formative assessments at the secondary level (given at least quarterly). To help students while they write in school and at home, MCPS has reference books in the classroom and for purchase. Teachers are supposed to use MCPS instruction guides and some specific published resources, however many students and parents present were unfamiliar with the resources that are supposed to be available at every school. Many people asked that teachers be adequately trained to ensure that students learn more grammar each year. Training is part of implementing the curriculum, but each school has its own methods of doing so.

Feedback on writing is provided using group discussions, individual conferences, rubrics, peer review, and written teacher comments. Each teacher should be supporting and encouraging each student's writing so that they continue to want to write better. They are teaching, listening, suggesting, and reinforcing the best elements of writing. Rubrics focus on 6 traits -- ideas and development, organization, sentence fluency, word choice, voice, and conventions. The curriculum is designed around developmental appropriateness. In Kindergarten, for instance, writing consists of an introduction to putting ideas on paper, which could be just a picture with 2 words – not for mastery or correction. There is a difference in elementary and secondary feedback approaches. Student/teacher conferences are more common at the elementary level because it is so difficult to get time with so many kids at the secondary level. Sometimes a quick minute during a classroom writing assignment is effective. Lots of corrections, no matter what the ink color, don't do much to improve writing skills. Teachers try to give short, focused written feedback, which are much more useful to the writer. Written feedback needs to be timely and is most useful during the writing process, rather than at the end. This is one of the biggest workloads for teachers, especially at the secondary level. We asked whether staggered due dates would be a possibility to spread out the workload. When peers work together to review writing, they do so based on classroom expectations previously discussed by the whole class. Teachers should pair students of like ability in this, and even consider helping top students themselves. Student portfolios can be used to look back and get guidance for future writing. Parents may see these folders, but they frequently take a long time returning or disappear when students take them out of the classroom. Participants were concerned with inconsistency in implementation and grading. MCPS uses "range finding." Teachers from around the county come together and look at samples of student writing and discuss how to grade the work to help them learn what the expectations should be for each grade level. BCRs are intended to test reading comprehension, not writing ability. It was also pointed out that good grammar and writing skills are also useful for oral, which need to be emphasized.