

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 **fourth** 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 - APRIL 30, 2008

The agenda for this meeting was math, but it did not really discuss math at all. It consisted of a discussion of a **forum on math curriculum** that was held on November 7, 2007. The participants in that meeting were teachers, mostly represented by MCEA (the teachers' union) staff, and MCPS central office staff. It was initiated because of concerns expressed by individual high school math teachers. A draft document was produced based on that forum and CAA participants were asked to review it and comment on the list of "next steps" recommendations in it. We were told that parent and other stakeholders input from other meetings (such as our MCCPTA Curriculum Committee meeting at which we had a program on math on January 14, 2008) was taken into account in producing this document. The forum focused on three themes: acceleration, pacing/time, and structure of the curriculum. A fourth theme of professional development was embedded in the other three. The document consisted of a four-column chart, divided into the three themes. The columns listed challenges, successful strategies, suggested solutions, and next steps. Nearly all of the next steps in the fourth column were communication items, essentially telling all stakeholders what the math curriculum status quo is with a little staff development thrown in. None would solve the real problems listed under challenges. There were no suggested changes to the status quo of any kind listed and nothing in the report was surprising.

The Challenges section spoke of unspecified "targets" for which MCPS is aiming, which presumably include the goal that 80% of students successfully complete Algebra by the end of grade 8 (a year earlier than state guidelines mandate). This goal presumes that average and below average students can achieve at a same pace previously expected

of advanced students and that any extra effort required would be manageable. No data currently exists on the amount of extra help students need outside of class to succeed in accelerated algebra and other classes, but anecdotally this is considerable. If a majority of students require extra help, the target should be reevaluated. If what used to be considered standard is essentially considered remedial, this will have a chilling effect on many students. Students who perceive math as a struggle will not choose math and related fields of study when they reach higher educational levels, which would negate the benefits of math acceleration.

In the Pacing/Timing section of the document, the two main ideas were to slow down as needed to give teachers more time to teach the material, especially providing re-teaching time, by differentiating instruction within classes. This becomes necessary when all students are enrolled in the same course, but are not all at the same actual skill and comprehension levels. Teachers must walk a fine line between challenging some students and not overwhelming others. Some teachers do this more effectively than others and the difficulty increases with larger class sizes and more advanced curricula. There are no real choices for high school students who may do better in on-level courses, but could move faster or have some analysis added to the curriculum without reaching the level of honors and AP courses.

At the end of the meeting, participants were given sheets with answers to questions on writing and grammar instruction that were asked at the last CAA meeting. A copy of that Q&A list appears below.

Questions from Curriculum Advisory Assembly Meeting of February 20, 2008

Question 1	Is purpose of grammar only “good writing?” What about speaking? There is a lack of oral presentation opportunities in curriculum in middle school.
Response	We agree that grammar certainly applies to speaking. There are speaking opportunities throughout the secondary (including middle school) English guides, including structured discussions for literature circles and Shared Inquiry, oral presentations, and performances. We agree that greater attention to instruction on speaking and presentation is needed. It will be addressed in future revisions and ongoing professional development.
Question 2	What methods does the Montgomery County Public Schools have to assess grammar systemwide in middle school and high school? Are there countywide exams in English and is grammar part of those exams?
Response	Grammar is assessed during writing instruction and on the final drafts of writing common tasks throughout middle and high school. Additionally, grammar is assessed on all formative and end of unit assessments in middle school and on semester exams in high school.
Question 3	Formal grammar instruction seems to be standard in many Foreign Language classes. What explains the difference in approach?
Response	The process of learning language differs from learning a second language, particularly after puberty. Native speakers have been exposed to the structure of their language since birth. The purpose for teaching grammar in foreign language classes is to help students learn unfamiliar grammatical

	structures in the target language. Grammar instruction for native speakers therefore differs from grammar instruction for nonnative speakers.
Question 4	How often and for how much time per lesson is grammar taught per week?
Response	Grammar lessons attend to the indicators designated for that grade level. Depending on the needs of students, time allotted for grammar instruction varies. The expectation is that grammar is an ongoing part of writing instruction.
Question 5	What training do elementary school teachers have to make sure special education students in inclusion classrooms are getting appropriate writing/grammar instruction?
Response	Elementary teachers receive suggestions for differentiation in the instructional guides and collaborate with the special education teacher to differentiate instruction for selected students.
Question 6	Is handwriting still taught in elementary school? Proper pencil position? Drills? Cursive? It is graded—but not taught.
Response	Handwriting is taught. Continuous stroke manuscript is introduced in kindergarten. Students transition to cursive writing in Grade 3. Extra support is provided when students demonstrate a need for reinforcement. Feedback should be provided to help students improve letter formations, spacing, and legibility.
Question 7	Do you (MCPS) teach the concept of “artistic license” and not using conventions on purpose?
Response	Students are taught that standard conventions should be followed for formal writing, and that deviating from conventions can sometimes be an effective technique when used purposefully and appropriately.
Question 8	How often is curriculum revised?
Response	Curriculum is reviewed every five years. Curriculum is revised or supplemented based on changes in state requirements, research, and data.
Question 9	How are reference materials used? How many copies are available in each classroom?
Response	Reference materials can be used for direct instruction, during conferences, or during small group reinforcement. Students should consult reference material when a question arises during the editing or revision stage. The number of copies per classroom is a local school decision. Schools are allocated funds for this purpose.
Question 10	We saw resource guides. Are there student textbooks for grammar? We are told that drill isn’t good, but are any grammar exercises used? If so, to what extent and at what level? If not, why?
Response	Grammar exercises may be used as follow-up to direct instruction in the elementary grades. Grammar exercises are used to support specific writing goals throughout secondary instruction. A grammar textbook is not used. Style manuals such as <i>Writer’s Inc.</i> are available in elementary and secondary classrooms.
Question 11	The research base reporting that students learn grammar better in context makes sense in the sense that many students need a purpose to learn new skills. However, given that many good writers swear by <i>Warriner’s</i> and

	formal grammar instruction as being very helpful in their education, isn't there a place for them somewhere in the curriculum?
Response	Current research supports the approach that MCPS is taking with grammar instruction. Formal grammar instruction is expected in support of the goals of writing instruction, and teachers are encouraged to use recommended grammar resources.
Question 12	Within Quarter 1 of 4 th grade, students are expected to write a fable, which relies heavily on the ability to correctly punctuate dialogue. Where does developmental appropriateness fall within curricular expectations?
Response	Punctuating dialogue is a third grade indicator under mechanics. Understanding how dialogue contributes to a story is a second grade reading indicator. One of the most effective ways to teach dialogue is through the use of developmentally appropriate drama and plays.
Question 13	Why writing lessons for kindergarten? What kind of/how much writing is done? Is it corrected? What is a "convention?" What is the process for "justifying mechanics?" Could you add "your"/"you're" to your list?
Response	The purpose for teaching writing in kindergarten is so students understand that what they say can be written down and that writing is a means of communication. Teachers provide feedback to students. A convention is an accepted practice in a spoken or written language. Mechanics contribute to the overall accuracy of a piece. Teachers address problem word pairs such as your and you're across all grades.
Question 14	How are students held accountable for applying lessons? When you say these are great books to use—are they available for the school to purchase?
Response	Grammar is assessed during writing instruction and on the final drafts of writing common tasks throughout middle and high school. Additionally, grammar is assessed on all formative and end of unit assessments in middle school and on semester exams in high school. Grammar resources are available in schools and additional materials are available for school purchase. Schools are allocated funds for this purpose.
Question 15	Is there any guidance in respect to developmental appropriateness when deciding the curriculum?
Response	The content of the curriculum is determined by the Maryland State Department of Education. In addition, MCPS consults national standards documents, recommendations of professional organizations such as the National Council of Teachers of English, and current research. The lessons in the guides model developmentally appropriate content and instruction.
Question 16	Is MCPS moving toward adopting College Board Standards rather than Voluntary MSDE indicators?
Response	MCPS consults College Board documents, including resources related to Advanced Placement and the SAT. However, MCPS does not have a partnership with the College Board and has not adopted the College Board standards.
Question 17	What are the plans for augmenting/improving resources available within the instructional guides? Many of the lessons, including the example provided, are very basic and do not provide more complex examples.

Response	MCPS reviews curriculum documents every five years and revises resources periodically to keep abreast of current educational practice and to address the needs of our students. Teachers are encouraged to develop lessons that address target indicators and employ effective instructional strategies.
Question 18	Re: “commonly confused words” e.g., who, whom. How is the different usage taught? I find a lack of the “why” behind it: subjective or nominative case vs. objective/subject case
Response	Usage is taught throughout middle and high school with as much attention as possible to the “why” of how language works. Usage is taught within the context of clarity and function in the sentence.
Question 19	Grammar K–12: Is there any intent on focusing grammar instruction not only on writing, but also on speaking eloquently?
Response	Vocabulary instruction has been a recent focus for reading instruction in elementary school. Word choice is one dimension to speaking eloquently. The importance of all adults modeling eloquent oral language is a responsibility that we acknowledge.
Question 20	Are you aware that many middle school teachers spend 10 minutes teaching the grammar right before the formative assessment?
Response	This is not the recommended practice.
Question 21	My experience of peer review is that they (students) don’t really correct things, just minor things. Problem of peer conferences for students who are not well-liked; for students who are “really good” – no real need to correct
Response	Peer review has to be structured, taught, modeled, and monitored for it to be effective.
Question 22	Could Jim provide these writing feedback tips to all teachers?
Response	Yes. We continue to work with our middle and high school English resource teachers to provide this type of guidance in their departments and will continue to seek other ways to offer useful professional development to all teachers.
Question 23	How does peer feedback work when there is a drastic difference in the skills of the two students? It seems to me that one student’s comments would be too harsh and the other not sufficiently critical.
Response	Peer review and feedback is a skill that has to be modeled and taught. Teachers are encouraged to pair students appropriately so that all students have the opportunity to learn from the experience.
Question 24	I have trouble imagining elementary students identifying a skill to work on. Are they given a list of suggested skills?
Response	Skills that have been taught can become a focus. When the teachers confer with students, they can jointly determine what the student might work on next to improve the quality of writing.
Question 25	How do we redefine the focus of peer feedback?
Response	It is generally determined by the skill or technique that has been taught.
Question 26	On State assessments you can not see what you do wrong on the multiple choice?
Response	True.
Question 27	Could teachers assign a variety of due dates for writing assignments so that

	feedback could be more timely?
Response	Yes. This practice is used by some teachers for exactly this purpose.
Question 28	Realistically, how many assignments can a teacher grade in a year? How many students do they typically have? How much time should they spend grading papers?
Response	Answers vary to this cluster of questions. Elementary school teachers typically have one class of 25–30 students. Middle and high school teachers typically have five classes of 25–30 students. Some papers take only a minute or two to grade; longer papers may require 15–20 minutes to read and grade, sometimes even longer. Teachers spend many, many hours grading papers.
Question 29	With the elimination of BCRs on MSA does that impact the format in which students are taught to construct a paragraph?
Response	BCRs have not been eliminated on the MSA, but their elimination is proposed on the HSA. We encourage teachers to avoid formulaic approaches to writing and to emphasize clarity through organization and the other components of the 6 Traits of Good Writing.
Question 30	I do not see how rubrics are feedback – they are what you base the assignment on them. If teachers do not write right on the paper then how do they tell what they did wrong?
Response	Rubrics are designed to identify specific skills and expectations. When students are taught what these skills and expectations are, the rubric score can offer immediate feedback about each student’s performance on these specific skills. Other types of feedback are also helpful to students, especially when provided early in the writing process.
Question 31	Has MCPS looked into computer tutorials for grammar so that students who have been identified as having a particular issue can receive instruction on these skills?
Response	Yes, we have looked at several computer tutorials for grammar. There are some promising products, and we continue to look into alternative ways of providing effective instruction.
Question 32	An English teacher once commented to me what as a teacher he enjoys teaching literature, but he knows what students are most likely to use from his class is their skills in writing. Do MCPS teachers across the county share this view and does it affect their approach?
Response	The curriculum is designed to balance instruction and to help students develop reading, writing, and critical thinking skills. We continue to emphasize with teachers the importance of writing instruction. Writing is an essential component in literacy development.
Question 33	Are teachers aware that on MSAs the BCRs on L.A. are graded differently from BCRs in Math and Science?
Response	Yes.
Question 34	But the focus of writing seems to be mostly about content not grammar points; what gives students the idea of grammar as a goal?
Response	Communicating in writing is the goal; grammar is a means of doing this clearly. Errors in usage should not interfere with meaning.

Question 35	Papers, at least in high school, seem to be kept (recollected) by teachers after they are graded. This prevents students (and particularly parents!) from using old papers and the comments on them for guidance in future writing. Why can't students keep papers?
Response	Teachers are encouraged to help students maintain a portfolio of their work. Students are permitted to take their writing portfolios home whenever they want.
Question 36	Writing process does not occur in my AP Language class. All we do is write essays and very rarely get feedback.
Response	This is not the recommended practice.
Question 37	Teachers often write "extend response" on students' paragraphs (BCRs). Could MCPS teach teachers to make more explicit feedback to guide students?
Response	Yes. We continue to work with our middle and high school English resource teachers to provide this type of guidance in their departments and will continue to seek other ways to offer useful professional development to all teachers.
Question 38	Why do students purchase books instead of the school? I know it's not policy but it happens.
Response	Schools are allocated funds to purchase recommended references and instructional resources. Local schools decide how to use the funds.
Question 39	How does follow-up really work—not just in theory—in terms of holding students to the material taught, even in non-English classes?
Response	In all content areas, teachers use formative and summative assessments provided with curriculum to hold students accountable for material taught.
Question 40	Is anyone looking at fewer assignments but more edits?
Response	Throughout MCPS we continue to seek balance in curriculum, instruction, assessment, and feedback to students.
Question 41	Do most elementary schools incorporate lessons from Lucy Caulkin's writing program? What feedback do you have on it?
Response	Many schools do. The instructional guide in reading language arts also includes model lessons that incorporate her strategies. No formal feedback is available. Informal feedback is positive.
Question 42	Do teachers in elementary school have sufficient time to teach writing on a daily basis?
Response	The reading language arts instructional block allows a minimum of 30 minutes per day for writing instruction. Additional time for writing in math, science, and social studies is possible.
Question 43	What are the implications for special education and ESOL students?
Response	Instructional guides provide scaffolding and differentiation strategies. Classroom teachers are expected to collaborate with ESOL and special education teachers.
Question 44	Are there any additional resources to help teachers with providing feedback, e.g. instructional assistants?
Response	In the current budget climate, additional human resources are unlikely.
Question 45	The writing is taught in reference to different pieces of literature. Is it

	possible to limit the number of pieces of literature, so teachers can be sure to teach the writing in more depth?
Response	Literary analysis is a content standard that must be addressed each marking period. Similarly, common tasks that involve reading and responding to text are required. The number and length of literary texts are flexible. Teachers may make choices based on student needs and skills.