



Montgomery County Public Schools

200 JUNKIN STREET CHRISTIANSBURG, VIRGINIA 24073

November 18, 2009

TO: School Board Members
FROM: Walt L. Shannon, Interim Superintendent
SUBJECT: EMH Testing Investigation

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Background:

The investigation into the reported testing irregularities at Eastern Montgomery High School has been completed. The following is a summary of the findings and conclusions from this investigation. The Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) report alleged that students at EMHS, who were potentially at risk of failing SOL tests, were removed from courses that required SOL test participation. In September of 2009, VDOE released a report stating that there were 39 instances, involving 24 students, wherein courses were dropped outside of the normal add/drop period as stated in the policy of Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS). The MCPS policy that is in question reads:

Section 6-6.2 – the procedure for dropping/changing a course in a four- by- four Block schedule which states: *If a student drops a course after five days of membership in the course, the grade shall be recorded as a "WF" (computed as an "F" for G.P.A.) for the term in which the course is dropped. Levels in a subject may be changed up to three days after the issuance of the first progress report (three weeks of the term). Exceptions to this provision may be granted by the principal in case of extenuating circumstances.*

It is clear that the 24 students and 39 incidents in question were made late in the semester and that 11 of the 24 were students with Individual Education Plans (IEP). The changes for IEP

students were made by the IEP committee. It seems reasonable to question the rationale for all the schedule changes and whether the MCPS policy 6-6.2 was violated.

During the interviews with teachers it was explored why students were moved into part-one-courses. What became abundantly clear was that all the teachers could speak, very specifically, about the needs and challenges of each child. When asked if the move was in the best interest of the student the responses were overwhelmingly, “Yes.” When asked if there were extenuating circumstances that made this move in the best interest of the student the answers were overwhelmingly, “Yes.” When asked why this information was not provided during the VDOE investigation, the teachers responded that (at the time) they were not aware which students were specifically in question. It became clear that during the meetings among the Principal and the teachers, the discussions centered around the total child, not solely the SOL’s. These meetings were a continuation of the “closing the achievement gap process” that was used by the school. It is open to interpretation whether the timing of these particular meetings and the schedule changes were appropriate and within the confines of policy.

The question concerning the five days for requesting to drop a course per policy 6-6.2 was also asked of the three secondary school principals interviewed. Without question, the principals believed that the five days was specifically for the students and parents, and that extenuating circumstances were at the sole discretion of the principal. Since this was not clearly defined in the policy, the principals did not document their specific reasons, and believed it was within their responsibility to make the schedule changes when necessary.

Additionally, there is the issue of grades for those classes that were dropped. Rather than receiving a “WF” most students received a “W.” This was essentially done in order that the students would not be penalized. However, most teachers carried the grades forward to the new

class where the students were, indeed, penalized. When asked why they did not allow the student a fresh start, teachers responded that they had not given it prior consideration. Again, the teachers and staff seemed to believe that the administration had the authority to use extenuating circumstances in assigning students the status of “W” rather than “WF.”

The next significant question is how the 24 students might have affected the SOL pass rates of the school. In reviewing the data, and assuming that all 24 students would have failed the SOL tests, the pass rate would have only gone down by 1 percentage point in each area. Since the school was well within the passing requirements, changing these student schedules was not significant in determining the pass rate for accreditation. Looking at the school’s AYP progress, the 24 students in question neither added to or subtracted from the number of sub groups that were counted, making this a non issue

Conclusion:

Based on the investigation it is difficult to conclude that the reason for the schedule changes was, in fact, to affect the outcome of the school’s SOL testing results. The number of changes does not significantly affect the outcome of the school’s SOL testing results, nor do they make sense if the intent was to affect the AYP of the school.

Superintendent's Recommendations:

That no personnel disciplinary actions be taken in regards to the reported testing irregularities at Eastern Montgomery High School.

That School Board policy 6-6.2 be revised or regulatory guidance be provided to principals that includes language that incorporates requirements of VDOE for SOL testing and clarifies what constitutes extenuating circumstances for changing class schedules.

That a report be provided at the end of each grading period for Middle and High Schools that lists the names and changes that were made to student schedules during the prior grading period. That this report be reviewed by the superintendent or designee to insure compliance with policy and guidelines.

That course offerings and catalogs be reviewed to insure there is a full description, that course codes align with VDOE codes, and that there is a progression. When there is a lower level course that should have a follow-on course, a progression will be described that leads to credit for the diploma or completion of the SOL testing.

That additional training be conducted with guidance staff and the school administration on policy 6-6.2, impact on SOL testing, and the requirement to insure that the credits required for diplomas are communicated to students and parents.