

Opinion: MCPS needs to build stronger foundation before expanding regional programs

Moving ahead will only deepen inequities among schools

By [Evelyn Chung](#)

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With much fanfare, Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) is rolling out a plan to divide our school system into six regions, replacing countywide magnets with regional programs. On paper, the plan has merits, namely reducing transportation time and expanding access to special programs. However, in its current form, the proposal diverts funding from long overdue updates to science and English core courses, critical for the success of all students. And without a stronger implementation plan, MCPS will eliminate access to countywide programs for many students while deepening inequities among schools.

The Board of Education and County Council should be asking the following questions:

First, what is the standard of review and who will be responsible for ensuring quality? MCPS is reducing access to the countywide International Baccalaureate (IB) and criteria-based science, math and computer science magnet programs, without first establishing standards, curricula and metrics for success for the new, replacement regional programs. Nor is MCPS likely to create them before the programs begin – they have not even delivered [the middle school Humanities magnet frameworks](#) promised to the Board of Education in January 2023. Even with standards, MCPS lacks the staff or will to ensure they are followed. The Office of School Support and Improvement, which oversees principals, has historically failed to regulate instructional quality. Right now MCPS has one central IB coordinator with no enforcement power, and virtually nobody overseeing magnet programs (the Office of Accelerated and Enriched Instruction has been understaffed and undermined for years).

Second, how is MCPS evaluating existing programs and how will it evaluate the new ones? [MCPS's own data shows that the existing regional IB programs have had widely varying outcomes, but has not examined why.](#) Do the coordinators or teachers need more training – or replacement? Even when MCPS plans [Office of Shared Accountability program reviews, they often are released late or cancelled, such as the analysis evaluation of the criteria for magnet programs and math courses due in 2024.](#) The district will be deciding on criteria for new regional magnets without examining the impacts of the drastic changes

made to the selection process in the last eight years on curriculum, instruction, or student outcomes. MCPS should not move forward without evaluating existing programs and establishing metrics, timelines, and protocols for future reviews.

Third, how will MCPS pay for this proposal? In addition to new bus routes, a proper implementation plan should include the cost of convening program staff across regions, creating program standards, and—most importantly—providing high-quality curricula and ongoing professional development.

Finally, why is MCPS focusing on programs instead of our core courses? Simply saying local schools will be strong does not make it so. MCPS still hasn't purchased or planned to purchase high-quality secondary science or high school English curricula or invested in science teacher training, despite three years of Montgomery County Council of PTAs advocacy. [A recent MCCPTA review found that many high school English classes are not assigning enough grade level work, much less advanced Honors work.](#) In many classrooms – including “Honors” English in our most affluent schools – students aren't reading grade-level, full-length texts. About half [of our high schoolers are not passing state science assessments; about 40 percent are not passing the state literacy test.](#) MCPS should not chase shiny new programs while neglecting the foundation.

In short: If there's money for new programs, there is money for the basics. The Board of Education and the County Council should make clear now that they will not approve a budget for the regional program expansion before MCPS has funded high-quality secondary science and English curricula and training, including Honors courses, and also established standards, curricula, professional development and oversight for existing regional and countywide programs.

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