



COMMISSION ON CHILDREN AND YOUTH

March 14, 2014

The Honorable Isiah Leggett  
Montgomery County Executive

The Honorable Philip Kauffman  
President, Montgomery County  
Board of Education

The Honorable Craig Rice  
President, Montgomery County Council

Dr. Joshua Starr  
Superintendent, Montgomery  
County Public Schools

Uma Ahluwalia  
Director, Montgomery County  
Department of Health and Human  
Services

Dear Mr. Leggett, Mr. Rice, Ms. Ahluwalia, Mr. Kauffman and Dr. Starr,

The Commission hosted its annual Youth Having a Voice Roundtable on December 4, 2013, at the National Center for Children and Families in Bethesda. Approximately 15 teens representing Crittenton Services of Greater Washington, Greentree Adolescent Program, YMCA Youth & Family Services and various high schools throughout the County, joined us for a lively discussion. This year, the conversation focused on two key topics associated with Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS): food offered during the school day and the 10<sup>th</sup> grade health curriculum.

We first tackled the subject of school food and sought students' opinions on quality and appeal. The Commission is aware of the magnitude of the process of feeding MCPS students. Several Commission members had the opportunity to tour the Division of Food and Nutrition Services last fall and were impressed by its scale and efficiency. But, with increasing publicity on the quality of foods offered by schools nationally, coupled with the increasing numbers of students relying on school food for their daily nutrition, we thought it important to hear directly from the consumers.

Consistent themes emerged from the lively discussions on these topics. Overall, students are disappointed by the quality and appeal of the food offered during their school day. An overwhelming theme was that the food did not seem fresh or "real", although the youth did acknowledge their craving for "junk" food, as well. Specific student comments included:

**Department of Health and Human Services**

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- I am lactose intolerant, so on days when breakfast is a cream cheese-stuffed bagel and milk. I'm left with few options. I can find more options at lunch.
- I'm an athlete and the portions are too small to satisfy me.
- There aren't enough vegetarian options.
- My breakfast sandwiches are often wet.
- I'd like a heavier breakfast with more fresh fruit.

Another concern that surfaced is meal-skipping. Many high school students are busy with clubs and other activities during their lunch periods and seek alternatives to cafeteria offerings. Other students have no lunch period because they opted to schedule a class instead. In some cases, students forego lunch altogether given the long cafeteria lines. Therefore, the **Commission recommends having healthy, reasonably-priced food options available to students throughout the day, via vending machines or kiosks, so that youth are not forced to go hungry or eat more junk food.** The new federal regulation that precludes vending machines that do not offer healthy options from being turned on until 30 minutes after school ends makes it more important than ever that vending machines with healthy options be available for students who remain after school for sports and other extra-curricular activities.

Additionally, the Commission was struck by the inconsistency of offerings throughout the school system. Overall, it appears that a few MCPS facilities offer a salad bar but others do not. Some offer other unique options, like a burrito/taco bar. There appears to be no consistency and many schools have none of these extra offerings. **The Commission recommends an increase in parity of food offerings among schools. We recommend that MCPS develop a plan to ensure that each school facility expand its healthy options, including through fresh salad bars, and make these offerings available to students who receive free and reduced meals.**

Council President Craig Rice and Council Vice President George Leventhal, in a recent letter to Superintendent Starr, raised many valuable points that would improve the health and nutrition of students. We look forward to working with all parties, particularly the County Council, to develop the funding mechanisms to implement these recommendations.

Following the dialogue on food, the discussion shifted to perceptions of the 10<sup>th</sup> grade health curriculum. The Roundtable participants had an overwhelmingly positive attitude toward health-related concepts and the overall importance of a solid foundation in them. Because the curriculum includes sensitive topics, such as sex, sexually transmitted diseases, the use of contraception, and mental health the Commission was grateful that the youth participants were so willing to share their opinions on the subject.

Of greatest note, the youth felt invested in their health and, if anything, wanted more engagement on these real-world topics in the school curriculum. Specifically, youth comments included:

- Condoms aren't taken seriously enough. People feel like they're in love and will be together forever so protection isn't necessary.
- I wish we could learn more about love and emotions and how they fit with the physical acts.
- I want to know more about addiction and how to handle it. There is a big issue with depression. Mentally we are not good. We might not look it but we go home and are just sad.
- I was so inexperienced in tenth grade that many of the topics confused me. Things have made more sense as I've gotten older.

The participating youth also offered the following suggestions for what would help engage them even more in the health curriculum.

- Guest speakers would be a great way to hear personal stories we might relate to, especially when it comes to drugs and alcohol.
- I had lots of unanswered questions and didn't know what to do about it. Maybe we could write our questions on a note card for the teacher to read anonymously?
- Anything that will make it more comfortable to open up during class.
- When teachers don't appear comfortable discussing the curriculum, students won't either—the ability of the teacher to relate to students and openly discuss the issues made all the difference.
- One-on-one time with the teacher might help.
- Some agreed that they were likely to go against what their teachers said, just because the information came from that source of authority.
- We need concrete ways to handle peer pressure.

This is also where we heard the topic that arises during every year's Roundtable: the yearning of students to develop meaningful connections with the faculty and staff around them. In previous roundtables, this subject has surfaced in the context of guidance counselors. And, while youth again agreed that their counselors were not sufficiently accessible for personal issues, this year, the lack of meaningful connections was discussed more broadly. While all participants agreed that there was at least one adult in the school building that they could trust, most felt that their teachers "don't bother getting to know" them as individuals. Interestingly, though, the list of trusted adults at school extended beyond the common categories to include Student Resource Officers and building services staff. As varying family dynamics make conversations, particularly about sexual health, tricky in some households, the youth reiterated their need to have trusted sources for information. The alternative is that students take to asking friends or conducting online research to fill in their knowledge gaps.

The Commission applauds out-of-school programs like Crittenton Services' Sneakers and Pearls that offer support for youth on these issues. Yet, safe places where youth can find accurate information are still needed by many. **The Commission also recommends additional training for all faculty and staff to encourage their openness to students in need of guidance on a sensitive health issue.**

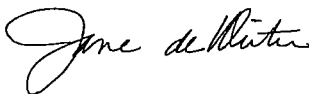
Participants also expressed an interest in a more holistic version of “health,” to include other life skills. The participating youth asked for more practical classes, such as driving, cooking, and budgeting, which they recognize as being critical to future success. As one participant said, “school acts like English and math are your life; but they aren’t.”

The Commission is heartened that MCPS is already addressing many of these concerns by revamping their curriculum. We have had the opportunity to meet with the curriculum team, and appreciate their attendance at the roundtable. The Commission is proud to have been able to help inform the development of the new health curriculum.

As you can see consistent themes emerged from the Roundtable, the dialogue was lively, and the students learned from one another. We hope that you consider our findings and lessons learned and use them to shape policies and practices that will support the youth in our community.

Do not hesitate to contact us if you want additional information or clarification about the goals of the Commission and/or the findings of our Roundtable. Our members look forward to continuing to partner with you on issues related to children, youth and families.

Sincerely,



Jane de Winter  
Chair

cc: Cara Alberghini, Share Our Strength  
JoAnn Barnes, Acting Chief, Children, Youth & Family Services, HHS  
Marla Caplon, Division of Food and Nutrition Services, MCPS  
Cara Grant, Health and Physical Education, MCPS  
Jeffrey Mehr, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, MCPS  
Brett Meyers, Nourish Now  
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