

[Email from Family Council Chair on Fri Dec 15]

Dr. Haas and Dr. Hayes –

Thank you for your support of our November meeting on middle school concerns ([Minutes](#)). Family Council members are following up to request a **Middle School Program Evaluation** to examine to what extent ACPS is succeeding in its goal of helping all early adolescents thrive and to determine whether changes should be made.

Many important middle school program changes, documented in [Appendix A](#), were enacted during, just before, and immediately following the pandemic, including:

- Grading
- Homework
- Unleveling English Language Arts
- Every-Other-Day Schedule
- Recess

We are concerned about the process of rolling out these middle school program changes:

- For families, changes were not well-communicated. In fact, we cannot find documentation nor explanations for all of these changes even today.
- For educators, this was a large number of changes to roll out in a short period of time. While some professional development was provided, this was a lot of change quickly.
- Everyone was consumed by the pandemic, which exacerbated the feeling that these decisions were made without a strong engagement process. See [Bellwether Report](#).

Family Council members are concerned that some of our middle school children are really struggling. We agree with the need to increase equitable access to rigorous courses & improve achievement as well as engagement. We note that (see [Appendix B](#)):

- Student Engagement – Over 50% of kids report feeling “bored” or less-engaged than prior school years.
- School Climate – Almost every Panorama measure at every MS declined over prior year.
- Academic Outcomes – Students enter MS with math and reading deficits, which continue and often widen during MS years.
- Mental Health – The pandemic crisis continues to negatively impact early adolescents.

We recommend that ACPS conduct a Middle School [Program Evaluation](#) by an ACPS staff member like Jamie Gellner or by an external team if internal capacity is limited, to include:

- Identification of key outcome metrics aligned to each change implemented.

- Analysis of student data, both academic and early adolescent development aligned with “[Portrait of a Thriving Youth](#)” report by UVA.
- To deepen understanding where data is unclear, we suggest youth discussion groups with middle school students themselves, including youth who are “not-thriving” by a variety of definitions including academic and otherwise.
- Teacher in-depth interviews followed by a survey, a broadening of the Bellwether proposed action for spring 2024 which focuses only on Algebra I. Are the conditions in place for educators to be successful at implementing these changes? Which are causes of frustration for teachers and how might implementation be supported?
- Family engagement, including “reboot” of communication on key policies and practices such as grading/homework. What is the rationale for the division-level practices? Where is key information available? (See [letter on MS Program Guide](#).)

As families, we do not know the right mix of changes that should be enacted to improve our middle schools. What we’d like to see is consideration given to the realities that exist and a commitment made to a cycle of continuous improvement.

Thank you for your attention to these important concerns. As Chair, Heidi will be following up on this request for a Middle School Program Evaluation. We also plan follow-up with principals on the question of recess, as suggested by Dr. Haas.

Sincerely,
ACPS Family Council

Heidi Gilman Bennett, Chair
Kathleen Bunch-Meneses, Officer
Dana Griffin, Officer
Laura Handler, Officer
Ali Miller, Officer

Including representatives from each middle school in ACPS.

[Response from Dr. Haas on Jan 2; note that he cc'ed school board members Kate Acuff and Judy Le, plus Jamie Gellner who would lead a program evaluation.]

Good Morning, Heidi,

Thank you for sharing your perspective and advocacy. With limited staff (school and central) time and resources and multiple new mandates from the VDOE as well as prioritized strategic actions from the Bellwether report as integrated into our strategic plan, we will take your thoughts under consideration.

Thanks, again,



Matthew S. Haas, Ed.D.
Superintendent