

The Downcounty Consortium Is Coming!

by

Mark R. Adelman, KHCA Education Committee

Any KHCA members who are concerned about public education in our area have probably heard about the Downcounty Consortium (DCC). But just in case you haven't, or have not had the time to follow its progress, I thought this brief synopsis might be useful. Let me say at the outset, however, that I am NOT an expert on the DCC and that you can learn a LOT more than I will cover here by consulting the MCPS website page on the DCC at the following URL:

<http://www.mcps.k12.md.us/schools/downcounty/pages/upcoming.htm>.

With that disclaimer, let's jump in. The DCC is a major piece of the process by which MCPS, the Board of Education, and Superintendent Weast are working to improve public education in the Downcounty area - OUR area. The DCC involves five high schools: four that are open now (Einstein, Wheaton, Kennedy, Blair) and one that is expected to (re)open in 2004 (Northwood). And by extension it includes all the elementary and middle schools that feed (or will feed) these five high schools. In addressing general public dissatisfaction with the performance of this segment of the MCPS system, the powers that be have acknowledged a number of special "challenges" in Downcounty Schools; these include "highly diverse learners, largest number of ESOL students, highest concentration of poverty, (and) student mobility and interrupted education". One can identify a number of "issues" that result from these challenges and it is clear to all that many of the problems that most concern the public become strikingly obvious in the high school years. But all also recognize that these challenges must be addressed across the entire range of schools our students attend, beginning with the "early years". To that end, much effort has been expended on the "Pre K to Grade 8" part of the picture. Mentioning just a few items: increased numbers of all-day kindergarten; reduced class sizes (especially in grades K-2); renovation, expansion and/or reopening of schools (such as Newport Mill Middle School to serve the Einstein cluster); more support for teacher development; extended learning opportunities; higher expectations of students; and efforts to better "align the curriculum and assessment".

While opinions vary on how successful these efforts have been, it is clear to all that, in the view of most of the public, it is in the high schools that "the rubber meets the road". And this is where we come to the DCC. The fundamental idea is to improve all the high schools in the Consortium by grouping them together, applying "best practices" identified at one school to all, applying new strategies to all, and conserving resources by reducing duplication of programs where the reduction of such duplication does not penalize students at one school because a desirable program is not offered at that school. Two major elements of the consortium plan are so-called ninth grade, or freshman, "academies" and one or more "signature programs" for grades 10-12. Each high school will group all its entering students (freshman = ninth grade) into a so-called academy. This is, from my point of view, a de facto admission that large schools do not work well and that students, especially those making major transitions such as the one from middle school to high school, will do better if they are parts of a smaller student

body where teachers and administrators get to know each student well and can take the time - as a a group - to discuss the strengths, weaknesses, and special attributes of each student. By grouping all ninth graders into an academy (one at each high school), the system hopes to create (however artificially) a smaller student body so at least some of the benefits of truly smaller schools can be derived by our kids even as they enter the very large schools that our current high schools really are.

As to the "signature programs" (they are referred to generically by many names), you can think of them, ideally, as "magnet" programs: the idea is that each high school will have 3-4 special programs at which they hope to excel, by bringing special resources, specially talented teachers, and specifically-interested students together. [The projected programs at Einstein are to be: International Baccalaureate; Academy of Finance; and Academy of Visual and Performing Arts with Visual Arts Magnet.] That last element is a critical part of the package and a major element of the consortium concept. By reducing the extent to which similar programs are available at ALL the high schools in the cluster, the hope is to conserve resources so each program can be better than would otherwise be possible. But, so that students are not penalized just because their "home school" does not have a specific program that interests the student, all schools in the consortium are to be open to all students whose home school is one of the five. The way it is supposed to work is that each student will indicate a preference for a specific signature program (actually probably at least a first and second choice); and he/she will attend the school that houses that program, even if it is not the student's "home school". Of course there are a lot of details and the devil is always in the details. A student may chose to go to his/her home school, but later on change their mind. The assignment of students to non-home-schools has to be balanced so no one school is overloaded, transportation costs and times are kept under control, etc. It doesn't take a genius to see what problems may arise, and only time and effort will tell if/how well the selection process works. And then there is the special issue of Northwood HS.

Northwood HS (on University Boulevard near Arcola) is an older school that has, for many years been a "holding" school used to house students of a school that was being renovated. Not surprisingly, Northwood (its name changed every few years to match that of the school whose students it was "holding") has not itself been renovated in MANY years. A group of citizens from the schools around Northwood has been working extremely hard with MCPS, addressing issues such as how much money is to be made available to renovate the school, when it is really going to open, how its signature programs will be defined, how its teaching and administrative staffs will be chosen, and what its "base area" will be; i.e. to what students (from what middle schools) will Northwood be the "home school". Once again, it does not take a genius to recognize that these are some tricky questions. If you are interested in getting some feel for the ongoing dialogue, you can check out the Yahoo-sponsored ListServ at the following URL:

http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Downcounty_Consortium_Neighbor_Network
The people involved in defining when and how Northwood will reopen have devoted countless hours to this task and many have been subjected to a variety of questioning/doubting messages - which is of course not surprising. But we all owe them a debt oif

gratitude because, if you think about it, the success/failure of the DCC will depend on the success/failure of each program in each of the Consortium high schools; and, because Northwood is starting "from scratch", it is especially vital that Northwood be "equally good".

So that - in an exceedingly small nutshell - is one person's take on the DCC. For those of you who want to know more, I suggest you check the URLs I've provided. If you find errors in this report (there MUST be many), please let me know so I can fix them in the next KHCA newsletter. And if you have kids in (or soon to enter) an MCPS school in our area, please get involved. The KHCA Education Committee would value your input and any effort you expend will help all of our children, and thus will help all of us.

4/24/03; Copyright Mark R. Adelman