

*Howard County Issues Questionnaire Responses*  
from  
Board of Education Candidate Allen Dyer  
September 14, 2008

**Issue 1. Expanding school year into summer, expanding school day or decreasing days in school**

The Board of Education’s annual review of the public schools calendar should be guided by long-term written goals established after consultation with parents, teachers and administrators. In addition, the Board must always keep in mind that the regular school calendar creates a mandatory schedule for parents and students and failure to see that your children attend school can result in a fine of \$100 per day and imprisonment of 30 days. EDUCATION ARTICLE § 7-301. Creation of a school calendar is a heavy responsibility and the Board should not engage in willy nilly “tweaking.”

**NO YEAR ROUND SCHOOLING:** Based on my 20 years of experience with the Howard County public school community, I believe a substantial majority of the parents are against “year round” schooling and, thus, the Board should formalize that opposition as an official HCPSS School Calendar Policy. In addition to creating a formal policy, the Board should take immediate steps to reverse the ongoing diminishment of the summer break by a day or two every year.

**VOLUNTARY SUMMER SCHOOL:** At the same time, I think the Board should actively investigate bringing back the **VOLUNTARY** summer school term for those students who have need of a continuing academic experience through the summer break as well as for those who want to take courses during the summer that they didn’t have time to take during the regular school year. For example, one of the best decisions I made as a high school student was to take a typing course during the summer of 1962. No other course has been as valuable to me in terms of saved time and constant return in today’s world of computers as my summer school typing class. Our young people deserve that same opportunity to make decisions about how they want to spend their summertime.

**VOLUNTARY EXTENDED DAY:** In addition to protecting summer vacation and bringing back summer school, I propose the Board of Education explore a **VOLUNTARY** extension to the regular school day. A longer school day (with bus transportation home at the end of the extension) would make many more options available to our students and enrich the K-12 experience. For example, a longer school day could provide meaningful access to “extracurricular” activities, vocational classes, day care (for all—not just those who win a lottery), debate club, foreign language instruction in elementary school, swimming classes, etc. At the same time, those children and families

that do not wish to participate in the extension to the regular school time could leave at the end of the regular school day, but, the parents would be responsible for providing transportation home.

The years our children spend in K-12 should always provide plenty of opportunity for experiencing the wonders of the world and, sometimes, you just have to get out of that tiny little classroom.

## **Issue 2. Middle school sports**

For the eight years my children attended River Hill High School, I was active in the boosters club and often the discussions about how to improve the school experience would drift to: “Why don’t we have middle school sports in Howard County?” We never found a good answer because school athletics develops self-confidence, a sense of fair play, and the capacity to think and act under stress. Athletics, whether competitive or purely recreational, is part of being young and alive.

Beyond the immediate health benefit of sports activity is the long term benefit of a habit of sports activity. For example, part of the middle school sports program should focus on fitness for life activities such as handball, squash, golf, tennis and swimming. Sports aren’t just for kids.

We can, and should, do a better job of providing opportunities for all of our middle school students to engage in properly supervised athletics and the cost of participation in sports should not be a barrier to any student in Howard County. As Gen. Douglas MacArthur emphasized: "Upon the fields of friendly strife are sown the seeds, that upon other fields, on other days, will bear the fruits of victory."

## **Issue 3. Vocational Training**

While a quality education is its own reward, our public schools must also prepare our young people to live full lives and make contributions to their communities. In order to live a full life, however, our young must be prepared for work.

Skills training and technical education is critical to anyone that will be working in our highly technological society. “Man is a toolmaker” and our schools need to provide basic training in the use of today’s technology. Currently, Howard County offers a number of excellent career programs at the Applications and Research Laboratory (“ARL”) but too many students are unable to participate in the ARL programs. In addition to ARL programs, I believe technical education needs to return to our high schools so all of our students will have the opportunity to acquire some confidence in their technical abilities.

Too many of our high school students get bored and disengaged because they don't intend to pursue an academic career. Disengaged students are likely to drop out of high school because they see nothing of immediate value to them. Technical education, however, is an effective strategy for increasing student engagement and improving attendance. For too long, many education policy makers have ignored the positives of technical education and, instead, have viewed technical education as lacking academic rigor and leading to low-paying jobs. Our "all kids are college bound" policy needs revision — we need, and our students need, technical education at every Howard County high school.

#### **Issue 4. Half days on the school calendar**

Early release or half days are a serious problem for working parents and an inefficient use of student time. We need to consider how to optimize learning and also consider students who may have no one at home during the day.

The primary justification for half days is "professional-development" but setting full days aside for professional-development would be much more effective. The half-days that are currently in the calendar should be consolidated into full days dedicated to professional development.

#### **Issue 5. Funding for aging schools - Mt. Hebron building, mice infestation in new Reservoir High**

I opposed the decision to "renovate" rather than rebuild Mt. Hebron High School. I believe the decision to renovate rather than rebuild was a forced decision driven by a lack of funds and I would have preferred the decision be delayed until sufficient funding was available to rebuild Mt. Hebron.

Unfortunately, Howard County does not have a sustainable way to fund capital projects and, in particular, aging infrastructure. Indeed, the renovation plans for Mt. Hebron High School do not include the funds necessary to comply with the LEED environmental standards that are, as of July, mandated by state law. We are not planning for the long term.

With respect to Reservoir High School, the mice infestation is unacceptable. Caution, however, must be exercised in any attempt to combat the infestation. Many of the common approaches to pest control are totally inappropriate in our public schools because our schools must be safe for all students — including those that have sensitivities to pesticides and rodent poisons.

## **Issue 6. Transfer tax to support school funding**

The Board of Education does not have statutory authority to levy taxes. Furthermore, before supporting any tax increase, the Board of Education should make the budget more accessible to the public and comb through it to understand exactly why the money we have is not enough. There needs to be more openness with the budget – it should be available online in a detailed yet user-friendly format so the public can see exactly how much money there is and where the money is going and what projects are still waiting for funding.

Assuming the school budget proves to be fiscally responsible but capital funding still falls short, the Board of Education can provide well-researched documentation to the county council and the state delegation establishing the need to have a sustainable way to fund capital projects involving aging schools. The Board can also communicate with other local boards of education to collect information on how other communities have dealt with the issue of aging infrastructure.

Should the county council give serious consideration to use of a transfer tax to fund the renovation or rebuilding of our aging schools, I would support such an approach because I think, whenever possible, a tax should be related to the benefit the government is going to provide with the income from the tax, and, you don't have to be a realtor to know that the price of a house is directly associated with the quality of nearby public schools.

## **Issue 7. Restoring recess**

Kids need time to eat and time to work off energy and if we don't provide an outlet for their pent up energy we make the job of teaching those students doubly difficult. From the simple perspective of economics, if we don't have adequate recess, we are failing to get the full benefit of our staff's professional talents.

But, even more — the National Association for the Education of Children has identified six benefits of recess:

1. Play is an active form of learning that unites mind, body & spirit;
2. Play reduces the tension associated with school;
3. Children can express and work out emotional aspects of the day;
4. Play develops cooperation, helping others, sharing, and problem solving;
5. Children have an opportunity to sharpen their perceptual abilities via smell, touch, taste, and the sense of motion through space;
6. Time spent out of doors improves the child's ability to navigate the real world safely and lays the foundation for the courage to lead his/her own lives.

Finally, when I was in school, recess was—by far—my favorite part of the school day. Why would anyone want to take away the very best part of school??

### **Issue 8. Method of decisions regarding admin and teacher placement**

The proper and efficient allocation of our administrators and teachers can reap student achievement improvements without a major budgetary increase.

Currently, the lowest scoring schools have the newest teachers because, over the years, teachers acquire seniority and tend to migrate away from the schools where they are most needed. We need to get maximum benefit from our professional resources. The Board of Education can help by establishing an incentive system that will give the Superintendent the ability to precisely position our best teachers where they are most needed. To that end, I advocate a program of using financial incentives to motivate the best qualified teachers to transfer to those schools having higher numbers of lower achieving students.

With respect to the transfer and assignment of administrators, however, the Board of Education is not constrained by a collective bargaining agreement. The Board should make clear that the elimination of the student achievement gap takes priority over any assignment to the central office. We need our best professionals on the front line.

Thank you for providing this opportunity to communicate with the citizens of Howard County. Allen Dyer