



ADVOCATING FOR EFFECTIVE ASSESSMENTS IN MCPS

SURVEY ANALYSIS – OCTOBER 2015

HIGH SCHOOL COUNCIL ON TEACHING & LEARNING

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Survey Context

Between September 28 and October 9, 2015, 2,122 high school educators, or **67.28% of MCEA members** coded at high school buildings, responded to the High School Council on Teaching & Learning (CTL) survey on “#askteachers: *Advocating for Effective Assessments in MCPS.*” The number of responses clearly indicates how strongly teachers feel about the importance of authentic, meaningful assessment that accurately reflects student learning. This type of assessment takes time to plan, implement and evaluate.

Survey respondents were asked to identify at which school and in what subject they taught, their opinions on the four assessment options presented by Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS), as well as their opinion on a fifth question: “Based on the pending final exam changes, what other assessment option(s) might you suggest? (*For example, are there options you would combine? What’s missing from the current options presented?*)”

While the results are not an answer to over testing, the results do show that Montgomery County Education Association high school members believe that student are being tested too often in the high school setting; teachers, however, find the final exams to be more closely aligned with curriculum than with the PARCC exams, though they understand that PARCC testing is a state requirement and not in local control.

The survey results should form the basis of a larger conversation around effective assessments, which the High School CTL will continue with constituents and stakeholders.

Overall Themes

- An overwhelming number of teachers strongly opposed the elimination of final exams, primarily due to the cumulative nature of learning and the negative implications for college/career readiness.
- Semester exams are important preparation for IB/AP exams.
- Most teachers advocate to maintain a final assessment category, calculating semester grades numerically and reporting grades as a percentage, or instituting a +/- to show variations within a letter grade to increase precision of grading and reporting.
- A significant number of teachers proposed that if exams must be eliminated, a cumulative semester assessment should be implemented. Many suggested reducing the evaluation category value to 10-15%, although a few desired to raise the category value.
- Eliminating the final exam schedule will hinder the depth of critical thinking that can be evaluated in a constricted time frame.
- If cumulative assessments are created and implemented, there needs to be countywide consistency within content areas and differentiation among content areas, while maintaining high standards.

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MCPS Option 1: Numeric (Percent) Average

*Remove final exam/evaluation category. Each marking period carries equal weight; final grade calculated by averaging marking period percentage grades (MP1 + MP2 / 2)**

Those survey respondents who favored this option tended to do so because percentage-based grades are:

- ❖ Simple to calculate, easy to understand, and accurate.
- ❖ Motivating for students since they will know that the quarters are equally weighted (current trend-based system allows students to “coast” in certain quarters).
- ❖ Educators in the bottom third of high schools impacted by poverty¹, the top third of high schools impacted by poverty and special education teachers favor this option above all others.

In addition, the overwhelming majority of teachers choosing Option 1 also mentioned their strong preference to keep final exams. Concerns were raised about various issues: several respondents questioned the definition of “meaningful portion” in the context of the Option as described, some feel that percentage calculation may shift student and parent focus from the learning to the grade percentage earned, and both the attendance policy and 50% rule were mentioned as mitigating factors.

MCPS Option 2: Quality Point Average

*Remove final exam/evaluation category. Each marking period carries equal weight. Quarter and semester grades reported by letter grade; final grade calculated by averaging quality points (MP 1 + MP 2/ 2)**

This option was not as well received as Options 1 and 4; close to a majority of the respondents did not recommend.

- ❖ Resultant grades would be the least precise method of all the options, with a focus more on grades than learning, while being difficult to explain the earned grades to students and parents.
- ❖ This option does not directly correlate letter grades by the point amount each letter is given. This means the grade distribution may change due to either the inflation of lower grades and/or the decrease of higher grades.

¹ As indicated by FARMS rates.

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MCPS Option 3: Trend

Remove final exam/evaluation category. Two marking period grades, averaged by trend (MP2 carries elevated weight). (Currently used in courses in which there is no final exam, per grading chart attached.)

Overall, Option 3 was the least supported option of the four proposed. Well over the majority of the respondents do not recommend this option. While a small number of teachers feel that trends can be motivational for students, the overwhelming majority disagree. A significant majority of teacher feedback on this option also strongly advocated for keeping final exams.

- ❖ The trend system is inequitable, inaccurate, and vague due to too many variables beyond student and/or teacher control, and too few data points for this system to accurately show students' work and learning.
- ❖ This is an unfair way to assess seniors in second semester.
- ❖ Disproportionate weight given to the second and fourth quarters of the year.

MCPS Option 4: Additional "Final Evaluation" Assessment Category

Keep current final exam category weighted at 25%, replace with teacher-developed "final evaluation" administered in class. Keep current grade averaging per grading chart attached. (Currently used for students exempt from MCPS final exams in AP/IB courses).

Teachers feel final exams prepare students for college and are concerned about the success of students who have never taken exams in a similar format. This option is preferred over Option 2 and Option 3, though many discussed combining this option with Option 1. Teachers want to see numeric averages used rather than letter grades, ensuring a fairer view of grade percentages and student performance. Many teachers still favor keeping the current final exam structure, questioning the rationale of creating a new Final Evaluation Assessment Category that essentially replicates the current Final Exam Category. Many teachers voted for this option expressing that Option 4 was chosen because it is the strongest of the options, not because they agree that this is an improvement over the current assessment practice.

- ❖ Teachers want to ensure the consistency of the type and rigor of assessments. Most teachers would prefer a county-created assessment; however, those who want teacher-created assessments value differentiation of assessments to more accurately reflect student mastery of knowledge and skills specific to each content.
- ❖ Students can still pass a semester, despite failing a quarter, if they do well on the exam.
- ❖ Many suggested changing the percentage to 10-15% rather than keeping it at 25%.
- ❖ Final exam data is currently used as a major data point to assess our success in closing the achievement gap. Eliminating exams removes a lens on the achievement gap.
- ❖ This option is most preferred by ESOL teachers.
- ❖ Teachers are concerned about grading time if an additional assessment is put into place.

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An important note is a lack of clarity regarding the phrase “*teacher-developed ‘final evaluation’ administered in class.*” Often, teachers voiced concern regarding the lack of equity around the County in “final evaluations” created by individual teachers, and the increased workload and stress of teachers responsible for making their own assessments. While county-wide assessments negate these concerns, it is important to include teachers when creating these assessments.

Conclusion

Regardless of which option or combination of options are implemented, teacher voice is imperative in the process to ensure equity and transparency in the effective assessment of the students of Montgomery County.

Equally important, any change in assessment practice must respect educator workload and professional integrity.