

## President Jennifer Martin's Remarks to the MCEA Representative Assembly

September 6, 2023

Good evening and welcome to the first fully in-person RA we've had since March of 2020.

Before we begin, I'd like us to take a moment of silence to acknowledge the passing of two beloved members of our union: Susan Loftus, who served as a member of our Board and was a tireless activist for our public schools and our profession, and David Eberly, who served as MCEA president many years ago.

Tonight promises, I hope, to give us all a chance to reconnect, meet new folks, and build our collective sense of what it means to truly be a union.

The changes you will vote on tonight in our proposed standing rules reflect the board's work to make the RA to be a more energizing and engaging experience. Hybrid meetings had low energy and low turnout, so we are scrapping them this year. We instead propose three in-person RA's and the remainder would be virtual.

We are also seeking to transform three RA's into all-member meetings, so that more of our membership may fully participate. While the president may cancel RA's in an emergency, the RA itself may vote to cancel an assembly. I'm hoping they will agree with the board that this would be a worthwhile experiment.

Later you will have the chance to consider the details, and I am hopeful that you will agree with the Board that these changes will help us use this time each month more productively.

So, the first weeks of the school year have already brought us significant challenges. We are still missing hundreds of teachers and paraeducators for our classrooms, and we remain desperately short of folks to fill other crucial job categories, such as school psychologist. Thanks to the raises we successfully fought for we're in better shape than many other school systems, but there is so much more to that MCPS needs to do to make our profession an attractive career choice for people entering the workforce.

Meanwhile, the press has done for us what MCPS would not—take our concerns about bullying and harassment seriously. MCEA members from Farquhar Middle

School were furious to see their abusive principal promoted to be principal at Paint Branch High School, about whom they had made repeated complaints to MCPS. They escalated their actions, contacting Alex Robbins, a substitute teacher and acclaimed author, who investigated their allegations and uncovered more than a dozen shocking examples of abuse by this principal over the years at three schools.

And what was MCPS management's response? They immediately sought cover, saying they would conduct an independent investigation---but using a law firm that specializes in fighting employees who bring such complaints to the employer.

Our colleagues at Farquhar who courageously spoke up and persisted in seeking justice are to be commended, as are the thousands of us who wrote to the board demanding a truly independent investigation. In these first weeks of school, we've already been proving our power to move MCPS in the right direction. The Board of Education heard us. At our urging, they reached out to the county and state inspectors general, who appear poised to take over the investigation. Once the findings are in, we will insist on being partners in creating systems that take complaints seriously and mete out justice to bullies and those who abuse their power.

We can predict that this is just the first of many issues we will face this year. Staff and student health and safety are ongoing concerns. There are new MCPS policies that make us more work, but have little chance of addressing the student cell phone problem or the student attendance crisis. We have a new expectation to use "Remind" so that the boundary between work life and home life is further erased. We still lack adequate substitute coverage and a new covid variant is on the rise. We have students lacking the special services they need and the classroom supports we need. And this week many of us are experiencing the misery of faulty HVAC systems in 100 degree heat.

This year, however, holds real promise for us and our students through our union efforts. This month we'll be seeing substantial increases in our paychecks, thanks to the contract wins we had last year. You'll hear tonight about a very successful union summer program, get a preview of our political action plan, and you'll help us launch a new PAC drive. But before we get our official meeting started, we have

a very special treat today: the DC Labor Chorus is here to raise their voices and lift our spirits!

The DC Labor Chorus is a musical ensemble from the DMV area. They say, "We sing for solidarity, we sing for justice and we sing for joy. Some of us are professional musicians, but most of us are union members and activists who just love to sing!"

The DC labor chorus performs at concerns, rallies, demonstrations, and picket lines. Our mission is to strengthen the labor movement, raise awareness of social injustice and be an agent of change through the use of music and arts."

Now...Let's give a warm welcome to the DC Labor Chorus!