

## Save the Magnets press release, Version 4.0

On March 26th, the MCPS school board will vote to dismember the Blair High School STEM Magnet, the Poolesville STEM Magnet, the Downcounty Consortium (DCC), and Richard Montgomery's International Baccalaureate (IB) program.

The Save the Magnets Coalition opposes Superintendent Taylor's proposed regional plan, and the severe damage it will inflict on legendary programs that took decades to build. The Coalition is asking Montgomery County's concerned citizens to contact the Board of Education before March 26th, and have the Board either vote to delay the Regional plan's implementation, and/or change course to a viable alternative before it's too late. Otherwise, they warn, the regional plan will inflict system severe institutional and reputational damage to the county school system, that might prove irreparable.

## Saving the Golden Geese

"The MCPS regional plan kills geese that are laying golden eggs, feeds to pieces to six other geese, and hopes the new geese will magically start laying golden eggs," Coalition founder and Blair Magnet alum Jon Phoenix said. "That's not how geese work. And it's not how you build quality high school programs either."

It is an apt metaphor. Richard Montgomery's IB program currently draws applicants from all over Montgomery County. The two STEM Magnets at Blair and Poolesville High Schools draw applicants from different halves of the county. These programs' educational excellence, gradually developed over decades, have developed a national renown and solidified Montgomery County's reputation for excellent schools.

Taylor's regional plan, splitting Montgomery County into six regions, ends these county- and semi-countywide programs. Magnets would be subject to a 30-50% cut in size and resources, and be downgraded from a county to a regional program. Blair and Poolesville would remain the STEM programs within their respective region, while MCPS promises to start four new STEM Magnets in time for the 2027-2028 school year.

The problem, according to the Coalition: "Taylor and MCPS do not have the capacity or resources to create four new STEM Magnets at the same quality of the two existing ones in 18 months. It's that simple." says Phoenix. "Moreover, the only way they can even try is by cannibalizing the existing Magnet programs, which leaves the whole county worse off."

Coalition member Emily Tai agrees: "MCPS could lose in one second programs that took decades to build" she says, referring to the upcoming March 26th vote. In a recent letter to the school board, Coalition parent Tracy Katoski, whose son graduated from the Blair Magnet agrees, describes the damage Taylor's proposal would do: His plan shrinks Blair's Magnet from around 120 students per grade down to between 60 and 85 instead. Poolesville High School's smaller Magnet (which has helped make the rural school the third highest ranked high school in Maryland) would also lose students as well. Fewer kids at any one Magnet school will make it harder to hold the specialized graduate-school level STEM classes the Magnet is known for. Standing up four new STEM Magnets in an unrealistic 18 months means dispersing the small number of experienced Magnet educators, without providing sufficient time to recruit and train new ones. The result will be a overall decline in STEM program program quality. "And once these programs are dismantled, they don't come back easily," adds Coalition member and DCC advocate Narissa Johnson.

Coalition member, UMD Professor, and Quantum Computer Theorist Daniel Gottesman agrees. Gottesman points out that the Richard Montgomery's IB program also faces a downgrade to regional status under Taylor's plan. One difference however: MCPS already tried creating regional IB programs a little over six years ago. And MCPS promises that the regional IB's would be at the same quality as the original were utterly broken. "The worst-performing regional IB had only 24% getting a passing grade in even one IB subject in 2024, compared to 99% at Richard Montgomery," Gottesman says, "and all three regional IB's are under-enrolled."

Using language remarkably similar to Katoski's letter, Gottesman warns that MCPS thinks they can solve the problems of underperforming regional IB programs by cannibalizing students from the countywide IB. Now, Gottesman says, "they want to repeat the same mistakes with the STEM and other Magnets. The best programs in the county will shrink and only be accessible to a small fraction of students"

The Coalition isn't the only organization sounding the alarm. David Stein, president of the Montgomery County's teacher's union (MCEA) and former Blair Magnet teacher agrees with the Coalition's assessment, saying the new regional Magnets would be "Magnets in name only." Stein is not the only teacher worried; both the entire MCEA union and the Montgomery County Council of PTA's (MCCPTA) have come out opposed to Taylor's regional plan. They, along with the Save the Magnets Coalition, see the proposal as rushed, poorly conceived, and likely to worsen the very educational inequality that Taylor claims to want to address.

## Fake Equity vs Real Equality

Coalition member Jon Phoenix currently lives in Knox County, Kentucky - having made the same journey in the opposite direction as Montgomery Blair, his high school's namesake. MCPS has a budget the size of Andorra's economy, while Knox is one of the 50 poorest counties in America. Yet both have similar problems with educational inequality: State standardized tests show roughly a third of high schoolers in both places below grade level in reading, a percentage that rises to half when only considering working class students on Free and Reduced Meals (FARMS).

But Phoenix and the Save the Magnet Coalition part ways with Superintendent Taylor when it comes to how to address this inequality. Taylor has framed his regional plan as a tool to boost educational "equity," by creating more "Magnet" seats. But multiple Coalition members denounce his vision of equity as fake. Not only does it ignore the real causes of educational inequality, they argues, but it risks making the achievement gap larger.

"If Taylor was serious about addressing educational inequality, he would be adopting externally vetted curricula that solves the problem at the source," says Narissa Johnson. The focus on curricula references a growing body of cognitive science research, dating back to E. D. Hirsch's work in the 1980's and popularized in books like *The Knowledge Gap*. This work (which Hirsch has continued thru his Core Knowledge Foundation) traces MCPS's achievement gap to a flawed approach to reading education in early elementary school: Despite the research saying roughly 80% of literacy comes from background knowledge (i.e., knowing who George Washington is helps a child read a paragraph about him), American elementary schools typically do not teach science, history, or social studies until late elementary school. But by then, the damage is already done. A gap in reading skills has opened up early between children with educated upper/middle class parents who can fill in the missing background knowledge at home, and working class or less educated parents who can't.

For Save the Magnet Coalition members, MCPS has better options to provide stellar schooling for *all* of its students: Namely adopt Hirsch's Core Knowledge curriculum and approach to teaching reading. Johnson has testified in favor of this, and Phoenix points to a 2023 UVA controlled experiment testing the Core Knowledge approach on schoolchildren in Denver. The curriculum completely eliminated the achievement gap by income. Experiments with the Core Knowledge approach in one rural Kentucky county have also proven promising,

"But," Phoenix continues, "instead of doing something that works to improve education for everyone, Superintendent Taylor has chosen something that won't work, to improve education for a select few." In a county with over 160,000 students, Taylor's plan will decimate established Magnet programs in order to create only a few hundred new spots at most in the new pseudo-Magnets. Moreover, says Tai, it ignores other viable alternatives on the table: Growing the smaller Poolesville Magnet, or building just one new STEM Magnet program, but building it properly. It was that exact process, Tai notes, that saw Blair's Magnet teachers guide and gradually build the Poolesville Magnet roughly twenty years ago. The launch was a stunning success story that would subsequently launch tiny Poolesville (population 5,742 out of the over one million in Montgomery County) into the national spotlight.

## **An Expensive Logistics Disaster Waiting to Happen**

A Coalition member who has requested anonymity (due to their position inside MCPS) warns the bad plan gets worse. For behind Taylor's regional proposal is logistical planning so negligent that it has spurred a complaint with the Montgomery County Inspector General, requesting they audit the accuracy of MCPS's proposed budget. Driven by a mixture of junk data and even worse assumptions, the complaint alleges the transportation piece of the regional plan is so flawed it throws the accuracy of the related MCPS budget proposal itself into question.

Superintendent Taylor has already faced severe and repeated criticism over recurring logistical failures. Many MCPS parents were livid about school transportation problems during the February 2026 winter storms, while Taylor's previous district (Stafford County, VA) suffered a significant school transportation breakdown shortly after Taylor's departure, due to planning decisions made during his tenure. Taylor's regional plan has already drawn criticism for its transportation cost - almost \$10 million to create 96 new school bus routes to service the pseudo-Magnets and new regional programs. But the IG complaint suggests this number is a severe underestimate.

The crux of the issue, according to multiple Coalition members, is a complete lack of accurate data as to how many parents from which part of the county would actually send their kids to which specific programs across their region, were this regional plan to actually pass. "Taylor repeatedly promised to survey parents, and never did," the anonymous Coalition member says.

Then, rather than gathering usable survey data and analyze it time for the March 26th vote, Superintendent Taylor and MCPS instead substituted their own deeply flawed assumptions about projected regional program usage. "Taylor assumed a uniform percentage of students departing each high school for regional programs, ignoring the reality that current participation rates vary significantly across different high schools," continues the anonymous member. "The Whitman High School cluster, for example, has historically sent only 2% of Whitman's population to other schools," less than 30 students per year. Taylor's plan forecasts Whitman sending a whopping 15 times as many instead.

The result is a logistics plan all but certain to misallocate transportation assets. Worse still, Taylor's transportation plan calls for a drastic reduction in both school bus stops as a cost cutting measure. For example, Wootton High School area students currently traveling to Blair are now served by nine school bus stops to help get them there. Under Taylor's plan, the nine stops going to a single destination would be consolidated to a single stop, at Wootton itself, serving five regional high school destinations. Under the regional plan, kids wanting to attend a program at a high school in their region other than their local one would still need to be driven to their local high school anyways - in order to catch a bus from their local high school to another high school in their region. "This creates a profound equity barrier for families without flexible schedules or vehicles," says the anonymous Coalition member "and risks disenfranchising the very students the regional model supposedly serves." It also, concludes Emily Tai, creates a transportation bottleneck that demonstrates the hollowness of Taylor's rhetoric: For all this talk of "equity," the number of seats his regional program actually creates at any one high school will be limited to the number of students who can fit onto one bus from each of the other high schools in a given region.

Phoenix, who works as a logistician, agrees: "Taylor may well be using these bad assumptions because they back up his \$10 million underestimate," he says. "The actual transportation cost to do a six-region plan properly are much higher. But MCPS doesn't know how much higher. They haven't collected the proper data to find that out. So instead, they're substituting this worse bus plan, which lowballs the transportation cost, but is really an expensive logistics disaster waiting to happen." Phoenix's biggest worry is the potentially catastrophic effect on the Blair Magnet, which depends on having an additional ninth period that keeps their students in class almost an hour longer than their peers. It's not clear to Phoenix that Taylor has reckoned with programs in the same region having different dismissal times.

## A Viable Alternative

Montgomery County's legendary Magnet and IB programs have helped Poolesville, Blair, and Richard Montgomery hold their own with America's elite public high schools, such as Thomas Jefferson High School in Fairfax or Stuyvesant High School in Manhattan. But unlike TJ or Stuyvesant, Montgomery County's Magnet programs have long been programs within larger high schools, rather than separate Magnet high schools themselves. To Coalition member and Blair *non*-Magnet alum, James Jackson, the result is something both beautiful and rare: Genuine socioeconomic integration, where students from some of America's wealthiest zip codes go to the same school where a third to half the students are on Free and Reduced Meals. "I wasn't in the Magnet, but I want it to continue to thrive," Jackson says, currently a special-ed teacher at Eastern Middle School. Johnson echoes the concern, given that Taylor's regional plan also breaks up the popular Downcounty Consortium, a collection of several middle and working class high schools in southern Montgomery County (including Blair) that gives students in each DCC high school a chance to attend programs in the other schools. "The regional plan replaces it with six regions, most of which are not economically integrated, and puts up hard walls between them," Johnson says. Blair's Communication Arts Program for example, formerly serving the DCC area, would end up with a smaller catchment area, mostly comprising wealthier neighborhoods in Bethesda.

This combined push - to save the DCC, IB, and the Magnets - has helped the Coalition create a viable alternative to Taylor's regional plan: Rather than split MoCo into six economically segregated regions, divvy it instead into three larger economically integrated consortium areas. The DCC, RM IB, Blair, and Poolesville Magnets could all remain intact and even be expanded, while the Blair and Poolesville Magnets could help create a new third elite Magnet program in the third consortium area.

Gottesman has run the numbers on the proposed three-area plan. He says his three-area plan "substantially improves access while preserving the strong existing Magnets." And the logistics of three consortia promises to be less thorny than planning for six. Whether the Board of Education will even consider this better alternative on March 26th remains to be seen. But the Save the Magnets Coalition is determined to try.

Emily Tai's Action Network petition opposing the regional plan has generated 673 letters to the Board of Education, while multiple petitions on the topic (including two created by the Poolesville community, and Johnson's Red Flag petition) have garnered a combined total of almost over 2000 signatures. The Save the Magnets Coalition is asking anyone wanting to stand up for quality and equality in MCPS to contact the Board of Education ([boe@mcpsmd.org](mailto:boe@mcpsmd.org)), and urge them to vote down or vote to delay Taylor's regional proposal. The damage his plan will do, they warn, could be irreversible.

Concerned citizens and local media can email [SaveTheMagnets@use.startmail.com](mailto:SaveTheMagnets@use.startmail.com) for press inquiries or to join the Coalition.

**Action Network Letter Campaign:** <https://tinyurl.com/Vote2Delay>

**Change.Org Petition:** <https://tinyurl.com/Save-The-Magnets-Petition>

**Red Flag Petition:** <https://tinyurl.com/RedFlagPetition>