Dear Administrator –

As you know, Partnership for Extraordinary Minds (xMinds) is a membership organization for parents in Montgomery County who have a school-age child on the autism spectrum. As such, the Board members of our organization have frequent contact with parents of autistic students in MCPS, and we hear from them about their challenges. About a year ago, Board members were hearing an increasing number of reports from parents that they weren’t receiving sufficient communication from their school teams. We therefore conducted an online survey in Spring 2018 to get a clearer picture of MCPS communication practices generally and to see if our anecdotal reports might be indicators of widespread problems.

The data we received back from our survey did, in fact, support the idea that the problems we had heard about were not isolated. We want to bring to your attention the problems we believe are present in some parts of MCPS, and we’d like to work with you to find solutions.

First, we want to address why parents of autistic students become so concerned when there is insufficient communication from their child’s educators. As you know, parents are an essential part of the IEP team for children with any special needs. When it comes to autistic students, however, the nature of their core challenges further amplify the importance of good communication with parents.

One of the primary challenges of autism is difficulties in communication, which can include a child not reporting to parents the problems they may be having at school, whether they be academic, emotional, or social. Communication difficulties can also result in a student failing to self-advocate with a teacher or parent when he or she doesn’t understand an assignment. Again, because of this challenge, caregivers are more able to support their child’s academic success if their source of important information is the school rather than the student.

Another core challenge of autism is executive function difficulties, which can result in autistic students struggling to break a task into manageable pieces, remembering to bring their homework to school, and keeping track of the assignments and tests for multiple classes. If caregivers are kept apprised of their child’s assignments, they have the opportunity to support the child in managing his or her workload with strategies that can be applied at home.

A third core challenge of autism is difficulties with self-regulation. Stressors that may be tolerated by typically developing students may trigger disruptive behavior in an autistic student and each of these behaviors may differ from child to child. Strategies for anticipating and diverting these episodes are always being tested and tweaked in school, and if parents are kept in the loop with how educators are handling these situations, they can keep their responses consistent with the school’s approach, which is likely to produce better results in school and support generalizing that success to other contexts as well.

There are several problems with communication that we are eager to resolve, and we would like to offer our help. Specifically, these are the most urgent problems we see:

1. At the elementary school level, students on the autism spectrum who are placed in a special education program (as opposed to neighborhood schools) and who are mainstreamed for at least some of their academic classes have a need for more communication from their general education teachers. The level of communication that the general education teacher provides to parents of their general education students may be sufficient for those students, but autistic students generally require more to be successful. This is not something that the special education teachers can provide, since the communication that’s needed is about the work in the general education teacher’s class. Because self-advocacy is compromised for many autistic students, they are not in a good position to request that additional communication.
2. At the elementary school level, students on the autism spectrum who are placed in neighborhood schools (as opposed to a special education program) require significant improvements in school-home communication from their special education teachers in those schools. We were surprised by the degree to which reports of school-home communication differed between program placements and neighborhood placements. We are concerned that strategic changes within MCPS have led to more students being placed in neighborhood placements than before , when those same students might have previously been placed in special education programs. While the placements may have changed, the students’ needs have not. When special education teachers are less involved in the success of these students, behavior issues that could be understood and resolved by special educators instead escalate to involve school administrators. We had heard parents describe this sequence of events, and our survey results confirm that parents of students placed in neighborhood schools receive more communications from school principals and less communication from special education teachers than do parents of students with program placements.
3. An area of great dissatisfaction is the frequency of communication to families of students on the autism spectrum who are placed in neighborhood schools. This was observed at both the elementary and secondary levels. Our survey indicates a very low frequency of communication and high level of dissatisfaction for the majority of parents in this group. Although students placed in neighborhood schools, and particularly older students, can be expected to be more independent than students placed in programs, they still benefit from good communication between the school team and caregivers and close monitoring in general. The levels now provided may be insufficient.

There are many possible solutions to these problems, and the input of teachers is essential to that effort. We can add that several special education programs received high marks from caregivers for quality and frequency of communications. These programs, which could be looked to as potential models, are the Elementary Asperger’s Program, Elementary Behavioral and Emotional Support Services, and the Middle and High School Bridge Programs.

Our discussions with parents and the data from our survey have generated some ideas that you may want to consider and which we believe will improve communication in the areas where we have found the greatest need:

* Require that all IEPs clearly define the terms of school-home communication: frequency, methods, and sources, so that the IEP team is communicating in the way that is needed to support each individual student.
* Require general education and special education teachers to respond to caregivers within 24 hours of contact by a parent.
* Provide autism training for neighborhood school administrators so they will better understand the behavior they see, and not treat behavior that’s rooted in an autism disability as disciplinary problems.
* Require that all teachers of ASD students (K through grade 12) set up and maintain current information on their classes’ online page through the myMCPS Portal, so reliable information about assignments and assessments can be easily accessed by parents and students; and require that teachers make their class notes and smart board slides available online daily for all students with ASD.
* Make available to teachers, particularly in the neighborhood schools, a variety of reporting formats, including set formats that may facilitate reporting by teachers. We want to make communicating with parents as easy as possible for teachers.

We have attached the report of our survey results, along with an executive summary of our findings. We believe you will find the results and recommendations for improving school-home communication in MCPS compelling. Caregivers’ comments are shared throughout the report; reading their own words will give you a sense of the depth of their concerns.

We are eager to collaborate in finding ways to improve school-home communication so that parents can provide support to their students with ASD that will allow them to best access the MCPS curriculum and succeed.

Thanks you for your consideration,

Board of Partnership for Extraordinary Minds