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Subject: RE: Fund MaST or Lost Teaching Positions

Mat,

[...]

Let's be honest, the priority of Early College has unfortunately never been about increasing trade skills. It's been about giving more students an opportunity to go on to college after MaST, and to provide an alternative for students who do not perform as well in our regular high schools and would prefer a smaller school with smaller class sizes. And this is no surprise, given the goals of Early College programs (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Early_college_high_school). These are admirable goals, and I don't blame students and parents for wanting us to keep MaST open for these reasons. But these are not the reasons (increasing trades and local job skills) that were used to sell MaST to the public and to commissioners when they originally agreed to fund MaST.

Students who were reportedly struggling to get by in school or making C's & D's are now getting 4.0's at MaST. That's great! But how much of this is attributable to the student turning his life around (which would be awesome) versus the possibility that we are just making school easier for the student. If students don't score well on a test, we don't just give them an easier test. I get that students (and parents) love MaST...who wouldn't, with the sort of grade improvement I am hearing about. But are we really doing what's best for our school system? Or have we fallen into the give-a-kid-a-trophy mentality...let's just give every kid a degree. If a kid cannot succeed in a particular environment, rather than helping them learn how to better succeed, we'll just give them a new environment. (I'm not sure how that works outside of academia once they are in the "real world".)

Are the kids at MaST earning their degree the same way that kids at other schools must earn their degrees? Is a 4.0 GPA at MaST equivalent to a 4.0 at one of our other high schools? Unfortunately, I don't think so. Beyond the possible lower rigor, the extra weighting of the college credits as freshman will give these students a HUGE GPA boost. Their GPA's should be substantially higher than their peers at the other high schools. Is it because MaST is such a better school? Or is it because we have artificially created a system which is rewarding students differently than it would at their normal high schools? Is this really the type of system we are striving for? For some kids who were low performing students, I hope we aren't giving them the false impression that they now need to go to college. I have repeatedly remarked that I strongly disagree with any notion that everyone needs to go to college.

What is going to happen to all of the other kids at WCHS and ECHS and Croatan when they hear that the D students are all of a sudden getting B's and higher? B students at our regular high schools are all of a sudden at the top of their class at MaST. Higher grades for easier work, a college schedule with many elective classes meeting only 2 days a week, getting out of school at 1pm on Fridays as freshmen.... As an 8th grader, this sounds great! Students can get college credits for CCC courses which are easier than their AP class equivalents, and students don't have to take one of those pesky AP exams to prove their proficiency in the subject! I predict that the popularity of MaST will continue to soar and attract hordes of students from the other high schools. It may be hard for the other high schools to compete for bright students with the apparent (unfair) advantages provided at MaST, and I worry that our scores at other high schools will suffer as a result. Is this really what we should be doing? It reminds me of the decisions students must sometimes make when picking an elective class... Do I take the really hard class with lots of homework where it is difficult to get an A? Or do I take the class where an easy A is practically guaranteed. I just hope that our other high schools don't lower their standards while trying to compete with MaST in order to retain students.

Now let's talk about the true benefits of MaST. Smaller class sizes are a really big help, especially for less outgoing students or for struggling students at risk of dropping out of school. And contrary to what was told to commissioners, I

do not believe that MaST math and English class sizes are comparable to the same freshman classes at our other high schools. I have asked for confirmation of this, but still have not received a reply. (I do not have data for class sizes at the other high schools, but from what I have been told, they are not comparable. The MaST class sizes are attached if anyone wants to review them again.) I truly wish we could offer smaller class sizes in all of our schools across the county. It's a shame that this benefit may be limited to a select few lottery winners at MaST. Some may disagree with me, but I'd rather have nobody receive the benefit than being forced to select a few winners, leaving the "losers" behind at one of our other three high schools to deal with larger class sizes.

After reading the countless testimonials from parents and students (and I have read every single one of them), I will be the first to acknowledge that there is a real need to serve our students who struggle in a larger school setting. The vast majority of testimonials we received were about this type of student. I am sincerely happy that MaST has been serving this need, but we desperately need to find a way to serve these students in our current high schools rather than only serving a select few lottery winners at MaST. I have a heart, and I want to help these students. But if this is the primary purpose and benefit of MaST, then let's be honest about it. A much smaller sampling of testimonials were about helping to reduce costs of college or allowing students to take trade classes. It could be possible to get some of these same benefits within our current high schools and through programs such as dual enrollment. But the biggest benefit of MaST, based on parent testimonials, has been the small-school, small-class environment.

The benefit of easy college credits to help pay for college costs has been not been heard as much...I suspect because that benefit wouldn't sit as well with taxpayers and parents whose kids aren't getting these credits at the other high schools. It is really interesting to hear MaST being portrayed in so many different ways, depending on the audience. For the reserved/shy student, it is the small-school, small-class-size which is being advertised. When the school is being pitched to the high-fliers, MaST is a science academy for the very brightest students who are too smart for regular high school. For the numerous families worried about exorbitant college costs, the easy/free college credits are pitched. And when it is being pitched to the commissioners, Early College is not for college bound students at all, but is a school created and intended for the trades and local job market. It can be dizzying to witness the amount of spin that has been spun.

I would LOVE to implement as many of the MaST benefits as possible into our current school schools, and we can strive towards this goal wherever we are able to. In the meantime, we must try to achieve the most benefit possible for *all* of our students (at the lowest cost possible). It is easy to look at the cases of individual students and see the benefits MaST provides to these individuals and want to continue to help them. It is much more difficult to look at the big picture and see the unintended consequences that MaST may have on the rest of our school system and all of its students. Weighing such items and trying to make rational and equitable decisions on them is one of the toughest tasks we face. I hope we choose wisely.

Travis