

Testimony before the Board of Education of Howard County

March 13, 2014 Public Hearing on Policy 9090 Wellness Through Nutrition and Physical Activity

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My name is Anne Markus. I am a long time resident of Howard County and have two children in the Public School System. I am Associate Professor at The George Washington University in Washington, DC, in the School of Public Health and Health Services Department of Health Policy. I am not here today as an academic but as an “on-the-ground” member of this community and as the Chair of the Howard County School Health Council (SHC).

The School Health Council is a state-mandated, advisory committee composed of three main groups: (1) individuals and organizations from the community, (2) public school system and health department staff, and (3) parents from the PTA Council of Howard County. Although the School Health Council as an entity is mandatory for each local school district in Maryland, many of its members participate on a completely voluntary basis. Why? Because investing in health and wellness in our schools (and in our community) is not only important to improve health outcomes, it is also the key to brain health and academic performance, the main goal of the school system.

The policy under discussion today proposes two new tasks for the SHC:

- 1) Provide “feedback” to the Board of Education on the implementation of the policy once adopted.
- 2) Establish a new wellness subcommittee, which would provide an additional “conduit” in the county for the community to voice concerns but also make suggestions for improvement, as well as hear from various stakeholders on how we are performing as a county.

The SHC believes these tasks are responsive to the new federal requirements and appropriate functions for the Council under certain conditions, including some financial and non-financial support:

- 1) “Feedback” function: The SHC would like to ask the Board to ensure that the Council can easily seek information from within the school system and review adequate, appropriate, timely and necessary de-identified data in order to be effective in meeting the new expectations tied to this “feedback” function. We applaud the emphasis in the policy on establishing wellness teams at each school in the County, which is an important infrastructure change that will support implementation and monitoring of the policy at the most local level. However, the policy – as currently drafted – lacks clarity on how this information will “trickle back up” to the central office as well as to the SHC and who will be in charge or what mechanism will be in place to make sure that this effort is coordinated and shared at a systems level. The policy is delegating many important monitoring and evaluation functions to each individual school with little accountability to the school system as a whole.

- 2) “Community representation” function: There is some concern among some community members about the potential make-up of the new sub-committee. The policy does not provide assurances that the majority of the membership has to be from the community nor does it spell out that the Chair/Co-Chair should preferably be from the community. While these issues can be addressed in a revision to the Council’s bylaws, the policy is silent on some broad principle of balancing interests from the community with the interests from other members of the Council, especially those who are either HCPSS staff or Health Department staff.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today and share some of our thoughts that pertain to the infrastructure surrounding the implementation and assessment of the policy. We look forward to our continued collaboration with the Board on these important issues.

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