Good afternoon, Board of Education, Superintendent Smith, and other MCPS officials. I’m Rodney Peele, an active member of two local PTAs and MCCPTA, but I am speaking my own views today instead of representing an organization. Over the last 7 weeks, I have had many conversations with other parents, PTA leaders, school staff, and MCPS central office experts about the future of high school choice programs, ahead of a scheduled presentation by MCPS to you on the subject on May 30. This is my tenth and final year as a parent at Ritchie Park ES, and the first of possibly eight straight years as a parent at Richard Montgomery HS. I say “possibly” eight years at RM because I’m optimistic that my younger child will have greater choice of outstanding options and academic programs when she begins high school in the fall of 2022 than she had in elementary and middle school.

Other parents and I have closely watched MCPS implement some of the Metis Report recommendations at the elementary and middle school levels. You received the Metis findings in the spring of 2016, and MCPS began field testing changes for elementary schools in the fall. That was fast! I appreciated the speed, but worried about unintended consequences. For the middle schools, MCPS implemented significant revisions to programs after students had already applied for them. I think this caused problems that could have been prevented with more transparency and less haste. Today, I want to give you some thoughts in advance of making decisions about the high school choice programs.

A couple of months ago, MCPS began seriously rolling out its ideas to small audiences for high school choice programs. The proposed changes are specifically based on Metis Recommendation 3A on selection (universal screening) and Recommendation 7 on seat capacity (expansion). There is a multi-year implementation proposal, but changes could start in fall 2019.
Universal screening should mean more interested and qualified applicants. More seats should provide more access.

**My first request for high school programs is more choices.** I think parents and students appreciate choice among a variety of good options. I appreciate that MCPS staff is considering a variety of programs to better meet the college and career needs of future adults. More access and choice also means more mobility – more on ramps, and more off ramps alike, not central office sorting of populations and cohorts. Choices should be available at multiple stages in school. I realize more options means more costs. However, please don’t create more opportunities for some students at the expense of others. Let’s truly expand choices, not make tradeoffs.

To have good choices, we need good programs. **My second request is not to rush to implement changes.** Once the direction is determined, I think MCPS needs time to increase program capability and to adjust, if necessary, as challenges arise. It’s my understanding that MCPS has started some pilot programs, particularly with Montgomery College. Let’s see how those programs are doing before rolling them out too fast. When the results are good, then expand as you are doing with the enriched literacy curriculum (ELC). For the growth of more established programs, we need to study the details and the practical requirements for success, not just what might look good on paper. Students and parents want more choices, but good choices will take time. Please establish a long timeline, including measurable metrics.

To make good choices, we need good information. **My third request is that MCPS be more transparent about choices and changes.** High school programs are arguably the first step into adulthood, as students begin to scope out college and career interests. These decisions are personal, difficult, and impactful. Parents and students need to understand what is changing from what was available before, and we need realistic information about new programs. We don’t want to get to high school and find the program continued to change into something students did not expect. Please share the practical details, not just the aspirational philosophy.

To get good information, we also need time to understand. Just as MCPS needs time to build, you need time to inform. If you slow down implementation, then you will also have more
time to get it right, and to better inform students and parents. My fourth request is to provide **enough time for students and parents to comprehend the actual options available before having to make a decision.** A conversation about high school programs and options should not begin just in the fall of eighth grade. I think these conversations should start earlier, because middle school course selection can matter, and having goals for high school can motivate students in middle school. High schools are already well into their planning for 2019-2020. Even if schools have a year to put changes into effect for 2020-2021, parents and students could be forced to make application decisions much sooner. Please reserve more time to adequately understand the details.

I think MCPS is proposing incremental change, not radical revision, but even small changes cause anxiety. We support strong, comprehensive local schools, and we recognize that special programs have the potential to add tremendous value. We appreciate accurate and equitable identification of students so that every student can learn in school, but we don’t want tradeoffs that pit one group of students against another. We would like to see an expansion of opportunities for all student populations, including programs for highly able students. As you look to replicate existing, successful programs, there are many features we think are essential. More capacity means more than just more seats. We need critical mass in the cohort of qualified students to be able to offer a variety of courses that attract top students. MCPS will need time to increase program capabilities – to train faculty, to provide student supports, to determine transportation, to scale up what works or to build something new. Expanding access should be real access, not just an illusion of equivalence.

We have some great programs in Montgomery County. Let’s make them bigger and better.

As always, thank you for your time and consideration.