

# MCS Teacher Talk

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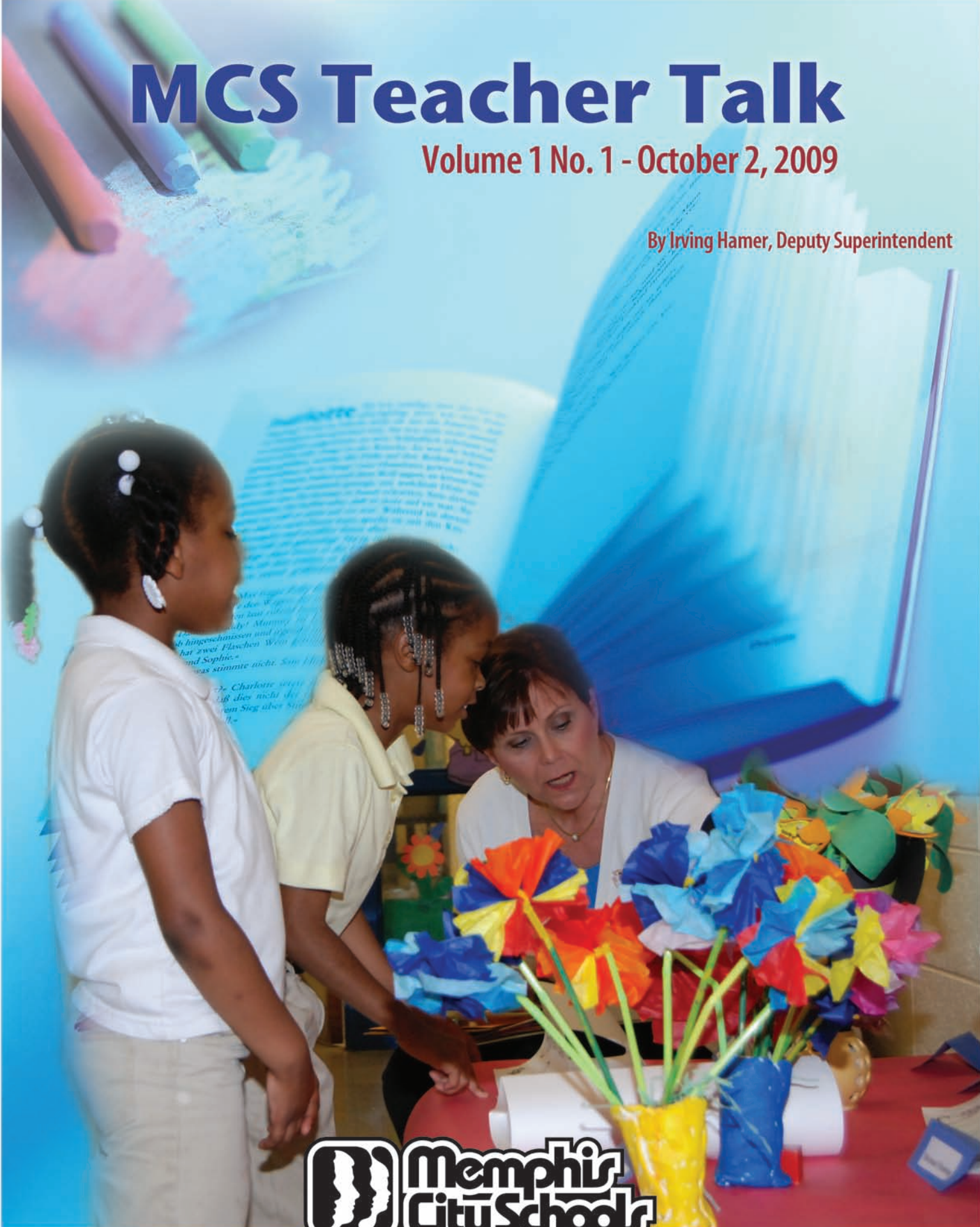
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In the past few weeks, I've spoken with Association Representatives from the Memphis Education Association, teachers from Kindergarten through the 3rd grade, and 12th grade English teachers. Those conversations have reinforced for me what I already knew – our teachers are the heart and soul of MCS.

But in each of the groups of teachers I've spoken with, challenging themes have emerged. With repetition and volume, two problems – low morale among teachers and the exhaustion teachers are experiencing because of current work expectations – were raised by each group. From the conversations with teachers it is abundantly clear that there has not been enough engagement of our front-line experts in the current reform agenda.

So it's time to bring the conversation directly to you through this new medium, MCS Teacher Talk. A key objective of MCS Teacher Talk is to provide you with information and facts that will hopefully dispel rumor, provide support for teacher interactions with administrators, and extend the conversation from just a few selected groups of teachers to all teachers in the district.

## Notes on the Pre-K- Continuum

In Regional conversations with teachers in the early grades about standards based grading protocols, retention, and the new progression policy there were important outcomes and adjustments.

Perhaps the most important among the outcomes was the widespread opposition to elimination of the retention policy for students in grades K-3. In response, the administration is proposing to the Board of Commissioners a modification to the new policy. Essentially, it proposes that there be no retention K-1 immediately with a staggered implementation of the no retention policy over the next two years in grades two and three.

To support the importance of early childhood development, efforts are underway to provide teaching assistants to kindergarten and first grade teachers. A key function of the teaching assistants is to support the administration and implementation of interventions that are essential to student success. In addition, the implementation of the standards based grading and reporting to families will be implemented immediately in PreK-3—a new grade will be added in successive years. In addition, the effort to introduce looping to the early grades will be expanded in academic year 2011 with official notices and plans being announced in the spring.

The thinking behind the Pre-K-Continuum is based upon the notion that a good foundation coming out of the early years will reduce retentions and improve the possibility of success in grades 4-12.

## A Footnote on the Exhibition of Student Work and the Capstone Project for Seniors

A discussion to finalize plans for the Capstone project for seniors was held with teachers of English to senior students. During the conversation it became clear that requiring seniors to prepare exhibitions for the fall show was too much pressure for teachers and students. Participating teachers cited college applications, reference letters, personal statements, and the rigors of course work as the activities that conflicted with doing a project worthy of exhibition in the fall semester.

The issue was resolved by a decision that exempted all seniors from displaying an artifact of their work in the fall Exhibition of Student Work. As a result, no senior is required to have an artifact exhibited in the fall exhibition. Seniors are expected to focus their work and energy on developing a high quality research paper and artifact for presentation at the Spring Exhibition of Student Work.

Correspondingly, it has been decided that the Capstone project for grades 5 and 8 would be delayed one academic year because of the volume and demands of implementing new initiatives. Beginning with the academic years 2010-2011 students in grades 5 and 8 will be required to prepare and exhibit a Capstone Project.

## PowerTeacher—the MCS Grade Book

The newly installed teacher grade book is available for use. It promises to radically reduce paperwork for teachers. Unlike Teacher Ease, Power Teacher is available to all teachers at no cost to a school or parents. Most important is the interface between Power Teacher and SMS—entries into Power Teacher are uploaded to SMS.

At the September meeting of Association Representatives a question was raised about whether or not teachers were required to enter grades from the first nine weeks into Power Teacher. There is no such requirement. It should be noted, however, that when fully loaded with all grades Power Teacher will automatically assist teachers in calculating final grades for a marking period and end of semester reports.

Please be advised that Parent Connect that is attached to Power Teacher is operational. What we need to do is distribute passwords to all parents so that they might access information about their individual students. Plans have been developed to distribute parent access codes at the Parent-Teacher Conferences on October 12th and at the Report Card distribution session on October 14th. Needless to say, we need teacher and administrative support in making sure that parents receive their access codes—this is essential to affording parents access to information about their children with appropriate levels of security and confidentiality.

## Progress Reports

In discussion with teachers it became clear that there is considerable confusion about progress reports. Now that the district has a common nine-week reporting period it should be clear to all teachers and administrators that there is only one progress report per nine-week grading period. After considerable discussion and debate, the final decision is that there will be only one progress report during the nine-week reporting period. Such a progress report should be issued on/at the 4 ½ week mid-point during the reporting period.

## Lesson Plans/Syllabi

At all middle and high schools it is the expectations that teachers will develop and use comprehensive syllabi to guide their classroom instruction. Such syllabi can be developed collaboratively by content area. Our Content Area Specialists have developed samples of syllabi for all content areas and have posted them on Learning Village for teacher use.

During recent conversations with teachers it was shared that some principals were requiring teachers to do both daily lesson plans and syllabi. There is no such requirement.

A comprehensive syllabus should be more than an adequate guide for substitute teachers. A beginning teacher might want to develop daily lesson plans to support their instruction. This, however, should be voluntary or part of an improvement

## Learning Village and Avatar

Numerous teachers have complained about the difficulty of using Learning Village and Avatar. In this regard, it is important to report that over 4,600 teachers have successfully logged onto Learning Village and developed over 400,000 lesson plans and syllabi. In addition, over 5,000 teachers have participated in over 13,000 courses in Avatar. Nonetheless, the difficulty of using the system has been noted. The difficulty with using the system is a function of the 1981 technology system MCS is operating on. It is way over due for replacement. In the very near future the administration will be making a proposal to the Board of Commissioners to completely replace and upgrade the basic operational system for MCS. When approved, there will be dramatic improvements to both Learning Village and Avatar. Hopefully, this is an area where teachers will be vocal supporters of the effort to transform the technology infrastructure of MCS.

## Teacher Effectiveness Initiative (TEI)

The proposal for the MCS Teacher Effectiveness Initiative to The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is posted on our website. In addition, there are responses to frequently asked questions and a roster of currently held myths with the corresponding facts available for review on the MCS website.

There has been no final decision on our proposal. We expect the final decision in early November. MCS has received \$1.2 million in local contributions to the MCS Foundation in support of TEI. This support will help us continue planning for TEI whether we receive the Gates Foundation funding or not.

We are, in close collaboration with MEA, going forward with the reform of the current teacher evaluation tool and process—a source of substantial criticism from teachers. And, we are proceeding with changing the way we recruit and staff schools—we want to do away with the surplus practice and we want to have all schools staffed by April for the new school year. In addition, we want to make the receiving of tenure more rigorous for beginning teachers (no tenured teacher will be required to go through the new tenure review process). There is forward moving activity in each of these areas because the reform of these elements is critical to improving student achievement and should not be dependent upon funding from the Gates Foundation.

Please, at your convenience, review the full TEI proposal ([www.mcsk12.net/tei](http://www.mcsk12.net/tei)). Also, read the “The Widget Effect”, a research report on effective teaching that significantly influenced the proposal we submitted to The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

Lastly, you are advised that MCS is one of five districts selected from 150 districts nationally to be in a deep, five year partnership with The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to improve the status and effectiveness of the teaching profession. If our proposal is approved, MCS will be a national leader in this work. It is also clear that the aspects of the proposal will benefit from adjustments that will be made after it is approved and more teacher input informs how we might elevate the status and effectiveness of the teaching profession.

At this point, we ask that each of you remain open to the possibilities of TEI and where your interest and expertise might contribute to the work, we request your active participation in this groundbreaking opportunity to do something wonderful for students, MCS, and Memphis City.

