

June 1, 2015

Dear Superintendent Nyland and the Seattle School Board Directors,

I'm writing this letter to express my grave concern over the announced closure of Middle College High School (MCHS) at High Point Center.

I write to you as a proud product of Seattle Public Schools (Garfield class of 1990), a former Seattle Public School teacher, an active citizen involved in discussions surrounding public education reform, and as the parent of a (future) Seattle Schools student.

I also write to you as an expert in educational inequality with a Ph.D. in curriculum & instruction and educational policy studies, a tenured Associate Professor in the School of Educational Studies at the University of Washington Bothell, and as an award winning scholar and teacher.

In 1996 I was a student teacher at the original MCHS at Seattle Central Community College. I then became a founding faculty for the MCHS at South Seattle Community College, where I later took on site administrative duties. Currently I have ongoing professional relationships with my teacher colleagues at MCHS at High Point Center, as well as with my teacher colleagues at the Ida B. Wells School for Social Justice (itself a former MCHS built on the same model) located on the campus of the University of Washington Bothell. Suffice it to say, I know MCHS at High Point Center very well, and I know the kinds of students they serve equally well.

When I taught at MCHS I saw what it meant to be a student who didn't fit within the large, comprehensive high school system in Seattle Schools, and what it meant to be a kid who struggled daily with a myriad of issues that could stand in the way of educational success: homelessness, lack of healthcare, poverty, being on the edge of gangs or street life, alienation and disengagement from schooling or the curriculum, violence, emotional abuse, working multiple jobs to help parents pay bills, taking care of siblings, court cases, anxiety, pregnancy – really any major issue that kids face today.

And within that space, within the work that we did and that my MCHS colleagues still do today, I saw amazing things happen. I saw students flourish within the small school environment that actively and openly worked with them on the problems they faced in the world, a small school that encouraged them to become *agents* of their own lives. Students at MCHS always responded to our curriculum of engagement and empowerment, and this became a cornerstone of how and why we, as teachers, as a learning community, as an *alternative* high school, were able to engage the formerly disengaged and draw in those students who embraced their struggles on the way to high school graduation.

The statistics are clear. We know what happens when kids drop out of high school and don't return. We know how dropping out contributes directly to the schools-to-prisons pipeline. We know the risks our kids run when they turn to street life to survive. Because

of this, I can't put it any more bluntly than to tell you, with all seriousness: MCHS saves lives.

I know that the status quo of education reform today is to generally disregard non-school factors and to work towards standardizing the school system with common standards and high-stakes, standardized tests. However, I hope you understand what it is you do when you close down alternative schools (and threaten to close down others like the Ida B. Wells School for Social Justice, which always seems to operate under threat from the district): You are effectively closing programs and schools that are designed to serve the students that your large, comprehensive high schools simply *aren't able* or *aren't willing* to serve.

Indeed, I would argue that MCHS and other alternative schools provide models for ways that the district can reach the students of highest need, the ones the district has such a hard time educating and seems to fail at educating on such a consistent basis for decades. In this regard schools like MCHS should be studied, expanded, and duplicated, not closed.

Closing MCHS simply creates yet another obstacle in the lives of these high-needs students and cuts off one of the few avenues of success that they might have. In the name of equity and equal opportunity for *all* Seattle Schools students, I urge you to reconsider this decision.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Wayne Au', with a stylized, cursive-like script.

Dr. Wayne Au
Associate Professor
School of Educational Studies
Chair, Campus Diversity Council
University of Washington Bothell
Wayneau@uw.edu