

## Village Roll-Out

Written by Emily Zhang, Lillian Zhou

Transcribed by Robert Sun

On March 9, the Village Initiative Roll-Out Event was held at CCACC. The event was sponsored by CAPA-MC, CCACC, and the Asian American Studies Program of the University of Maryland. Panelists from MCPS, Montgomery County Federations of Families for Children's Mental Health, the Arc, and Partnership for Extraordinary Minds joined together to give a talk on building connections with community resources for families with children with special needs. The panelists were Julie Reiley, Kevin Lowndes, Simone Geness, Dr. Christina Conolly, Celia Serkin, and Melissa Egan, and the emcees who communicated the information in both Chinese and English were Benjamin Lee, a student from Churchill and David Cao, a student from Frost Middle School. The audience consisted of many parents with students with special needs who wanted to learn more about what is offered in the MCPS system for their children. To start the event, the audience watched a video put together by the Village Initiative with sections from the movie "The Silent Dancer", which is about a Chinese girl who became deaf at a very young age, but persisted and eventually overcame the many challenges that she faced, realizing her talent as a dancer. This video corresponded to some of the topics mentioned in the event, and was a good bridge to the topics discussed that evening.

### **Parent Advocacy**

Julie Reiley is the co-chair of the MCPS Special Education Advisory Committee and the chair of the MCCPTA Special Education Committee. At the event, she specifically talked about being an effective advocate for your child. She mentioned that an Individualized Education Program (IEP) can be requested through a written request to the school for students diagnosed with disabilities. At an IEP meeting, the parent is the student's best advocate, and can request an interpreter if needed. Parents should come prepared with a list of things to discuss including the hopes and goals for his/her child.

Students with special needs are also entitled to be educated in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), in which he or she can receive an appropriate education. This means that parents of kids with special needs can advocate for some general education classes for their child.

The key points to remember are that being an effective advocate means appreciating, and a child's IEP must be tailored to meet his or her unique needs.

If there are concerns on how things are being handled on a school level, parents can contact Mr. Lynch, the director of Special Education at (240) 740-3900 or Mr.

Lowndes, the Associate Superintendent at (240)740-3042 or visit this website:  
<https://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/departments/special-education/seac/>



Julie Reiley gives the audience advice on advocating for their child.  
Photo by Claire Yu

### **MCPS Services at a Glance**

Kevin Lowndes is the associate superintendent of MCPS Special Education. He gave a brief overview of the MCPS service, which starts from birth to 21 years old. The more students that can be reached at an earlier age, the more support they will have later on.

From 3-5 years old, there are preschool programs and centers in daycares to provide the least restrictive environment which contain services provided at daycare programs with specialized teachers or services provided at pre-school.

At the elementary level, special schools have services in another classroom or (for students who need more intense needs) programs with specialized therapist and nurses.

At the middle school and high school level, resource classes are available with more time to complete assignments or tests. There are also contained classes for the

intellectually disabled which includes two pathways: 1) GED-ED and 2) Alternative Learning Outcomes curriculum.

For more information, visit

<https://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/departments/special-education/programs-services/>

Kevin Lowndes can be contacted at (240)740-3042 or emailed through

[Kevin\\_E\\_Lowndes@mcpsmd.org](mailto:Kevin_E_Lowndes@mcpsmd.org)



Kevin Lowndes summarizes the MCPS service.

Photo by Claire Yu

### **MCPS Transitional Services**

Simone Geness is the supervisor of MCPS Transitional Services. She gave a brief overview of the MCPS transitional services, which are required by law under IDEA (The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act). Some psychological services that are provided are special education and 504 evaluations, individual and group counseling, academic and behavioral consultations, and additional mental health services. To request these services, parents can contact the building principal for school psychologists. A bilingual assessment team (for special education evaluations for

students who speak another language other than English) can be requested by contacting Dr. Michael Barnet at (240)740-4420. Key players in transition services are the student, special education case manager, teachers, counselors, transition service teachers, family, and other members of faculty.

“Transition services is an inclusive process... I encourage parents to come out to information meetings whether sponsored by MCPS or other agencies... We always have to integrate students and we always want to make sure that we are planning ahead [for] what [the] student wants to do when they graduate from high school, [and] when they go into the world.”

Simone Geness can be contacted at (301)649-8008 or emailed through [Simone\\_A\\_Geness@mcpsmd.org](mailto:Simone_A_Geness@mcpsmd.org)



Simone Geness overviews the services provided.

Photo by Claire Yu

### **MCPS Psychological Services**

Dr. Christina Conolly is the director of MCPS Psychological Services. Dr. Connolly oversees the psychologists working in MCPS schools and is also part of the bilingual assessment team. She receives referrals for the Bilingual Assessment Services

and provides consultation support in individual and group counseling. In her work, Dr. Connolly determines which students may need individual support and works with psychologists to provide that support.

During the panel discussion, Dr. Connolly stated, “mental health is like cancer- it’s difficult to struggle silently, and individuals are not always successful.” She is looking forward to the increased emphasis MCPS is placing on student mental, emotional, and social health next year. “Academics are important, but so is the mental and social aspect. So next year we’re going to focus on those more.”

Dr. Connolly can be contacted at (240) 740-5640 or emailed through [Christina\\_N\\_Conolly@mcpsmd.org](mailto:Christina_N_Conolly@mcpsmd.org).



Dr. Christina Connolly discusses mental health issues and more.  
Photo by Claire Yu

### **Community Support**

Celia Serkin is the director of Montgomery County Federations of Families for Children’s Mental Health. She works in Bridges to the Future, a program for 16 through 21 year-olds struggling with mental health, specifically those that are fully or loosely disconnected from society (i.e, living alone, unemployed, or without a support network).

Serkin informed the audience that these young adults are often trapped between adult and child transitional services, and forced to bear the responsibilities of an adult when they are unable to do so successfully. Along with seminars about education, vocational instruction, employment and housing, the program holds movie nights and youth resorts to build bonds between youth, adults, and their families.

Celia Serkin can be contacted at (301) 412-3604 or emailed at [cserkin@mcfof.org](mailto:cserkin@mcfof.org).



Celia Serkin informs the audience about transitioning to adulthood.

Photo by Claire Yu

Melissa Egan is the Vice President of Partnership for Extraordinary Minds. Also known as xMinds, the partnership was founded in 2009 to unite parents, professionals, and educators to advocate for improved education. Completely parent-run, the members consist of families, educators, and adults with autism who share a common goal of empowering parents to be effective educational advocates for their children.

xMinds holds many events including monthly speaker talks at the Silver Spring Civic Building; Annual Extraordinary Minds events; clinics about the IEP every October, where attorneys and other experts to answer questions from parents; a Parent Panel

every May; and a monthly newsletter about their events and services. To learn more about the many events upcoming soon, visit <https://xminds.org/>.



Melissa Egan tells the audience about the organization and her feelings as a parent of a son with autism.

Photo by Claire Yu

