

**A REPORT ON THE STATUS OF THE  
JULIA R. MASTERMAN  
LABORATORY AND DEMONSTRATION SCHOOL**

**Effects Of Recent School District of Philadelphia  
School Selection and Other Changes**



Masterman Blue Dragons

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Prepared by the Masterman Home and School Association based on extensive research, parent surveys and community input.

## Table of Contents

<b>I. INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>II. REPORT OVERVIEW.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>III. STATE OF MASTERMAN SCHOOL .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>SECTION A: BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT .....</b>	<b>7</b>
1. Origin, Mission, and Size .....	7
2. Masterman’s Model for Success .....	8
3. Need and Efforts to Improve Diversity.....	11
<b>SECTION B: CURRENT CHALLENGES .....</b>	<b>16</b>
1. Mission and Identity Crisis .....	16
2. Effects of randomized admission process on the academics.....	20
3. Effects of randomized admission process on school culture .....	28
4. Curriculum and Policy Changes .....	32
5. Trust and Communication .....	37
6. Community Voices: A plurality of voices from the community .....	39
7. Impact on Other SA Schools with Pathways .....	44
<b>IV. RECOMMENDATIONS .....</b>	<b>48</b>
<b>V. CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>51</b>

# I. INTRODUCTION

The Julia R. Masterman Laboratory and Demonstration School is being systematically dismantled. Long established academic pathways have been severed and the school has been split in two. The long history of rigor and enriched curriculum is fading. The identity of the school and its purpose and mission are in disarray, leaving a fractured community.

Over the last decade, Masterman has consistently been ranked among the highest performing schools in the country while also being one of the most diverse. Additionally, about forty percent of its students are economically disadvantaged. Many come from immigrant families. Masterman has served its community by offering students from diverse backgrounds the opportunities they required to make meaningful progress in their advanced educational trajectories. Those hallmarks of a Masterman education are disappearing at the school.

With the dramatic changes to the school selection process for the 2022–23 and 2023–24 academic years, Masterman has had to jettison its own eighth graders and welcome new students across all grades. The school now has a student population with a much wider array of talents and needs for support as compared to previous years. The community has wholly welcomed new students and families, but the requisite staff and resources to support all students have not been made available to the school.

Specifically, benchmark assessment scores are down—way down—just midway through this year. Experienced, award-winning teachers are struggling to accommodate students with a much wider range of preparation and ability. Masterman’s relatively small size is not well suited to accommodating this broader range of academic needs, especially at the high school where all classes offered are honors courses. This situation is not serving children at any level in the school: gifted and talented students who need accelerated learning are receiving less, students in the middle are not being elevated, and students who need remedial assistance are struggling while awaiting additional supports.

School leadership continues to make curricular and staff changes that are causing exasperation and despair in the classroom and the community. The stark, new reality has already started to alter the calculus for many families, both current and prospective, regarding Masterman’s fit for students with advanced academic needs and aspirations. Student, teacher and community morale is at a low point as the school struggles to serve the academic needs of all its students.

Another far-reaching ripple effect of the new school selection process has been to sever the middle school from the high school. Contrary to longstanding practice, school leadership’s new stance is that the middle school should not prepare students for high school differently than other district middle schools, since most students will be departing after grade 8. What once was a successful 8-year longitudinal pathway has been destroyed. The school community is devastated at the loss of so many middle school graduates being cast away from our community when they want to remain here. This new discontinuity of the longitudinal pathway has catalyzed a range of long-term policy decisions that are degrading the middle school education.

Likewise, with the vast majority of 9<sup>th</sup> graders now admitted from other schools, the high school cannot count on special preparation or above-grade-level proficiency as it did in the past, so its offerings and instruction, too, must be adjusted. The overall effect is to ask less of, and deliver less to, a group of

Philadelphia’s most promising students. Masterman in the past was a thriving ecosystem of students, teachers, parents, and staff working together to serve the particular needs of advanced learners and propel them toward promising college experiences. We offer this report in the spirit and hope that the district will work with us to repair this and reverse these trends, which are further detailed in the sections below.

### **Why does this matter?**

The District has expressed a commendable intention to improve every school. That must include “high performing” schools as well: the goal must be for *all* ships to rise with the tide. Second, Masterman’s fate matters because with 50 years of experimentation and evolution, it’s one model of institutional experience and learning that might be studied, replicated and expanded. That might mean building other schools with a comparable mission and curriculum or expanding Masterman itself. But more importantly, Masterman serves as a model of how a clear mission and a commitment to school community over a long learning pathway can pay off.

The school district’s vision for the future conveyed in the Transition Plan is to pursue a world-class education in Philadelphia and raise the level of instruction for every child across the city. The small but crucial role of “Mastermans” in this vision is to educate the highest-achieving students, nurture future citizens, and leaders—and to stand as a symbol of the inherent good of intellectual development and aspiration. It is the place where students go who will commit to and prioritize academic challenges and independent learning. It is a place for students who do not thrive in slower-moving educational settings. By examining the experiences of a few Philadelphia’s magnet schools like Masterman, the District can preserve and improve current models of success and create new schools dedicated to the right fit for a distinct set of self-selecting students. This report calls upon the District to support a strategic re-set at Masterman in the larger milieu of its magnet schools, as part of its strategic plan, and recommends possible paths forward.

## II. REPORT OVERVIEW

Masterman was founded as a middle school to offer an accelerated curriculum to academically advanced students in 1958. In 1976, it expanded to include a small high school in order to provide an opportunity to continue such advanced learning for the most dedicated students. Over time both middle school and high school have expanded, but, until this year, the two schools were deeply interconnected in terms of longitudinal learning pathways, shared pedagogy and priorities, and shared space, faculty, and administration—an arrangement that was fundamental to Masterman’s model of success.

Masterman has been constrained by its physical facility with a sizeable middle school offering and a very small high school program, and its image in the city grew beyond its capacity. Demand grew, and with it, right-minded calls for more equitable access. Although the student body was diverse in many ways, in the most recent decade it lacked an appropriate proportion of Black and Brown students. During the 2020–2021 school year, a new admissions process was put into place as a first-line remedy, and found some real success in increasing the number of Black students entering 5th grade and 9<sup>th</sup> grade in Fall 2021.

With the randomized process carried out in 2021–2022, that improvement was lost. There was no significant increase in diversity; indeed, for some minority groups, access was reduced. In addition, following the first round of randomized admissions, data shows that the students who entered fifth, sixth, and ninth grades were markedly less prepared for the accelerated curriculum than earlier classes.

During the same time as the school was adjusting to new need for wider differentiation within the classroom, other elements of curriculum appear to have been diminished. These include availability of world language instruction, accelerated math pathways, and enriching electives. These changes compound the sense on the part of students and parents that Masterman’s essential mission of advanced learning has been intentionally abandoned.

In the moment of all of these difficult changes, the school has also experienced an increasing gap in communication and shared expectations between parents and students on one hand and the administration on the other. Increasingly parents and administration feel at odds with one another and struggle to find common priorities.

### Sources of this Report

The Masterman Home and School Association (HSA) embarked on a listening campaign to hear from parents, students, and teachers about what they want from the school. We also listened to parents and school leaders across the city speaking about what they want from the special admissions selection process. We drew data from SDP, school, and state reports to create a portrait of where Masterman came from, where it is now, and would like to articulate our informed opinion on what direction it should move in. We offer specific recommendations for how to restore Masterman’s integrity with a clear mission and effective means of reducing demographic disparities in education.

### Desired Outcomes

This report raises many urgent questions for Masterman school leadership and the School District of Philadelphia (SDP), with the pressing request for constructive discussion and outcomes that best serve

current students, and continued evolution of an accomplished institution in serving future students where equity, fairness, and excellence are honored. Our broad aims are:

- SDP and School Board leaders learn of the need for a strategic re-set at Julia R. Masterman Laboratory and Demonstration School as part of the District’s strategic plan.
- SDP reaffirms its commitment to magnet schools in general and to Masterman’s unique mission in particular.
- SDP provides additional support to Masterman to maintain and renew commitment to past success despite current challenges.

More specific proposals are laid out in our Recommendation section. In short, we suggest that the SDP and school leadership immediately implement policies and actions necessary for Masterman to continue as a connected middle school and high school serving academically talented students with accelerated learning, while increasing access.

Those policies and actions include:

#### Fix the Selection Process

- End the lottery selection and restore a human touch to the process.
- Restore some priority to Masterman MS students.
- Establish selection criteria appropriate for academically talented students to participate in an accelerated program.
- Establish task force to place all the children who lost all their lotteries in acceptable magnet schools.

#### Increase Access

- Move Masterman to a larger building and increase the size of the high school class.

#### Dare to Be Excellent

- Restore World Language in a continuous path from MS to HS.
- Provide additional resources to address wider array of talents currently in the school.
- Stop all curricular initiatives that serve to diminish educational opportunities for any students.

### III. STATE OF MASTERMAN SCHOOL

#### SECTION A: BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

##### *1. Origin, Mission, and Size*

- The Julia R. Masterman Laboratory and Demonstration School was founded as a middle school in 1958 to offer an accelerated curriculum to academically advanced students with a cohort size of approximately 180 students per grade.
- The introduction of magnet schools was part of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century efforts to desegregate large urban schools, specifically “to achieve voluntary desegregation through parental choice rather than through student assignment by offering specialized instruction and innovative academic offerings.”<sup>1</sup>
- Masterman was established with the purpose of educating students that showed academic promise in grades 5-9.
- Beginning in 1976, Masterman expanded its program by accepting a select group of 30 students from Masterman’s 9<sup>th</sup> grade (of approximately 180 students) to continue their advanced learning for 10<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grades.
- In 1979, the first class of 30 students graduated from Masterman High School.
- In order to offer the advanced high school experience to more students, in 1990, the school increased the number of students from the middle school from 30 to approximately 100. At this time the school was reorganized as a middle school for grades 5-8 (instead of grades 5-9) and a high school serving grades 9-12 (instead of grades 10-12).
- Since 1990, the school has maintained the following approximate cohort sizes by grade:
  - 5<sup>th</sup> grade: 160 students
  - 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grades: 190 students
  - 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grades: 100-120 students.

##### High School Admissions:

- The constraints of building size and capacity has always limited how many students can continue on to complete the 8-year program.
- The 120 Students accepted into 9<sup>th</sup> grade had to meet the high criteria established by the School District and demonstrated by their performance at Masterman middle school.
- The small size of the cohort from 9<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grades at Masterman necessitated that all admitted students from the middle school could participate at the same accelerated level.
- The experience at Masterman middle school helped to prepare students for these high expectations and demands of the accelerated curriculum.
- Very few students were admitted from outside of Masterman into 9<sup>th</sup> grade prior to the 2022-23 school year.
- Prior to the new school selection process via lottery for Fall 2022, the School District always maintained that Masterman middle school students had “priority” for HS admissions, as

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<sup>1</sup> <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/advancing-integration-equity-magnet-school> Is-report#:~:text=Magnet%20schools%20are%20public%20elementary,instruction%20and%20innovative%20academic%20offerings

stated in writing in the Fall 2021 high school profile, “Priority for admission given to Masterman’s current 8<sup>th</sup> grade students.”<sup>2</sup>

- The written promise of priority admission into the High School was rescinded, without notice, to all current 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students plus all of last year’s 8<sup>th</sup> graders, totaling approximately 720 families who chose to matriculate at Masterman, at least in part, based on this promise. Regardless of one’s race, gender, or economic status, the written contract outlined by the School District of Philadelphia was broken.

## **2. Masterman’s Model for Success**

- For the 8<sup>th</sup> grade students who didn’t continue on at the school, the advanced academic experience prepared and made them extremely competitive to attend and succeed at other selective Philadelphia high schools.
- The impressive college admissions and academic achievement record of Masterman’s graduates and the school’s ranking can be attributed to the rigorous scaffolded learning, enrichment opportunities and progressive course offerings through the 8- year program of a carefully structured curriculum and student experience.
- Success of students may also be attributed to the high standardized score cutoff used as criteria for selecting students, and with competition for seats, the selection of students typically exceeding by far minimal cutoff criteria.
- Students learn in an overcrowded building where all resources, including teachers, are shared across the school; especially from 7<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grades. Teacher’s familiarity with students across all grades helped inform cohort preparation and planning for their HS journeys.
- Teaching resources and staff have always been shared under one roof, and under one administration.
- Student participation in middle school clubs (i.e. debate, robotics, and chess), the music program (i.e. orchestra, choir, and the musical), and athletics (i.e. basketball, ultimate, and track), begins in middle school under the peer mentorship of high schoolers and students then enter the high school eager to assume leadership roles in their extracurricular interests.
- The limitation of physical space and sharing of teacher resources along with the implementing of a World Language 1 course starting in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, and Advanced Math track starting in 7<sup>th</sup> grade (both programs have been eliminated from 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade curriculum) made rostering courses at Masterman complicated, with few degrees of freedom to modify.
- The model of an extended preparatory program preceding a 4-year HS program has been used as a formula for success in other district schools. Carver (6-year program), GAMP (8-year program) and SLA Beeber (intended at an 8-year program with first graduating 8<sup>th</sup> grade cohort this year who were required to enter the lottery.)

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<sup>2</sup> The School District of Philadelphia High School Directory Fall 2021 Admissions, page 48 under “Additional Requirements” <https://www.philasd.org/studentplacement/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2020/09/HS-Directory-2021-for-web-2020-09-17.pdf>



## Academic Pathways that were possible due to an 8-year program

### *Advanced Math Path:*

- Until 2020, all students were on the same accelerated track, with the exception of math, in which highly advanced students could place into an even more advanced track (this was eliminated in 2020).
- The advanced track created an opportunity for students to take Algebra 1 in 7<sup>th</sup> grade and Algebra 2 in 8<sup>th</sup> grade.
- This track was offered to about one-third of students based on a placement test and was not a student choice, though students testing into the advanced track could opt-out to take the standard track.
- More students placed into the advanced track than space available resulting in a waiting list for Algebra 1.
- The advanced math was over-represented with White and Asian students.
- This advanced track was eliminated in 2020.
- While not accelerated in comparison to many US school districts, the continued offering of Algebra 1 in 8<sup>th</sup> grade was a strong lure to many families, as a component of the accelerated curriculum.
- Some families cite their students in grades 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> as being “bored” by the current math curriculum.
- At a recent Language Townhall meeting, administration shared that the Algebra 1 criterion for HS admissions might be removed as many schools in the district did not offer it in 8<sup>th</sup> grade and it was inequitable to have a criterion that would limit access for district students to attend Masterman HS.

### *World Language Program:*

- There was a robust and structured five-year study opportunity in French and Spanish, also considered an essential part of the “accelerated curriculum”, as this is not commonly offered in middle schools in the Philadelphia School District.
- Previously, Latin was taught as early as 5<sup>th</sup> grade with a focus on culture and mythology. Language study in French and Spanish started in 7<sup>th</sup> grade with half a year each of introductory Spanish and French for each student, so they would be familiar with both languages to make the course selection of a full language 1 course in 8<sup>th</sup> grade.
- Students were instructed in Spanish or French from 8<sup>th</sup> grade and went through the progression of language 1, 2, 3, and 4 until 11<sup>th</sup> grade and could take an AP Course in 12<sup>th</sup> grade in either language.
- Dozens of Masterman students in 8-12 grades were recognized annually in the Le Grand Concours French language competition; likewise in the Spanish equivalent.
- Language mastery provides an important distinction in applying to colleges and opens access to more college options.
- In 2022-23 a full world language course offering was eliminated for 8<sup>th</sup> graders.
- A parent petition objecting to this diminution of 8<sup>th</sup> grade curriculum resulted in a 2 day a week Chinese enrichment course for 8<sup>th</sup> graders.

- The AP French offering was in jeopardy for the year 2022-23 and students had to advocate for themselves with school and school district leadership to retain that course offering.
- The French 4 and AP French offerings are still in jeopardy for the next school year.

Masterman's academic success and rankings:

- In 2022, Masterman ranked #10 nationally for High Schools in the US News and World Report and has ranked #1 in the City of Philadelphia and the State of Pennsylvania for many years consistently.<sup>3</sup>
- While the process and criteria of the ranking itself means a lot to some and seems inane to others, it's still a laudable achievement that Masterman has consistently placed above its peers, even in the far better funded suburban schools.
- Whether the rankings are justifiable or not holistically, they still provide some evidence of Masterman's success as an 8-year program for academically advanced students.
- 5<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade students at Masterman learn how to embrace their uniqueness. They learn to thrive in a place where their individual interests – no matter how specific or awkward – are encouraged rather than squelched. This is largely a product of the fact that the 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> graders are supportive. They remember feeling overwhelmed by the overflowing classes on the second floor, and they empathize with and encourage the younger students in the building.
- Masterman has functioned as an 8-year community since the school expanded 40 years ago, and this single unit is one of advanced academic expectations as much as it is one of social acceptance. Most high school teachers also teach 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> grade, and the skills and content taught at the middle school levels are an introduction to their high school classes.
- In 2022 Masterman produced 19 National Merit scholars, 3 more than the total of all other Philadelphia schools, including independent schools. Of the other 16, four of those scholars graduated 8<sup>th</sup> grade from Masterman.<sup>4</sup>
- Between 2016 and 2021, Masterman produced 105 National Merit scholars and 15 National Hispanic Scholars.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.usnews.com/education/best-high-schools/national-rankings>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.inquirer.com/news/national-merit-semifinalists-pennsylvania-new-jersey-philadelphia-20220914.html#loaded>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.philasd.org/masterman/wp-content/uploads/sites/25/2021/01/Masterman-Profile-2020-2021.pdf>

### **3. Need and Efforts to Improve Diversity**

The number of Black and Brown students has declined over the last decade at Masterman. Many factors have been cited for the decline ranging from a lack of transparency in the admissions policy at Masterman, to the district's removal of race-identifying information for 5<sup>th</sup> grade applicants beginning in approximately 2015, to the complete absence of measurable diversity goals for the school until 2021, a rapidly growing Asian population in the last census decade, to the District's culpability in not achieving its own objectives for preparing more Black and Latinx students in the elementary school system.

#### A Word About Disparities, Standardized Test Scores, And Grades

Disparities in group performance, particularly at the "top" of the performance distribution, challenge notions of diversity. More pointedly, when school selection is based on the relative performance of one student vs. another, then criteria used (i.e., test scores, grades, attendance, or other measures) are critical. Disparities have been and still are rife among racial and ethnic groups in Philadelphia, with no indications of abatement.

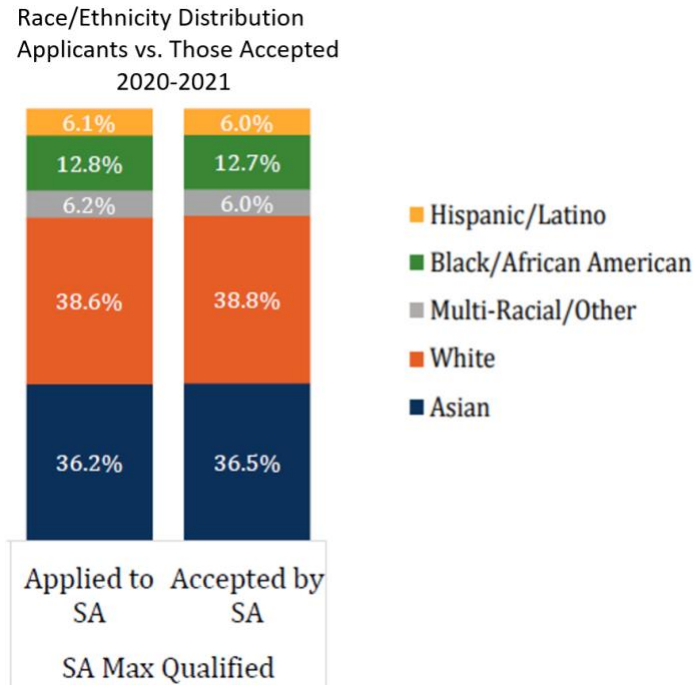
The SDP continues to use grades and standardized test scores as indicators of individual and school performance, and for selection criteria for many schools. We have chosen to also use this information in this report, recognizing potential imperfections, but believing they provide a sufficiently strong signal to forward arguments. We are also sympathetic to possible criticisms.

As a necessary accompaniment to elevating the overall quality of performance of students in the district and eliminating disparities, we would ask that the SDP prioritize the following: A study and report on the underlying measures used to define and monitor student and group performance and disparities. To do this, for example, the SDP could commission an independent study of biases in its students' grades and standardized test scores, perhaps proposing new or composite measures in the process.

Our hope is that these steps would improve the accuracy of measures used in the future and allow SDP to correct biases where needed, for example, in school selection. The determination of who will thrive in a particular academic setting should be determined with test scores as one component, and not the only component. As further explication, because standardized tests have known biases, correction factors might be applied when those students compete with other students for school positions. Such correction factors are already used in "boosting" a student's grade point average when they enroll in honors classes, for instance. These and undoubtedly other steps are essential to a just and equitable approach to school selection.

Race distribution of top decile of student applicants to SA schools in 2020-21

According to the SDP statistics for the year 2020-2021, almost 100% of all SA Max Qualified<sup>6</sup> applicants were admitted to Special Admission schools. The race distribution of the top decile showed that only 12.8% of the students were Black and 6.1% were Latinx; by contrast, White and Asian students each represented more than 35% of the students who qualified.



- The school and the SDP must expand opportunities and access for more students of color that meet criteria to attend Masterman.
- There is a need for a strategic and deliberate process to identify and recruit students by addressing the barriers they encounter.
- This would be better conducted through a concerted, informed effort rather than through chance (i.e., lottery) and unpredictable zip code prioritization.
- In the year 2021-22, Masterman conducted interviews with qualified students for 5<sup>th</sup> grade admissions. To date, the highest increase in percentage of Black and Latinx students of any cohort at Masterman came from that process.
- The lottery admissions provided no significant changes in demographics.

New school selection process

Many Black and Latinx students at preparatory middle schools that qualified for admissions to the high school are denied opportunity for advancement through the lottery. Like other students, the process displaces students of color from schools that were a good fit for them. Both this year and last, some qualified students are denied selection at *any* criteria-based

<sup>6</sup> SA Max is an SDP designation previously used in its reports, and can be roughly thought of as the top 10% of students in the city based on academic performance.

school. It is estimated that on the order of 5% of Black and Latinx students were affected in this way both this year and last.

What demographic changes resulted at Masterman from the new selection process?

- For the 2021-22 lottery-based selection process for the 2022-23 academic year, the grades in which the largest number of new students enter - 5<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> - had virtually no change in students of color.
- 5<sup>th</sup> grade and 9<sup>th</sup> grades combined saw a net increase of 2 students of color: This reflected an increase of 5 Black/African American students and a *decrease* of 3 Hispanic/Latinx students.

The largest change in students of color for total Masterman matriculants seems to be based on an increase in 6<sup>th</sup> grade of Black/African American students; explanations, including possible zip code priority effects and qualified applicant pool composition, are still wanting. The figure below highlights changes for 5<sup>th</sup> grade, most notably indicating an increase of 20 students of color in 2021-22, as a result of the prior school-based selection process. It also indicates for 2022-23 a net increase of 15 White students in 5<sup>th</sup> grade, through the lottery-based school selection process, as compared with the prior year.

**Figure A. Masterman 5<sup>th</sup> Grade Racial/Ethnic Composition 2017/18 to 2022/23.**

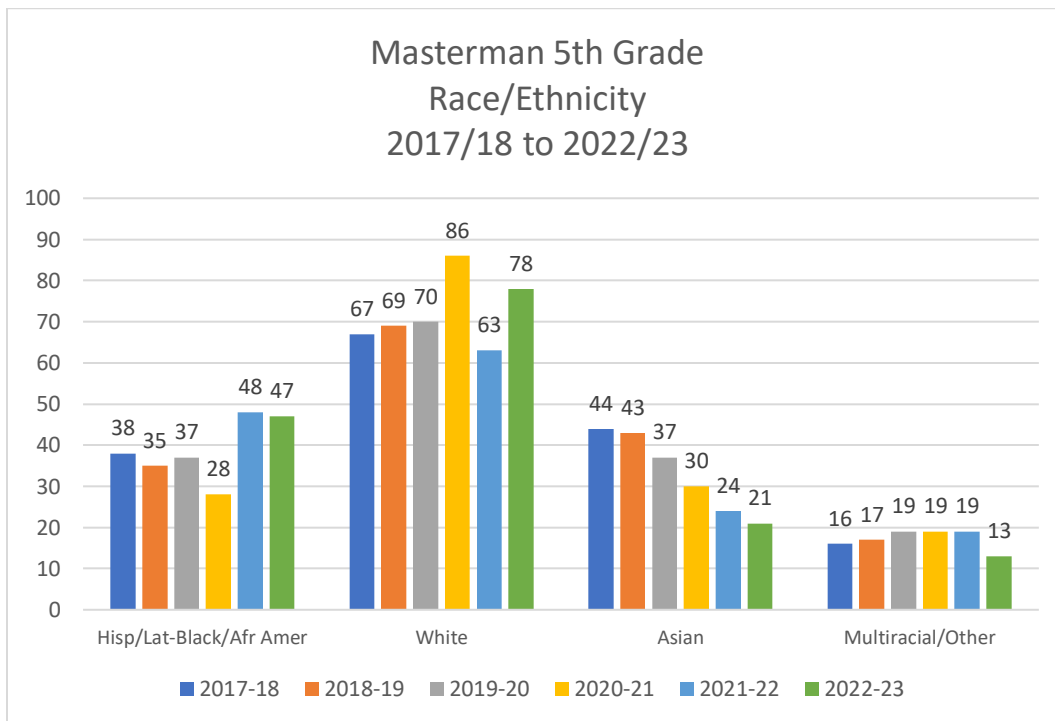
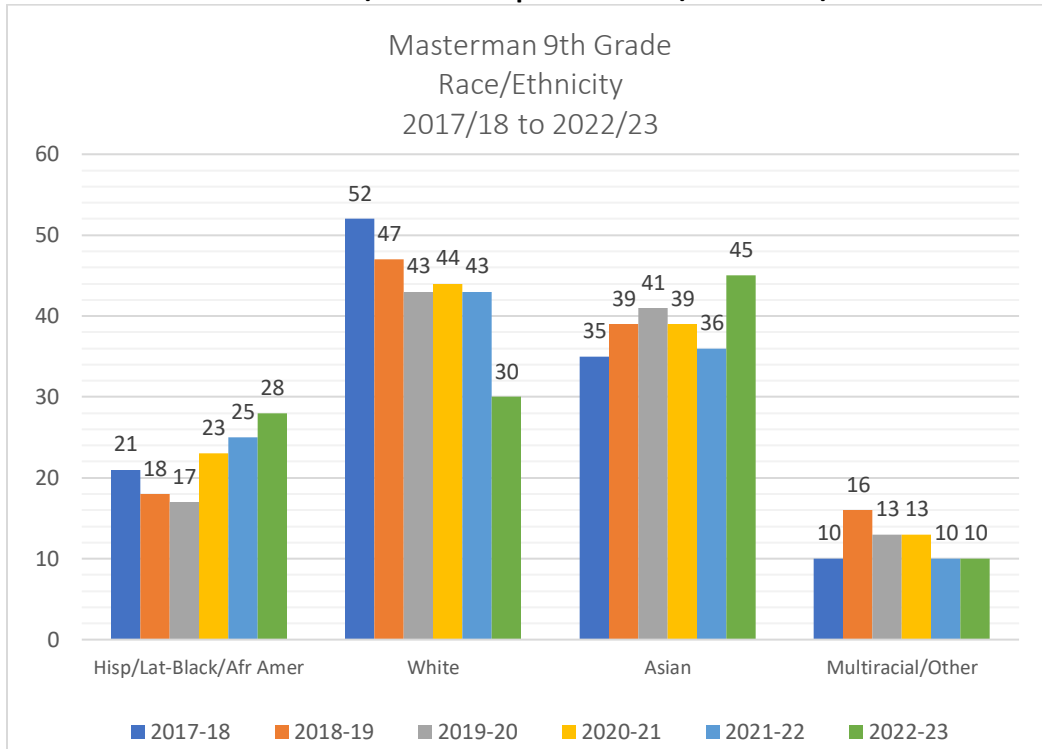


Figure B highlights changes for 9<sup>th</sup> grade, indicating a net increase of 3 students of color in 2022-23 as a result of the lottery-based school selection process. It also shows a decrease of 13 White students and an increase of 9 Asian students.

**Figure B. Masterman 9<sup>th</sup> Grade Racial/Ethnic Composition 2017/18 to 2022/23.**



PEW Study Findings

The 2017 study by the Pew Charitable Trusts’ Philadelphia Research Initiative<sup>7</sup>, which tracked the 2015-16 9<sup>th</sup>-grade class identified some of the underlying issues affecting the entry of Black, Latinx, special ed., and ESL students to SA schools concluded that:

*“The School District of Philadelphia operates a system with a wide range of high school options, led by the special admission schools, which include the system’s highest-performing institutions. The makeup of incoming students at these schools differed in 2015-16 from the ninth grade as a whole. Latinos, students receiving federal poverty aid, boys, and African-Americans were less numerous at these schools than in the ninth grade overall, while Asians and whites were more numerous. There were disproportionate numbers of black and Latino students, low-income and special education students, and English language learners at neighborhood high schools, most of which have comparatively low standardized test scores, high dropout rates, and fewer college-preparatory course options.*

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.pewtrusts.org/-/media/assets/2017/09/pri\\_getting\\_into\\_high\\_school\\_in\\_philadelphia.pdf](https://www.pewtrusts.org/-/media/assets/2017/09/pri_getting_into_high_school_in_philadelphia.pdf)

*Admission to high-performing schools in Philadelphia is based largely on academic performance, including standardized test scores. But boys, whites, Latinos, students living in poverty, and special education students were less likely to apply to special admission schools even when they met the minimum academic criteria. And rejection rates for students with advanced math and reading PSSAs were higher for blacks, Latinos, and students receiving poverty assistance. Among admitted students, more blacks and Latinos did not show up for class when their ninth-grade year began. Nearly half of black and Latino students who were admitted to but did not attend special admission schools and programs instead attended citywide or neighborhood schools; 24 percent never enrolled in a public school in Philadelphia.”*

The study found a number of issues relating to the enrollment of students of colors in Magnet schools and the choices they make and the barriers in their path. The new selection process does not address all of them. To attain the diversity goals we have set ourselves we need a comprehensive approach and make a concerted effort to address these myriad issues. A randomized admissions process does not take into consideration individual impediments. Reports and analysis of the PEW study in the media<sup>8</sup> in 2017, acknowledged that even though Masterman did not have adequate representation of Black and Latinx students; it was one of the more diverse and integrated schools in Philadelphia.”

The Missed Opportunity as a Result of the Lottery

The Pew Study data regarding the lack of admittance of qualified Black and Latinx students suggests greater diversity can be achieved through targeted research, while maintaining high standards at Masterman. These results are disappointing, but it provides The School District of Philadelphia a great opportunity to create a minority outreach unit that can focus their time and energy on developing relationships with schools across the city and work together in making prospective students of color aware of Masterman and discussing the potential benefits of their enrollment. This would align with the mission of equitable access.

**Students Demonstrating Proficient and Advanced Performance 2021-22 PSSAs**

	ELA		MATH	
	Proficient	Advanced	Proficient	Advanced
<b>3rd Grade for 5th Grade Admissions:</b>				
Black/African American (not Hispanic)	634	32	258	66
Hispanic (any race)	378	39	180	72
<i>Subtotal Black/African American + Hispanic</i>	<i>1,012</i>	<i>71</i>	<i>438</i>	<i>138</i>
<b>7th Grade for 9th Grade Admissions:</b>				
Black/African American (not Hispanic)	979	177	162	51
Hispanic (any race)	491	97	98	46
<i>Subtotal Black/African American + Hispanic</i>	<i>1,470</i>	<i>274</i>	<i>260</i>	<i>97</i>

<sup>8</sup> <https://philadelphia.chalkbeat.org/2017/9/13/22186408/pew-report-highlights-disparities-in-high-school-selection-process>

## SECTION B: CURRENT CHALLENGES

### 1. *Mission and Identity Crisis*

Until August of 2022, the Masterman mission statement was prominently displayed on the school web site as:

*“Masterman is a multicultural welcoming community of learners that engages academically talented students in grades 5-12 in advanced intellectual study.”<sup>9</sup>*

In September 2022, school administration removed the mission from the school web site and the Community Handbook<sup>10</sup> without notification or explanation to the school community. It has resurfaced, and then disappeared again, with significant and evolving modifications through early January 2023 in different sources, most notably the removal of language that Masterman offers an “accelerated curriculum.”

A mission statement is obviously vital to the operation of any institution. As simply and eloquently framed by the Colorado Department of Education, it is used “to describe their founding purpose and major organizational commitments—i.e., what they do and why they do it.”<sup>11</sup> It is also vital as an advertisement and recruitment, drawing families, in the case for Masterman, from all across the city. On the basis of the school’s stated mission, hundreds of families sought out Masterman and enrolled their students with the expectation that this mission would continue to reflect the school’s work and curriculum— and further, that any substantive changes would only happen through a deliberate process in conjunction with the School Advisory Council (SAC) to ensure participation by all community stakeholders. At a minimum reasonable expectation, families anticipated that any material changes to the mission of their child’s school, would be implemented in a timeline that afforded families the necessary lead time to decide whether the school would still be the right fit for their student and make placement decisions accordingly.

Rescinding the mission statement, combined with the curricular changes underway, signals to many that school leadership is departing from the purpose and commitments families previously understood at the time of enrollment. Mission statements are deserving and needing of periodic review; however, changing a mission statement without public discourse or communication, leaves a school community confused, disconnected, and disillusioned. As a parent stated at the December SAC meeting, “This isn’t what we signed up for.”

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<sup>9</sup> This statement was developed at least a decade ago through an inclusive and extensive community process that included parents, teachers, and others.

<sup>10</sup> It has since been replaced by various statements, and as of January 14, 2023, it reads as follows: “The mission of the school is the pursuit of excellence in both teaching and learning.”

<sup>11</sup>

<https://www.cde.state.co.us/cdechart/newschoolworkbookbootcamp#:~:text=A%20mission%20statement%2C%20or%20simply,and%20why%20they%20do%20it.>





To the utter astonishment of many teachers, families, students, and alumni, the motto “Dare to Be Excellent” was replaced on the school’s seal (or crest) with “Middle & High School,” in an apparent decision made unilaterally by administration, without communication or input from school stakeholders.

School leadership’s perplexing approach to communicating about the mission statement’s disappearance and revision has caused considerable angst and confusion and to many families, indicating an identity crisis. Undoubtedly, some of this was put in motion by changes to the school selection process by the School District. These changes announced in the fall of 2021 for the 2022-23 academic year precipitated a cascade of events at Masterman that has challenged school leadership and consternated many members of the community.

A few consequences are now becoming apparent to the Masterman school community:

- 1) There is no longer a continuous eight year “advanced intellectual study” program for students at Masterman.
- 2) The criteria for admissions for the 2022-23 academic year were significantly lowered and students are now requiring intervention supports. It is uncertain how criteria for the 2023-24 admission will affect student cohorts and their respective needs.
- 3) The promise of an accelerated curriculum in middle school is being eliminated.
- 4) The Middle School and the High School now have a tenuous connection and even disconnected objectives. While they happen to be in the same building, that they are now functionally distinct undermines both the academic program *and* the sense of a single, unified community.
- 5) Parent engagement is at risk with less commitment to the school when the 8-year pathway is eliminated.

*“If the Middle School is no longer affiliated with the High School and is being stripped of “advanced intellectual study,” what exactly is the Middle School’s mission? What should a parent who puts their child as young as 10 years old on SEPTA to attend this school understand that their child is getting in return?”* —HSA Survey Response from Masterman Parent

#### Challenges to the mission, identity, and functioning of Masterman

- The middle school no longer serves to prepare students for its rigorous high school program.
- Highly qualified 8th grade Masterman graduates, including students of color, have been denied entry into Masterman and in some cases entry into any magnet school.
- Only 33% of this year’s (2022-23) 9<sup>th</sup> grade class attended Masterman middle school.

About eighty percent of Masterman 8<sup>th</sup> graders went to other high schools for the 2022-23 school year. Preliminary results from school selection for 2023-24 suggests that percentage of Masterman 8<sup>th</sup> graders remaining will decrease even more.

- There are some students in 9<sup>th</sup> grade for whom Masterman was not their first choice and for some, it was their only option; in the past, this was not the case.
- Many Masterman 8<sup>th</sup> graders who graduated both last year and this year have been placed in schools that wasn't their first choice, even if that choice was not Masterman.
- Discussions with administration since the change in the selection process reveal that the impetus for recent changes to the math, world language and other programs were instituted to account for this separation of the Middle School and High School.
- As most 9<sup>th</sup> grade students are coming from other schools, school leadership has communicated that it does not want to advantage Masterman middle school students over these students. Following this rationale, the middle school curriculum "needed" to be redesigned.

This underscores three major problems with the current system:

- 1) The Middle School curriculum and instruction are being modified for students with a wider range of preparedness and abilities.
- 2) even though the Middle School and the High School are now effectively two separate schools, they have only one administration with unavoidable tactical and resource conflicts, because the interests of the students in the two school are not aligned; and
- 3) as a result of numbers 1 and 2, families are confused about the mission, functioning and the viability of the Middle School.

The totality of changes has raised existential questions about the future of Masterman for current and prospective families. It calls into question what is the *purpose* of the Middle School. This question – the continued *purpose* and function of the Middle School – has been repeatedly raised in many SAC and Town Hall meetings but has never been answered.

#### *Questions for school and district leadership:*

- School leadership is modifying the academic operation of the school in a manner that is inconsistent with the historic mission. Members of the community voice the desire to preserve Masterman's mission and its curricular implementation. How does the district's strategic plan and vision for magnet schools inform reconciliation of this rift?
- Until last year Masterman was a school for academic talented students who studied a variety of subjects including world language and the arts that prepared them for a college education in science, liberal arts or the arts. School leadership has expressed the vision of narrowing the school's focus, most recently as a STEM school. Is the district supportive of such a change in vision for and alteration of curricula at Masterman?
- What are the principles and best practices that school leadership should use to modify the mission statement prior to altering courses and personnel at the school? How much input and guidance will the district contribute to this process? What role do parents, students and teachers have in this process?
- Does the district intend to preserve criteria-based schools that function as schools for high academic achieving students?

## Six Months and Six Mission Statements

- This was the mission statement that was in the handbook for the last several years.<sup>12</sup>  
*"Masterman is a multicultural welcoming community of learners that engages academically talented students in grades 5-12 in advanced intellectual study.*
- August 2022 School Web Page<sup>13</sup>  
*Mission & Approach to Learning: Masterman provides an accelerated, enriched curriculum for academically talented students who are interested in a college preparatory experience. Masterman's motto is "Dare To Be Excellent." To that end, students participate in a rigorous academic program supported by a wide range of co-curricular activities. At Masterman, academic and personal growth take place in a genuinely diverse community. Our students learn in and from this diverse atmosphere, truly experiencing and honoring the differences. Masterman promotes not simply tolerance, but the rich possibilities for individual and community growth.*
- Also August 2022 School Web Page<sup>14</sup>  
*Masterman School is a multicultural, welcoming community of learners that engages academically talented students in grades 5 through 12 in advanced intellectual study.*
- Oct 2022 School Web Page<sup>15</sup>  
*The Julia R. Masterman Laboratory and Demonstration School is a middle and senior high school serving culturally diverse, academically talented students in grades 5-12*
- November 2022, HS Directory for 2022-23 School Selection.<sup>16</sup>  
*Mission & Approach to Learning: Masterman provides an accelerated, enriched curriculum for academically talented students who are interested in a college preparatory experience. The Masterman motto is "Dare To Be Excellent." To that end, students participate in a rigorous academic program supported by a wide range of co-curricular activities. At Masterman, academic excellence and personal growth take place in a genuinely diverse community. Our students learn in and from this diverse atmosphere, truly experiencing and honoring the differences. Masterman promotes not simply tolerance, but the rich possibilities for individual and community growth. We are committed to fostering an inclusive learning community that equitably meets the needs of every student.*
- November 29, 2022 School Web Page<sup>17</sup>  
*The Julia R. Masterman Laboratory and Demonstration School is a middle and senior high school serving culturally diverse, academically talented students in grades 5-12. We are a special admissions school. Our students come from all regions of the city primarily from public schools, but also from non-public schools.*
- January 14, 2023 School Handbook.<sup>18</sup>  
*"The mission of the school is the pursuit of excellence in both teaching and learning."*

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.philasd.org/masterman/wp-content/uploads/sites/25/2019/10/2019-20-Masterman-Student-Handbook.pdf> <https://www.philasd.org/masterman/wp-content/uploads/sites/25/2018/03/17-18-Student-Parent-Handbook.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> <https://masterman.philasd.org/about-us/at-a-glance/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://web.archive.org/web/20220419191816/https://masterman.philasd.org/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://masterman.philasd.org/about-us/>

<sup>16</sup> <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1VLOHCzf2Elm2r4PYMWlyTnlirwqiOeTt/view>

<sup>17</sup> <https://masterman.philasd.org/about-us/>

<sup>18</sup> <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1p9iD7C38sYeJA3zceHnvma8e8YoroLBJwxTnPjKq63c/edit>

## 2. Effects of randomized admission process on the academics

### Impact of selection criteria on classroom instructional needs:

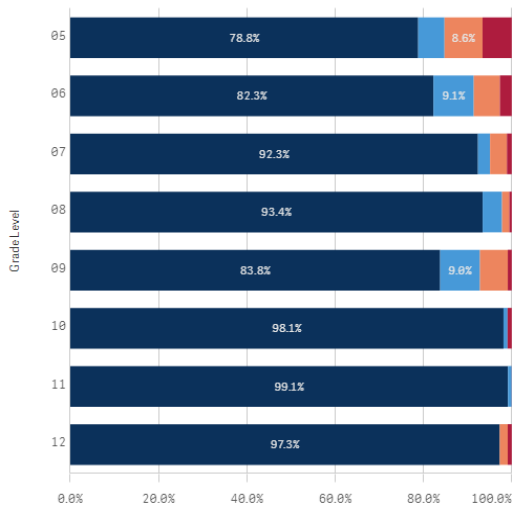
For the first time in its history, Masterman is faced with a much wider array of student talent, abilities, and learning styles in classrooms, necessitating new approaches to differentiated instruction and additional resources to address the immediate needs of its students. The stratification of ability is significant and poses unprecedented challenges for maintaining an accelerated curriculum. The array came about not because of the lottery per se, but because the reduced criteria for eligibility and the absence of any interim supports and tools to assist students in preparing adequately for the rigorous accelerated curriculum at Masterman.

Without PSSAs, the school selection criteria for current 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grades were limited to at least Bs (during one of the two previous academic years, one of which was virtual) and 95% attendance. There was no other assessment or interview, as had been conducted the prior year. There was no behavior requirement.

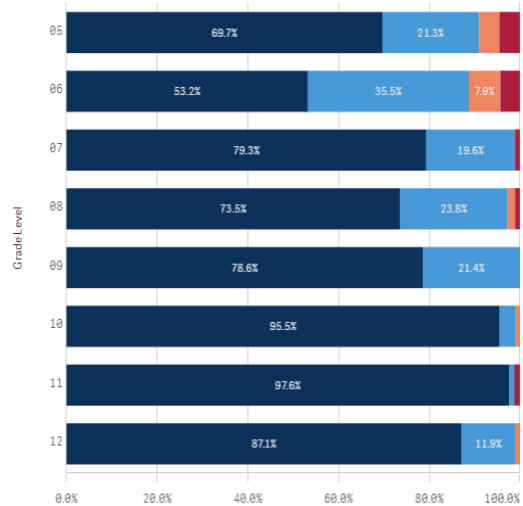
Criteria for current 9<sup>th</sup> grades was revised from As and Bs in 7<sup>th</sup> grade to As and Bs using the better of grades between 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grades, (meaning a student could meet criteria with all Bs in 6<sup>th</sup> grade and all Cs in 7<sup>th</sup> grade). There was no PSSAs due to COVID (previously at 88% minimum). There was no behavior requirement. The 95% attendance requirement continued. The writing test was implemented with a minimum score of 22 with the highest possible scaled score of 30. The world language requirement was eliminated. SDP stated priority for Masterman middle school students was eliminated.

### Students are below Grade Level in Reading and Math

**Reading Results by Grade**  
Star, Gr. 5-12, Fall 2022-2023



**Math Results by Grade**  
Star, Gr. 5-12, Fall 2022-2023



■ At/Above Benchmark 
 ■ On Watch 
 ■ Strategic Intervention 
 ■ Intensive Intervention

- In reading, approximately 22%, 18%, and 16% of all 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, and 9<sup>th</sup> graders, respectively, have been identified with scores that indicated below grade-level proficiency.
- In math, approximately 30%, 47%, and 21% of all 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, and 9<sup>th</sup> graders, respectively, have been identified with scores that indicate below grade-level proficiency.
- A significant portion of students in 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grades have also been identified for strategic or intensive intervention in reading and math.
- Students admitted to other grades through the lottery this past year are also experiencing academic challenges. This is more than is typical for Masterman students who were selected through more rigorous entry criteria, as evidenced by the relatively low number of students below grade level in grades 7-8 and 10-12.

### Implications for Masterman

- In November 2022, a beloved 6<sup>th</sup> grade classroom teacher was reassigned to address the academic needs of students in 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade, across 11 sections, who required immediate ELA intervention. It is unclear how math intervention is being administered.
- Despite the influx of students with a greater stratification of abilities, the school has not received any supplemental supports to students for the rigor and instructional pace of the curriculum; and, in some grades, it has necessitated a slower pace of instruction.
- The 9<sup>th</sup> grade cohort also has a wider array of needs beyond settling into a new school. Parents of new 9<sup>th</sup> grade students have expressed concern over the lack of appropriate tools to help their students acclimatize and succeed in this academically challenging environment.
- The removal of behavior criteria for admissions criteria has also brought in a new set of challenges as well as safety concerns for students and classroom management.
- There has been a marked increase in serious incidents and suspensions (see page of the Mid-Year Data Report).
- Today, the student body needs (both advanced and struggling students) have increased, and the school does not have the necessary resources to address them.

### Questions for school and district leadership:

- Will next year's school budget for Masterman provide for more resources for intervention and supports for students who require them, without additionally diverting resources from other programs?
- Is a summer program to support current students that require supports under consideration for ELA and math?
- What is the plan to expand the bridge program to give incoming students who need additional help the supports they need to increase their readiness for the next academic year?
- Is there a plan to provide additional resources to students who have educational plans that require more rigorous academic options?

Reinstating PSSA scores – understanding what it means to change from 88% to 80%

- While the SDP has reinstated PSSAs as a requirement for admission for 2023-24, the criteria for the 80<sup>th</sup> percentile correlates to a level of proficiency that may continue to pose challenges for teaching an accelerated curriculum to all students. The 80% percentile correlates to the following levels of proficiency<sup>19</sup>:

PSSA Score	For Incoming Grade	Subject	80% Percentile Score	Corresponding Proficiency Level as Determined by State of PA
3 <sup>rd</sup> Grade	5 <sup>th</sup> Grade	ELA	1037	High End of Proficient Range (1000-1142)
		Math	1009	Low End of Proficient Range (1000-1109)
7 <sup>th</sup> Grade	9 <sup>th</sup> Grade	ELA	1077	Middle of Proficient Range (1000-1129)
		Math	972	High End of Basic (904-999)

For context, if the criteria were to reflect only advanced students, the percentile threshold would need to be increased to the following criteria:

PSSA Score	For Incoming Grade	Subject	Advanced Score	2021-22 Percentile in Philadelphia
3 <sup>rd</sup> Grade	5 <sup>th</sup> Grade	ELA	1143	95%
		Math	1110	93%
7 <sup>th</sup> Grade	9 <sup>th</sup> Grade	ELA	1130	89%
		Math	1109	94%

*Questions for school and district leadership:*

- What degrees of freedom does Masterman have in defining criteria for the next school selection process to ensure that the school can meet the needs of all its students with optimal resources and ensure a positive school climate?
- It appears that changes to selection processes were made by the SDP without sufficient analysis on how individual schools would be affected. How will the district reconsider processes for the next school selection cycle, given the consequences already documented for Masterman and other schools?
- Will the school district consider the ability of its students to compete in the global workplace in establishing its criteria?
- How is district planning to provide educational opportunities for its students to compete against graduates from well-funded private and suburban schools for college admissions?
- How will district students gain admission to the top colleges without access to required World Languages and math proficiency?

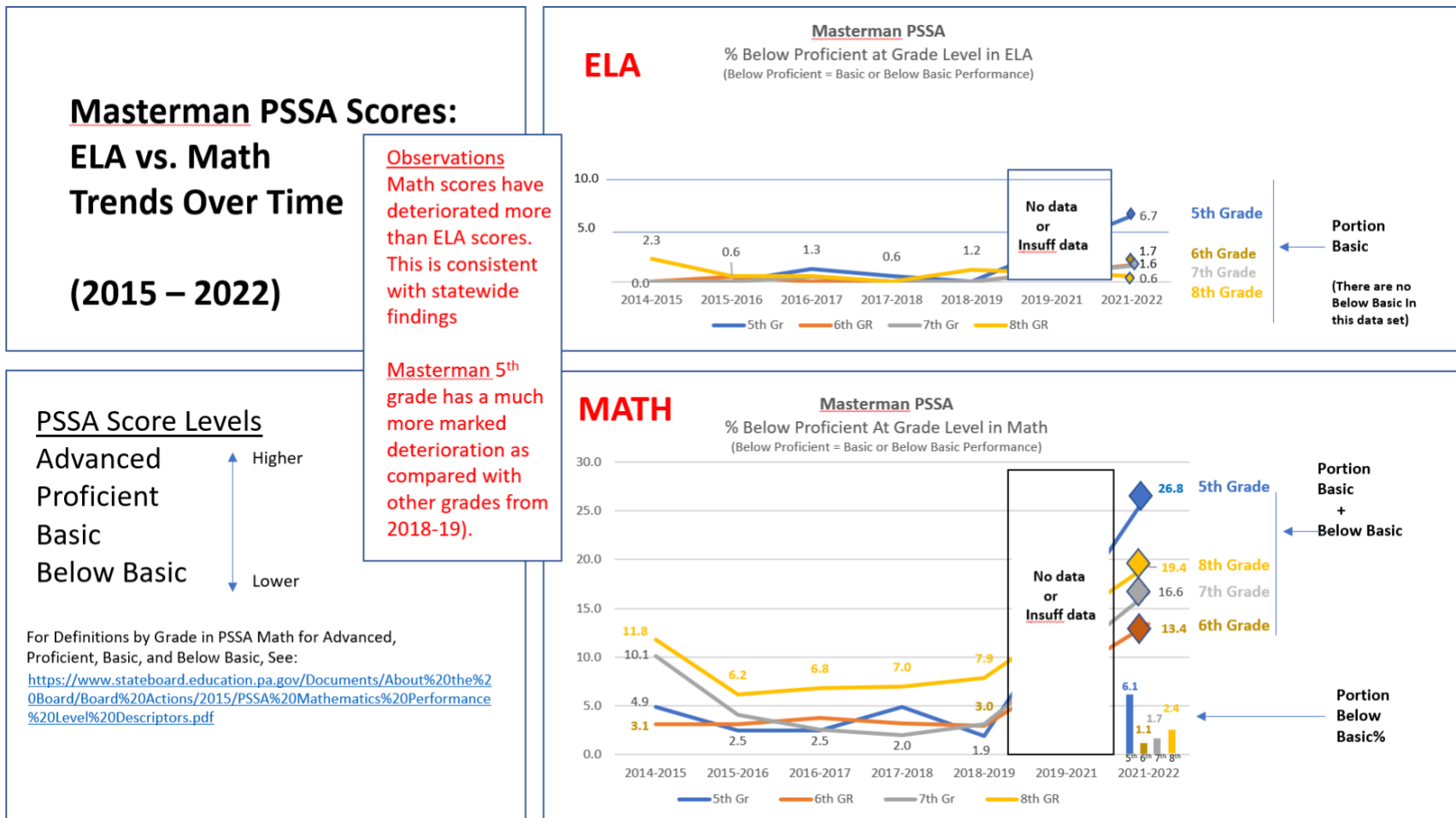
<sup>19</sup> Scale Score Ranges Prepared by the Pennsylvania Department of Education and Data Recognition Corporation and the School District of Philadelphia 2021-22 Percentiles, Division of Evaluation, Research, and Accountability, September 12, 2022.

### Effect on changes on standardized test scores and school ranking

Masterman's ratings as the #10 school nationally is based on data from 2015-2019 (SAT scores and AP courses taken). The number of AP options at the school is being diminished and general appetite for academic rigor from the student body is also diminished from the selection process criteria. Decline (independent of COVID learning loss) may already be showing up in the data, and will appear in the coming year.

- The change in the Masterman selection process in 2020-21 for 2021-22 5<sup>th</sup> graders may have had an effect on the readiness for the demands of Masterman, and performance as reflected in PSSA scores from spring of 2022.
- The figure below indicates relatively stable PSSA scores for Masterman students going back to 2015. With resumption of PSSA testing in 2022, there was a marked increase in the % of students performing below Grade Proficiency for Math in all grades; reflecting a nationwide trend. However, the degradation in performance was most marked for 5<sup>th</sup> grade students (26.8% performing at the Basic or Below Basic level in 2022, as compared with 1.9% in 2019).
- Learning loss due to COVID is one possible explanation, but change in admissions and the absence of PSSA percentile qualifications is another. This drop in performance could have implications for teaching burden immediately and for the progression of and curricular progression for this cohort throughout middle school and high school.

Figure C. Masterman PSSA Score Trends Over Time.

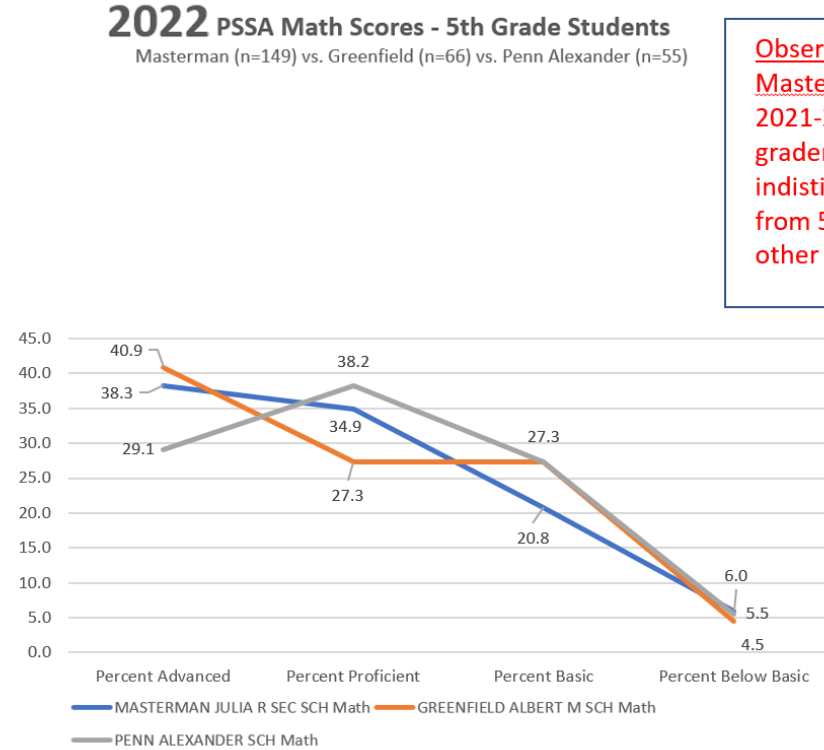
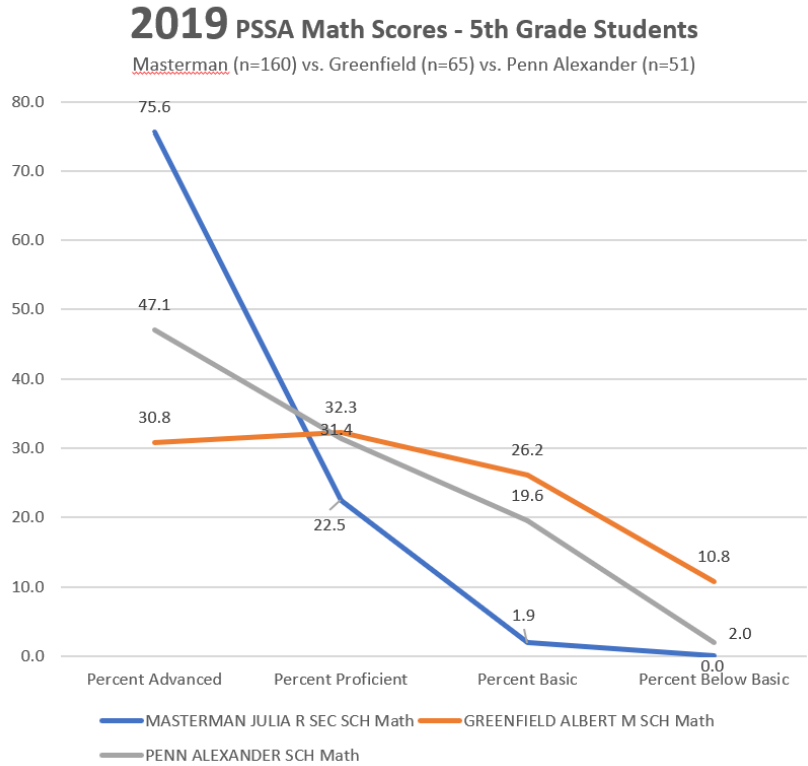




The drop in performance of 5<sup>th</sup> grade students and its possible effect on Masterman’s identity as a top “magnet school” can also be examined by comparing performance with 5<sup>th</sup> graders at other schools.

- The figure shows Masterman 5<sup>th</sup> grade student Math PSSA scores in 2019 and 2022, compared with 5<sup>th</sup> grade students at Greenfield and Penn Alexander.
- In 2019, 75.6% of Masterman students were Advanced in Math Scores, as compared with 47.1 and 30.8% of their peers at these other schools; as well, only 1.9% of Masterman students were Basic or Below Basic, as compared with 38% and 21.6% of their peers.
- In 2022, Masterman 5<sup>th</sup> grade students were indistinguishable from their peers across the range of Math PSSA performance.

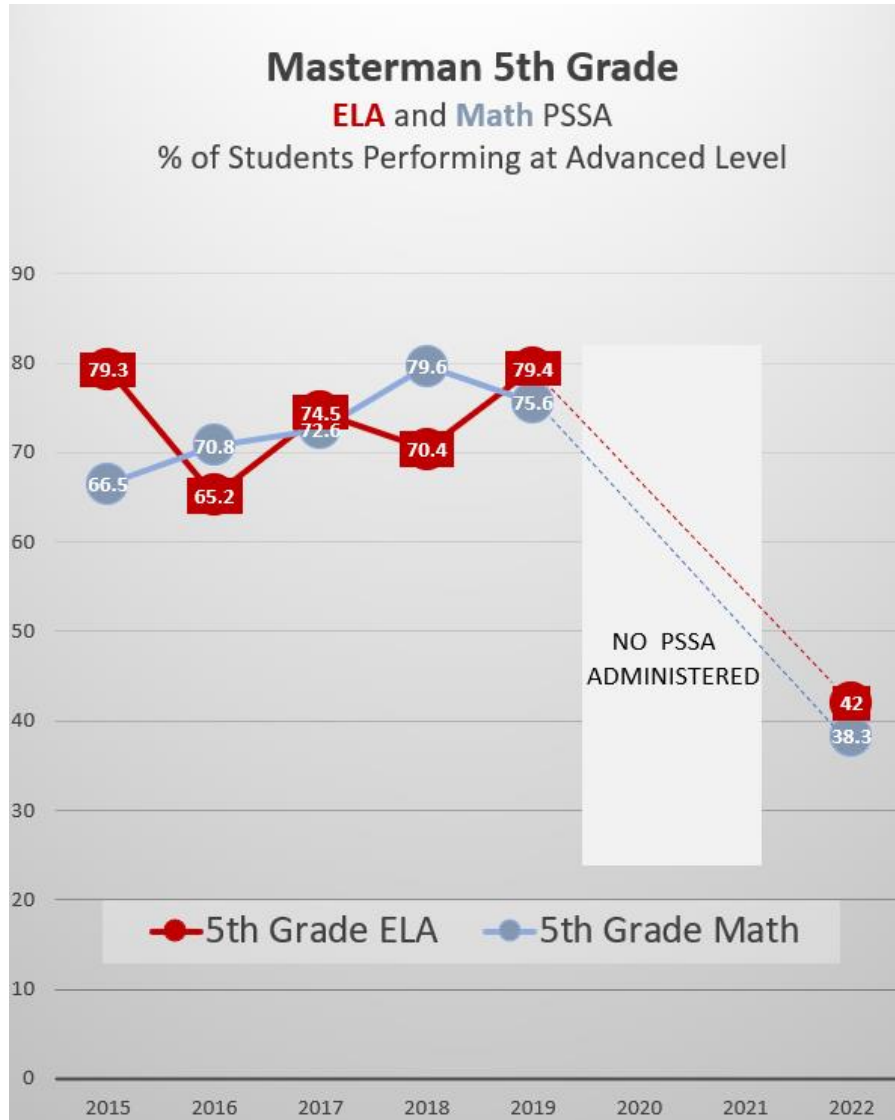
Figure D. 2019 and 2022 Masterman 5<sup>th</sup> Grade Students PSSA Math Scores.



**Observations**  
Masterman  
 2021-2022 5<sup>th</sup>  
 graders, are  
 indistinguishable  
 from 5<sup>th</sup> graders at  
 other schools

The change in performance for Masterman 5<sup>th</sup> graders can be additionally illustrated by the trend of *Advanced* performance of cohorts in PSSA ELA and Math. The percentage of 5<sup>th</sup> grade students achieving Advanced dropped in half for both in 2022. Whereas in 2019 7-8 out of 10 students performed at this level, in 2022 only 4 of 10 did.

Figure E. % Of Masterman 5<sup>th</sup> Grade Student Achieving Advanced on the PSSA.



**Questions for school and district leadership:**

- What is the plan from school leadership to ensure that current Masterman students (particularly 7<sup>th</sup> graders) have the required knowledge and test taking skills to take the PSSAs this year (half of all 7<sup>th</sup> graders did not have a math teacher for many months last year and a third of them did not have an ELA teacher this year)?
- When will the students have access to the test prep materials that the school acquired back in November 22?

### **3. Effects of randomized admission process on school culture**

#### Erosion of morale and community in middle school:

**Takeaway:** The removal of the 8-year program opportunity for a majority of the middle schoolers has led to the disenfranchisement of middle school students, particularly 8<sup>th</sup> graders whose future in the district has become uncertain and the possibility of ending up in a school that is not a good fit.

#### *8<sup>th</sup> Grade Cohort:*

- When Masterman students left for high school it was predominantly to Central High and other top schools in Philadelphia where they were a good fit.
- Masterman middle schoolers did not ever have the risk of ‘not going’ to the school of their choice, after four years of an advanced rigorous curriculum, if they chose to leave or were not admitted to Masterman’s high school program. Today, a stellar student of color from Masterman can end up without a spot in any of the 5 special-admit choices on their application. Last year, 7 Black and Latinx students were in this position. (unverified survey of 8<sup>th</sup> grade graduates 2021-22)
- The 8<sup>th</sup> graders at Masterman no longer know if they will have a future as a community member. There is no investment in their success from school administration as part of this community in sharp contrast to other school administrations all across the city advocating and supporting their graduates to seek and find the right fit.
- This change of status from a guaranteed spot in a top school of your choice for high school if you maintained your academic and behavior record to the luck of the draw when it comes to high school admissions has wreaked havoc to the future prospects for Masterman middle school graduates in the City of Philadelphia. This causes a high level of anxiety for both students and their families. Consistent and supportive acknowledgment of this from school administration has been lacking.
- Instituting disruptive changes to school selection in the fall of 2021 just as students were returning to in-person instruction and struggling with mental health and social trauma from the pandemic, was deemed by many to be nothing less than cruel.
- The message received about lottery-based school selection, was that high academic achievement no longer mattered. The perceived sea change in this messaging resulted in distrust of the “establishment” and “adults.”
- Frantic students and families with no lottery offers and no advanced learning options, feel unsupported and hear messaging from the School District and some school staff, to “go to private school” or “you’ll always have your catchment school.” This is perceived as uncaring, detached, disdainful, and even hostile.
- The cumulative toll of changes has added even greater challenges for under-resourced families.

#### *Impact on rest of middle school:*

- Student attrition rates are the highest they have ever been at Masterman. New students were admitted into nearly every grade this school year. In the past most students

stayed.

- The elimination of priority for middle school graduates to high school has in effect eliminated the purpose of the MS, and divided the MS and HS communities.
- Changes implemented this year reveal that an accelerated curriculum is no longer a priority for MS as it does not serve the purpose of the HS.
- If Masterman middle school does not offer an accelerated curriculum and is not a feeder school to the high school and the students who graduate have no guarantee of being accepted into a criteria-based HS because of the lottery admissions, this drives down the desirability of the MS.
- The continuous erosion of an academically challenging environment for students who need it, and the elimination of World Language studies and advanced math track raises questions about why families would choose Masterman over a neighborhood school. Would families opt to put their 9- and 10- year students on public transportation in an unsafe city for a school very similar to their catchment schools?

#### *Questions for School and District Leadership:*

- While the District is currently focused on improving academic achievement throughout the city, the future of students who have consistently demonstrated academic excellence is left to a gamble. What are the educational and societal implications of leaving to chance high performing students' access to academic programs that are the right academic fit for them?
- The district and the school are focused on raising standards for students who are lagging, while the aspirations and needs of students who excel academically and need an advanced curriculum are not met. Will the district leadership provide resources to address both types of students?
- The SDP's 'Find Your Fit' mission and campaign to educate and align students to a variety of SA schools in the district that are unique in the purpose and mission was a successful one that led the students to high schools that were a good fit for them. How does student satisfaction and success from the different selection processes compare?

#### Risk of erosion of teaching staff:

- The growing needs and concerns of the changing student community at Masterman and the challenges that come with it are directly felt by the teaching staff.
- 'Demonstration' certified teachers who excelled at what they did must now adapt and change their assignments and teaching methods to address the varying abilities and needs of students with limited resources.
- While most teachers can and do do their best, lack of additional support to address specific challenges combined with the erosion of student expectations and academic curriculum creates additional stress.
- The community is concerned about the risk of losing its great teachers to better funded and safer districts/schools and the subsequent risk of not attracting stellar demonstration qualified teachers as it did in the past.
- The departure of the chair of the World Language department last year coincided with the elimination of 8<sup>th</sup> grade language instruction along with AP French in 12<sup>th</sup> and French 2 in 9<sup>th</sup> grades (essentially eliminating the French pathway); and with the decision to place the language program on hold for a year without consideration of how it would affect the student's language study progression.

- More curriculum changes and stoppages might result in more teacher attrition to better-funded and safer districts/schools.

#### Questions for school and district leadership:

- How might the community, following school administration's lead, take steps to ensure that our great teachers are recognized and retained?
- Given the high attrition rate among teachers nationwide, what is the district and school leadership doing to retain this exceptional cohort of professionals who have dedicated their careers to academic excellence?
- Has the district studied or engaged with teachers to understand how the change in admissions criteria is impacting their work?

#### Dismantling of a Delicate Ecosystem

**Takeaway:** Masterman's curriculum, rostering system, and academic success, were facilitated by the continuation of middle school students into the high school; disruption of this continuity and the accompanying changes to selection criteria have upended planning with cascading effects on the curriculum and instruction.

- Masterman by design meet the needs of academically advanced students, most of whom, progressed through an 8-year program.
- Teaching resources and staff have always been shared throughout the overcrowded school under one roof, and under one administration.
- The space limitation makes the high school cohort a very small one, and rostering students across the school with shared teachers is a delicate operation with many moving parts.
- This worked well before when Masterman students were prioritized for 9<sup>th</sup> grade admission, because of the systematic progression of courses and similar academic and course needs for each cohort.
- The new school selection process has already led to dismantling of the carefully structured 5-year world language program with 2 language offerings leading all the way to an AP course.

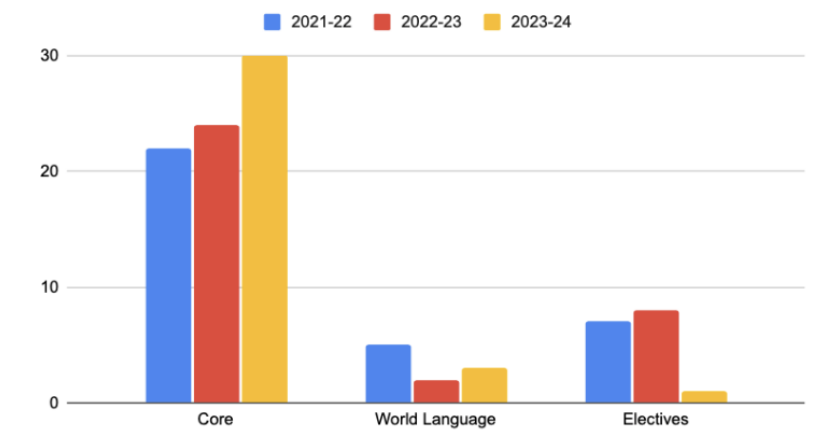
#### Proposed New Schedule Further Dismantles Masterman Curriculum

- Recently, school leadership stated that Masterman 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders' schedule did not comply with the required minimum instructional minutes per day as per the requirements of the State of Pennsylvania. It was shared with HSA leadership that students would need to be scheduled for double periods of Math and ELA each day (90 mins each) in 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades and that 8<sup>th</sup> graders would have to give up their electives such as gym, art and music if they want to take a language course. In 2021-22, 8<sup>th</sup> graders at Masterman took 5 periods of Spanish or French in addition to 7 other electives each week. The proposed schedule would allow for just 1 elective in addition to 3 language classes each week if a WL experience is introduced in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. (See next page)
- Furthermore, a new 7 period schedule for the whole school is currently under review for implementation next year. This would eliminate options for daily electives and language classes for all middle schoolers. The enriched curriculum with opportunities to participate in

multiple activities that used to be the hallmark of the Masterman experience will no longer exist.

- The schedule of 8 periods for both MS and HS, where the high schoolers had ‘options’ in the last period was instituted more than 30 years ago as a solution that worked for both MS and HS until this year. Administration informed the community that the district had deemed that that practice was not in compliance with district policy.
- As a magnet middle school Masterman has always offered its students a rich elective curriculum of not only language arts, math and social studies enrichment but also multiple periods of gym, art and music each week for MS. A weekly guidance period that facilitates peer counselling offered by high schoolers and the participation of MS students in band during one eighth period every week ensures access for all students and enriches the student experience.
- This purposefully crafted and scheduled enriched curriculum is under the risk of completely being eliminated by the proposed sweeping changes to adopt a new 7 period A-B schedule for the next academic year for both HS and MS which would eliminate the rich electives like gym, music and art education on a weekly basis and undermine the quality of education for middle schoolers and make Masterman middle school less desirable.

Proposed Changes to Masterman 8th Grade Curriculum



Proposed Changes to Masterman 7th Grade Curriculum

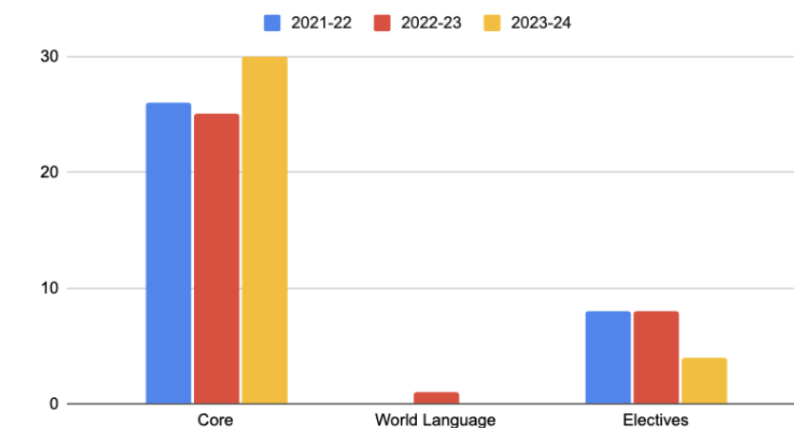


Figure above shows the distribution of core, world language and electives for 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades for 2021-22, 2022-23 (current year) and the proposed schedule for 2023-24 for an

**8-period a day schedule.** Administration is revising schedule for these grades to follow PA state minimum instructional requirements for core subjects. There is another proposal to switch the school to a 7-period schedule which will reduce the time for electives by another 7 slots.

*Questions for school and district leadership:*

- School leadership has and continues to make changes that have widespread school and school district effects; the District has promised to audit this process and they may look very different next year. How might the SDP continue to reform incrementally the magnet school system by studying more carefully the local effects of systemic changes, thereby preventing drastic and sudden disruptions? This report is offered as one data point.
- What will school leadership do to seek and utilize institutional knowledge/memory, study best practices, and garner and honor community input to evolve operations to ensure student and community preparation for curricular and academic transitions?
- What is school leadership’s accountability for honoring past promises and community input regarding curriculum and schedule changes?
- What are federal, state and Philadelphia requirements for course time? Specifically, could the district clarify if all 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders in the district including the ones in magnet schools are required to take 90 minutes of ELA, 90 minutes of math, 45 minutes of science and 45 minutes of social studies daily and 45 minutes of health each week? Please confirm that it is possible for any school, including magnet schools, to get a waiver from the State of Pennsylvania<sup>20</sup> for the required minimum instructional minutes for core subjects?
- Could the district clarify why the past practice of several decades – the use of the 8<sup>th</sup> period as “options” for the high schoolers was not in compliance with district policy?
- Does district policy support the removing access to gym, art, music and digital literacy at schools that have the required staff to teach it?
- Has the District policy in support of flexible scheduling in schools that have both middle and high school communities that share resources changed? (Our initial research indicates that other criteria-based schools like Masterman are on an 8-period schedule with some flexibility built in to accommodate the needs of MS and HS students.)

#### **4. Curriculum and Policy Changes**

Dismantling of World Language Program: direct consequence of removing language criteria

**Takeaways:**

- The defined five-year language pathway was one of the hallmarks of programming at Masterman.
- The removal of a World Language course credit as a criterion for admission to 9th grade at Masterman combined with subsequent decisions made by Administration has effectively demolished the advanced program in just one year.
- 8<sup>th</sup> grade language course was eliminated.
- French Course progression was eliminated.

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<sup>20</sup> <https://www.education.pa.gov/Teachers%20-%20Administrators/Federal%20Programs/Pages/EdFlex.aspx>



- Access to French 4 and AP course for qualifying students in grades 10 and 11 uncertain.
- Starting 2023-24 only 4-year language study will be possible for any student. It has been stated that students will skip Spanish 4 and have the option go directly from Spanish 3 to AP; which is not ideal.

#### **Elimination of French Pathway:**

- French 1 offering eliminated in 8<sup>th</sup> grade.
- French 2 offering was eliminated in 9<sup>th</sup> grade. Students who had already had a year of French language instruction were placed in Spanish 1.
- Elimination of AP French announced and reversed after advocacy for Class of 2022-23
- Students currently in French 3 (10<sup>th</sup> graders) and French 4 (11<sup>th</sup> graders) have no guarantees if the next course in their progression will be offered next year per the last SAC meeting on Dec 21.
- There is no more French instruction for incoming students even though all the promotion material to prospective applicants states in writing that there is a French program leading to AP.

#### **Dilution of Spanish Pathway:**

- Spanish 1 offering eliminated in 8<sup>th</sup> grade.
- 3 out of 4 sections of current 9<sup>th</sup> graders are now in Spanish 1 and no path to AP Spanish has been laid out by administration for this cohort; which requires 5 years of study in most school systems.
- In the absence of a Spanish placement test it is unclear what options were provided for new incoming 9<sup>th</sup> graders who already had prior instruction in Spanish.
- Only a portion of students from charter and district schools who had prior language instruction in Spanish were placed in Spanish 2 in 9<sup>th</sup> grade.
- There is no Spanish progression to AP for incoming students even though all the promotion materials to prospective applicants boasts of a Spanish program leading to AP.

#### **Implications for Middle School:**

- Neither Spanish 1 nor French 1 is offered to 8<sup>th</sup> graders, as it was for many years prior.
- This means Masterman 8<sup>th</sup> grade graduates will no longer be able to access an AP language course at Central or any other high school, severely curtailing those students' ability to progress to AP-level WL classes in other high schools without "doubling up" during High School.
- Instead, a Chinese enrichment experience is provided 2 days a week. This too was a result of advocacy and the serendipitous availability of a teacher in need of immediate placement by the district.
- Because the limited Chinese offering is being paid for by the district and is not part of the school budget, it is unclear what will be offered next year.

#### **Administrative decisions and community advocacy:**

- Last year, a French teacher's retirement, the removal of Language 1 course as a criterion for entry to 9<sup>th</sup> grade and the fact that two-thirds of 9<sup>th</sup> graders were from schools other than Masterman led to a series of decisions that precipitated a decimation of language studies at Masterman.
- Last year, the message to the school community from school leadership following the

teacher retirement was that the hiring of a new teacher for the vacant language position was to be put on hold for a year to gather community input. The suggestions of rehiring a French teacher, even for just a year-long contract to continue French instruction were rejected.

- This decision was followed by a robust petition campaign to administration and the district leadership by both parents and students that resulted in a Chinese enrichment course for 8<sup>th</sup> graders and AP French being restored; but the latter was offered only during lunch period for 12<sup>th</sup> graders when most club activities take place, and many students opted for club participation and enrolled in independent study for AP French.
- The Masterman community has repeatedly expressed its desire through surveys, petitions, and meetings (SAC and townhalls) to have a full language course for 8<sup>th</sup> graders; preferably, an option for language programming that would allow for continuation of instruction in that language through HS enabling an AP class in 12<sup>th</sup> grade.
- Another survey that was distributed on Jan 18<sup>th</sup> and another townhall scheduled for Jan 25<sup>th</sup> to address this issue (update on this at the bottom of section).
- At the last language townhall in November 2022 school leadership stated that the 8<sup>th</sup> grade full course would not return as it was inequitable because of the new school selection process whereby students coming in from other SDP schools would not have had access to language study in 8<sup>th</sup> grade; the counterpoint has been raised with school leadership that there are other SDP schools in addition to charter schools in Philadelphia that offer language 1 courses in 8<sup>th</sup> grade.
- School leadership has also suggested the removal Algebra 1 as a criterion for admission because it too is regarded as inequitable to SDP students.

#### **Administrative responses to reduced WL options:**

- At the last language townhall in November 2022, School leadership shared a plan that outlined that they would need seven language teachers (French and Spanish) to implement the same course progression that existed up to last year that was previously accomplished by just four language teachers.
- Recently, school leadership indicated that the schedule for past 8<sup>th</sup> graders at Masterman did not comply with the required minimum instructional minutes per day as per the requirements of the State of Pennsylvania, when it offered 5 periods of language instruction a week to 8<sup>th</sup> graders. It was shared with HSA leadership that students would need to be scheduled for double periods of Math and ELA each day (90 mins each) in 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades and that 8<sup>th</sup> graders would have to give up their electives such as gym, art, and music if they want to take a full language course. In 2021-22, 8<sup>th</sup> graders at Masterman took 5 periods of Spanish or French in addition to 7 other electives each week. The proposed schedule would allow for just 1 elective in addition to 3 language classes each week.
- Furthermore, a new 7 period schedule for the whole school is currently under review for implementation next year. This would eliminate options for daily electives and language classes for all middle schoolers. The enriched curriculum with opportunities and participate in multiple activities will no longer exist at the top magnet school in Philadelphia.

#### **Update from January WL townhall:**

- Administration announced that all 8<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> grade will receive French education every other day.
- The language pathway at Masterman will be four years of Spanish terminating in either

- language 4 or AP course based on student choice.
- No clarification for HS students in the current French pathway was shared for continuation of their language studies.

***Questions for school and district leadership:***

- What guidance for immediate implementation would the SDP provide about the elimination of full-world language offering to Masterman 8<sup>th</sup> grade students and the reduction of world language offerings throughout its high school?
- Does the school and district leadership support hiring a language teacher to the position that was put on hold by administration last year? Has this position been filled with a teacher for a different department? If so, can school leadership share the specifics with the school community? Has school leadership requested funds for additional language teachers for next year in the school budget?
- What role, if any, does the SDP play in decisions regarding Masterman’s World Language program?
- Can SDP leadership define and outline its priorities for course offerings at Masterman as a magnet school?
- Based on the priorities listed in the transition Report, will SDP leadership support and adequately resource Masterman to restore Language offerings both at the MS and HS level (i.e.) teaching staff, supplemental programs for catching up and summer programs?
- The consistent message from school leadership is that Masterman cannot offer anything more than other SDP schools because it is equitable and the has greatly affected the offerings and the desirability of attending Masterman MS. Does district leadership support this view?
- 8<sup>th</sup> grade students who have completed language 1 course requirements are eligible to take Language 2 courses at Central High. How is removing this course equitable to students who go to other high schools that require 4-year language study to take an AP course? (about 100 Masterman students are freshmen at Central this year)

**Devastation of the Music Program: an unintended casualty**

**Takeaway:**

Masterman’s music program, both vocal and instrumental, has long been a source of pride, with many students participating in the program. Changes to the selection process have decimated the program by removing the pathway for students from middle to high school, which lost 26 instrumental and 20 choir members from last year’s 8<sup>th</sup> grade.

**Accomplishments:**

- The High school music program is well represented in the All-City Band, Orchestra and Choir each year; typically, Masterman High School students hold principal chairs and have often won the Concerto Competition. This year, Masterman students hold the positions of Concertmaster, Asst. Concertmaster, Principal cello, Principal flute, Principal percussion and Principal harp. In the All-City Concerto Competition, Masterman students account for the winner and all three runners-up as well as two finalists this year.
- The Middle School music students contribute largely to the All-City program as well. This year, as in others, there are more Masterman students who made All-City than any other school; among their positions are Concertmaster, Principal 2<sup>nd</sup> violin, Principal flute,

Principal percussion and Principal cello. Masterman's vocal students were integral to this year's All-City Middle/Elementary choir festival.

- The Masterman high school groups play professional level music, including a full musical each year. The annual musical highlights the talents of students from 5<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grade, providing an important full community activity at the school.

**Program:**

- At Masterman, the classroom Instrumental Music Teachers (CIMTs) teach the students a once-a-week lesson on a rotating schedule from 5<sup>th</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> grade.
- After four years of lessons and participation in the MS music ensembles, the students develop proficiency by 9<sup>th</sup> grade.
- Some high school students take outside private lessons (mostly at SDP partner programs where students can get good training for a low cost), but most just visit the CIMT lesson teachers during their lunch or advisory when they need help on something. This system works as they already have 4 years of excellent training.

**Lottery Impact/Challenges:**

- Last year's 8<sup>th</sup> grade class had 28 instrumental music students. Only two of the 28 students from MS orchestra were chosen by the lottery to attend HS. There are currently only six 9<sup>th</sup> graders playing instruments at Masterman, mostly new music students.
- Only two of 22 students from MS choir were chosen by lottery as well.
- Many of the students who weren't selected by the lottery are now in schools without music programs or have left the district.
- In high school, the students can no longer be included in the lesson teacher's rotating schedules as their spots are filled with the incoming 5<sup>th</sup> grade students.
- At other high schools with instrumental music programs, the high school teacher teaches instrumental music lesson classes scheduled during the day. Due to budget cuts over the years, the instrumental music teacher is used all day to teach classes, so the teacher cannot provide the needed instruction to sustain a HS program where the incoming 9<sup>th</sup> graders have not had study in middle school.
- The concern is that if this trend continues, there will be a very small high school music program where one with highly proficient students flourished for so many years. The loss of opportunity to continue with a school music program for students that leave is also a concern.

*Questions for school and district leadership:*

- Is SDP aware that changing the dynamics of a school from an 8-year program of progressive learning and splitting it into two 4 year and eliminating pathways for mastery would diminish and shrivel up extra-curricular proficiency, opportunities and achievement?
- Will school and district leadership support the allocation of more CIMT resources to train HS students in instrumental music to sustain the HS music program?
- Could the school and district leadership advertise the musical opportunities in the HS directory for the year 2023-24 to attract students who already have proficiency to consider Masterman for HS?
- Is SDP aware and does it support the notion of academically advanced students with musical proficiency leaving the district after training them for 4 years by removing the possibility of

- going to a district HS where can pursue music study at an advanced level?
- Is the district aware that many of these students are being forced into high schools where there is no option to pursue music at all, because the lottery takes away their choices?
- How might the SDP and Masterman school leadership respond to preserve the Music Program at Masterman, and ensure opportunities for musically talented students who leave Masterman?

## **5. Trust and Communication**

### Erosion of Trust in School Leadership:

#### **Visions for Masterman middle school: school leadership vs teachers, and parents and students when they enrolled**

- Current middle school families see Masterman as a ‘magnet’ middle school where their student will pursue an accelerated curriculum along with an array of electives like music, art, gym and digital literacy.
- Current administration appears to view the middle school as no different from other neighborhood schools and has indicated the intention to not advantage Masterman Middle School students over peers at other schools for admission to Masterman High School.

#### **Curricular decisions with lasting academic ripple effects (i.e., WL) on the whole community**

- Decisions to remove full language course for 198 eight grade students this year despite overwhelming community consensus against this decision, resulting in community disenfranchisement.
- Every student currently enrolled in French (2022-23) still does not know if they can continue their language study in 2023-24.

#### **Divided priorities middle school vs high school**

- Leadership is looking to change the middle school schedule to a 7-period schedule that would greatly curtail the electives for middle school. These were an integral part of this accelerated program. The schedule is being considered as it better serves the high school.

#### **Communication and transparency re: events/changes that impact the school and student education**

- Missed opportunity to capitalize on Spring 2022 Community Engagement Survey (see Appendix for the Joint HSA-SAC survey with over 500 respondents).
- Voluminous feedback (more than 100 pages containing over 1300 comments) provided to school leadership in March 2022 covering community requests and concerns re: academics/curriculum, mission, world language, communication and transparency, with little evidence that leadership acted on this information a year later.
- Answers to direct questions often deferred and decisions or implications of decisions often insufficiently communicated.
- Multiple forums and input from parents and still seeking input.

## Parent/guardian ratings of school leadership in SDP survey (2021-22)

A new administration took over in September of 2021. As the figure below illustrates, this coincided with a large drop in ratings of Masterman School Leadership, as reported by the School District of Philadelphia. Masterman School Leadership ratings are compared with a few other schools; the average rating for city schools is also included. In 2021-22, Masterman had the lowest rating by far of any high school in the city, and the lowest ratings recorded for any high school in recent years. This also coincides with the roll out of the new selection process that affected all of these school leaders as well.

Figure H Parent/Guardian Ratings of School Leadership<sup>21</sup>

### Parent/Guardian Ratings of School Leadership 2018-19 to 2021-22 A Few Sample Schools and Average of All Schools School District of Philadelphia

Questions on the District-Wide Surveys are grouped into six key topics. Further, each topic is divided into more specific subtopics.

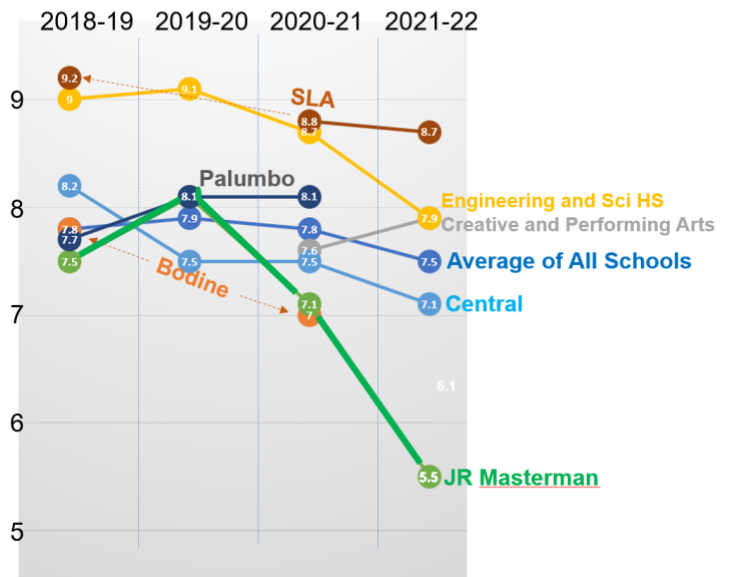
<b>School Leadership</b>	How school leaders manage their responsibilities, communicate, and perceive their level of autonomy.
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All question responses are scored on a scale from 0 - 10, where 10 is the most positive possible response. Topic and subtopic scores are calculated using these scaled scores.

**Questions Posed**

- Parent/Guardian: The principal or school leader is accessible to me.
- Parent/Guardian: The principal or school leader has a clear mission for the school.
- Parent/Guardian: The principal or school leader works to create a sense of community in the school.
- Parent/Guardian: The principal or school leader promotes parent/guardian engagement.
- Parent/Guardian: The principal or school leader has high standards for student learning.
- Parent/Guardian: The principal or school leader treats all students fairly.

Source: <https://dashboards.philasd.org/extensions/district-wide-surveys/index.html#/topics>



<sup>21</sup> <https://dashboards.philasd.org/extensions/district-wide-surveys/index.html#/topics>

## 6. Community Voices: A plurality of voices from the community

This new lottery-based selection process that the SDP put in place last year has innumerable unintended consequences for students, families and schools. Masterman HSA is collecting feedback on the selection process via a Google form that has been distributed throughout the District, and will share this feedback with SDP.

### Parents' Critiques of the Lottery Based School Selection Process:

#### Sampling of our community voices with different perspectives:

In meetings and surveys Black, Latinx, Asian, and White parents have pointed out various inequities of the lottery as a system, which are summarized in this section. Many parents noted that lottery systems are by nature volatile and unpredictable when it comes to equitable outcomes. Some pointed to research that has documented the failures of relying on a lottery in pursuit of equity in educational admissions (see for example: *Lotteries to address– diversity - A Game of Chance*<sup>22</sup>)

*“This process was extremely stressful. Knowing that your child has worked extra hard for 4 years at Masterman middle school to maintain excellent grades so that they may be able to get accepted into one of the top schools in the area, only to be placed into a lottery and possibly not get into any school and be subject to attend their neighborhood high school. These kids worked hard in middle school, and then just got told that it wasn’t enough, that everything was based on a lucky draw. . . . One of my daughter’s closest friends got waitlisted for all the schools she applied to, and her parents were forced to register her into a Catholic high school, over her catchment high school. Another classmate who scored perfectly on just about every test and assignment, and above average on his PSSA, didn’t get into any school via the lottery either. Now how is that fair to these children who scored above average to get into Masterman middle school, and then not get into any of the top 5 public high schools in the city.” – Parent of Hispanic/Latinx Student.*

Many parents have argued that prioritizing any zip code in a city full of marginalized, low-income, ESL, and SPED students across so many zip codes is fundamentally inequitable, disadvantaging a large share of the city’s already-disadvantaged students and families. One Black parent wrote, *“Zip code priority is the opposite of equal access – it’s a discriminatory practice, an example of modern-day redlining, particularly when the zip codes chosen are among those in the city that are gentrifying most quickly.”* The lottery, this parent noted, is *“purposely making it more challenging for Black families who live outside of the priority zone to gain access to the top public schools in the city.”*

Parents of all races at Masterman expressed that being labeled entitled or racist because of opposition to an unvetted, inequitable, and discriminatory process that the SD implemented with no real input from the stakeholders, was a demoralizing experience. It eroded trust and faith in the SDP. It made families of all races feel that SDP leadership does not understand or appreciate the diversity of class, ethnicity, and the disadvantages faced by many immigrant,

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<sup>22</sup> <https://www.chronicle.com/article/admissions-as-a-game-of-chance-new-research-says-lotteries-could-decrease-diversity>).

working-class, and other families at the school (diversity at the school is discussed further below). Many Black and Latinx parents also asked why the SDP was not invested in supporting their children's continued academic success with coherent pathways in schools that best fit their learning goals and strengths. As one parent of color said, echoing many others, *"Lowering the standard of curriculum will only reduce the opportunity for the Black and Brown students to excel."*

Many parents pointed out the contradictions between the SDP's lottery system and the purposes of magnet schools. Magnets were meant to attract young people with specific interests and who have demonstrated specific skills, parents noted; they were never meant to be treated as neighborhood schools with preference for students from any part of the city. As a Black parent said, *"Lowering academic requirements and completely removing behavior requirements does not address equity. It essentially changes the purpose of certain magnet schools regarding the kinds of kids that would be a good 'fit.' This seems to have only impacted academic magnet schools since performing art schools can keep their auditions and exclude students based on 'fit' for their program."* Another parent, echoing many, pointed out how this has affected *"curriculum at Masterman. They focus their efforts on a few students who have trouble keeping up but ignore the vast majority of students who need more challenges. For example, math was taught 1 grade above in the middle school in the past, and is now taught at the same grade level."* Another parent noted that, *"for years the District ran the Find Your Fit campaign, and now they replaced it with this lottery system that has kids sitting in schools they don't want to be in."* About 30 percent of the respondents to our school selection feedback survey indicate that they have been "placed only in schools that are not a good fit for us."

Parents expressed a variety of ideas and aspirations about more effective ways to promote equity at Masterman and in Philadelphia public schools. Many focused on the need to better-prepare students across the city for magnet schools; and many endorsed the prospect of increasing the number of magnet schools. As one parent wrote, equity in education *"will not be found through zip code priority or by funneling the youth of the 6th largest city in the US into five magnet schools. The SDP cannot resolve the educational inequity in our communities by changing which 1,300 students, give or take, get to go to Central, Carver, Masterman, and Academy at Palumbo for 9th grade."* An Asian parent of a high school student at Masterman echoed a widely shared view expressed by parents: *"In order to increase the number of Black and Brown student at Masterman, they should focus on improving early elementary school education so more qualified and capable Black and Brown students have a chance to get into Masterman and be successful. Enrolling students who are not prepared for Masterman is detrimental to both students and school overall."* Another parent's comments about pathways reflected the enthusiasm many parents shared for improving pathways: *"Identify students and families who are interested in academic magnet schools early on. Target those students for pathway programs. After school or Saturday math and Language arts enrichment. Introduce them to extracurricular activities such as debate club, chess club, music club – learn how to play an instrument, foreign language club, etc. Have representatives follow these kids and give them the opportunity to spend a week once a year in an academic magnet school."* Generally, parents agreed that addressing decades of inequity in the SDP will take time, but the current lottery system is not an effective way to get there.

*"It appears the interest and eligibility of the students applying to special admissions/magnet schools greatly outweighs the # of seats available which goes*



*against the inclusion, diversity and equity goal of the school selection process. The process also says to my daughter that no matter how hard you push yourself, you might not be rewarded for your efforts.” – Parent of Masterman White Student.*

*“My daughter had had great results for the special admit lottery. However, leading up to last Friday was very stressful. Although she had a 94% on her PSSA’s and all A’s, we did not know if she would be able to go to the school her brothers went to, Central HS. Also, while she was feeling excitement, she also felt bad for her classmates with the same scores and grades who were not selected for a school for high achievers. My suggestion would be to end the lottery and maybe lower the PSSA requirement to 85% with A’s and B’s and make sure there is a diverse population selected for the schools.” – Parent of McCall Hispanic/Latinx Student.*

### **Teaching and Learning Challenges Following from the Lottery**

The lottery has created challenges of teaching and learning that relate both to students’ and teachers’ everyday experiences and their longer-term pathways and trajectories. An 8<sup>th</sup> grade student at Masterman expressed details of both, echoing comments made by many students and parents:

*“The lottery system fails to recognize the needs of the students. The quality of our education has decreased drastically. Language classes and advanced math classes have been taken away (because new students may not be prepared for them) instead of raising the overall quality of our education throughout the city.*

*During the past year, I’ve noticed that the new teachers hired fail to teach the curriculum in an interactive and effective way and fail to answer questions students pose. The community in Masterman overall has become more chaotic and violent.*

*Stress and financial issues have increased due to the uncertainty in getting into ideal schools. From what I’ve observed, families have been rushing to find houses in the suburbs and/or finding a way to fund their child’s potential private school education.*

*I understand that the lottery system was implemented to ‘avoid human judgment’ but by lowering the requirements and education, the statement is hypocritical as it suggests that the under-represented groups are academically less intelligent. Instead, I believe that the school district should work to improve education and provide sufficient materials city-wide.*

*The purpose of having a prestigious school is to fulfill the needs of students who need to be more challenged. By taking away that aspect from schools such as Central and Masterman, I feel as though that it also takes away the interest students have in learning as lessons become pedestrian.”*

Parents, largely informed by their children’s experiences, voiced similar concerns about curricular changes at Masterman resulting from the lottery, particularly the admission of students who have struggled at the school academically. *“Not only is it unfair to the gifted students who lost their seat to the lottery,”* said one parent of an 8<sup>th</sup> grader, again echoing

comments by many, *“it’s unfair to the students that lost their opportunity to learn harder materials, and teachers had to spend more time with students that are struggling to catch up. Many teachers had to divide up their attention to teach a class with students that are on different levels.”* A parent of a 7<sup>th</sup> grader confirmed, *“Their math class is divided into two groups. The teacher has to spend more time teaching those who cannot catch up. Those who are good with math need to learn by themselves. I think it’s really unfair to those more advanced students.”* A parent of a 10<sup>th</sup> grader added, *“It was not like this before. When my son was in 7<sup>th</sup> grader, Section 1 to Section 4 used the same math curriculum, and 5 and 6 used a different curriculum. So the students in the same class learned the same material. Now the same class is divided into two groups. For the teachers, it is like Mission Impossible.”* The *“lottery cannot help students improve their academic performance,”* said another parent. *“We can already see the negative effect caused by the huge gap between different students at Masterman in the past couple of years.”*

Some parents noted diminished motivation to learn among their children, again echoing the student’s comments above. *“There is no way to encourage students to work harder using a lottery system and depending on a lucky straw,”* said a parent of a 5<sup>th</sup> grader. *“Using the lottery to determine whether a student to stay or leave is not a way to encourage good students to keep working hard and make them feel their hard work is valued. Rather, it forces them to accept whatever is imposed on them, leaving them to feel powerless and helpless. I am not sure how Masterman will change in the future in terms of teaching modality and quality, I just hope that we will still feel proud of the school.”*

### **Diversity at Masterman**

Like other institutions, Masterman has recently been rightly criticized for its record of racial representation and climate at the school, as in the documentary and web site *Black at Masterman*. And like other institutions, in recent years parents, teachers, staff, and students at Masterman have worked on DEI issues and initiatives. One result of this work is a heightened appreciation for how diverse Masterman already is, along with ways it can become more so. And while the school has more work to do, it did make recent progress in admissions, though that was undermined by the lottery.

In 2020-21, the school’s DEI work helped inform the interviews that yielded a larger class of Black and Brown students for admissions into 5<sup>th</sup> grade in 2021 than the lottery did in 2022. This fact in itself undermined parents’ and students’ trust in the lottery’s ability to produce as equitable outcomes as the interview-based system the school had devised the year before.

In meetings and surveys about DEI, community-building, the lottery, and other topics, Masterman parents, students, teachers, and staff have repeatedly pointed to the many ways that Masterman is diverse: by class, ethnicity, immigration status, gender identity, among other dimensions; while recognizing the school has work to do to become more diverse by race, particularly with more Black and Latinx students. Masterman’s student body is diverse within each of the broad racial categories, reflecting how diverse the city has become in recent decades: with Black students from African, Caribbean, and Afro-Latinx as well as African American families; Asian students from Cambodian, Taiwanese, Filipino, Fujianese, Indonesian, as well as many other Asian backgrounds; Latinx students from Puerto Rican, Mexican, Dominican, South and Central American origins; and Albanian, Middle Eastern, North African,

and Ukrainian students reflecting some of the diversity within the White category. Within many of these categories is further ethnic and religious diversity, which parents, students, teachers, and staff at Masterman have repeatedly noted is ignored or masked in many discussions and most measurements of diversity in the SDP and its lottery.

A recently retired teacher detailed the ways the diversity of Masterman's students and families has been highlighted in and through its curriculum:

*"The students at Masterman are surprisingly diverse. When I taught 10th grade there - a global literature course - I always assigned at least one of two projects that celebrated their cultural differences. At the beginning of the year, I'd ask students to work with peers to create a 'culture sculpture' that visually represented how each is an individual and a part of a larger culture. They would make an apartment complex, a flower bed, an orchestra - all ways to show individuality and connectedness. Through this project, I learned that about half of my students spoke a language other than English at home, and they learned that they had more in common than they anticipated.*

*At the end of the year, I'd often assign a 'cultural experience' project. I'd ask my students to deliberately experience something new. While this was an individual project, many teamed up. Students would attend worship services or dance classes together. Most, however, chose to eat dinner at a friend's house (restaurants weren't allowed). You don't have to look far at Masterman to find a grandmother cooking dumplings or Palau or samosas or empanadas. The school is full of children and grandchildren of immigrants from all over the world. I've never worked in such a diverse place.*

*Food is a constant window into the cultural diversity at Masterman. For years, a student-led service club sponsored a lunch on an early dismissal day. Students would bring in homemade foods representing their particular culture, and teachers and students would gather for a feast. For many, it was the culinary highlight of the year. Some years, there would be a similar international dinner held at school, and, more recently, students and teachers have gathered for a Friendsgiving feast. While the purpose of this potluck is more about connections than food, the variety and quality of the homemade offerings always draws a crowd. These food-centered events have helped the Masterman population celebrate the diversity within the building.*

*Every year - often the final day before winter break - students in the high school put together International Day. Students sign up (usually in groups) to lead a presentation on a specific culture. In order to accommodate all of the students in these presentations, at least fifteen unique groups must volunteer. Often, students represent a country, but there are sometimes sessions on African American culture, Jewish culture, and other non-nationality-specific groups. Each group prepares a short session - often including music and food - for rotating classrooms of their student peers. The day culminates with a fashion show, where students wear their nicest traditional attire for their peers to admire. It's a fantastic way to spend a school day."*

## **7. Impact on Other SA Schools with Pathways**

### **Effect of Lottery on Other Schools with Continuous Pathways from Middle to High School: Carver, GAMP, SLA Beeber.**

The other criteria-based admission schools with continuous programs starting in earlier grades have also had to go through the new school selection process via lottery and have been affected in different ways. Multi-year programs exist at Carver Engineering and Science with a six-year program and GAMP with an 8-year program and SLA Beeber, with its very first 8<sup>th</sup> grade cohort this year.

#### **A Case for Carver as a Model School: A six-year program in crisis.**

- Carver High School of Engineering and Science (HSES) is a predominantly Black school that promises a safe and nurturing learning environment that challenges the minds of students. It has become known in some circles as the high school equivalent of an historically black college or university (HBCU) as it has primarily served academically talented and college-bound Black students. These students pursue interests in the fields of science, mathematics, engineering, technology, and medicine.
- In 2015, HSES began its Middle Years program, which included 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades to give younger students an opportunity to prepare for the rigor of the high school.
- In the two prior years (2020-21 and 2021-22), 88% of HSES 8<sup>th</sup> graders who applied were admitted to the HS.
- The description of the Middle Years program posted on the website since its inception, explicitly stated, up until recently, “Our program offers interested students the unique opportunity to join our school community early to enrich and deepen their STEM learning experience. Students may accelerate into higher-level classes in high school to create enhanced opportunities for internships and dual college enrollment options. In addition, students will be encouraged to participate in all Carver E&S student life activities. Join early for what, if not the high school?”
- Prior to the lottery, approximately 25% of each 9<sup>th</sup> grade cohort of approximately 200-220 students is comprised of returning students from the middle school, which helped to create continuity and community in the school.
- In 2022-23, only 9% of the 9<sup>th</sup> grade class is continuing students.
- Requiring those middle school students to re-enter a lottery for 9<sup>th</sup> grade and relocate to different schools begins to unravel the community that the school has so successfully built.
- The lottery entry devalues what became a very successful program in a very short time, by eliminating the academic and cultural continuity of the early 2-year experience that prepared the students for the high school program.
- During a SAC meeting, on March 11, 2021, some families requested a dedicated counselor for 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade and were informed that HSES is one school and the budget, and all resources are shared across all grades, 7<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> (documented in the minutes).
- While guaranteeing a high school seat to its qualified 8<sup>th</sup> graders was not an official policy, it was practiced as it supported the mission of the Middle Years program. The school was always presented as one community, with a Middle Years program. One had to apply but it was presented as a formality for students who met the criteria.
- In 2022, HSES had an 8<sup>th</sup>-grade graduating class of 64 students.

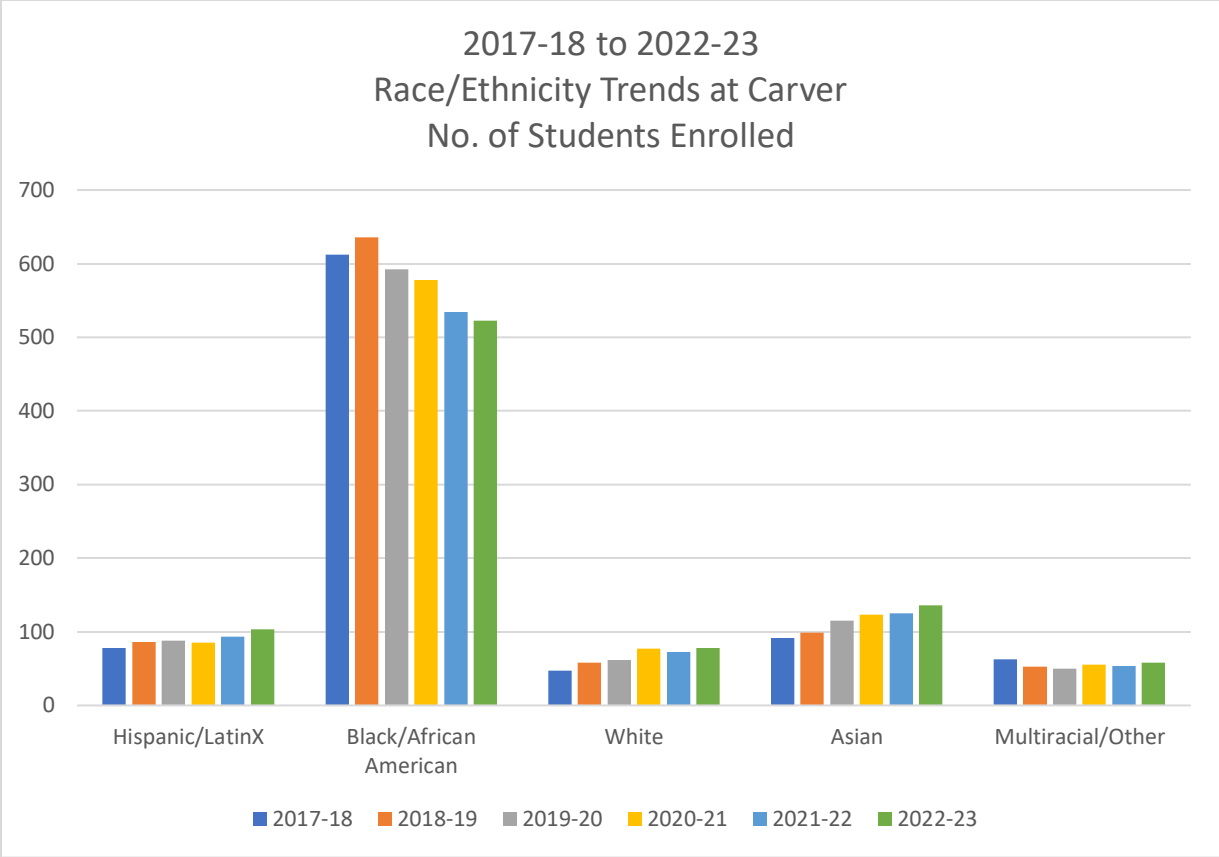
- Families were told that the SDP would not increase the number of seats from the typical enrollment (200-220) to accommodate the 64 students, expressing it simply would not be done.
- SDP increased seats to as much as 360 for 9<sup>th</sup> grade and still didn't allow Carver 8<sup>th</sup> graders priority to enter HS. That number ultimately decreased by the start of the 2022-2023 school year to 248.
- Because of the SDP's refusal to honor the historical practice of eligible 8<sup>th</sup> graders transitioning into the high school, 24 (almost all Black students) of the 64 students who had been expecting a 9<sup>th</sup> grade seat were denied entry through the lottery and had to move on to other schools.
- They had no chance of gaining a seat because HSES was overenrolled and took no students off the waitlist. Coming off COVID lockdowns, loss, and a full year of isolation and virtual learning, this was a horrible blow to these families.
- This year (2022-23), HSES has 45 8<sup>th</sup> graders and it is expected that many of them may not get a 9<sup>th</sup> grade seat under this new process. For some, 8<sup>th</sup> grade at HSES is their first year at the school and will be their last.
- Since the new process was implemented, there has been a noticeable decline in interest in HSES's Middle Years program for 2023-24, which can be attributed to the new process that split a 7-12 school into two independent schools now consisting of a 2-year program that leads to nowhere and a separate 4-year high school.
- There is now virtually no incentive to leave a K-8 neighborhood school since the student must first apply for 7<sup>th</sup> grade, which is a critical year for high school selection, and then reapply a year later with the general group in a lottery system for 9<sup>th</sup> grade.
- If the SDP continues with this new process, the demise of the middle school will occur organically as fewer families see any benefit in the Middle Years program which has lost its purpose and its viability.

There has been a steady decline in the number of Black students at Carver<sup>23</sup>, which continues to dip despite the new school selection process. In 2009, HSES was 83% African American. In 2022, it is down to 58%:

Year	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
%AA	83%	ND	81%	78%	77%	77%	75%	73%	69%	68%	65%	62%	60%	58%

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<sup>23</sup> Philadelphia School District's Website under School Enrollment and Demographics:  
[https://www.philasd.org/performance/programsservices/open-data/school-information/#school\\_lists](https://www.philasd.org/performance/programsservices/open-data/school-information/#school_lists)



While the student population is more diverse in 2022-23 as compared with the previous year, this trend was already happening organically over the previous five years. There is no indication that the new school selection process substantively affected that trend. More pointedly, the new process has resulted in disruption to the community that had been built in prior years and raises questions about the viability of the middle school, disconnected from the high school.

**GAMP a performing arts school with an 8-year program.**

As a performing arts school GAMP has auditions as a criterion for entry conducted by staff. By retaining the ability to continue using auditions as a criterion gives the school some control of identifying students that satisfy the necessary criteria and are a good fit for the school. In 2022-23, there were a total of 343 applications for 9<sup>th</sup> grade, and 86 offers made; 77% of those offers were to GAMP 8<sup>th</sup> grade students.

**SLA Beeber a project-based learning school intended to be an 8-year program**

SLA Beeber tried to replicate the model built by other schools like Masterman, GAMP and Carver to extend the 4-year HS program into an 8-year program starting at earlier middle grades. In 2019, they started a middle school (starting with 5<sup>th</sup> grade) that was intended to be a feeder to the high school. The middle school was built grade by grade under the same roof as the high

school and students were prepared for transition into that high school. This year the very first cohort of Beeber 8<sup>th</sup> graders had to enter the lottery for admissions into high school with no guarantee that they will have a spot in their own school. SLA Beeber retained some measure of control over the 'fit' of prospective students by requiring a project presentation as part of the qualification process.

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*Questions for school and district leadership:*

- With what consistency are requirements being for criteria-based schools being altered? For example, are school- specific arts and project *performance* criteria for selection (e.g., via sight reading music, sketching a vase, presenting a project) being altered just as criteria for high academic achievement are being altered for some schools? Will PSD eliminate all magnet middle schools attached to magnet high schools as they are becoming functionally dissociated from the high school?
- When criteria-based schools with middle years programs retain some control by requiring an additional component to qualify for HS admissions does it better serve the school, its students and the community? Is their 9<sup>th</sup> grade filled with students who are a better fit for the program?
- Have the mission and purpose of these criteria-based middle schools changed from being a performing arts or project-based or STEM based school because of the randomized admissions process?
- Are these criteria-based schools considering increasing ELA and math instructional minutes to 90 mins each day as per PA state guidelines and removing electives from MS curriculum as Masterman is?
- Do MS students at these schools no longer have access to a more specialized enriched curriculum that aligns with the mission and purpose of the school?
- Is the MS curriculum and student experience being sacrificed to cater to the growing needs of the new composition of the HS? Are they using institutional memory to preserve the institution and its purpose to minimize the disruptive effects of changes effected by lottery admissions?
- Masterman school administration maintains that Masterman MS is no different from other middle schools in the city. Is this the how administrators at other criteria-based middle schools view their schools post lottery school selection process?

## IV. RECOMMENDATIONS

Masterman is at an inflection point. An urgent strategic reset is needed to stem the current tide of frustration, disappointment, and academic descent —and at the same time to begin not only to rebuild a school with a clear sense of mission but also to rebuild it with new attention to equity according to best practices.

Without reservation, our recommended path is for Masterman’s identity to be reaffirmed and its purpose clarified and functioning strengthened. This requires immediate attention to rectify existing problems and a long-term vision to set intentional policies; these are enumerated below.

The alternatives to this path are, in our view, dire. They would unnecessarily and wastefully tear down existing structures with proven success and would require an even greater outlay of resources in mission-setting, planning, and support.

To be sure, it is up to the SDP to determine if our recommended path will indeed set the future of our school. Whatever the outcome, we respectfully ask that a clear intention be set, communicated, and supported—as quickly as possible, since decisions regarding next year’s school offerings and schedule are being made now.

The overriding recommendation is that Masterman continue as a connected middle school and high school serving a subset of Philadelphia’s advanced students with accelerated learning on a seven- or eight-year pathway, a clear statement of the guiding principles and aim of that pathway, and adequate support to overcome recent challenges and changes.

In order to achieve this, immediate and long-term steps are required.

### **FIX THE SELECTION PROCESS**

- 1. End the randomized admissions process and restore human judgment to admissions, preferably with a designated admissions officer and/or committee following best practices to improve diversity, and student choice and fit.**

Clearly, the current randomized admissions process failed in its objectives regarding diversity at Masterman and failed our children in placing them in schools that were the right fit for them. It should be ended. The District should return admissions decisions to the schools and hire a dedicated, full-time Admissions Officer to systematically court the most gifted students from across the city of every demographic.

- 2. Restore priority to Masterman Middle School students in High School admission and provide longitudinal pathway for advanced students from MS through HS.**

As this report has shown, crucial to Masterman’s model is the long path of accelerated learning from middle school through high school. In addition to doing away with the randomized admissions to ninth grade, we must reaffirm the value in and of itself of having a long-term continuous plan of education for the students.



This means giving priority to Masterman middle school students in high school admission. Restoring priority in admissions also restores the logic inherent in advanced MS learning, and signals that we as a school and District value what students have committed to and achieved. It also facilitates maintenance of a strong, unified community throughout the school.

## **INCREASE ACCESS**

### **3. Expand access by moving this 120% overcrowded school to a new building and increasing the size of the HS.**

If there is one silver lining of the lottery selection process, it has demonstrated high demand for what Masterman offers. The District needs to expand opportunity for a Masterman education. Moving to a new building will allow the District to strategically resize the school so that more high school seats are available, allowing for a greater influx in grade 9 while retaining priority for 8<sup>th</sup> graders who qualify and wish to return.

Expanding the size of Masterman would enable the District to fulfill its promise of a high quality education in Philadelphia public schools for many more of its qualified students. The magnet school system has unique advantages and can make us the envy of American large cities by building on the academic differentiation catering to multiple disciplines and capabilities if we further this model to replicate other magnet schools.

### **4. Reaffirm Masterman's mission as a connected MS-HS offering accelerated learning for academically talented students, and establish admission criteria appropriate to school mission**

In a landscape of choice, Masterman's particular mission and identity need to be clarified. There is community consensus in keeping the spirit of Masterman's mission as a school that addresses the needs of academically advanced. There is proven need for it in our student body, and the school has demonstrated success in this mission. The community needs a clear idea on what the district's intention is for Masterman.

In light of that reaffirmation, admission criteria should be developed that support Masterman's mission. Since some criteria can perpetuate systemic bias, a range of criteria are needed that speak to students' ability, achievement, preparedness, potential, commitment, interests, and behavior.

### **5. Pause changes to Masterman curriculum, schedule, etc. until the District has clarified its mission and future development and restore a richer curriculum in math, world languages, and electives in all grades.**

Academic intervention in core subjects is urgently required right now for some of our students. As detailed above in this report, sweeping changes to curriculum and schedules are being proposed and put into place that substantially alter the learning environment at Masterman for the long term to address the short-term needs of some students. While we

recognize the intention is to address crisis-level disparities, the school community will not support them as it does not address the academic progress of all of its students. The crisis in needs was caused by the lottery, not by Masterman’s preexisting approach. We request that school administration cease further changes that undermine Masterman’s model of an accelerated curriculum for advanced and gifted learners with an enrichment curriculum and the offering of multiple electives.

Instead of changing the curriculum to cater to students currently struggling in this setting and standardizing Masterman’s offerings relative to other schools, follow the clearly (and strongly) expressed wishes of teachers and parents to maintain or restore as quickly as possible the math, world language, and electives that Masterman has long offered. This should be done in concert with temporary measures to lift up struggling students and challenge the more advanced students. Thoroughgoing and lasting changes may be needed in the coming years. Masterman was never perfect. But such changes—especially those that fundamentally refocus the priorities of teachers and learners—should only be made deliberately and in communication with parents, teachers, and students. This is in alignment with the priority of “parent and family involvement in decision making; and school-family collaboration and conflict resolution” detailed in the SDP Transition Plan, p. 25.

**6. Immediately help us to develop solutions to support students negatively affected by randomized placement across the academic spectrum at Masterman.**

Many students will be able to thrive at Masterman only with additional support and intervention. This includes advanced students who are currently sitting bored with busywork while their teachers teach below grade level; and students who are struggling. For the advanced students, enrichment opportunities are a must in the short term and more fulsome differentiation in order to meet the needs of every student so they can progress should be considered for the next 1–2 years. A major campaign for class unity should be undertaken to help all students feel welcome, appreciated, and included. At the same time, it should be acknowledged that the lottery resulted in poor placement for some students, and there should be ample support for families who seek a school with a better fit. The District should consider allowing students unhappy with their placements to swap with one another. And the District must develop a task force to place the hundreds of qualified District students who were not placed in any magnet school, the District’s “lost children.”

In sum, these six points are critical to implementing a strategic reset at Masterman—to restore trust, alignment with mission, and responsiveness to student needs.

## V. CONCLUSION

We offer our recommendation for the future of Masterman Laboratory and Demonstration School, based on the deep research and community voices cited throughout the present report. It is a recommendation, but it reads like—and feels like—a plea. Masterman has been the saving grace of many a student (who might proudly self-designate as “nerd”) starving for learning and intellectual kinship, who finds herself out of place, bored, ostracized, and even bullied in other schools; it has been a place of welcome, and acceptance for many a child of immigrants who is immensely talented but lacks connection; it has stood as a sign, along with few others, that even in a city and a school system with innumerable challenges and tragic failures, students can flourish under the right conditions. But, we need to understand, learn from, and build on the experiences that engenders those conditions; not forget and squander them in a rush to reform.

Even though this report is specifically about the climate and conditions at Masterman, this story is much wider. Other schools are experiencing a similar disruption—schools such as Carver, SLA Beeber and GAMP, which also offer specialized pathways. These schools were also intentionally designed to be multiple year programs, beginning before high school, to provide an intensive course of study with a particular focus and longitudinal pathways.

The essential mission of creating space for a particular mode of learning, accelerated or otherwise, must be equally available to students of comparable readiness from all ethnic, racial, and economic backgrounds. It is not, however, any one school’s responsibility to ready the pipeline of future comers. In addition, while schools like Masterman can and should work to overcome disparities in achievement occurring within its walls, it is unrealistic to imagine that individual schools can, on their own, overcome the disheartening disparities in education that exist across the district. In the past, Masterman could function successfully, relatively under-resourced, precisely because its students were capable of doing so much independently, including through cooperative peer learning and collaboration. But that can only go so far when the student body becomes stretched in academic identity beyond its ability to self-repair.

A handful of magnet middle schools cannot alone serve as beacons for curricular aspiration. The SDP’s Transition Report cites a need for “every K-8 school [to offer] the courses that are required for entry into criteria-based schools (i.e., algebra, STEM courses, or foreign language)” (p. 21), and to “ensure every child ready for Algebra in 8th grade has access to it” and “every student has access to world languages in middle school” (p. 15). We wholeheartedly agree.

With the SDP’s commendable strategic planning process, we have an opportunity to reset and revitalize Masterman and hope the same for other schools and school communities. This moment of intentional change at the school district provides an opportunity to double down on an invaluable asset in this city - differentiated magnet schools. As it does, we hope that the district will provide the support and policy guidance needed for this system of criteria-based schools to continue to thrive and serve the students of this city.