

# BOARD OF EDUCATION OF HARFORD COUNTY INFORMATIONAL REPORT PRESENTATION ON

## PATRIOT PROGRAM

January 27, 2025

### **Background Information**

Over 30 years ago, a teacher at Prospect Mill Elementary School (PMES) started a program to help build patriotic pride within the school. That program, which came to be known as the Patriot Program, was run exclusively at PMES until the opening of Fountain Green Elementary School (FGES). At that time, a small number of teachers who moved from PMES to FGES chose to start their own Patriot Program at the new school. Other schools, to the extent that there was interest and the infrastructure to support it, did likewise and began their own version of the Patriot Program. As individuals facilitating the program changed, the components of the individual programs shifted to align to the priorities and personal philosophy of the facilitators. Without coordination or standardization across the system, there is no cohesive Patriot Program spanning all schools and about one-third of HCPS elementary schools do not offer the program at all.

This organic evolution has led to wide disparities across HCPS regarding access to, participation in, and experiences with what is collectively called the Patriot Program. In the 2023-2024 school year, a version of the Patriot Program was run in some form in 22 of the 35 HCPS elementary schools with only about 30% of students participating. While some students have had positive experiences with a Patriot Program, the vast majority of students (70%) in Harford County Public Schools were not being reached by these programs, either by being excluded, not having access, or choosing not to participate.

A survey of staff at those elementary schools offering some form of a Patriot Program showed large disparities or inconsistencies in the experience, including but not limited to differences in:

- requirements for completion. There were few consistencies in what was required of students in order to complete their school's Patriot Program. Some required students to memorize portions of documents such as the preamble to the United States Constitution, the Gettysburg Address, or the poem *Paul Revere's Ride*. However, there was little uniformity regarding which documents were included or the grade levels at which they were required. Other programs focused on students identifying specific information, such as locating Maryland or the United States on a map or recognizing an American flag. Additionally, some programs incorporated research projects, activities needing adult supervision, or assignments that required students to purchase or supply their own materials. While certain programs allowed students some degree of choice in fulfilling requirements, others were more prescriptive. Many, but not all, schools included a service-learning component as part of their Patriot Program.
- supports for students with learning differences. While most schools provided supports for students with IEPs or 504s, such as modifications and/or accommodations, 20% of schools reported that they do not support students with learning differences or disabilities through modification or accommodation of the program requirements. Few schools reported providing any supports to multilingual learners. The net result was inconsistent access to

the Patriot Program for students with disabilities, students with learning differences, and students who are multilingual learners.

- verification of program completion. Some schools relied on PTA volunteers, others used school staff (teachers or administrators), and some accepted parent signatures in lieu of verification as evidence of completion.
- program completion timeline. Approximately half of schools gave students 2-3 months to complete the program. The other half of schools have a wide range of timelines ranging from as short as one month to as long as 4-5 months or six or more months for completion.
- use of instructional time. Less than half of schools reported that students completed all components of their Patriot Program at home or independent of instructional time. More than half (64%) of schools reported that students completed some or all of the components of the Patriot Program during the instructional day, taking away from essential time needed for standards-aligned instruction.
- who can participate. While the majority of schools that ran a program offer the experience to students in Grades K-5, some schools only offered it to Grades 4-5 or just Grade 5. Few schools offered it to the Pre-Kindergarten students.
- how participants were celebrated. The majority of schools (80%) hosted assemblies to celebrate participants, though this practice was not consistent across all programs. In addition to assemblies, some schools provided tangible rewards, which ranged from items such as shirts, medals, or pins to smaller tokens like patriotic pencils and folders. Certain schools also organized field trips as part of the program's celebration. Some included local excursions alongside the in-school assembly, while others offered out-of-town trips to patriotic destinations such as Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., Annapolis, or Gettysburg. In some cases, these trips served as a culminating experience for all Grade 5 students. However, at other schools, the trips were reserved exclusively for students who had completed the program—either for a single year or, in select cases, for those recognized as “Super Patriots” for completing the program year after year.
- who facilitated the program. Nearly half of the Patriot Programs were led by teachers volunteering their time without additional compensation. Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs) facilitated approximately 27% of these programs. At the remaining schools, a mix of other adults assumed responsibility for the program's implementation. Some schools noted that they previously offered a Patriot Program but discontinued it due to shifts in the availability of parent volunteers or changes in teacher assignments, such as role transitions or staff turnover.

In addition to comparative quantitative data, we also asked open-ended questions to better understand the nature of the historic Patriot Program. The qualitative feedback further highlighted the issues with the disparities highlighted by the quantitative data. The challenges highlighted by the qualitative feedback include:

- The program created unintended consequences for students, particularly those unable to participate fully. Some students faced barriers such as learning differences that made memorization tasks inaccessible, a lack of parental availability for at-home support of component completion, financial challenges preventing the purchase of required materials, or limited supervision and time for independent activities. These obstacles left many students feeling excluded or punished for their inability to participate. This exclusionary nature of the program further alienated some students. For example, those who did not

complete the program were sometimes assigned alternative work while their peers attended celebration assemblies. In other cases, independent field trips organized for program participants disrupted the instructional day and excluded large portions of the student body. In other cases, some students or families did not want to participate in this voluntary program but felt pressured by peers or the broader community into participating. These dynamics not only created disparities but also fostered feelings of isolation and resentment among students who were left out, undermining the sense of community the program sought to build.

- The implementation of the program often had a significant and detrimental impact on the instructional day. In many cases, valuable instructional minutes were redirected toward completing program components that were not aligned with established academic standards or testing students on program-specific requirements. This misallocation of time detracted from opportunities to engage in meaningful, standards-based learning experiences, which are critical for academic growth and success. The disruption caused by pulling students from regular instruction for testing further compounded the issue, interrupting the flow of lessons and reducing the overall effectiveness of teaching. Such practices not only hindered the continuity of learning but also placed additional stress on both students and educators, undermining efforts to maintain a high-quality educational environment. Over time, these interruptions may contribute to gaps in students' mastery of essential skills and knowledge, ultimately affecting their academic achievement.
- Teachers were already managing demanding workloads within their contractual responsibilities, and the addition of the Patriot Program exacerbated these challenges. In many schools, educators were tasked with overseeing the program, either by taking full responsibility for its implementation or by coordinating with parent volunteers. This often involved planning lessons that accommodated student absences for testing or verification, monitoring student progress, and ensuring the program ran smoothly. Many teachers reported feeling pressured to contribute their time and energy beyond their contractual obligations. This pressure often stemmed from a desire to support those students who enjoyed the program or to meet community expectations that had developed around the program's tradition. Some teachers noted feeling significant pressure to ensure the program's success, particularly from PTAs and well-meaning parents enthusiastic about the program. While teachers recognized and appreciated the collaborative potential of the related parental involvement, many raised concerns about the dynamics these historical expectations sometimes created. These included pressures to adjust or compromise instructional plans to accommodate volunteer preferences/expectations and to take on responsibilities well beyond their contractual duties. Such dynamics occasionally led to frustration and, at times, strained parent-teacher relationships. Concerns were also raised that requiring teachers to extend their duties in this way leaves HCPS vulnerable to grievances filed with the local educators' association (HCEA).

As a result of both the quantitative and qualitative data, the Office of Social Sciences and the Office of Elementary Educational Services engaged in collaborative focus groups with teachers and principals to gather additional feedback about how best to move forward with making necessary enhancements to the Patriot Program to ensure that all students will have consistent access to a program of study that seeks to foster civic-minded students with knowledge of the rich history of the United States, an appreciation for the democratic values that are the foundation of

our society, and an understanding of the ways they can responsibly participate in and contribute to their communities.

Based on the feedback from the principal and teacher groups, a work group was assembled to create a curriculum-embedded Patriot Program for Grade 5 for SY24-25. The group developed a proposal of what a universal Patriot Program would involve. Their proposal was presented to a principal focus group, a parent group, and to all elementary principals as a group for feedback before finalizing for SY24-25 implementation.

The updated Patriot Program is based on nine strands through which students will engage in learning related to the goals of the program. The strands are as follows:

- Civics
- Geography
- Economics
- History
- Art
- Music
- Library/Media
- Physical Education
- Community Service

Learning related to each strand will be taught through the curricular program of study and is standards-aligned. The Civics, Geography, Economics, and History strand topics correspond to learning experiences integrated in and enhanced through the Social Science curriculum. The Art, Music, Library/Media, and Physical Education strands will be embedded in the Unified Arts and PE coursework in which students engage. The Community Service strand will vary depending on the developmental needs of each grade level. Specific Learn with Me opportunities have been identified to strengthen family partnership around this important topic. In this way, students will no longer be left out of learning about patriotism, citizenship, and the ways that they have access to participate as active, responsible citizens in our democracy.

At this time, this updated Patriot Program is operational in Grade 5 while materials are being developed for Grades Pre-K to Grade 4 for implementation in SY25-26. As we are implementing in Grade 5, we are gathering feedback to strengthen the program. Additional enhancements to the program that will be added based on feedback include materials for School-to-Home communication to strengthen partnerships with families. Additionally, content offices will be working to create Constitution Day lessons that are standards-aligned, to be used as part of a celebratory launch of the Patriot Program each year moving forward.

While the Patriot Program is undergoing changes to better support the diverse needs of all students, HCPS remains committed to honoring the legacy of this historic initiative. The program will continue to provide students with opportunities to learn about patriotism and civics and students will still have memorable, impactful experiences as a result of their participation in the Patriot Program. Schools can still hold student-focused assemblies that celebrate the participation of all students in the curriculum-based Patriot Program, offering valuable learning experiences for all attendees. Additionally, students may still earn awards, ribbons, or pins, funded by the either

school or PTA, at the school's discretion. Field trips recognizing students' achievements in civic responsibility and patriotism can also continue as a culminating celebration of all students' engagement in the Patriot Program.

Elements from the original Patriot Program, such as memorization activities, are not part of the updated curriculum but may still be pursued through after-school clubs or at home to complement in-school learning. Students who complete these activities can be recognized during celebration assemblies, and recitations can be included as part of these events.

These enhancements to the Patriot Program mark a significant step forward in expanding this important program, transforming it from a selective opportunity into an inclusive initiative that ensures all students benefit from its valuable learning experiences. By expanding access, these changes honor the program's legacy while amplifying its impact and empowering every student to be an informed citizen.

**Discussion:**

This presentation provides an overview of the background, history, and modifications of the Patriot Program.

**Superintendent's Recommendation:**

The Superintendent of Schools recommends that the Board of Education accept this informational report and presentation of the HCPS Patriot Program.