



# The Comet Newsletter

December 2019

## An Interview with Dr. Chao Wu

As many of you may know, redistricting has been a very hot topic lately. Therefore, *The Comet* wanted to interview a board member to get his perspective on the whole process. On November 28th, I met up with Dr. Chao Wu for an interview -- here is the conversation we had.

### **Tell us a bit about yourself and your background.**

**Dr. Wu:** I grew up in a very poor family, I had to work very hard to find food before I went to college. We didn't have lunch at school, so we would walk back and forth between school and home twice per day. We had to find a way to survive and thrive in school. Afterwards, I went to college and got a scholarship to Singapore, where I stayed [for] two years. Then in America, I got my Ph.D. from the University of Maryland. We settled in Howard County because of the great public school system and neighborhood. Furthermore, my background is not in politics; in fact, I work in the STEM field.

I was elected as a member of [the] Howard County **Board of Education** (BOE) in 2018. There are seven board members and one student board member. We talk about a lot of issues for the school system like school budget, school calendars, school policies and even bid/contracts. There are around 100 school policies to govern the whole school system, and every year there are some policies for the BOE to review and update. This year, we got school redistricting, where we had to figure out the best way to balance school overcrowding, community continuity, transportation needs and socioeconomic status.

### **Why did you want to run for the Board of Education?**

**Dr. Wu:** Even though I come from a STEM background, I wanted to get involved because we are an incredibly diverse community, and everyone has a unique

perspective. So, I thought it was a good step towards serving the community and providing a unique perspective to the school system.

**Are there any lessons that have been learned over the course of the redistricting process?**

**Dr. Wu:** There were a lot of lessons we can learn from. The board started out without a clear target... without a clear threshold of how much we wanted to decrease overcapacity even [though] I asked the board to discuss this at each meeting. At first, we were going to have six work sessions, but at the end we added many more, with some going from 1:00 PM to 11:00 PM. Everybody spent a lot of time on this effort, including the community. Even when the work sessions started at 1:00 PM, people arrived at 8:30 AM just to get a seat in the boardroom. Another lesson we learned is that we need to improve our technology because we are still using the same process as we were twenty years ago for the data analysis. With technology evolving, we can make this process more accurate and effective. Then the data itself had some issues. We were not able to get the student population projection correctly and the FARM data and student data were not synchronized in the same time stamp.

**Do you have any advice to students affected in this redistricting plan?**

**Dr. Wu:** We tried to come up with the best solution, but it is very complicated. Roughly 5,400 students will be impacted across the whole school system. Additionally, our school system is short around \$60 million dollars in 2021. So, I am very concerned as to how we handle our FY 2021 budget in two weeks. Some kids will have to leave their current school. Some kids may stay at the current school but their friends will leave for another school. So, please talk to your friends, counselors and your parents. I hope our community can work together to improve the process in the future and minimize the impact on our students, families and communities.

**What is the most challenging part about being a Board of Education member throughout this redistricting process?**

**Dr. Wu:** The goal and the outcome of the policy change over [the] years. We do not have a follow up process to evaluate the impacts of the policies. Additionally, there is no long-term evaluation for changes, as the years go on, policy changes are not consistent. Due to changes in board members or the superintendent, it is critical to track everything over [the] years. Student performance should be tracked horizontally and vertically over many years to understand the implication

of this redistricting result.

**Was there anything that you had to do in your own time regarding the redistricting proposal?**

**Dr. Wu:** Yes, there was a lot. I went to community meetings, talked to board members and school staff, and tried to take consideration of everybody's concerns. I also tried to reply to every email. I took almost two notebooks of notes. I wrote programs for data analysis and also designed a website to assist student movement in the decision making process, such as polygons and their statistics like the number of students and FARM rates, and feeder and capacity changes.

**Do you have any advice for our generation regarding our careers and futures?**

**Dr. Wu:** Yes, this is a great question. As you know, automation means that many jobs will be automated. We need to develop skills to communicate with people, because communication will remain important. Also, think about what things you're interested in, and how technology will impact them. So, let's say you want to be a teacher or professor, things like online teaching will decrease the needs for teachers. So, you must think about how in-person teaching has unique benefits over online teaching. Another example is lawn mowing. I used to work in robotics navigation area. There are machines which mow lawns and even pick up fruits from the field. Automation will dramatically change the workforce and the skills needed for your generation.

- Lily Peng

## Travel

### My Trip to Britain, Part Two

Hey everybody, this is part two of my Britain travels. Hope you like it! [Part one can be found in the October issue of *The Comet*.]

#### **Fourth Stop: Borough Market**

Borough Market is one of the biggest food markets in London. It has food from India, Germany, Mexico, China - you name it. What I liked about Borough Market is obviously the



food, but also how there can be stuff from a lot of different cultures from all over the world in just one place.

### **Fifth Stop: The Tower Bridge**

One thing I find interesting about the Tower Bridge is that many people mistake it for the London Bridge. In actuality, the London Bridge is just a small rickety bridge, whereas the Tower Bridge is the big symbolic guy. Anyways, about the Tower Bridge, it is a bridge with two towers, hence its name. It can also lift up its walkways/road with hydraulic machinery to allow large boats to pass by. Along with that, the main tourist attraction, the overpass at the top, has a small part with a sheet of really thick glass instead of a floor so you can see everything under you.



### **Sixth Stop: Dover**

Dover is a part of Britain with lots of interesting history from World War Two, and is the setting of the movie *Dunkirk*. During World War Two, most of the British soldiers were surrounded by German troops at Dunkirk, France. While literally sitting on the toilet, Prime Minister Winston Churchill thought of a plan to save their troops stuck in Dunkirk. Because Dunkirk is so gosh-darn



conveniently close to Dover, thousands of civilian boats were able to make their way to Dunkirk, get pretty much all of the troops on their boats, and make their way back to Dover. Dover is also home to the magnificent white cliffs, and the historic Dover Castle.

This concludes “*What I Liked About My*

*Trip To Britain, Part Two.*”

I am sure to make a part 3 in the future, but until then, 再见了, 大家! (Goodbye, everyone!)

- Siyuan Dai

## What's Happening?

### Veteran's Day

On the 11th of November, citizens all around the nation celebrated and commemorated our veterans, whether by participating in their local parades, dressing up in USA spirit, or simply expressing gratitude to a veteran passing by. Several members of our own Comet Team attended the annual Columbia Lakefront ceremony in the morning. How did you celebrate Veteran's Day 2019?  
-Naomi Ling

### HCPSS Redistricting

After many months of planning, data-collecting, and hearing feedback and testimonies, the decision for redistricting was finally determined on November 21, as I'm sure almost all of you know. The plan will go into effect next year in the 2020-2021 school year. The two main goals of the redistricting were to evenly distribute students among schools and better balance students affected by poverty in Howard County to minimize inequities for the future. The final plan will currently affect a total of 5,402 HCPSS students, including 568 middle schoolers and 2,007 high schoolers. These changes are planned to greatly relieve the population issue, especially in schools where overcrowding is most significant. It should also more evenly distribute students so that the percentage of FARMs (free and reduced meals) students in each school will be closer to the county average of FARMs students.

If you are one of those students that will be affected, the school you are going to will provide the support that you and your parents will need, so don't be afraid to talk about your situation with your parents or teachers, and don't be afraid to reach out for help.

Source:

<https://news.hcpss.org/news-posts/2019/11/board-takes-action-on-school-boundary-adjustments-for-2020-2021-school-year/>

### The Holiday Season

Thanksgiving is unfortunately over, but that means it's now our favorite time of the year: The Holiday Season! I know I'm excited and prepared to go all out on decorations this year. But, until Winter Break officially starts on Saturday,

December 21, we do still have school (T^T) so remember to stay focused and save the relaxation for the break. And of course, sometime during your glorious twelve days of freedom, be sure to spend some time with your family and friends. Most importantly, treat yourself to a little downtime after all of your hard work in school. You deserve it!



P.S. If you're giving presents, I suggest you go with homemade ones (because no matter how bad or poorly made the presents are, they have to love it). Happy Holidays and see you in 2020! :)

- Livia Zhao

### Sports Time

In football, the Ravens are actually doing very good this season! They are first in the AFC North Conference, with a record of 11 wins and only 2 losses. This makes them one of the best teams in the entire sport. In soccer, for the first time in decades, Finland secured a place in next year's European Championship. In the past, they haven't really been known for their soccer team, but they might have a chance now.



- Justin Blackman

### The Ultimate List of December Holidays

Happy Holidays! December is filled with a multitude of holidays; here's just a few of the most interesting I found!

1. **Chanukah/ Hanukkah** (the 22nd)- When it comes to the spelling of this holiday, 74% of people prefer spelling it Hanukkah, while the remaining like to spell it Chanukah, which way do you prefer? Also, did you know that

60% of people play the dreidel with real money? And the rest play with gelt (chocolate shaped like coin), or other tokens? Yum!

2. **Christmas** (the 25th) - An all-time favorite, after all, nobody can forget Santa and his gifts. However, did you know Santa was not always part of Christmas? He became an icon of Christmas only after a popular newspaper portrayed him as the good-natured present giving man!
3. **Kwanzaa** (the 26th)- Kwanzaa is a celebration of culture, family, and community of African-Americans. Surprisingly, it's a relatively recent holiday, established by Dr. Maulana Karenga, a professor of Black studies.
4. **National Thank You Note Day** (the 26th) - A day after Christmas, this day is for thanking people, either with notes or just in words. Thank your teachers, friends, bus driver, parents, and other important people in your life that you may often forget to thank.
5. **National Chocolate-Covered Anything Day** (the 16th) - Many would gladly celebrate this holiday with a chocolate-covered strawberry or two, but did you know that for some people a chocolate-covered ant is equally appetizing?
6. **National Ice Cream Day** (the 13th) - One of my favorite cold treats, ice cream is a staple food in many people's diets. In fact, around 81% of people have ice cream in their fridge at any given time. Did you know that to make a gallon of ice cream, it takes three gallons of milk?
7. **National Candy Cane Day** (the 26th) - An essential part of the winter holidays, candy canes were first twisted into a shepherd's hook by a priest to keep the kids in church behaved and silent. A German immigrant first introduced it to America, and from there, its history. Did you know that they were first made without their traditional red stripes?

Want to check out some more holidays? Check out <https://nationaltoday.com/december-holidays/> for more!

- Sitara Chakkamadathil

## Comet Talk

### Why Does Writing...Suck?

Whenever I hand in an essay that I swear I did not procrastinate on, or at least I usually don't, I'm hesitant. When I read it the morning due, only then do I start

cringing over my writing, realizing all the tiny details that I need to fix. Maybe it's just me, but I don't think I've ever turned in a paper I'm really proud of, and there's probably a couple causes for that.

First off, **what is an essay?** I mean, by now you all are in middle school, and have written dozens of essays before. I'm sure that you have a basic definition of what an essay is, but we should consult an expert first. According to Paul Graham's "The Age of the Essay," essays were an accident at best. Through Law, the essay structure was born, adapted by colleges, and then schools. If you know anything about the structure of a court case, there's an opening statement, witnesses and evidence, and concluding remarks. If you didn't know that, well, neither did I. But otherwise, these probably sound familiar to the topic sentences, supporting paragraphs, and conclusions that our ELA teachers tell us to write.

As for the origin, Graham says, "To understand what a real essay is, we have to reach back into history again... to Michel de Montaigne, who in 1580 published a book of what he called "essais." He was doing something quite different from what lawyers do, and the difference is embodied in the name. *Essayer* is the French verb meaning "to try" and an *essai* is an attempt. An essay is something you write to try to figure something out. Graham continues, "Expressing ideas helps to form them. Indeed, helps is far too weak a word. Most of what ends up in my essays I only thought of when I sat down to write them. That's why I write them."

Finally he concludes with, "So if you want to write essays, you need two ingredients: a few topics you've thought about a lot, and some ability to ferret out the unexpected." So I guess **essays make a lot of sense**. You're trying to educate the reader, learn something yourself, and maybe add in a surprise element too. So if, by that definition, an essay is just an attempt, why is it still *my difficult*?

To start, you may find your writing embarrassing, but it's hard to form a solid opinion on what you wrote. When you read your writing over and over, it gets repetitive and boring, creating a bias against yourself. Sometimes your writing just needs a fresh pair of eyes on it. A second or third editor can tell you what was actually really good, and what fell short a bit.

On the contrary, when you read a piece of writing too much, you can also start letting big flaws zip right past you. My geography teacher, Mr. Wright, always tells us that the worst part in our writing process is when we are all done and too tired to read and edit. I must admit, I am indeed a perpetrator of this crime, and if you



have ever turned in a quiz because you are too exasperated to carefully check the answers, this is you, too.

Equally common, writers may have trouble starting their paper as well. Even with all your sections planned out, sometimes the hardest thing is to get that first sentence laid down - whether it's because of procrastination or simply because you just don't know how. It is common for writers to feel under pressure, because the first sentence can be like a foundation for the whole essay. In reality, this usually isn't true. Your foundation should be a skeleton of an introduction, some evidence, and a conclusion. Once you figure out what you're trying to say in each one, it becomes easy to get typing.

Lastly, when writing, age can make a big difference. Many say that kids are often more emotionally swayed, causing the writing to be more feeling based, where adult writing may be more mature and fact based. I'm not saying that a child will 100 percent of the time write worse than an adult, but there are some things that should not be rushed or forced. In fact, many experts state that young musical prodigies are unfit to play complex music, as they should not be playing music meant for adults. Though this is a controversial topic, it is safe to say that some experience should come naturally, and it is not always healthy for children to be pushed into accomplishing amazing feats at the price of mental health.

Overall, essays and papers will probably always be difficult, but now you know that there will always be other internal factors that can make up a big part of the reason essays are tough to write.

- Estelle Chen

## 2020 Census Corner

### Trivia about the Census

1. How do you participate in the 2020 Census?
  - A. by mail
  - B. by phone
  - C. online
  - D. all of the above

2. Is your response to the 2020 Census \_\_\_\_\_? (Choose all apply)
- A. safe
  - B. protected by federal law
  - C. only used to produce statistics by law
  - D. all of the above
3. Could your response to the 2020 Census be used against you in some way?
- A. sometimes
  - B. never
  - C. it depends
4. To support historical research, the National Archives and Records Administration could release census records after \_\_\_\_\_ years?
- A. 30
  - B. 60
  - C. 72
  - D. 100
5. All Census Bureau staff take a lifetime oath to protect your personal information, and any violation comes with a penalty of up to \$\_\_\_\_\_ and/or up-to \_ years in prison?
- A. 10,000, 1
  - B. 100,000, 3
  - C. 100,000, 5
  - D. 250,000, 5

### Answer Key

1. D, 2. D, 3. B, 4. C, 5. D

- Amanda Wang

### **Sources**

- *Why Does Writing... Suck?*  
 “The Age of the Essay” - Paul Graham  
<http://www.paulgraham.com/essay.html>  
 “How Youtube Changed the Essay” - Evan Puschak, TedxLafayetteCollege  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ald6Lc5TSk8>

2020 Census Corner

- <https://www.census.gov/library/fact-sheets/2019/dec/2020-safety-security.html>

## About Us

Hey! The Comet Team consists of seventeen middle schoolers who enjoy writing, editing, and journalism. Contact us at [thecometnewsletter@gmail.com](mailto:thecometnewsletter@gmail.com); we would love to hear feedback!

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