

Office of the Superintendent of Schools
MONTGOMERY COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS
Rockville, Maryland

May 10, 2011

MEMORANDUM

To: Members of the Board of Education

From: Jerry D. Weast, Superintendent of Schools

Subject: Innovations in Family Engagement

Executive Summary

Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) is committed to engaging all parents in their children's education in order to increase student achievement. Preparing students for the challenges of the 21st century demands creativity and synergistic strategies to support student learning and remove barriers to family engagement. More than 40 years of research confirms that family engagement promotes a range of benefits for students, including improved school readiness, higher academic achievement, development of appropriate social skills and behavior, and increased likelihood of graduation from high school and college.

In the 2002 report, *A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement*, authors Anne T. Henderson and Karen L. Mapp conclude that specific types of parent involvement activities are more likely to produce higher levels of student achievement at all ages and across cultural groups than more general forms of parental involvement. Their analysis indicates the most effective parent involvement efforts—

- focus on students' academic learning,
- engage families in supporting their children's learning at home,
- provide parents with specific knowledge and skills, and
- promote respectful and trusting relationships between teachers and parents.

The National Policy Forum for Family, School, and Community Engagement paper, *Beyond Random Acts: Family, School, and Community Engagement as an Integral Part of Education Reform* (December 2010), prepared by Heather B. Weiss, M. Elena Lopez, and Heidi Rosenberg from the Harvard Family Research Project, with support from Southwest Educational Developmental Laboratory, concludes that empirical research on school reform provides a compelling case for elevating family engagement as an educational strategy to improve academic achievement.

Parent engagement is an essential strategy in building the pathway to college and career readiness in today's competitive global society. One of the first steps in this process is to develop purposeful relationships between families and school staff members. The increasing diversity of our community—culturally, economically, and linguistically—has created fertile ground for increased innovation in family outreach practices.

Through the MCPS strategic plan and Board of Education policies ABA, *Community Involvement* and ABC, *Parent and Family Involvement*, the Board has affirmed its belief that family involvement has a positive effect on student learning and healthy development and is an important strategy in reducing achievement gaps. MCPS has been a leader in the area of parent engagement. In 1990, the Board developed the first parent involvement policy in Maryland and revised it in 2010. Policy ABC, *Parent and Family Involvement*, and MCPS Regulation ABC-RA, *Parent and Family Involvement*, provide the framework for the school system's efforts and embody the following six research-based national standards for effective school-family partnerships that will be utilized to make revisions to Goal 3: *Strengthening Productive Partnerships for Education* of the MCPS strategic plan for next school year.

- ***Welcoming all families into the school community***—families are active participants in the life of the school, and feel welcomed, valued, and connected to each other, to school staff members, and to what students are learning and doing in class.
- ***Communicating effectively***—families and school staff members engage in regular, meaningful two-way communication about student learning.
- ***Supporting student success***—families and school staff members continuously collaborate to support students' learning and healthy development both at home and at school, and have regular opportunities to strengthen their knowledge and skills to do so effectively.
- ***Speaking up for children***—families are empowered to advocate for their children, to ensure that students are treated fairly and have access to learning opportunities that will support their success.
- ***Sharing power***—families and school staff members are important and valued partners with unique information regarding decisions that affect children. Families and school staff members together inform, influence, and create policies, practices, and programs including full engagement in the school improvement process.
- ***Collaborating with community***—families and school staff members collaborate with community members to connect students, families, and staff members to expanded learning opportunities, community services, and civic participation.

Background

A systemic and integrated approach to family engagement that includes innovative strategies to leverage improvements in student learning is a key ingredient to school improvement and closing the achievement gap. Recommendations from the *Deputy's Minority Achievement Advisory Council Report* focused on the following areas through the lens of customer service: family engagement, clarity in communication, and fairness. These recommendations, along with feedback collected from parents at workshops, focus groups, study circles, and advisory groups, concentrate on empowering parents to advocate for and have active roles in their children's education. All parents need to know how their children are progressing and what they can do to support their children's learning and achievement.

MCPS utilizes strategies and resources to strengthen home/school partnerships. These strategies include meeting the needs of individual school communities, offering support for families whose primary language is not English, utilizing innovative ideas for community outreach, and gathering parent feedback. These strategies have as goals to:

- create a welcoming environment for all families,
- implement creative methods to gather feedback from families,
- build the capacity of families to navigate the school system and advocate for their children,
- increase the capacity of staff members to strengthen the family engagement practice, and
- facilitate culturally responsive engagement with families.

Welcoming Environment—Parent Advisory Council

The MCPS Parent Advisory Council (PAC), established in August 2007, works with the Department of Family and Community Partnerships (DFCP) to provide input on ways to improve communication and increase parent engagement at the district and local school levels. The Council also provides parent advocacy trainings and shares feedback on school system initiatives and programs.

Since its inception, the PAC has accomplished the following:

- Developed the parent advocacy workshop, *Can We Talk? How to Speak Up to Help Your Children Succeed*. As of April 1, 2011, PAC members working with DFPC staff members have delivered 16 workshops through the Parent Academy and individual requests by schools and parent organizations with 243 parents participating. Eight of the workshops were conducted in Spanish.
- Provided members to serve on panels at principal meetings and Office of Human Resources and Development intern and assistant principal trainings, sharing experiences and suggestions for creating a welcoming school environment.
- Contributed a “parent-to-parent” article about advocacy for each edition of the *Parent Connection* newsletter.

- Provided input on the revision of Board Policy ABC, *Parent and Family Involvement*.
- Generated ideas for the *Parent Guide* on the MCPS website.
- Provided feedback on the mathematics program for the MCPS K–12 Mathematics Work Group and the Elementary Integrated Curriculum.

As part of its work during the 2010–2011 school year, the PAC has been developing and providing schools with strategies and tips to assist in creating a welcoming school environment. Through parent advocacy workshops, parents are asked to identify what prevents them from being involved in schools. The bottom line response is that parents become involved in their schools only when they feel invited and welcomed to do so. The most valuable parental benefit of having a welcoming school environment is the development of trust that emerges from the relationships that are established and nurtured.

The PAC has drafted a Welcoming Environment Walk Through process and conducted the first walk through at John T. Baker Middle School on January 7, 2011. Two PAC members and two DFCP staff members visited the school and conducted the welcoming environment walk through. The reviewers collected data on the physical environment and customer service. In conjunction with the walk through process, DFCP, as requested by the principal, asked a prospective Spanish-speaking parent to come to the school office to determine how welcoming the school is to incoming Latino parents. A literature review was conducted to assess the cordiality of the school's written communication to families; this included the school's website and newsletters. Additionally, parents who were chosen randomly were interviewed via telephone about their experiences and were asked to offer suggestions. A report of the findings was shared with the principal. The report will be used with school staff members as a means to discuss, refine, and strengthen customer service.

Principals may request a Welcoming Environment Walk Through by contacting DFCP. Additionally, the PAC has created a film clip scenario and a Parent and Family Involvement Tip Sheet (Attachment) to help families feel more comfortable in interacting with school staff and feel they are an important part of the school community.

Welcoming Environment—ASK MCPS

Effective two-way communication is essential to building positive home/school partnerships. Parents depend upon clear, timely, and relevant information to make decisions and support their children's learning at home. Parents must have access to accurate and clear information in a variety of formats and languages if they are to be effective advocates for their children. An average of 1,200 calls per month is fielded by the *ASK MCPS* Call Center in DFCP, which provides assistance in English and Spanish five days per week. DFCP staff members also responded to more than 1,800 questions and requests for support via the *ASK MCPS* e-mail drop box during the 2009–2010 school year.

The online MCPS *Parent Guide* is a multimedia resource for parents to obtain answers to questions about the school system. The Parent Guide is now available in English and Spanish and will be available in Chinese, French, Korean, and Vietnamese within the next few months.

Organization by grade levels—prekindergarten, elementary, middle, and high school—makes it easy to find the most relevant information.

Personal support to parents is invaluable, particularly to parents new to the school system and unfamiliar with MCPS programs and procedures. *ASK MCPS* events provide parents the opportunity to connect with staff members, have questions answered, and pick up handouts about school and community resources. During the 2009–2010 school year, DFCEP staff interacted with more than 2,000 parents and community members at *ASK MCPS* events held at shopping centers, community gatherings, and Drop-In Coffees at the DFCEP office at the Carver Educational Services Center.

Prior to the beginning of the 2008–2009 school year, MCPS held its first annual Back-to-School Fair as a way to welcome the school system’s diverse students and families to a new school year, share information about school system programs, and provide access to community resources—all in a fun-filled environment for students and parents. The fair, coordinated by DFCEP, brought together school offices, community organizations, and businesses to answer questions, provide information about services, and offer a day of exciting activities.

Back-to-School Fair attendance grew from about 5,000 students, parents, and community members that first year to last year’s record attendance of an estimated 12,000. Interpretation services were provided in multiple languages. The fair was made possible with generous corporate sponsorships and individual donations of approximately \$43,000 and \$200,000 of in-kind goods and services. More than 5,000 backpacks filled with school supplies were distributed to families.

Gathering Feedback—Parent Focus Groups

Since 2008, DFCEP has developed a focus group procedure for schools to collect authentic feedback from diverse parent groups to support the school improvement process. Principals collaborate with DFCEP to invite parents to participate and share what the school is doing well and what can be done to improve communication in the school community. The principal greets and welcomes parents to the focus group and DFCEP staff members facilitate discussion and gathering of information. To increase the comfort level, no school staff members are present during the discussion and sharing periods. The data compiled by DFCEP are shared with the principal. Schools utilize the data for the school improvement plan and to enhance parent outreach initiatives. The information, reported anonymously, also is a resource to help staff members explore and understand the needs and varied perspectives of the school community.

In collaboration with schools, DFCEP has facilitated parent focus groups in seven elementary schools, eight middle schools, one high school, and for two school clusters. Additionally, two middle schools have had focus groups with student participants. Principals work with DFCEP to analyze school data to determine the types of focus groups to conduct. Through individual letters and personal phone calls, parents who are not typically involved in school activities are invited to attend these sessions, which empowers them to be consulted about the school climate and instructional program as they connect to the needs of their children and the process of learning. Focus groups are held on various evenings for African American and Latino parents as well as

for parents of all students. Focus groups can be held in English and Spanish and child care is provided at the sessions.

A note of appreciation from a principal stated, “The focus group model you provided was characterized by support for families through collaboration and high expectations for students. As a result of your assistance and professionalism, we will be able to address the needs of our community and enhance our partnerships.” Below is a sampling of the feedback from several focus groups.

What’s Working Well?	What are Things That Need Improvement?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scheduling of classes • Receptive to parent input and advocacy • Students have made a great transition from elementary school • Timely response from school • Student support systems (interventions) • Some teachers go above and beyond for students • Enrichment opportunities for children during the day • Students can get additional support within the school day • Internet and Edline communication • After-school activities • Some teachers call home to tell us good news and bad news • Lunch money program • Newsletter is translated in Spanish • Quick e-mail responses from teachers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Widen the road in front of the school? • More ways for parents to view formative assessments • Diversity training for staff • Flexibility with dates and times for parent-teacher conferences • Outreach and help for new students • Consistency in re-teaching and re-testing process among teachers • Some teachers keep up Edline and some do not • Some African American students in higher level classes feel invisible • Some teachers do not know how to interact with African American students • Information needs to be in Spanish for me to understand • Edline workshop to learn how to use it • Have an interpreter at the meetings

Building Capacity of Families—Parent Academy

Systemwide Parent Academy workshops, open to all MCPS parents, are held in schools and neighborhood locations throughout the county. Launched in 2007, the Parent Academy helps provide information, tips and tools that empower parents to be effective partners in their children’s education. Child care and foreign language interpretation services are provided at no charge when parents attend these workshops. The yearly cost of \$3,000 to operate the Parent Academy includes stipends for staff members who provide child care services. The workshops are presented by central office and school-based staff members as well as partners from community, government, and business organizations.

The Parent Academy has been effective in reaching a diverse group of parents, including those whose primary language is not English. Of the 670 parents who participated in systemwide Parent Academy workshops during the fall session of 2010, 36 percent were Hispanic, 17 percent

were African American, 19 percent were Asian American, and 28 percent were White. In addition to interpretation for workshops being available in multiple languages, a number of workshops are conducted in Spanish.

Recent and popular workshop topics include: Organization and Study Skills, Elementary Integrated Curriculum, Parent Advocacy, Algebra, Bullying, Basic Computer Skills, Meet and Greet Your Board of Education Members, Financing a College Education, the Special Education Process, Understanding the MCPS Operating Budget, and the Seven Keys to College Readiness.

Information about the Parent Academy is communicated through a variety of media. The schedule of workshops is available in six languages on the MCPS website. It also is disseminated through *MCPS QuickNotes*, Twitter, the Montgomery County Council of Parent Teacher Associations, local media, and materials sent to government agencies and community organizations. Schools communicate with parents about workshops through Connect-ED calls, newsletters, and school websites. Parents may register for workshops online or by phone, fax, or U.S. mail.

It is important to note that the Parent Academy is just one avenue through which workshops are provided for MCPS parents. Last year, DFCP staff members fulfilled additional requests from schools and parent organizations and conducted 244 parent workshops with attendance of more than 6,000 parents. Nearly 60 percent of the presentations were made available in other languages.

Increasing Capacity of Staff Members—Parent Involvement Toolkit

The Parent Involvement Toolkit, a collaborative resource launched in 2008 for principals, is now available on the *myMCPS* intranet site for use by all staff members. The toolkit includes information, strategies, and tools to improve communication and engage parents and the community as valued partners to promote school and student success.

The toolkit is organized by the six research-based standards for family/school partnerships as outlined in Policy ABC, *Parent and Family Involvement*, with strategies to support each standard. Each standard also includes a self-assessment, points to remember, bright ideas, and film clips. The content of the toolkit is generated from family engagement activities that schools have implemented. Currently, 44 schools have submitted best practices. The toolkit provides staff members with strategies to enhance professional development and access to ideas that can be adapted and replicated to strengthen family engagement practices.

Culturally Responsive Engagement—Study Circles

Engaging stakeholders to work together is challenging in a system as diverse as MCPS. The Study Circles Program was created as a tool to overcome these challenges. Since 2003, the Study Circles Program has helped schools and offices bring together diverse parents, staff members, and students to develop the trusting relationships and mutual understanding that are necessary to create effective partnerships and address racial and ethnic barriers. DFCP staff members develop the curriculum, train facilitators, recruit participants, and support action steps. Last year

100 study circles, workshops, and trainings with 2,319 participants were conducted. In response to increasing requests for support over the past two years, DFCP has created a variety of new formats to engage a wider audience with a focus on specific issues.

Spanish-language study circles were created in response to concerns raised in many traditional study circles about the vital need to engage more Latino families as partners in the education of their children. Spanish-language study circles are conducted with interpretation for English-speaking school staff members. Last year, DFCP used feedback from participants and facilitators to revise the Spanish language study circles curriculum.

As a result of a study circle at Earle B. Wood Middle School, a Latino parent committee was organized. This Latino parent committee, led by Latino parents and supported by school staff members, averages 45 parents attending meetings each month. At Newport Mill Middle School, participants from the Spanish-language study circle were instrumental in organizing a new study circle with the Parent Teacher Student Association leadership. After participating in a Spanish language study circle, a principal commented that this was a “life-changing experience.” A parent shared, “I had never imagined that I could meet the principal but now I am seated next to her. I now know how to work with the school and other parents.”

Student study circles provide school staff members the opportunity to understand student perspectives based on their experiences. DFCP created new study circles that are specifically designed to empower students to tell their story and provide the school with honest feedback. Facilitators lead students in 8 to 12 hours of dialogue. As in the adult study circle, students participate in activities that help them build trust, talk about their experiences, and create ideas for change. All student study circles conclude with a presentation to school staff members or leadership teams. Many of these presentations are videotaped so that all staff members may use the experiences to engage in dialogues, develop new strategies, and develop the school improvement plan.

Comprehensive study circles offer schools the opportunity to engage additional participants by using different formats and multiple study circles simultaneously. The comprehensive plan began with a study circle for Latino students. To address Latino student achievement, Gaithersburg High School held a variety of study circles. At the conclusion of each study circle, a video was created to express the concerns and suggestions of the students who participated. In the summer, the Instructional Leadership Team (ILT), including parents and students, participated in a three-day study circle to develop the school improvement plan. The concerns and suggestions from the student study circle were integrated into the Gaithersburg High School ILT study circle. The Gaithersburg High School ILT then decided to build on their study circle by collaborating with DFCP to organize five new study circles this year: one Spanish-language study circle for parents and staff members and four student study circles. DFCP continues to work with the Gaithersburg High School ILT every other month to address racial and ethnic barriers.

Central Services workshops and trainings provide staff members opportunities to better understand how decisions impact diverse stakeholders. As a result, offices and departments are able to develop improvement plans that are equitable and reflective of the diversity of students, families, and staff members. During the 2010–2011 school year, DFCP has worked with the Office of the Chief Operating Officer, the Executive Leadership Team, the Office of Curriculum and Instructional Programs, the Department of Safety and Security, the Department of Transportation, the Employee and Retiree Service Center, the Department of Materials Management, and the Division of the Comptroller. “I appreciate the openness of people in the group to talk about tough issues” said one participant. “Many of our discussions made me proud to be part of this department.” Another participant said, “I now see that I was heard and I had to learn to listen even more. It was a wonderful experience.”

Conclusion

Every family has something to share that affords us the opportunity to learn more about each other and enables us to design innovative strategies to engage parents in order to support their children’s education. Parent and family involvement is at the center of our work to increase student achievement and enhance the educational experience and well-being of every student. The changing demographics of the school system require staff members to be culturally competent, innovative, and strategic in the ways they engage students and their families. Families contribute to the success of all students when they feel welcomed at school, have the knowledge and skills to advocate for their children, and have opportunities to participate in decision making. The school system will continue to look for additional ways to build effective partnerships with parents and the community, and provide families with the resources they require to help their children succeed in school and life.

Present at the table for today’s discussion are Mr. Eric A. Davis, director, Department of Family and Community Partnerships; Ms. Bronda L. Mills, community superintendent, Office of School Performance; Mr. Kevin E. Lowndes, principal, Wheaton High School; Dr. Rajeev Warriar, co-chair, Parent Advisory Council; Mrs. Louise J. Worthington, principal, John T. Baker Middle School; Mr. John S. Landesman, coordinator, Department of Family and Community Partnerships; Ms. Kristin Tribble, president, Montgomery County Council of Parent Teacher Associations, Inc.; Ms. Patricia Williams, president, NAACP Parents’ Council; Ms. Norma Colina, Padres y Alumnos Latinos en Acción. Also present in the audience today are members of the Deputy’s Minority Achievement Advisory Council and members of the Parent Advisory Council.

JDW:daf

Attachment

Parent and Family Involvement Tip Sheet for Schools

Board of Education Policy ABC, *Parent and Family Involvement*, and MCPS Regulation ABC-RA, *Parent and Family Involvement*, provide the framework for the school system's family involvement efforts and include six research-based national standards for effective home-school partnerships for student success.

Welcoming all families into the school community—families are active participants in the life of the school, and feel welcomed, valued, and connected to each other, to school staff, and to what students are learning and doing in class.

- Signs help visitors find parking spaces and the main office.
- The entrance to the building is inviting to visitors with signage in multiple languages.
- Visitor and volunteer sign-in process is user-friendly.
- School has attractive and colorful displays of student work and art.
- Main office arrangement is planned to feel open and inviting and has a comfortable, clean, and well-kept place for visitors to wait.
- Main office staff members are friendly and inviting. Questions are answered politely and pertinent information is provided.
- Schools provide a variety of opportunities for parents to volunteer from home and at school.

Communicating effectively—families and school staff members engage in regular, meaningful, communication about student learning.

- School promptly follows up with parents if they have questions or concerns.
- School has an “open door” policy.
- School uses the Language Line and provides interpretation services at meetings.
- School hosts meet and greet events, open houses, and parent coffees.
- School administration sends welcome letter for the new school year before the start of the school year.
- Schools use multiple methods and languages, as appropriate, to provide effective and timely communication including, but not limited to newsletters, the school website, listservs, Edline, and Connect-ED.

Supporting student success—families and school staff continuously collaborate to support students' learning and healthy development both at home and at school, and have regular opportunities to strengthen their knowledge and skills to do so effectively.

- Principal sets tone and expectations for the school emphasizing working together for student success.
- Back-to-School Night provides a time for parents to find out about their child's instructional program and encourages parents to be involved in school.
- School communicates the availability of parent-teacher conferences throughout the school year, based on the needs of the student and requests from the parent or teacher.
- School provides information and arranges meetings for parents on how to help them support their children's learning and development and shares systemwide services available to families.
- School has processes in place to intervene if students are experiencing difficulties. Parents are made aware of the resources.

Developed by the MCPS Parent Advisory Council in collaboration with the
Department of Family and Community Partnerships

Speaking up for children—families are empowered to advocate for their children to ensure that students are treated fairly and have access to learning opportunities that will support their success.

- Parents are aware of how to contact teachers and counselors to discuss their child’s education.
- Principal develops relationships with students and families.
- Parents are encouraged to talk with staff members and administration.
- School staff members demonstrate sensitivity for the students’ home and school experience.
- Parents have the right to request and discuss additional resources and support for their child.

Sharing power—families and school staff are important and valued partners with unique information regarding decisions that affect children. Families and school staff together inform, influence, and create policies, practices, and programs including full engagement in the school improvement process.

- School staff members see parents as partners to support children’s learning and healthy development.
- Parents are encouraged to join the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) and other parent organizations and are informed on how to get involved.
- The school improvement team should include parents who reflect the diversity of the school community and who are given the opportunity to participate meaningfully on the team.
- School uses multiple methods to collect feedback from parents, including but not limited to the Survey of School Environment, and to share the feedback with the parent community.
- All parents have access to the school improvement plan.

Collaborating with community—families and school staff collaborate with community members to connect students, families, and staff to expanded learning opportunities, community services, and civic participation.

- School administration and staff members are accessible and visible in the community.
- School and PTA actively seek to establish partnerships with community organizations and businesses.
- School meetings for parents are held a few times a year in community locations.
- The school shares opportunities offered in the school community that will benefit families. Staff members are familiar with school community and the demographics of the neighborhood.