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

March 13, 2012

MEMORANDUM

To: Members of the Board of Education

From: Joshua P. Starr, Superintendent of Schools

Subject: Strategic Priorities: Interventions

Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) is rightfully recognized for high levels of student achievement overall; however, as seen in school districts nationwide, persistent gaps continue between the performance of White and Asian students and of Black or African American and Hispanic/Latino students. Disparities also exist between the overall performance of students and those with disabilities, limited English proficiency, and economic disadvantages. These disparities have proved difficult to rectify and continue to act as a call to action.

Educating every student, in every classroom, every day requires a careful alignment of individual student needs with strategies and supports. Student performance data in MCPS indicate the critical need for supplemental supports and interventions to prevent increasing numbers of students from falling behind their peers. A substantial national body of research suggests that students who experience difficulty early in school will continue to struggle throughout their educational careers if they do not receive assistance. Without adequate intervention, many of these children may eventually drop out of school.

There are a wide variety of reasons for students falling behind; however, it is incumbent upon us to weave a tighter safety net than currently in place so that our most vulnerable students may be successful. The size and diversity of the district create obstacles for consistent implementation of effective strategies matched to the needs of individual learners. A Professional Learning Community (PLC) approach that stresses communication, collaboration, and differentiation based on a student's needs is key. A successful intervention model requires positive home-school connections, shared beliefs, knowledge, and skills; an extensive collection of supplemental support and intervention tools and resources; consistent monitoring of individual students, schools, and the district; and sufficient staff with the expertise and confidence to implement the model with fidelity.

The *MCPS Transition Team Report* acknowledged the accomplishments of the district in the area of teaching and learning, and noted the challenges of implementing a rigorous curriculum in a large and diverse school system. The report recommended that MCPS sharpen the focus on differentiation within schools, and consider how best to allocate resources and support to meet the individual needs of teachers and students at the classroom level.

The Transition Team members recommended that MCPS examine the instructional core, the relationship among the teacher, student, and content to determine—

- which teachers may need coaching or professional development to discern how best to meet a struggling student's need and

- which students might benefit most from a varied instructional program or from supplemental learning opportunities.

The recommendation to examine how we most effectively meet individual students' needs mirrors the national discussion and aligns with the Montgomery County Board of Education's core values of tailoring instruction to promote individual success. Legislation and research commonly refer to this philosophy as a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS), or as Response to Intervention (RTI)[1], with increasing levels of focused support in the general education environment. The models stress the importance of consultation among colleagues, leadership teams, and parents, and endorse approaches emphasizing the following key components of effective education to address individual academic and behavioral needs.

Prevention translates to students learning a challenging curriculum taught by a skilled teacher who can identify and respond to their individual needs in a timely manner during the teaching and learning cycle. Small group instruction and flexible grouping within the classroom facilitate meeting student needs, as do strong teacher-student relationships and a positive classroom culture that supports the social and emotional learning needs of students. Most students— national research suggests 80 to 85 percent—will succeed in a classroom in which such an optimal integration exists.

Early Recognition of individual needs ranges from the many strategies for checking progress during a lesson that teachers use—such as observing students' level of understanding or noting their frustration as they explain a concept—to other formative assessments and progress monitoring tools teachers also use in the classroom to help plan lessons that match their students' needs. Early recognition of needs also includes multiple data points such as more formal assessments and records of strategies used to support a student's learning and emotional growth.

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[1] Batsche et al, 2007; Castillo et al, 2010
Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act, 2004;
A Tiered Instructional Approach to Support Achievement for All Students: Maryland's Response to Intervention Framework (2008)

Supplemental Support and Intervention may be provided by a teacher, specialist, or paraeducator in the classroom to reinforce appropriate behavior, clarify misconceptions, review or preview content, refine skills, deepen understanding, or shape behavior. Some students—national research suggests 10 to 15 percent—will need supplemental support and interventions to succeed. This support may differ from classroom instruction, but does not replace instruction in a subject or skill area. Duration, frequency, and intensity are key factors and can vary widely according to student need. Supplemental support and interventions are part of the general education environment. The match of student needs to the specific intervention is key to the process at this step. Curriculum-based, formative and summative data are necessary to make the appropriate match. For example, a kindergarten student may need additional small group support to enhance phonemic awareness or sound-symbol relationships skills that are important to early reading success.

Intense Intervention may occur in or outside a student's classroom during the school day. While the intervention may differ from classroom instruction in a subject or skill area and be linked to skill specific commercially available products, it does not replace it. Rather, intense intervention is provided in addition to classroom instruction. Intense intervention is more individualized, may occur three to five days a week, and includes progress monitoring two to three times a week. Typically, a small percentage of students—national research suggests 5 to 10 percent—will need intense intervention to succeed. Again, general education is most often the setting where intense interventions are delivered. Intense intervention may be academic or may involve counseling or psychological services.

Consultation Between Educators and Families supports the common interests of meeting individual students' needs. Such collaboration establishes productive partnerships that are focused on problem-solving and shared ownership of finding, implementing, and monitoring appropriate strategies or interventions matched to students' specific needs.

Current State of Interventions

Curriculum

As described in research and literature, the intervention model in MCPS also begins with *prevention*, or effective delivery of instruction by skilled classroom teachers of an accessible and challenging curriculum. As curriculum is developed or revised in MCPS, it is designed to highlight effective instructional practices that promote engaging, flexible, equitable, accessible, and challenging classrooms through—
- cultural relevance,
- equitable practices,
- access to content presented through different modalities or formats and at different levels,
- opportunity to learn in an inclusive environment that challenges and supports all students, and
- multiple and varied methods for students to demonstrate learning.

Problem Solving for Student Success

As noted above, the MCPS approach is founded on the collaboration of educators and families to recognize and address individual students' academic, behavioral, and social emotional learning needs as early as possible. The Collaborative Problem Solving (CPS) process outlined in the *Problem Solving for Student Success* guide promotes the success of all students through the Plan-Do-Study-Act cycle. Schools are expected to implement this process as a part of the general education program, including recommending intensive interventions. The instructional match between the needs of the student and the selected intervention is critical to success. The CPS team records interventions, reports, and determines if the support or intervention is having the desired impact on achievement or behavior. It is anticipated that most students will exhibit improved self-discipline and accelerate performance with this level of support.

The CPS structures align with a PLC model that support the strategic monitoring of student progress and the process to identify and implement appropriate strategies in the classroom occur within and across grade levels and include examples such as the following:

- Grade- or course-team collaborative planning and curriculum study
- Grade- or course-team data chats
- Professional learning communities across roles and grade or school levels
- Common assessments embedded in the curriculum

All schools are expected to convene a more formal and intense level of problem solving when evidence shows that students' academic or behavioral needs are not met through the CPS process.

Intervention Resources and Strategies

MCPS provides support for interventions through the allocation of school-based positions such as academic intervention teachers, focus teachers, reading intervention teachers, staff development teachers, and counselors. Central support positions include school psychologists, supervisors, coordinators, instructional specialists, and program specialists across offices whose responsibilities include supporting schools. In addition, the district established systemwide extended day and extended year programs to provide supplemental focused learning time as a way to meet the unique learning needs of our students.

The *Report on Disproportionality in Montgomery County Public Schools (2009)* identified a need for tiered instructional supports in the general education environment as a strategy aimed at reducing the disproportionate identification of students with disabilities. It is clear that students with limited English proficiency also benefit from supplemental supports and interventions.

Over the past several years, staff members in the offices of Curriculum and Instructional Programs (OCIP), Special Education and Student Services (OSESS), School Performance (OSP),

Shared Accountability (OSA), and the Chief Technology Officer (OCTO) collaborated to identify and implement effective structures, tools, strategies, or resources that provide support to schools as they use the CPS process. Supplemental supports and interventions to be used within or outside the classroom by teachers, specialists, counselors, or paraeducators in the areas of reading, mathematics, and behavior were identified. OCIP and OSESS regularly distribute information to schools about proven strategies and resources and have purchased recommended materials for schools in recent years.

In addition, a cross-office project team was convened in 2010–2011 to work to identify reading supports and interventions that are appropriate for students who may or may not receive services in special education or English for Speakers of Other Languages programs. Based on school administrator and teacher feedback, the team is focusing on interventions for secondary students and on communicating pertinent information about purpose, target audience, level, cost, and details related to requirements for staffing, space, equipment, and scheduling.

Professional Development and Support

Staff members in OCIP, OSESS, OCTO, OSP, and OSA support schools in the improvement process to analyze student performance data and to refine instructional practices and the skills to make appropriate decisions about prevention, early recognition, supplemental support, and targeted or intense intervention. They provide guidance to schools on the selection of support and intervention strategies and materials to meet the unique needs of students in their schools.

OCIP, OSESS, and the Office of Human Resources and Development provide professional development on teaching and learning, curriculum and instruction, and strategies that support collaborative problem solving and progress monitoring including the PLC Institute and the School Leadership Team Institute. Recent efforts include training on how to conduct a Functional Behavioral Assessment and develop a Behavioral Intervention Plan. Grant funds are used in pilot projects to set the course to provide comprehensive training on the use of targeted and intensive interventions, coach staff members, and monitor the fidelity of implementation in order to ensure student success. While MCPS uses local, state, or federal funds to support professional development, a significant need exists for job-embedded professional development to build the capacity of principals, teachers, and paraeducators to implement the intervention model with fidelity across all schools.

Vision for Instruction and Interventions in MCPS

Based upon a review of the *MCPS Transition Team Report*, research and literature on interventions, and lessons learned from our experiences in MCPS, a vision for instruction and interventions emerges. By focusing on a well-defined, well-designed, and well-implemented model of support and interventions, MCPS will build on current effective practices to best serve students. It is imperative that we increase the district's capacity to recognize and meet student needs expeditiously. In order to accomplish this we must ensure that instructional staff is

provided with the professional development necessary to deliver excellent first instruction every day for every student in every classroom. In addition, staff must operate in a PLC environment based on the belief that all students can be successful.

To achieve the vision for instruction and intervention in MCPS, leadership will align resources to focus on the following factors critical to success:

Instructional Core—Instruction will address students' academic and social/emotional needs because teachers will have the capacity to build strong relationships with students and to recognize and respond to students' needs during instruction in a manner that is timely, natural, authentic, focused, and appropriate.

Clarity—Central services staff members, school instructional leaders and staff, and parents and community members will have a clear understanding of our goals, rationale, expectations, and decision-making protocols for supporting and challenging all students.

Consistency—Schools will focus on the instructional core, implement problem-solving processes, and provide support and intervention strategies consistently.

Resources—Schools will have the tools, information, materials, support, and job-embedded professional development to provide effective instruction, support, and interventions to meet each student's needs.

Relationships—Strong family-school partnerships will contribute to students' school success.

Challenges

Staff members must understand the concept of the power of a strong instructional core and how the interplay of teacher, classroom climate, and content can proactively support a struggling student's needs. While effective instruction as prevention is a critical goal, it must be acknowledged that for some students it is not enough. Staff members also must have the expertise to recognize and clearly identify the specific needs of students early and to match them to appropriate supports and interventions at the lowest level of intensity possible. For the small percentage of students who require more focused supports based on their unique needs as learners, the model will build on an array of strategies, tools and resources, that provide the structures necessary to recognize and address students' needs on an ongoing basis.

Challenging beliefs and building the knowledge and skill of staff members, providing a comprehensive selection of proven interventions, and considering the strategic allocation and use of staff all require financial resources. Like other districts across the nation, MCPS faces continued fiscal constraints, potential changes in federal and state laws, and the advent of new state curriculum and assessments.

Schools are encouraged to strategically monitor the impact of interventions on the progress of individual students. However, additional work needs to be done to upgrade the tools available and the level of understanding necessary to more effectively implement a process that is clear and meaningful as a way to ensure that decisions are consistently data based.

A reduction in central services positions, including psychologists and instructional specialists, directly impacts the availability of staff members to provide the level of consultation and ongoing support essential to the success of the model. Similar cuts to supplemental school-based positions negatively affect implementation. We must examine and continue to allocate supplemental school-based and central services positions. Professional development to build administrative and instructional staff members' understanding and skill will be required.

A range of commercially available intervention programs are approved by MCPS. However, a systematic evaluation of the impact of the products is needed after the appropriate training and support are provided to schools.

Next Steps

A highly effective and systemic intervention model is a priority for MCPS in order to provide all students with the skills necessary to successfully navigate a path to college and career readiness. The Office of School Support and Improvement (OSSI) will be a key stakeholder in discussions and planning focused on the following:

- Identify gaps between the current and desired state that will be used to inform the process for developing the Fiscal Year 2014 budget.

- Ensure that social emotional learning is addressed through meaningful curricular connections, particularly as they pertain to the thinking and academic success skills of Curriculum 2.0.

- Continue to develop or revise curriculum to align with the Common Core State Standards and promote an engaging, flexible, equitable, and accessible instructional program and embedded assessments that support and challenge all learners.

- Enhance professional development focused on the PLC model and the power of belief systems as a support for the CPS process.

- Develop and implement a systematic model to monitor and evaluate the impact of targeted and intensive interventions on student outcomes.

- Continue to monitor the identification of students with disabilities at the system and school level and provide support and professional development to schools as needed.

- Support schools to ensure that trusting and supportive relationships are developed with all members of the school community.

At the table for today's discussion are Mrs. Chrisandra A. Richardson, associate superintendent, Office of Special Education and Student Services; Ms. Betsy Brown, director, Department of Curriculum and Instruction; Mr. Bertram B. Generlette, principal, Piney Branch Elementary School; and Ms. Alice I. Wright, itinerant resource teacher, Department of Special Education and Student Services.

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