Montgomery County Public Schools

EARLY SUCCESS PERFORMANCE PLAN
Educational Reform in the Montgomery County Public Schools

May 2003

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The Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) Early Success Performance Plan recognizes the long-term consequences of inadequate academic preparation in the early years of a child's education. In MCPS, greater numbers of students are reaching our classrooms with increasing needs related to poverty, language development, and disability.[1] These students are entering school lagging behind their peers in foundational literacy skills.[2] Such students need to have access to a rigorous and challenging curriculum and be held accountable to the same high standards as their non-impacted peers. A study of MCPS graduates revealed that students who were not performing on grade level by Grade 3 had little chance of being prepared for rigorous high school courses.[3]

In 1999, the school system developed a landmark report, *Our Call to Action*,[4] to articulate a shared vision to raise the level of student achievement to rigorous standards of academic performance and to address the opportunity gap facing increasing numbers of children. The report, developed by staff, parents, community, and business leaders, created ownership of the problem and outlined specific strategies for systemic reform.

To address the inequity of opportunities of many of our students, MCPS made a commitment to the success of its youngest learners, as part of a comprehensive reform effort. A fundamental element of ensuring the success of the early childhood initiative (pre-kindergarten through Grade 2) is the focus on quality teachers and principals; a comprehensive and aligned curriculum; individual diagnostic assessments; a continuous feedback loop utilizing a technology-based monitoring system; and ongoing, targeted professional development.

MCPS identified a problem—gaps in achievement and opportunity. A diagnosis was made and a comprehensive plan developed—the Early Success Performance Plan[5] for the district's youngest learners. A clearly articulated early childhood education plan coupled with a focus on building a quality workforce are the two essential components of the MCPS plan.

The Need for Change

To ensure that all students have access to a rigorous and challenging curriculum, the *Our Call to Action* report identified the need to conduct curriculum audits. In September 2000, Phi Delta Kappa International completed *A Curriculum Management Audit of Mathematics Education*.[6] This audit represented the first comprehensive review of a K–12 curriculum in the school system and provided a benchmark for reforms in other areas, including curriculum governance by the Board of Education. While the audit identified a number of findings in the area of mathematics, these findings also were applicable to other curricular areas:
1. Variability in curriculum implementation
2. Lack of curriculum alignment
3. Lack of curriculum-based diagnostic assessments
4. Disparity among textbooks and materials used for instruction
5. A gap in achievement between minority and non-minority students
6. Lack of a coherent curriculum policy

An Overarching Curriculum Policy

Following the mathematics audit, the Board of Education adopted an overarching curriculum policy[7] that encompasses all facets of curriculum design and revision, including staff development and monitoring. The policy calls for a clear and coherent written curriculum in the form of a set of objectives derived from local, state, national, and international standards.

Four critical questions based on *Professional Learning Communities at Work*, by Rick DuFour,[8] guided curriculum improvement efforts:
1. What do students need to know and be able to do?
2. How will we know if they have learned it?
3. What will we do if they haven't learned it?
4. What will we do if they already know it?

Standards-Based Curriculum Framework

In accordance with the curriculum policy, the pre-K–8 curriculum framework was developed in reading/language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies.[9] The framework establishes precise expectations for what students are expected to know and be able to do by the end of each grade level. The Council for Basic Education (CBE), a national non-profit organization that advocates high academic standards for all students and exemplary teaching in every classroom, worked with MCPS staff to establish grade-level standards aligned to the Maryland Content Standards Assessment Program and assessments that measure student achievement success. The curriculum frameworks, however, are not limited by the Maryland Content Standards, but include national and international standards ensuring the rigor and challenge required by students to successfully complete Honors and Advanced Placement (AP) courses. In spring 2002, the College Board reviewed the curriculum framework and concurred.[10]

The curriculum frameworks were organized into instructional guides.[11] The guides include model lessons and strategies for reteaching and enrichment along with pre- and end-of-unit assessment. The diagnostic information gained through the pre-assessments lets teachers know what material students already have mastered, and informs intervention, acceleration, and/or enrichment.

Diagnostic Assessments Included in the Instructional Guides

The assessments contained in the instructional guides are a component of the MCPS Assessment Program, a diagnostic assessment system.[12] The assessment program is aligned with the curriculum and enables teachers to monitor student progress and make instructional decisions to meet the needs of individual students. The MCPS Primary Reading Assessment is currently used in kindergarten through Grade 2. In addition, the Early Childhood Observation Record (ECOR), a performance assessment instrument, is used three times a year for ongoing assessment of pre-kindergarten and kindergarten youngsters. The primary goal of the ECOR is to monitor and document a youngster's overall development and acquisition of skills that support individualized instruction. The model of assessment development and implementation used for the Primary Reading Assessment serves as a guide for the expansion of the MCPS Assessment Program in reading, writing, and mathematics for pre-kindergarten to Grade 8.

The development of the curriculum framework and instructional guides, along with the identification of textbooks and resource materials, support teachers by providing a consistent and cohesive curriculum for all students and help to reduce the variability in instruction that has been reflected in student achievement. Using the guides and the assessment measures, teachers can plan appropriate instruction for student learning.

External Review of the Curriculum

One of the essential requirements of curriculum design is the integrity of the framework upon which the curriculum is based. Achieve, Inc., an independent, nonprofit, bipartisan organization created by the nation's governors and business leaders following the 1996 National Education Summit, found that, overall, the MCPS Curriculum Frameworks in English and mathematics are comprehensive and contain the core knowledge and skills found in high-quality curriculum guides. In addition, their February 2003 report entitled *Measuring Up: A Report on Education Standards and Assessment for Montgomery County*,[13] determined that the MCPS frameworks were rigorous and reasonable and, if strengthened in several key areas, could be on par with the best in the nation and the world.

Early Success Performance Plan

The curriculum revisions were first initiated in kindergarten. MCPS embarked upon an ambitious early success plan to "raise the bar" for all students and provide them with the skills and knowledge to succeed in reading, writing, and mathematics. The plan provides a four-year sequence or pathway for children countywide.[14] The early success plan is built around five guiding principles:
1. Focused and challenging curriculum for reading, writing, and mathematics
2. Ongoing diagnostic assessment of student progress
3. Expanded instructional time
4. Intensive, targeted, and sustained professional development for teachers
5. Meaningful family involvement and community collaboration

Pre-kindergarten through Grade 2 Reform

The pre-kindergarten through Grade 2 reform, the Early Success Performance Plan, began with a new kindergarten initiative that was implemented during the 2000–2001 school year.[15] A 1999 MCPS kindergarten study [16] documented the need to increase the rigor of the program and provide a differentiated instructional design for half-day and full-day programs. Over three years, this initiative increased the number of full-day kindergarten programs from 17 to 56, beginning with the schools having the largest number of students living in poverty. The plan includes the following components, all of which are interdependent and congruent:
- **Standards-based curriculum:** Revised standards-based curriculum with precise expectations of what students should learn and be able to do, instructional guides containing pre- and post-assessments, core-instructional materials, and textbooks.
- **Teacher training:** All teachers received professional development on the revised curriculum. In addition, teams of teachers, principals, and instructional assistants from schools were trained in the revised mathematics and reading/language arts curriculum.
- **Diagnostic assessments:** All students were assessed periodically during the year, which allowed teachers to make adjustments in their instruction for each individual student. The progress of each student was closely monitored through a technology-based system.

- **More time:** Full-day kindergarten programs were phased into 56 of the most-impacted schools over a three-year period with extended time for balanced literacy, and mathematics instruction was provided. All Grade 1 and 2 classes had a 90-minute block for balanced literacy and at least a 60-minute mathematics block.
- **Extended learning opportunities:** Extended-day and extended-year programs were provided for our students in the most highly-impacted schools in pre-kindergarten to Grade 2.
- **Smaller classes:** Class size was reduced to 15:1 in the full-day kindergarten program, and 17:1 in Grades 1 and 2 in the targeted elementary schools. In all schools, class size was reduced to 17:1 for the 90-minute balanced literacy block.
- **Parent involvement:** Increased communication with parents through grade-level curriculum documents that communicate the expectations of the revised curriculum. A redesigned family-friendly report card that is aligned with the curriculum, predictive of student performance on local, state, and national assessments.
- **Policies and governance:** Revised Board of Education policies that align grading and reporting practices with curriculum, instruction, and assessment. A Board of Education adopted accountability system that established measures and targets for school performance.[17]

Longitudinal Study Conducted

The positive benefits of the Early Success Performance Plan are clearly evident.[18] Overall reading scores continue to improve for significantly more students, particularly low-income and ESOL students. The first three years of a longitudinal study of 16,000 students found that poor and middle-class children in full-day kindergarten programs in high-poverty schools outperformed wealthier children in other schools with half-day kindergarten programs.[19] The students not only increased their foundational reading skills in kindergarten, but they sustained their achievement in reading in Grade 1.

The evaluation of the Early Success Performance Plan for students attending kindergarten in 2000-2001 also revealed that the pre-kindergarten program had to be revised to adequately equip students with the foundational skills required for success in kindergarten. Explicit indicators in reading/language arts and mathematics were aligned with the K–8 curriculum framework and teachers were trained in foundational literacy skills. Subsequent research on the students who attended kindergarten in 2001-2002 indicated that although the pre-kindergarten curriculum had been revised, many students continued to reach kindergarten with minimal foundational literacy skills. These findings spurred further revisions to the pre-kindergarten program with an increased emphasis on oral language and vocabulary development, phonemic awareness, letter name knowledge, and print concepts. Additionally, the individual diagnostic assessments for pre-kindergarten youngsters are being reviewed and revised. The latest research on the 2003 Grade 2 students underscores the need for this focus and supports the urgency for strengthening standards for pre-kindergarten.

A Focus on Principal and Teacher Quality

The effectiveness of the Early Success Performance Plan requires a quality workforce.[20] Beginning in 1999, with *Our Call to Action,* a series of workforce excellence goals was developed and implemented collaboratively with the principals' and teachers' unions.[21] MCPS aligned the hiring, induction, mentoring, professional development, support systems, and evaluation processes for principals and teachers. This had a significant impact on principals and early childhood teachers.

The first step in improving teacher quality began with a new set of standards and a new teacher evaluation system.[22] These standards were patterned after the National Board for Professional Teaching standards.[23] A new teacher evaluation system alone was not sufficient to reach the goals of a highly performing workforce; therefore, the district expanded the support into a professional growth system for all teachers with the following key components:

- A clear system of accountability so that teachers and leaders know the targets for student achievement
- Training and ongoing professional development on the revised curriculum, assessments, and instructional strategies so that teachers understand what they are expected to teach in their content area
- Support systems to provide job-embedded training and development at each school
- Support systems to provide specific support to underperforming and novice teachers
- A supervisory model that ensures consistent and pervasive support for implementation

The workforce excellence initiatives were launched at the same time that new contracts were negotiated with the principals' and teachers' unions in 1999 and 2000. The three-year contracts included explicit language about shared ownership of student results.[24] To retain the most qualified teachers in highly impacted schools, MCPS, in partnership with the teachers' union, is in the process of developing a "career lattice"[25] that would provide opportunities for teacher recognition for additional job responsibilities and professional accomplishments.

Training on the Revised Curriculum, Assessments, and Instructional Strategies

A comprehensive staff development program supports the implementation of the revised curriculum and assessment program.[26] Training continues to emphasize the critical relationship among planning, instruction, and assessment. Teachers and principals work on gaining a more precise understanding of what is expected of students and how to use the diagnostic information to plan for instruction. Training is provided on instructional strategies and beliefs that are matched to individual student needs. Over 400 kindergarten teachers of current second graders received 96 hours of training that specifically covered a methodology for assessing student knowledge.[27] The following year, over 1,700 teachers of first and second graders received four full days of training in the summer and 45 hours of follow-up throughout the year.

Another professional development opportunity to improve teacher quality is based on the district's partnership with Research for Better Teaching. The *Studying Skillful Teaching*[28] course, a 36-hour course, provides teachers with research-based skills and instructional strategies that lead to increased student achievement. The course promotes collaboration among teachers, peer observation, and reflection and analysis of teaching and learning. More than 2,000 teachers have completed the course thus far, approximately 20 percent of the total instructional workforce of 11,000 teachers.

Staff Development Teacher—*Teacher Coach*

The staff development teacher or "teacher coach," position was created based on research that confirms the effectiveness of school-based professional development.[29] Beginning with the 2000-2001 school year, every school was allocated a staff development teacher who provides a consistent focus on curriculum implementation, instructional strategies, and expectations for student

achievement. In addition, permanent substitute teachers were assigned to all schools to provide release time to classroom teachers. During this time, teachers participate in classroom observations of their colleagues and engage in team planning.

Peer Assistance and Review Program

A Peer Assistance and Review (PAR) program was designed and implemented in 2000-2001.[30] Under the PAR program, highly qualified master teachers, or consulting teachers, provide intensive support to all novice and underperforming teachers identified through the evaluation system. Fifty-eight full-time consulting teachers were phased in over a three-year period. An impartial panel of teachers and principals, selected by both the teachers' and principals' unions, oversees the work of the consulting teachers and makes recommendations as to whether employment should be continued. The results of the PAR program have been significant. [31]

School-Based Administrative Leadership

Over the course of three years, the leadership of the elementary schools was changing. This offered the opportunity to hire instructional leaders who would focus intensely on student outcomes and who would use new strategies to supervise and monitor teaching and learning. Since 1999, 82 new elementary principals were hired—63% of all elementary principals. The new leadership blended highly-trained internal candidates, along with experienced outside candidates from across the United States. All principals—new and veteran—received 12 days of training in the *Observation and Analysis of Teaching*[32] coursework that provides a common language about the complexity of teaching and learning. A new supervisory model with feedback to teachers on the breadth of instructional strategies took the place of the old "checklist" model. The richness of the feedback allowed even veteran K–2 teachers to receive insights needed to improve student outcomes.

Framework for Improving Teaching and Learning

In 2002, the district, along with the unions, national researchers, and professional consultants developed a *Framework for Improving Teaching and Learning*. The framework clarifies the main elements in the teaching and learning process, with concise descriptors of the "look-fors" and qualities for each element.[33] The elements of this framework included curriculum, instruction, evidence of student learning, planning, expectations, and building a professional learning community. Principals and assistant principals of all elementary schools attended an intensive five-day leadership institute with key teacher leaders from their schools to become familiar with the framework and to work with their staff on school improvement. Principals, teachers, and supervisors now have a common set of tools for monitoring the quality of instructional delivery in the classroom.

Central Office Leadership

The central office of the school district was reorganized to fully support the reform initiatives.[34] Community superintendents oversee geographic clusters of schools and provide focused support and monitoring. District-wide resources were realigned to support schools directly through implementation of the following:
- **Cross-functional teams:** Teams from all departments in the organization work together to analyze data and support student achievement in the 60 most highly-impacted schools.

- **"Walk-throughs":** Systemwide school observations in which supervisory staff and school leaders identify areas for improvement and share best practices using a carefully constructed *Framework For Improving Teaching and Learning*.
- **Integrated Quality Management System:** The Integrated Quality Management System consists of a Data Warehouse and Instructional Management System (IMS). The Data Warehouse, to be deployed in July 2003, integrates all pre-kindergarten–Grade 12 school system data and provides strategic tools that support performance management. The IMS is a Web-based technology system that provides access to curriculum documents, lesson plans, and assessment data to monitor and inform instructional practices. Currently used by teachers and principals in Grades K–2, the IMS will proceed to Grade 3 in July 2003.[35]
- **Vertical articulation:** An emphasis on a seamless pre-kindergarten through Grade 12 program progression from grade to grade and among elementary, middle, and high schools with shared ownership and responsibility for school performance through the examination of student achievement data.
- **Four-year budget initiative**: A four-year budget was developed to support the Board of Education's reform initiatives. In the third year of the budget plan, all office and department budgets were reduced to zero and rebuilt to strategically support the delivery of services at the classroom level.[36]
- **Differentiated staffing:** Staffing in the 60 most highly-impacted schools was differentiated to include math content coaches, enrichment teachers, and ESOL staffing based on students' English proficiency.[37]

Results and Next Steps

The results of the MCPS Early Success Performance Plan are promising.[38] The current second grade students show impressive improvements in performance on a nationally-normed achievement test compared to the performance of previous Grade 2 students. Additionally, these same students show continued improvement on the Montgomery County Public Schools Assessment Program. Moreover, the improvements for the Grade 2 class of 2003 were significantly greater in the schools characterized by high poverty when compared to schools in wealthier areas.

In partnerships with national experts in early childhood education and teacher quality, the Early Success Performance Plan is undergoing intense scrutiny. The school district has undertaken a more comprehensive analysis of quality pre-kindergarten programs, including curriculum standards, diagnostic assessments, teacher training, and other program features. In addition, stakeholder feedback, about the Grades 1 and 2 curriculum and assessments are being carefully considered. The Councils on Teaching and Learning, a unique collaboration between MCPS and the teachers' union, provides valuable feedback on curriculum and assessment.[39] As positive results of the program are documented, the initiatives will progress through the grade levels. Sustained improvement in raising the achievement of all students and closing the opportunity gap can be accomplished only through consistent monitoring and adjustments of the plan, broad stakeholder commitment, and a systemic approach to continuous improvement.

EARLY SUCCESS PERFORMANCE PLAN:
EDUCATIONAL REFORM IN THE MONTGOMERY COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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Early Success Performance Plan

Montgomery County Public Schools

PRE-K

PRE-KINDERGARTEN PROGRAMS
Aligned reading, writing and
mathematics curriculum

*ELO — Summer

EXTENDED LEARNING OPPORTUNITY*
Summer programs in reading,
writing, mathematics,
and language

DIAGNOSTIC ASSESSMENT

Kindergarten

❖ASP

AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAMS❖
Congruent and focused instruction
in reading, writing, mathematics,
and language

*ELO — Summer

DIAGNOSTIC ASSESSMENT

Grade 1

❖ASP

IN SCHOOL ALIGNED READING, WRITING, MATHEMATICS CURRICULUM WITH ONGOING ASSESSMENT & LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

*ELO — Summer

DIAGNOSTIC ASSESSMENT

Grade 2

❖ASP

*ELO — Summer

ASSESSMENT

Grade 3
ALL
STUDENTS
READING

Curriculum, Assessment, Professional Development, Technology, Research, and Parental Involvement

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT