

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

October 1, 2002

MEMORANDUM

To: Members of the Board of Education

From: Jerry D. Weast, Superintendent of Schools

Subject: Improvements in Student Reading in Kindergarten and First Grade

Significantly more students—especially those who are most heavily affected by poverty and English language development—are acquiring foundational reading skills in kindergarten and text reading skills in Grade 1 as a result of teachers and principals using a more rigorous curriculum, enhanced program implementation, and ongoing professional development. The gains in foundational reading skills in kindergarten, which are being achieved to various degrees among all racial and ethnic groups, are being sustained in Grade 1 as more students keep pace in achieving higher-level skills in reading text

These are the major findings of two ongoing studies that are part of an effort to chronicle the academic development of nearly 16,000 students who were part of the first group of children to benefit from the kindergarten reforms implemented two years ago (2000-2001) and the second group of students who completed kindergarten last year (2001-2002), including those who were enrolled in full-day kindergarten. The first group of children are now in second grade this year, and their experience last year as first graders provides emerging trend data that underscore the potential for long-term advancements in student academic performance, especially in the schools most heavily affected by poverty.

The growing impact of poverty is an important factor in the development and implementation of the kindergarten reforms and the expansion of full-day kindergarten. The attendance areas of the 56 schools that now have full-day kindergarten also have 81 percent of all elementary school participation in the federal meals program systemwide and 71 percent of the county's English language learners. The heaviest concentrations of the poor among all racial and ethnic groups also are located in these schools.

There is much more to be done. One immediate step is the implementation this fall of a phonics supplement in kindergarten through Grade 2 in the 18 federally funded Title I schools for students who need extra foundational skill development, especially those learning English as a second language. Other efforts will concentrate on improvements in oral language instruction for English language learners and increased focus on underperforming students, including those in special education. In the meantime, there is much that already has been accomplished. The

hard work by teachers, instructional assistants, reading teachers, principals, and early childhood program staff is clearly showing significant dividends in the pursuit of higher, more rigorous standards for what students are expected to know and be able to do in reading by the end of kindergarten and first grade in the Montgomery County Public Schools.

In fact, the findings from an initial, landmark kindergarten study released a year ago were confirmed by a second evaluation review that focused on previous Head Start students and made like-group comparisons with other schools for the first time. The review compared the performance of Head Start students in the original 17 full-day kindergarten schools in the 2000-2001 school year with the performance that year of other Head Start students from two groups of schools with half-day kindergarten. The findings show that the Head Start students in the full-day program significantly outperformed their peers in the other two school groups. For example, 50 percent of Hispanic students in Head Start in the original group achieved the benchmark in all four foundational reading skills, compared to just 32 percent in the first group of schools and 10 percent in the second group. Similar gains also were noted for all racial and ethnic groups. The second review findings are important because the lower-performing schools in the comparison are those that received the second and third phase of the full-day kindergarten expansion, underscoring the necessity of continuing to expand the program into schools with high levels of poverty and underachievement.

Overall, the two studies looked at three major areas: the second-year implementation of the kindergarten initiative, the effects of the enhanced full-day kindergarten program in targeted schools, and the sustained reading benefit in Grade 1.

The studies produced seven key findings:

- The acquisition of foundational reading skills improved in the second year of the kindergarten initiative, with better-prepared teachers producing better-prepared kindergarten students. The gain was significant for all groups of students. For example, 62 percent of African American students in the second year achieved the foundational reading skill benchmark, compared to 49 percent in the first year.
- The gain in acquiring the highest reading level in kindergarten (text reading) was significant. The percentage of students systemwide at or above the foundational skill level (i.e., reading text) improved from just 11 percent in the fall to 61 percent in the spring. All racial and ethnic groups made such gains, with African American and Hispanic students gaining the most during the year and helping to narrow the gap with Asian American and white students.
- The benefit of attaining foundational reading skills in kindergarten was sustained and enhanced in Grade 1, with 84 percent of the first-year kindergarten students achieving “early fluency” or “fluency” in reading skills by the end of Grade 1 and 60 percent of the

students attaining the more rigorous Grade 1 requirement of the text reading benchmark that includes a measure for reading comprehension.

- The sustained benefit of the first full-day kindergarten program helped African American and Hispanic students attain the text reading benchmark in Grade 1 at or above the average for all African American and Hispanic students in Grade 1 systemwide. For example, 51 percent of African American students from the first full-day kindergarten class achieved the Grade 1 benchmark, compared to 49 percent of all African American students in first grade systemwide. Similarly, 48 percent of students participating in the Free and Reduced-price Meals System (FARMS) from the first full-day kindergarten attained the Grade 1 benchmark, compared to 45 percent of FARMS students' systemwide in Grade 1.
- Overall, the attainment of the text reading benchmark in Grade 1 was lower for the first full-day kindergarten students, as a group, compared to all first grade students because of the significant impact of oral language deficiencies among students in the English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) program and their heavier concentration in the first full-day kindergarten class.
- The oral language deficiencies among ESOL students were most evident in the second year of the full-day kindergarten implementation, when the assessment was expanded to include oral language skill levels as part of the foundational reading measurement.
- The second year of full-day kindergarten confirmed the earlier finding that the greatest rate of improvement during the year for students in FARMS and ESOL occurred in full-day kindergarten, compared to the half-day program, underscoring the value of the extended learning opportunities for students impacted by poverty and/or learning English.

The foundational reading skills are those that prepare students for text reading, and they include letter identification, print concepts, hearing and recording sounds, and word recognition. The text reading skills include oral reading and fluency, as well as comprehension, in a manner that also can be described as "reading proficiency." The process of determining these skill levels involves individual assessments for each student by the teacher. This past year, the assessments in kindergarten were broadened to include determination of skills in phonemic awareness and oral language, as part of the continued strengthening of the kindergarten curriculum.

Montgomery County's kindergarten initiative is a multiyear plan that contains two distinct parts. First, both the kindergarten curriculum and the teacher-training program were substantially strengthened beginning in the spring of 2000. Second, a phased-in expansion of full-day kindergarten was initiated, featuring a substantially reduced class size with a student to teacher ratio of 15:1. This initiative began with 17 schools in the 2000-2001 school year, expanded to 34 schools last year, and now involves 56 schools with the highest level of poverty. These same 56 schools also have class size ratios of 17:1 in Grades 1 and 2.

In its third year of implementation, the full-day kindergarten program includes extended time for balanced literacy instruction, within a nurturing environment appropriate for the age group. The instructional program includes reading, mathematics, social studies, art, music, and physical education. Kindergarten teachers and elementary school principals are part of an ongoing training program that reinforces the focus on accelerated reading and mathematics instruction. (An ongoing study of student acquisition of mathematics skills in kindergarten is under way.) The strengthened kindergarten curriculum features a written framework and schedule that allocates specific blocks of time for sustained high-quality teaching. The kindergarten initiative, in fact, provided the model for the ongoing improvements now under way to improve the curriculum for all grade levels and the professional development program for all teachers and principals.

The emerging results are impressive. The long-term advantage of this kind of achievement is important in reaching the school system's goal of reading proficiency by third grade and opening the door to success in all other subject areas, particularly in writing and mathematics. For example, the new opportunities for accelerated mathematics instruction in elementary school are highly dependent on students reaching the reading proficiency levels that will give them the chance to comprehend more advanced classroom instruction, books, and other materials. Such reading proficiency will prepare them for even more success as they advance toward high school in our county.

I will continue to keep you informed.

JDW:kmy

Attachments

Copy to:

Executive Staff

Principals