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

January 10, 2012

<u>MEMORANDUM</u>

To: Members of the Board of Education

From: Joshua P. Starr, Superintendent of Schools

Subject: Strategic Priorities: Update on Professional Development

Professional development is the cornerstone of any school improvement effort. Public education is facing unprecedented challenges in preparing students for the unpredictable demands of the future workplace. Over the past few decades, postsecondary education requirements, workforce knowledge and skills, as well as school reform efforts—including those in Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS)—have dramatically raised expectations for student achievement. Additionally, Maryland, along with 48 other states and the District of Columbia, has adopted the internationally driven Common Core State Standards (CCSS). As a result, educators are increasingly being called upon to upgrade their knowledge, master new skills and responsibilities, and change their practices to ensure that all students achieve higher learning standards.

MCPS is widely recognized for its unique staff development initiatives and its professional growth systems. At the same time, the need to improve and expand professional development was raised at all of the staff Listen and Learn events held throughout the county between September and November 2011. Additionally, while the Transition Team focused its work on three major components—teaching and learning, operations, and culture/context—the topic of professional development emerged across all three areas and in nearly every focus group session held as part of the Team's work. Specifically, the Transition Team Report identified the design and delivery of professional development initiatives as one of its five recommendations. The redesign and delivery of professional development should respond to identified staff and organizational needs as new skills are required for growth and new leadership in the 21st century.

The recommendation for a systemic change in the design and delivery of professional development will necessitate a serious commitment to the collective responsibility for teaching and learning on the part of all employees. *The Balanced View: Staff Development*, prepared by Westchester Institute for Human Service Research, states, "Above all, policymakers need to be

aware of the risks of focusing on the short-term, immediate needs generated by school reform agendas. Professional development in a climate of educational reform is a long-term process."

School district central offices routinely attempt to reform themselves by restructuring formal reporting relationships within central office. While structural changes can be helpful, a transformation strategy is fundamentally about remaking what people in central office do—their daily work and relationships with schools. It will require a transformation in culture and practice throughout the organization, including reorienting central office. The district must have a laser-like focus on the instructional core—or the nexus among—teacher, content, and the student. The study by the Wallace Foundation, *Central Office Transformation for District-wide Teaching and Learning Improvement*, describes effective central office transformation.

As we engage in improving and aligning professional development in MCPS, we must attend to the following organizational elements, the Four C's, critical to successful implementation of districtwide improvement strategies:

- Collaboration—engaging employees actively to establish shared values and achieve a common goal
- Coherence—aligning the data, problem, and strategies
- Capacity building—strengthening employees' skills and knowledge based on their individual needs and specific work responsibilities
- Culture—focusing on 21st century tools and learning styles

While committed to the professional development of all employees across the organization, for the purpose of this discussion, we will focus on professional development specifically related to teaching and learning.

Current State of Professional Development

Beliefs and Values

Both the research and our own experience with school improvement over the past few decades indicate that collaborative cultures in which educators focus on improving practice, learn from each other, and are well led and supported by school principals result in better learning for students. It is for this reason that MCPS has invested in defining what good instruction looks like and establishing a common language to talk about it, creating professional growth systems, building professional learning communities, and developing instructional leaders including school-based content experts. These elements, described below, have blended to undergird our approach to professional development.

Common Language—The district invested in defining what good instruction looks like and creating a common language to discuss it through the design and delivery of the Studying Skillful Teaching courses. These courses support teachers to improve student achievement by examining beliefs about teaching and building a repertoire of instructional strategies to match

students' learning needs. To further support teaching and learning, all administrators are required to take the Observing and Analyzing Teaching courses to examine the knowledge base on teaching and learning and communicate about it from a common perspective with a common language.

Professional Growth Systems—Over the past decade, MCPS has developed and implemented three successful professional growth systems for teachers, principals and administrators, and supporting services staff. Several notable features of the systems include consulting teachers and principals and professional growth consultants for supporting services employees who offer a range of mentoring, coaching, and support, and the Peer Assistance and Review (PAR) process, a collaborative approach to addressing performance issues.

Building Professional Learning Communities—Our strategy to build professional learning communities has focused on effective instructional leadership development for administrators, staff development teachers, and other school-based experts. Specific initiatives like the Professional Learning Communities Institute (PLCI) and the School Leadership Team Institute (SLTI) were created to help school teams increase student achievement and eliminate the achievement gap by developing and strengthening a climate devoted to continuous learning and professional growth. Based on the capacity of trainers, these initiatives have been available to a limited number of schools each year.

School-based Content Experts—To support school improvement and provide collaborative, job-embedded coaching and support, MCPS has invested in school-based content experts including staff development teachers, reading specialists, math content coaches, team leaders, and secondary resource teachers. A pivotal position at all levels is the staff development teacher, whose role is to foster a professional learning community, support the implementation of district initiatives, and ensure that every school has high-quality staff development. However, 25 percent of the staff development positions have been reduced over the last three years as the result of budget cuts.

Organization to Deliver Professional Development

The district currently aligns resources and responsibilities for specific components of professional development with various offices. For example, leadership development, including the Professional Learning Communities Institute and the professional growth systems, is housed in the Office of Human Resources and Development. Instructional leadership support and curricular and pedagogical professorial development are housed in the Office of Curriculum and Instructional Programs. Additionally, other offices provide professional development related to their areas of expertise, such as technology and data management, special education and student services, and testing and accountability.

Organizational Learning

Overall, MCPS students continue to achieve at very high levels. For instance, the Class of 2011 was one of the most successful in the district's history, with an average SAT score of 1637 and half of the graduates earning a college-ready score on at least one Advanced Placement (AP) exam. Last year's graduates also earned more than $264 million in college scholarships, and 89 seniors were named National Merit Scholars. However, variability exists among similarly situated schools. This variability was observed by the Transition Team and noted in the Transition Team Report.

Amazing things are happening for students in individual schools throughout the county with very different demographic profiles. What we see across these schools is remarkably similar. The culture has been transformed through shared leadership, mutual responsibility and accountability for student achievement, and structures and processes that support collaboration and continuous improvement. We see a focus on teaching and learning based on student needs resulting in sustained academic performance over time.

However, there are schools that are not achieving the expected academic growth. To reduce variability and ensure that all schools make sustained progress over time, we must transform our organization into one relentlessly focused on the instructional core, or the intersection of teachers' knowledge and skills, students' engagement in their learning, and academically challenging content. We must engage our employees in new work that will equip them to meet the increased rigor of the CCSS and address the expectation of the 21st century learner.

We know from the research and our own experience with school improvement that to realize sustained performance over time, professional development must transform practices and become integrated into the work that educators do every day.

To effect systemic change in teaching and learning, MCPS needs to:

- Make professional development the collective responsibility of all employees.
- Create and sustain change in practice through structures and processes for collaboration.
- Align resources to support schools.
- Collect and link data to the effectiveness of professional development.
- Support effective professional learning communities across all schools and offices.

Vision for Professional Development

When the MCPS Fiscal Year 2013 (FY 2013) Operating Budget Recommendation was released last month, one of the three focus areas identified was "improving and aligning professional development for all employees."   Informed by the Transition Team Report and our organizational learning over time, as well as the research, we know that effective professional development is integral to moving our school system to even better student outcomes and increased organizational effectiveness.   As an organization, we will focus on the four

characteristics described below that articulate what constitutes successful professional development before we determine where it is housed or who delivers it (see following links):

- http://www.sharingsuccess.org/code/bv/pd.html
- http://www.michaelfullan.ca/home_articles/11_Pre-Read_Learning_is_the_Work.pdf

Professional development is **effective** when it—
- is purposeful and directly connected to the work students do in the classroom and provides a strong foundation in curricular content and pedagogy;
- occurs within collaborative work teams in schools and offices fostering ongoing learning and reflection and is differentiated by content and delivery to meet the unique needs of staff;
- is directly correlated with the needs of the students we serve;
- includes continuous study of impact and incorporates the research on adult learner theory;
- provides sufficient time and resources; and
- incorporates multiple models, e.g. training, coaching, collaborative planning, action research, peer observation and reflection.

Professional development that is the **collective responsibility** of all employees—
- sets the expectation that central services and school staff have roles individually and collectively to improve student performance, instructional practice, and organizational effectiveness and capitalizes on the expertise of staff in schools and offices;
- includes organizational structures that set expectations for and supports institutionalization of improved practice by providing resources, expertise, time, knowledge, and skills; and
- holds staff accountable for implementation and impact.

Professional development that is **aligned with system priorities**—
- addresses organizational effectiveness, teaching, and learning; and
- is driven by student learning needs as determined by an analysis of student performance data and classroom instruction.

Professional development that **transforms practice**—
- leads to observable, measureable, positive change in student outcomes and/or organizational effectiveness on clearly defined criteria;
- is sustainable—staff demonstrate a change in skills, knowledge, attitudes and behaviors; and
- is integrated into practice—it moves staff from learning to doing and the desired changes and improvements become integrated into daily practice.

How will we know if we are using the right strategies to engage our employees in meaningful professional development?   The following five elements will serve as an accountability

framework to ensure that professional development is differentiated and matched to the needs of the individual employee:

Exposure. Opportunities will be provided for adults to interact with new content or skills at least six months prior to implementation. Adults will be able to experiment with and will be supported as they learn to use and understand new content or skills in structured environments with high support and low pressure.

Just-in-time. Expert help and support will be available immediately prior to the implementation of new content or skills, providing a second cycle of learning at the time of implementation based on the needs of the learners.

Instructional leadership development. Opportunities for instructional leaders to know and understand effective practice will be provided. Strong instructional leaders have the ability to assess the context in which they operate and align resources to improve practice based on data.

Collaborative learning for all adults. All adults will engage in effective Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). The PLC does not have to be a new structure, but needs to provide an environment to collaborate on practice, whether it is instruction, building master schedules or coping with new resources.

Coaching. Shoulder-to-shoulder support from a skilled coach with strong content knowledge is a highly differentiated professional development strategy. Effective coaching is evidence-based and takes place in a highly structured environment.

Next Steps

Part of our work related to professional development is how we are organized to support schools. At my request, a small group of executive staff members is engaged in a plan to reorient central services to best support schools. To inform this process, input was solicited from our stakeholders including principals, teachers, and central services staff members. As we move through the MCPS FY 2013 Operating Budget process and complete the work on the reorientation of central services, we will organize our current resources to support collaborative learning environments for all adults in MCPS. For some schools, offices, departments, or job-alike groups, this work is well underway. For others, we will build a common understanding, establish expectations, and create structures that support successful professional learning communities.

At the table for today's discussion are Mr. Larry A. Bowers, chief operating officer, and Dr. Frieda K. Lacey, deputy superintendent of schools.

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