

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

April 17, 2012

MEMORANDUM

To: Members of the Board of Education

From: Joshua P. Starr, Superintendent of Schools

Subject: Strategic Priorities: Community Engagement

Partnerships among schools, families, and community groups are not a luxury—they are a necessity. We know from research and experience that when schools, families, and community groups work together to support learning, children—no matter what their families' income or background—are more likely to attend school regularly, have better social skills, earn higher grades, enroll in higher-level courses, graduate from high school, and enroll in postsecondary education¹.

In an era of increasing academic standards and the challenging expectations of the 21st century global economy, Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS), families, businesses, government and community organizations, and institutions of higher education must come together to ensure the success of our students and the viability of our county. We must empower our youth and families to take full advantage of the many resources within Montgomery County.

Our community engagement work will be guided by the following theory of action: *If we provide direct services to children and families that empower them to fully access all that MCPS and the community have to offer, and if we develop strategic public and private partnerships in order to expand the services we provide to children and their families, then all MCPS students and families will have the supports needed to be college and career ready.* Given this theory of action, it is essential that collectively, our vision for community engagement be viewed through the lenses of—

- **Empowerment and communication:** a shared responsibility in which schools and other community agencies and organizations are committed to engaging families in meaningful and culturally respectful ways, and families are committed to actively supporting their children's learning and development; and
- **Partnership development:** carried out wherever children learn—at home, in prekindergarten programs, in school, in after-school programs, in faith-based institutions, and in community programs and activities².

¹ Henderson, Anne T., et al. *Beyond the Bake Sale: The Essential Guide to Family–School Partnerships*. New York: The New Press, 2007.

² Weiss, Heather B., et al. *Beyond Random Acts: Family, School, and Community Engagement as an Integral Part of Education Reform*. Harvard Family Research Project, December 2010.

Our long-term community engagement efforts will require that we build a more robust and coherent infrastructure for linking services and developing stronger public-private partnerships countywide. These efforts include the following:

- Improved interagency collaboration to better serve families and students.
- Partnerships with higher education that provide students with a more seamless pathway to college and careers, particularly for underserved students.
- Partnerships with the business community to increase the alignment between the K-12 experience and careers.
- Potential partnerships with local advocates regarding arts and music, technology, green initiatives, and other areas.

In addition, the *Transition Team Report* recommended that MCPS examine the current approaches to community engagement, advocacy, and interest groups to—

- differentiate community engagement strategies to include stakeholder groups found to be disengaged or lacking access to share their voice;
- strengthen technology tools for parents and students that improve access to information;
- develop and implement a community engagement plan to involve all constituencies; and
- ensure two-way flow of communication with stakeholders.

Implementing our long-term community engagement vision will require that we create structures and processes that support schools in their efforts to create family and community partnerships that meet the unique needs of their student populations. Whether student-centered, family-focused, or curriculum-based, community engagement strategies must be aligned with building a pathway to college and career readiness for all students.

Current State of Community Engagement

The MCPS strategic plan, *Our Call to Action: Pursuit of Excellence*, articulates the Board of Education's commitment to community engagement with the following academic priority: *Strengthen family-school relationships and continue to expand civic, business, and community partnerships that support improved student achievement.*

Additionally, the Board has demonstrated its long-standing belief that community engagement is essential to student success with the 1974 adoption of Policy ABA, *Community Involvement*. In 1990, the Board adopted Policy ABC, *Parent and Family Involvement*, the first parent involvement policy in Maryland. Policy ABC was revised in 2010 to incorporate the research-based national standards for effective school-family partnerships.

Each fall, the Board engages the community in discussions on how to improve the school system and results of these discussions inform the district's strategic planning process and budget deliberations. In addition to its monthly or twice monthly meetings, the Board holds annual meetings with a variety of constituents, including the three employee associations, the Montgomery County Council of Parent Teacher Associations (MCCPTA), and Montgomery County Region of the Maryland Association of Student Councils.

Recognizing the diversity of our stakeholders, MCPS communicates with families and community members in multiple languages using a variety of multimedia tools and strategies, including print, television, video, telephone, web, email, and social media. The MCPS Parent Guide, an online multimedia tool available in six languages, helps parents navigate the school system. MCPS TV programs such as *Our Schools Today*, produced in multiple languages, and the Board of Education program *Education Matters* inform the public about school system policies, programs, and initiatives. Avenues for two-way communication include public forums and meetings; feedback cards and opportunities for web-based feedback; online surveys; workshops and focus groups; and social media.

Parent and Family Involvement

Our current family engagement efforts focus on the following six research-based national standards for effective school–family partnerships:

- Creating a welcoming school environment.
- Communicating effectively in multiple languages through a variety of methods.
- Supporting student learning at home and at school.
- Empowering families to advocate for their children to ensure that they are treated fairly and have access to opportunities that support their learning needs.
- Sharing information and decision-making that affect children.
- Collaborating to connect students, families and staff to expanded learning opportunities.

Examples of initiatives that support the district’s family engagement work include the following:

The Parent Academy—More than 100 workshops are presented each school year by community partners and MCPS staff to provide parents with tips and tools to help their children be successful in school. Examples include *The Teen Years: Effective Parenting Skills*; *Math for Parents*; *Kaiser Permanente Presents: Healthy Transitions from Middle to High School*; and *Curriculum 2.0*.

Principal’s Parent Involvement Toolkit—This web-based collaborative resource is organized around the six national standards for school–family partnerships and includes resources, strategies, and best practices to support school staff in their efforts to engage families and build community partnerships.

Parent Advisory Council and Welcoming Environment Walk-through—The Parent Advisory Council provides input on ways to improve communication and parent engagement at the district and local school levels and promotes parent advocacy to support student learning. The Council has developed a “welcoming environment walk-through” process, through which schools may examine and assess their school climate and environment. Administrators may request a walk-through site visit, invite a “secret shopper” to come to the school, request a parent interview or focus group, and ask for a review of communications products.

Study Circles—Since 2003, the Study Circles Program has helped parents, staff, and students develop the mutual understanding necessary to create effective partnerships across racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic differences.

MCCPTA—MCCPTA supports local schools by providing information and resources, advocating on behalf of students, and providing leadership training to parents throughout the county. MCCPTA’s participation at the local level, as well as its involvement and advocacy at the system level, strengthens the ability of school staff to improve teaching and learning.

Interagency Collaboration

The school system’s sustained focus on ensuring the success of every student has been supported by the investment of time, money, and resources by many sectors of the Montgomery County community. As poverty has increased in the district, we have worked hand-in-hand with the county and the state to provide a continuum of services for students and their families: health screenings, free breakfast, after-school programs, summer learning and much more.

Existing collaborations with local agencies include the following—

Kennedy Cluster Project—The Kennedy Cluster Project is a collaboration among MCPS and local government and community organizations. It has allowed us to address the needs of the whole child; however, it has only served 80 students and families thus far. Lessons learned from the project will allow us to determine the scalability of the model and will help inform our future work with community and government partners.

Linkages to Learning—A collaborative program with the Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services and public, nonprofit partner agencies, Linkages to Learning provides school-based health, mental health, and social services to the county’s neediest families. Currently, there are 26 Linkages sites and 5 school-based health centers.

Excel Beyond the Bell—A partnership with Montgomery County Collaboration Council and the Montgomery County Recreation Department, Excel Beyond the Bell provides after-school programs in three middle schools that engage students in sports, arts, leadership, career exploration, and Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) activities.

Business, Community, and Higher Education Partnerships

Partnerships with businesses, community organizations and institutions of higher education that support students and families are critical in our efforts to create a college and career-ready community. Examples of current partnerships include—

Montgomery County Business Roundtable for Education (MCBRE)—Among its activities, MCBRE provides programs that help students connect what they are learning in the classroom with the real world, including the Student Emerging Leaders Program and Young Professionals Conference.

Community Organizations—Montgomery County has many organizations that are doing outstanding work engaging with diverse students and their families. Community organizations such as IMPACT Silver Spring, the NAACP, Identity Inc., the Maryland Vietnamese Mutual Association, Latino Education Coalition, and the Chinese Culture and Community Service Center work closely with students and their families to address barriers to family involvement and student achievement.

Montgomery College and the Universities at Shady Grove—Collaborative efforts with these two local institutions of higher education include more than 30 programs and activities, including the College Prep and Scholarship Fair, a spring event for 6th through 10th grade students and their families aimed at early engagement in the college planning process, and the Concurrent and Dual Enrollment Programs that offer college courses on high school and college campuses for students from 18 of our 25 high schools.

Many partnerships exist with individual schools throughout MCPS. From the GreenKids partnership with the Audubon Naturalist Society, to collaborations with Round House Theater and Strathmore Music Center, to service programs with Riderwood Village Retirement Community and the Interages tutoring program; these partnerships enrich educational experiences for students in schools and the community.

Next Steps

In building a framework for community engagement over the coming years, we will need to work with the community to focus on the following questions: What are the services we need to provide? When will we provide them? Who will be providing them? How much will it cost?

The following preliminary steps will help us answer these questions:

- Begin work this summer to design a plan and strategies for community engagement, which may have Fiscal Year 2014 budget implications, including the addition and/or realignment of positions and the involvement of an outside partner in the work. The announced departure of the current director of the Department of Family and Community Partnerships provides us an opportunity to rethink the roles and responsibilities of this position.
- Create an asset map of district and community resources, which will provide an inventory of existing services and identify gaps and areas of greatest need.
- Build on work that has begun with Montgomery College and the Universities at Shady Grove to provide a more seamless transition to higher education and support for those students who are the first in their families to attend college.
- Determine the leadership role of the Board in relation to our community engagement efforts.

MCPS has numerous systems and processes in place to engage parents and the community at the district and local school levels. By building on successful partnerships and implementing our theory of action, we will create a coherent framework for family and community engagement.

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