

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

March 8, 2016

MEMORANDUM

To: Members of the Board of Education

From: Larry A. Bowers, Interim Superintendent of Schools

Subject: Report of External Review—Montgomery County Public Schools:
Study of Choice and Special Academic Programs

In January 2015, the Board contracted with Metis Associates to conduct a review of choice programs in Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS). The review was to “initiate a comprehensive study of the wide variety of choice and other special academic programs that MCPS offers to ensure that these programs, both individually and collectively, are well-positioned to effectively advance the mission, core purpose, core values, and core competencies set forth in the MCPS Strategic Planning Framework.” This study was approved by the Board as part of its Fiscal Year (FY) 2015 Operating Budget.

The study focused on four main objectives:

- Understanding the unique history and current state of each of MCPS’ choice and other special academic programs;
- Identifying the original purposes of each of these programs, and assessing whether they are fulfilling those purposes;
- Assessing whether all students have equitable access to these programs, especially in light of the continuing growth of MCPS student enrollment and the changing demographics of the region, both countywide and at the neighborhood level; and
- Ensuring that these programs, both individually and collectively, are well-positioned to effectively advance the mission; core purpose; core values, including equity; and core competencies set forth in with the MCPS Strategic Planning Framework.

The study included MCPS’ full and partial language immersion programs at the elementary and middle school levels, the elementary school center program for highly-gifted students, magnet and other application programs with selective admissions criteria at the middle and high school levels, the schools in the three regional consortia (Northeast, Downcounty, and Middle School Magnet Consortium), as well as the Change of School Assignment process.

Metis Associates is a research and evaluation firm that is nationally known for its commitment to participatory evaluation, driven by a highly collaborative approach that involves active stakeholder involvement and includes multiple methods, measures, and respondents with multiple perspectives. Metis engaged in extensive fact and data gathering. After hearing from numerous stakeholders including staff, students, parents/guardians, and community members, reviewing an extensive collection of historical documents, surveying scholarly research and practices in other districts, and consulting with experts, Metis developed the attached report.

The findings and recommendations delineated in the report align with our organizational commitment to ongoing continuous improvement, building upon our 2010 Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award for performance excellence. The report rightly challenges us to rethink and reimagine some of our long-standing practices and programs to ensure that they reflect our core values.

Metis' report reminds us that the history of choice in MCPS is complicated and multilayered, and the consultants' detailed analysis presents us with the opportunity to more fully understand the various decisions that led us to the current structure and offerings. Metis found that the current array of choice within MCPS is the result of an ad hoc layering of decisions unique to the historical context in which they were made; the substantial demographic changes that the county has experienced; and court decisions that have made it more difficult for school districts to provide high-quality integrated educational opportunities. This amalgamation of decisions has resulted in a system that does not always align with MCPS' commitment to equity and access to rigorous instruction for all students. Moreover, the report calls us to consider improvements in our processes and procedures to establish a clearer vision of the role of choice within MCPS. Working together, I am confident that we will enhance our choice programs to ensure that they are predicated upon our commitments to equity and excellence.

The report marks the culmination of the data analysis and benchmarking work that Metis undertook as part of the first and second phases of this study. To prepare for the third and final phase, I have charged our staff to closely review the Metis report to identify ways in which we may address the findings and have a more coherent and effective model of choice. During the next few months, staff will develop a plan to respond to the report's findings and recommendations, while also considering the budgetary, capacity, and other constraints that confront our district. We will engage our community stakeholders in this process. As our plans develop, we will update the Board's Policy Management Committee, especially regarding our responses to Metis' recommendations that propose revisions to Board policies.

While we are formulating a broader response plan, I have charged staff to undertake the following immediate action steps. First, we will prepare options to address Metis' proposed revisions to Board Policy JEE, *Student Transfers*, for consideration by the Board's Policy Management Committee in the coming months. The Metis report confirms, in my view, that several clarifications are necessary to ensure that Policy JEE supports equitable access to choice programs. Second, staff has already begun work to address Metis' recommendations that MCPS should enhance its student data systems for ongoing monitoring of student participation in choice programs. My expectation is that enhancements to our data systems will be in place for the beginning of the 2016–2017 school year. Finally, the FY 2017 Operating Budget adopted by the Board offers a down payment on other key recommendations including expanding dual language programs, a promising research-based approach that brings together both native speakers of English and native speakers of the language of instruction.

As I stated in my budget presentation, we have created too many structural and systemic barriers that have prevented some of our students from full participation in an instructional program that meets their needs and pushes them to excel. We have created additional opportunity gaps especially for our students of color, English language learners, and low income students. We must address these barriers and the unintended consequences of the impact these program decisions have had on our achievement gap. Together, as a community, we can seize this opportunity to create a school system that provides a high quality and rigorous education for each and every student we serve.

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Attachment