

Summary Findings and Recommendations

Summary Findings

The data and results presented throughout the report on MCPS's choice and special academic programs point to the following overarching district-level findings for MCPS to consider in assessing alignment of these programs with the district's Strategic Planning Framework.

- **MCPS provides a wide variety of choice and special academic programs that have been developed at key junctures in MCPS's history and layered upon each other to create a complex system of programs that are not fully aligned with the district's core values, including equity.**
- **Information and communications about MCPS's wide variety of choice and special academic programs are not filtering to all segments of the community equally, which is impacting equity of access to the programs.**
- **There are significant racial and socioeconomic disparities in the enrollment and acceptance rates to academically selective programs, which suggest a need to revise the criteria and process used to select students for these programs to eliminate barriers to access for highly able students of all backgrounds.**
- **The district's implementation of some provisions in the current Board Policy JEE, *Student Transfers*, does not fully align with MCPS's goal to provide equitable access to choice and special academic programs.**
- **The placement of special academic programs within local schools has increased the diversity of those schools' student population, but, in the absence of targeted mechanisms to integrate the program participants and non-participants, it has created conditions of within-school separation.**
- **The MSMC has been more successful than the high school consortia (the DCC and the NEC) in promoting racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity due in large part to shifting demographics as well as three programmatic elements: the MSMC, unlike the DCC and the NEC, does not utilize base areas, admits out-of-boundary students, and has developed and implemented distinct, whole-school themes.**

- **The overall demand for choice and special academic programs in MCPS exceeds the supply of seats in the programs.**
- **MCPS does not systematically track participation in or attrition from its choice and special academic programs.**

Recommendations

In light of these key findings, Metis provides the following recommendations that will help MCPS better achieve equity of access and excellence through choice and special programs:

1. **Revise Policy ACD, *Quality Integrated Education*, to clarify a defined mission for choice and special academic programs with input from community and staff stakeholders to clearly outline the goals and purposes for the programs, as well as their alignment with MCPS' core values and stakeholders' strong belief that MCPS should pursue equity on a broad level by raising expectations and opportunities for rigorous instruction across all schools.**
2. **Develop and implement new strategies for communicating, outreach, recruitment, and sharing information with underrepresented or hard-to-reach families within MCPS. These strategies should include, but not be limited to:**
 - Streamlined communications in easily-understood language;
 - Revision of existing communication tools for cultural validity;
 - Outreach to families at community events or locations;
 - More opportunities for one-on-one or in-person communications with and recruitment of families; and
 - Additional materials and events held in languages other than English.
3. **Implement modifications to the selection process used for academically competitive programs in MCPS, comprising elementary centers for highly gifted students and secondary magnet programs, to focus these programs on selecting equitably from among those applicants that demonstrate a capacity to thrive in the program, that include use of non-cognitive criteria, group-specific norms that benchmark student performance against school peers with comparable backgrounds, and/or a process that offers automatic admissions to the programs for students in the top 5-10% of sending elementary or middle schools in the district.**
4. **Invest resources to expand and enhance early talent development programs for students of underrepresented groups in order to bolster participation of a broader segment of the MCPS student population in academically selective programs.**

5. Consider revisions to Policy JEE, *Student Transfers*, to clarify that the sibling link for immersion and other choice programs is not automatic; while siblings of applicants should be able to attend the same school where the special academic program is located provided that there are available seats, those siblings should be required to participate in the application process, such as the lottery for immersion programs, to earn a seat in the program.
6. To the extent that the district considers revisions to Policy JEE, *Student Transfers*, to alter the automatic articulation from middle school to high school within the cluster feeder pattern or consider approvals for programmatic requests, MCPS should analyze the impact on both school capacity and its efforts to promote diversity and avoid racial isolation.
7. Facilitate a process to devise strategies for fuller integration of special programs into the schools that house the programs to ensure that program participants and home school students have meaningful social and academic interactions, such as expanded use of specials or electives, common lunch or recess periods, and extracurricular programs; and that recruitment efforts are tailored to encourage home school populations to apply for the programs.
8. Conduct a comprehensive review of the signature and academy themes offered in each DCC and NEC school to ensure they provide options that are consistent with the district's Strategic Planning Framework and provide access to programs that would not otherwise be available in home schools, such as career education pathways.
9. Assess the feasibility and impact of revising the high school consortium model to reconsider the use of base areas and to allocate a number of seats for out-of-consortium students to enroll in signature programs and themes.
10. To the extent that MCPS invests in expanding seat capacity in choice and special programs catch up with growth in district enrollment and demand, it should ensure that these efforts are aligned with the district's core values, including equity, and consider a wider variety of models, such as dual language and whole-school, theme-based magnet programs that use lottery admissions processes that rely primarily on student interest.
11. Consistently utilize variables within the district's student data system to identify students who enroll in choice and special academic programs to assess participation, attrition, and academic and other outcomes of students in the programs to monitor implementation and impact of the programs.