

Introduction

The nation's 17th largest school system, Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) currently serves more than 156,000 students in 202 schools, including 37 National Blue Ribbon schools. MCPS is one of the most diverse school systems in the country, serving students from 157 different countries and native speakers of 138 languages. Its students live in geographically diverse areas in urban, suburban, and rural communities across the county's approximately 500 square miles. Six MCPS high schools ranked in the top 200 of the *Washington Post's* 2015 High School Challenge; and all 25 MCPS high schools have appeared on the list, which includes only the top 11% of all high schools in the nation. In 2010, MCPS was the recipient of the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award, the highest presidential honor given to American organizations for performance excellence.

MCPS has a long history of offering a variety of choice and other special academic programs designed to provide students with opportunities to receive specialized instruction in schools outside of their local attendance boundaries. These programs include full and partial language immersion programs at the elementary and middle school levels; elementary centers for highly gifted students; magnet and other application programs with selective admissions criteria at the middle and high school levels; and two high school regional consortia and one middle school consortium that offer a choice of thematic instructional options and admit students through lottery based processes that may consider student preferences, socioeconomic status, and other demographic factors. In 2013–14, MCPS offered 43 choice and special academic programs in 36 schools that collectively served approximately 22,700 students, which accounted for about 14.5% of the district's student population.¹

In June 2013, the Montgomery County Board of Education (Board) approved a new Strategic Planning Framework (SPF), *Building Our Future Together: Students, Staff, and Community*, which outlines the mission, core purpose, core values, and

MCPS Strategic Planning Framework:

Vision: *To inspire learning by providing the greatest public education to each and every student.*

Mission: *Every student will have the academic, creative problem solving, and social emotional skills to be successful in college and career.*

Core values:

- Learning
- Respect
- Relationships
- Excellence
- Equity

¹ The student enrollment data reported throughout the report are based on program-level data provided by the MCPS Office of Shared Accountability (OSA) and the Division of Consortia Choice and Application Programs (DCCAPS), as well as data provided by specific schools for several of the programs, including middle school language immersion programs, and the magnet and other application programs.

core competency areas that guide the work of MCPS to prepare all students with skills and knowledge to thrive in the 21st century. Embedded within the SPF is a commitment to the core value of equity by “*educating each and every student so that academic success is not predictable by race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status.*”

The Board developed the SPF with broad input from community stakeholders. To guide implementation of the SPF, MCPS developed a District Implementation Plan in 2014 that includes action steps and benchmarks. One of these steps is 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 action step was included in response to the Board’s authorization of this study in its Fiscal Year 2015 Operating Budget.

In October 2014, MCPS issued a request for proposals (RFP) to solicit and engage a professional firm or collaboration of firms to conduct a review to assess the effectiveness of the choice and other special academic programs in supporting the vision, mission, and core values of the SPF. The study was designed to address four main objectives using data and feedback from multiple sources, stakeholder groups, and experts in the fields of equity and choice:

- Understanding the unique history and current state of each of MCPS’s 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 SPF.

The study also was designed to review the intersection between these choice and special programs and other related MCPS policies and practices, including the change of school assignment (COSA) process, which provides another mechanism by which students may attend schools other than their home schools.

In January 2015, the Board awarded a contract to Metis Associates to conduct the study. Metis is a research and evaluation firm that is nationally known for its commitment to *participatory* evaluation. Participatory evaluation is driven by a highly collaborative approach that involves active stakeholder involvement and includes multiple methods, measures, and respondents with multiple perspectives in order to ensure that findings “speak to” a variety of audiences and stakeholders.

The research is being conducted in three phases. As outlined in the RFP, Phase I included gathering and analyzing data and information on the unique history and current state of MCPS choice and other special academic programs. Phase II included benchmarking innovative, high-quality programs in other districts and reviewing academic research on access to educational options outside students' home schools. The RFP planned for separate reports for the two phases; however, Metis researchers and MCPS staff made the decision to integrate the findings into this one report. Phase III, which will be conducted in March through May 2016 following the presentation of this report to the Board, will entail engaging with community stakeholders to develop a collaborative action plan for MCPS choice and special academic programs.

Organization of the report. This report is organized as follows. After the introduction is the study methodology, which describes the data collection and analysis methods that were used, and the history and context for choice and special academic programs in MCPS. The study findings are then presented in six sections with program-level findings for each program—language immersion programs at the elementary and middle school levels, the elementary center program for highly gifted students, secondary magnets and other application programs with selective admissions criteria, high school regional consortia, middle school consortium; and the change of student assignment (COSA) process.

Each of these sections is organized into three parts: 1) overview with descriptions of programs, the application and lottery process and outreach; 2) program-level findings, which include data on program applicants and enrolled students, academic outcomes, perceptions from stakeholders, impact on schools in which the programs are located and on sending schools, and staffing and transportation costs; and 3) research and benchmarking of relevant issues in the field. The sections conclude with program-level recommendations. The program-level findings are synthesized into an overarching district-level recommendations section for MCPS to consider as it engages in decision and policy making for the future development of the choice and special academic programs.