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

January 12, 2010

MEMORANDUM

To: Members of the Board of Education

From: Jerry D. Weast, Superintendent of Schools

Subject: Deputy's Minority Achievement Advisory Council Report

In an effort to increase the diversity of voices included in our ongoing conversation about closing the achievement gap, the Deputy's Minority Achievement Advisory Council (DMAAC) was convened in 2007. The Council was instituted to provide the deputy superintendent of schools with input from traditionally underrepresented communities. Over the course of their service, the Council refined their focus and, after significant research and in-depth discussion, their efforts culminated with the completion of the attached report, *Closing the Gap: Recommendations for Improving Minority Student Achievement in Montgomery County Public Schools*.

The report identifies the following three goal areas:

1. Engagement—to implement a systemic approach to achieve effective and genuine family engagement.
2. Clarity—to develop and engage in a conversation with all stakeholders aimed toward mutual and full understanding of a clear roadmap to success.
3. Fairness—to increase existing efforts to implement meaningful systemic remedies that decrease the disproportionately high suspension rates for minority students so as to increase learning time, educational equity, and student engagement.

Within these goal areas, DMAAC members offered specific recommendations with suggested approaches to generate input, such as planning door-to-door visits, as an outreach strategy. The recommendations are well researched and delineated in the report and are aligned with the Montgomery County Public Schools' strategic plan. As the Council developed the report, members met with staff from the Department of Family and Community Partnerships (DFCP) to assess how to both enhance and align their endeavors with the work currently under way in DFCP.

DFCP staff members have undertaken a number of activities aligned with the Council's goal areas. These activities support efforts to develop and share resources such as the Principals' Toolkit of best practices in family outreach and to improve the effectiveness of Parent Academies in educating parents to support their children's academic progress. *Closing the Gap: Recommendations for Improving Minority Student Achievement in Montgomery County Public Schools,* as well as conversations with DMAAC, have served to inform the work of DFCP and broaden the number of participants working together to ensure all students are provided with a high quality education that prepares them for college. In addition, DMAAC recommendations and strategies set the course to provide every family access to the information critical to their role in supporting their child. The report provides a community perspective on our shared priority of increasing academic achievement for minority students. This collaboration is evidence of the benefits of designing an inclusive conversation where the views of all are honored.

Present at the table for today's discussion are DMAAC co-chairs, Ms. Crystal DeVance-Wilson and Mr. Enrique Zaldivar; DMAAC members Mr. Ricky Ford, Dr. Alma Clayton-Pedersen, Mr. Beverly Dennis III; and Mr. Eric Davis, director, DFCP.

JDW:la

Attachment

2009

Closing the Gap: Recommendations for Improving Minority Student Achievement in Montgomery County Public Schools

Submitted to Dr. Frieda K. Lacey
Deputy Superintendent of Schools
Montgomery County Public Schools

Prepared by the Deputy's Minority Achievement Advisory Council

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

> *"He drew a circle that shut me out—*
> *Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.*
> *But Love and I had the wit to win:*
> *We drew a circle that took him in!"*
>
> - *Edwin Markham*

This report by the Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) Deputy's Minority Achievement Advisory Council (the Council) recommends strategies to improve the quality of education for all MCPS students, with particular emphasis on closing the achievement gap as soon as possible. The overarching message of this report is improved **customer service** through an improved communications paradigm. At the core of addressing the achievement gap lays a cultural/philosophical organizational shift from the current paradigm of a one-way communication approach, where MCPS educates students and informs parents, to a two-way communication paradigm, where MCPS is fully engaged in genuine conversation and partnership with students, parents/guardians and community members.

Paradigm shifts tend to involve a significant transformation of the underlying organizational culture. MCPS must support this transformation by: a) adopting a clearly articulated **vision**, approved at the highest levels of the organization, which spells out the desired new philosophical approach towards customer service; b) welcoming a dialogue and engagement with all stakeholders in order to **build alignment and commitment**; and c) creating **accountability** measures and procedures to ensure implementation of the desired customer service standards in every school.

The Council is convinced that in order to reduce, and eventually eliminate, the achievement gap, MCPS needs to undergo a paradigm shift and transform itself into an organization with a customer service orientation. The Council emphasizes that MCPS needs to articulate this orientation as part of its vision, build alignment and commitment behind it, and hold itself accountable for implementing the transformation.

The Council recommends three goal areas that, taken together, support this paradigm shift. These goals are: 1) **Engagement,** where the goal is to implement a systemic approach to achieving effective and genuine family engagement that positively impacts minority student achievement; 2) **Clarity,** where the goal is to develop and engage in a conversation with all stakeholders aimed towards mutual and full understanding of what a clear roadmap to success looks like; and 3) **Fairness,** where the goal is to further increase existing efforts to implement meaningful systemic remedies that decrease the disproportionately high levels of suspension rates for minority students; so as to increase learning time, educational equity and student engagement.

MEMBERS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

MEMBERS

The Council engaged a diverse group of professionals, support services employees and community partners to participate as members of the Council. A full membership list is provided below. The diversity inherent in the entire Council structure reflects the diverse fabric of minority groups in Montgomery County, the school system, and community organizations.

Crystal DeVance-Wilson, Co-chair	Enrique Zaldivar, Co-chair
Anthony Cheatham	Robert Hatchel
Alma Clayton-Pedersen	Denise Jones
Cecilie Counts	Anita Kattakuzhy
Beverly Dennis, III	Candace Kattar
Ricky Ford	Melvin Moore
Lorna Forde	Ruby Rubens

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Although all the members did were not able to participate over the entire time period that this report was developed, each member's insights and contributions strengthened the final report. The Council is indebted to all those members and others who eagerly shared their time, passion, and expertise with us.

MCPS offices that participated in and contributed to the works of the Council include: Office of Curriculum and Instructional Programs (OCIP); Office of Human Resources (OHR); Office of Organizational Development (OOD); Office of School Performance (OSP); Department of Family and Community Partnerships (DFCP); Office of the Chief Academic Officer (OCAO); and the Office of the Deputy Superintendent of Schools.

The Council would like to especially thank Dr. Frieda K. Lacey, Deputy Superintendent of Schools, Montgomery County Public Schools, for her leadership in convening the group in June 2006 and encouraging this effort.

We would also like to acknowledge the assistance of Dr. Donna S. Hollingshead and Ms. Lori-Christina Webb, executive directors to the deputy superintendent. Their assistance in the collection of data to better inform the Council's work was invaluable.

The Council also is appreciative of the facilitation efforts and guidance in writing the final report provided by Ms. Arronza M. LaBatt, acting coordinator of special initiatives, Office of the Chief Academic Officer and Ms. Lacey Robinson, instructional specialist, Equity and Training Development Team, Office of Organizational Development.

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INTRODUCTION

> The strength of the United States is not the gold at Fort Knox or the weapons of mass destruction that we have, but the sum total of the education and the character of our people.
>
> - Claiborne Pell (1918 - 2009)

This report by the Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) Deputy's Minority Achievement Advisory Council (the Council) makes recommendations to improve the quality of education of all MCPS students; with particular emphasis closing the achievement gap as soon as possible. The overarching message of this report is improved customer service through an improved communications paradigm is a critical addition to MCPS' current efforts. At the core of these recommendations to address the achievement gap is a cultural/philosophical organizational shift from the current paradigm of a one-directional communication approach, where MCPS educates students and informs parents, to a two-way communication paradigm, where MCPS is fully engaged in conversation and partnership with students, parents/guardians and community members. The Council recommends a paradigm where MCPS is further developing, and acting under, an even clearer philosophy/approach of customer service, that is, of serving students primarily, but also the other stakeholders who contribute to students' success.

Because such paradigm shifts tend to involve a significant transformation of the underlying organizational culture, a simple recommendation to just shift MCPS' paradigm would had been an unfair one, as such shifts in organizational culture usually occur successfully when two key elements coexist in aligned harmony. The first key element is a clearly articulated vision, approved at the highest levels of the organization, which spells out the desired new approach and welcomes a dialogue with all stakeholders in order to build alignment and commitment. Although articulating the vision goes beyond the scope of this report, the Council believes that this vision should reflect a paradigm of improved customer service. The second element is a set of coordinated efforts that, in specific, easy to understand actions, support with tangible and reachable goals the larger objective articulated in the vision.

In support of both key elements, the Council's recommendations are organized in three specific "goal areas." These goal areas, taken together, are designed to support the paradigm shift using three, mutually reinforcing and fully aligned specific directions, that is, engagement, clarity and fairness. These goal areas have specific recommendations that include training and professional development for all employees, an emphasis on clearly and genuinely welcoming and engaging families and communities in the education of their children, further supporting students' efforts to prepare for college and the workforce, and improving efforts to reduce suspensions.

As the diversity in Montgomery County continues to grow, efforts to design effective programs and implement initiatives that provide appropriate services to meet the needs of minority students and their families becomes increasingly important. The Council's recommendations are research-based and that identify the organizational processes and structures that are needed to

support effective implementation, however, associated budgetary implications were not priced out. Because the Council believes that its recommendations can increase student achievement, the Council urges MCPS to expedite implementation of these recommendations by determining how to provide financial support and by using creativity to minimize the need for additional funds and to strengthen existing organizational structures.

BACKGROUND

In order to capture an inclusive array of perspectives, the deputy superintendent convened a Deputy's Minority Achievement Advisory Council (the Council). The Council is intended to provide a forum for meaningful two-way communication with an emphasis on developing a shared commitment to the implementation of effective strategies for increasing the academic achievement of minority students.

The Council began meeting in Summer of 2006 with the deputy making a decision to enlist the support of community members who as a whole had previously been untapped. The Council played a critical role in disseminating information regarding the impending state mandated graduation requirement as well as through its advocacy efforts at the County Council. The Council provided valuable feedback and insights in the development and design of the MCPS Safety and Security at a Glance publication. This productive partnership evolved over time as the Council distilled the concerns of their community into specific recommendations for the deputy superintendent of schools.

Council Charge

MCPS African American and Hispanic students are performing at lower levels than their White and Asian counterparts. The Council was charged to complete research and recommend action steps towards reducing this achievement gap. Each of the areas delineated in the report have been addressed by the Council and are aligned with the expectations of Our Call to Action: Pursuit of Excellence—The Strategic Plan for the Montgomery County Public Schools of 2006–2011. The charge to the Council led to the establishment of three committees within the Council to address the overall objective, noted above, from three aligned and mutually supportive perspectives - engagement, clarity and fairness.

Council Meetings

The Council met formally on a monthly basis from June 2006 to June 2009. In addition, committees met to discuss specific issues and gather relevant research in order to bring information, questions, and recommendations to the Council.

Scope of Responsibility

The Council researched, debated, developed, and prepared recommendations to address the overall mandate and organized its own division of labor in three committees, each focusing on one of the three mutually supportive specific areas mentioned above. The committees were responsible for completing assigned tasks, providing regular updates, and making

recommendations to the whole Council. Decision-making in the Council was reached through consensus. To formulate and recommend strategies and initiatives, the committees reviewed relevant publications and literature, researched scientifically based practices, benchmarked exemplary models, reviewed and analyzed relevant data, and developed recommendations that encompassed the complete scope of their charges. In combination, the full package of recommendations becomes a three-pronged aligned approach towards supporting the paradigm shift towards a new two-way communication approach, where MCPS is fully engaged in conversation and partnership with students, parents/guardians and community members; where its philosophy becomes serving its customers, that is, students primarily, but also all the above-mentioned stakeholders. And, it is all designed towards fulfilling the mandate of reducing and eventually eliminating the achievement gap.

Organization of this Report

The report presents its recommendations and supporting analyses in three sections—engagement, clarity and fairness—while keeping in mind the paradigm shift these recommendations are designed to support. Following the recommendations, the report provides concluding remarks and a summary of the Council's recommendations. An overview of each section is given below.

Engagement. This section focuses on implementing a systemic approach to achieve effective and genuine family engagement that positively impacts minority student achievement. The Council uses the term "engagement," in contrast to the term "involvement," to connote a two-way process where MCPS not only sends 'one-way' information to students, parents and communities, but also ensures that real back and forth (that is, listening as well as speaking) communication gets established, nurtured and maintained. The measurement for success here is whether or not these efforts result in building strong relationships among parents, students, communities and MCPS.

Clarity. The focus here shifts towards developing and communicating (using the two-way engagement process of real back and forth conversations discussed in the first section) a clear roadmap to success; so that at each grade level, students, parents/guardians and community members all have a clear understanding of what levels of accomplishment, are truly preparing each student for, upon high school graduation, either being able to meet the academic rigor of college life or for successful careers in the workplace. The measurement for success lies in whether or not, at each grade level, parents/guardians, students and community members can accurately recognize whether a child (based on courses taken and grades received) is 'on track' to be ready at the end of 12th grade for her/his post high school step; and, if not, what can be done to adjust course midstream.

Fairness. Complementing the above two sections, this one turns our focus towards further increasing existing efforts to implement systemic remedies to decrease the disproportionally high levels of suspension rates for minority students; thus, increasing learning time, educational equity and student engagement. The measurement for success lies in declining trends of long-term suspension rates. It is important to distinguish that the goal is not to artificially lower suspension rates, just "to look good" in the reports. The goal is to genuinely address the underlying causes that have motivated those disproportionate rates.

The **Conclusion** puts it all together into a coherent whole by aligning all three individual strategies, previously stated in the three-section main body of the document, behind the overarching customer service theme mentioned above.

Finally, the **Summary of Recommendations,** for ease of reference, lists the individual-strategy recommendations.

<center>**RECOMMENDATION AREAS**</center>

GOAL AREA 1--Engagement. Implement a systemic approach that integrates school and nonschool individuals and organizations that support students to increase family engagement that positively impacts minority student achievement.

Background and Overview

Research conducted by various centers for family, community, and school advocacy has shown that the greater the family's engagement in a child's education the greater the child's academic achievement. Parent/guardian engagement not only has been known to improve student achievement but also to produce other significant long-term benefits - better school attendance, reduced drop-out rate, decreased delinquency (Jeynes, 2005). The Council uses the term "engagement," in contrast to the term "involvement," to connote a two-way process where MCPS not only sends 'one-way' information to students, parents and communities, but also ensures that real back and forth (that is, listening as well as speaking) communication gets established and maintained, resulting in building strong relationships among parents, students, communities and MCPS.

The Council believes that all parents have hopes and goals for their children and the home is the spherical foundation for a student's development. Therefore, it is vital that schools begin to recognize and incorporate parental engagement as a key aspect of school success. If educational institutions are to work diligently at eliminating the predictability of achievement by race, the engagement of families of color must become a linchpin of public education. Specifically, schools, parents/guardians and communities must create a collaborative environment where all stakeholders are acknowledged, engaged and utilized at full capacity. Proper planning and resources to support the engagement of families in schools must be addressed through opportunities for parents/guardians to augment their academic knowledge and skills and develop leadership and advocacy skills to successfully support their student's academic development. Effective parental engagement is a process, not a program, requiring a shared vision, a clear policy and a guiding framework, built through consensus.

Successful parental engagement generally has a common thread—supportive principals who have the knowledge and skills to foster the need for strong and active participation of parents/guardians in implementing and supporting school practices, policies and programs. At the core of successful parental engagement is school's accepting the responsibility for creating and maintaining a climate where families feel encouraged to seek the information and tools that will assist them in supporting their children. Too many parents, particularly those who are difficult to engage, view the school as an unfriendly environment for both themselves and their children. Students and their families must be made to feel important, appreciated and have a sense of belonging in the school environment.

MCPS Policy ABC *Parental Involvement* clearly articulates MCPS' strong commitment to the role of parents/guardians as valued partners in their children's education, to promoting and increasing effective, comprehensive parental engagement, and to ensuring that parental engagement efforts reflect the rich cultural and linguistic diversity of local school communities.

Within the MCPS Office of Communications and Family Outreach, the mission of the Department of Family and Community Partnerships (DFCP) is "to promote student achievement by strategically creating and fostering connections among diverse families, community partners, and schools."

In response to a large, diverse community of learners, the focus of the strategic plan of DFCP is for DFCP staff to provide, engage in, and support opportunities to increase parents/guardians engagement in priority schools based on the following criteria:

- Middle School Reform
- Community Superintendent Input
- Maryland State Department of Education School Improvement schools

These criteria allow the department to strategically deploy resources to schools, parents/guardians, and communities that may have historically had low family engagement. Additionally, the use of highly effective models of addressing the linguistic diversity that exists in MCPS is thoroughly supported by the process created and supported with DFCP. To fulfill the vision of becoming a national model for enhancing family and community engagement in order to increase student achievement, DFCP utilizes internal and external communication strategies and multimedia products to inform stakeholders about the school system's performance, programs, policies, resources, and initiatives, such as: conducting parent/guardian education workshops in various languages; developing an extensive and informative website with translated information; promoting two-way communication through Quick Notes; and using parent outreach coordinators to assist parents/guardians during EMT, IEP and other school meetings.

In an attempt to measure the effectiveness of its processes, DFCP utilizes instruments such as action plans, climate surveys, observations, workshop evaluations, individual case data, number of website hits, and phone call support data.

Although the DFCP is to be applauded for its strategic outreach to diverse families and collaboration with government, business, and community organizations to provide direct support to schools, students and their families, many of its practices are not designed to increase family engagement for individual racial or ethnic groups. For example, while MCPS has always viewed family engagement as a critical component in the education of children, there is no systemic approach that intentionally integrates school and non-school individuals and organizations that support students. This absence has resulted in variation of family engagement practices from school to school. Utilization of parent outreach coordinators in areas that have a high bilingual and racial/ethnic diversity has been successful in reaching groups that may not have historically been active participants in the education process. However, it is difficult to quantify or measure how effective this outreach has been and whether it is having an impact on closing the achievement gap.

Recommendations

The work of family engagement must be accompanied by efforts to make families part of the school environment. This happens as students and their families begin to feel that they are valued members of the school community. There are opportunities for improvement in current system efforts focused toward engaging families. It is incumbent upon school administrators, teachers and staff to recognize and embrace parental and familial engagement as valuable assets in increasing minority student achievement. Therefore, the Council makes the following specific recommendations:

1. *Promote family engagement as a shared responsibility.*

In order for schools to promote family engagement, it is essential that MCPS rethink the current roles and structures of family engagement in ways more consistent with Policy ABC and with the DFCP mission. Family engagement is a shared responsibility that must be part of the overall culture and climate of a school. Administrators, teachers and all support staff must be involved in the endeavors to access parental and community partnerships. MCPS should:

- Establish School-Family Partnership (SFP) teams consisting of the principal, school staff members, parents/guardians, and community in every school to facilitate home/school relationships to develop and implement a family engagement plan, and to monitor school systemic change.
- Develop an MCPS-wide training and development program for SFP teams. This program should address strategies for building culturally competent parent/guardian engagement in every school. It also should include specific strategies and interventions for schools (administrators, teachers and staff) to use in making the school environment more friendly and welcoming to minority families. Strategies for making the school environment more friendly range from greeting parents with warm and welcoming smiles to developing school and non-school initiatives that support academic achievement, such as developing an asset map of the community to identify and engage non-school individuals and organizations to support students and families.

2. *Foster equitable access to information for all audiences.*

An effort of this magnitude is labor intensive and requires resources specifically to address accurate communication practices and procedures that support home and school endeavors. Fostering access to information will involve doing more things than those currently being done in the school. Although MCPS utilizes media and web sources to communicate with the community at large and schools make computers available to parents/guardians that visit the school so that they can check grades online or access other school resources, it may be necessary to have a laptop available, with a wireless modem card, which can be transported to parents/guardian's homes to provide the same service that is available within the schools. MCPS should:

- Develop an ongoing system of communication and outreach to parents/guardians and community by creating and building on efforts and techniques such as door to door

canvassing of pertinent school information.

- Create community training workshops to inform parents/guardians and community about local and state issues. The workshops should include opportunities for parents/guardians to clarify and concepts, issues and programs.
- Develop an education and training program to build the capacity of a core of parents/guardians and community members within each cluster to train others in their community.

3.   *Analyze the implementation and impact of MCPS efforts to increase school and home partnerships, especially within minority communities.*

Many school efforts to reach parents/guardians rely on school staff designated as parent coordinators or liaisons. Often, such staff have many other responsibilities within the school. This greatly reduces the school's capacity to fully implement and evaluate the effectiveness of family engagement practices on targeted populations. Research indicates that any parental policy or practice that is implemented to increase parental engagement must be evaluated. MCPS should:

- Review current surveys and other data collection instruments to integrate measures that evaluate the effectiveness services and approaches that are likely to increase family engagement of minority families as well as those that measure customer satisfaction.
- Develop a continuous monitoring instrument using a set of criteria for predetermined program domains (i.e., relationship with school, community, and families; engagement with advisory councils and school improvement team; and degree to which activities address barriers to learning) which would be rated using a Likert scale to assess how each of these domains relates to a student's social and academic performance.

These recommendations will become operational by implementing practices recommended in the Beyond the Bake Sale (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007) at target schools, developing a metric to measure the effectiveness of the implementation, taking additional steps to ensure that information is accessible at the school, and promoting the DFCP at the school. The family engagement practices will require a commitment from the school principal, administrators and teachers at the school.

GOAL AREA 2--Clarity: Improve how MCPS communicates student requirements to achieve college and career readiness for minority students.

Background and Overview

The Challenge of Family and Community Engagement. The communication that takes place between schools, students' homes, and their communities, particularly African American, Hispanic and other ethnic communities should be improved. That said, there are many challenges that school personnel face in effectively communicating with students' families and communities. Too often, families are provided unintelligible, insufficient, or inconsistent information which, for practical purposes, prevents them from helping students understand the necessary pathways through a rigorous school curriculum to prepare for college success.

Researchers have identified many variables that contribute to low academic achievement and variance among ethnic groups in family engagement in school matters including: discrimination and prejudice by school personnel; institutional racism and white privilege; differing home/school environments; and differences in child rearing practices (Caro-Bruce, Flessner, Klehe, & Zeichner, 2007). Yet the bonds created through effective communication may significantly improve families' engagement in their children's education, which ultimately drives student achievement.

An often overlooked way to improve minority students' achievement is increasing their understanding of the relevance of their coursework through clear and effective communication. Students often lack motivation to master content areas important to their long-term academic success and may view such learning as largely irrelevant to their academic future and their chances for success in the 21st century workplace. Other factors that might contribute to the pattern of inequitable education, especially for African American and Hispanic students, include: students and families difficulties in navigating between their ethnic and racial cultures and the norms of school; lack of congruence between students' and teachers' expectations; and these students lack of information about the importance of postsecondary learning, and about college preparation and admission procedures.

Current School and Organization Efforts.   MCPS provides information to families and communities in a number of ways: publications that build family efficacy; Internet resources; workshops and seminars to foster collaborative relationships between the school system, families, and the community; translation of information in many languages. In addition, community groups such as the Montgomery County Council of Parent Teacher Associations (MCCPTA), the NAACP Parents Council and others host many meetings and use websites and "listservs" to inform families and communities of ongoing MCPS initiatives and common concerns.

MCPS has developed a number of publications aimed at improving its communications with students and families. Recently, MCPS has published the *Seven Keys to College Readiness for Students of all Races/Ethnicities* to establish a framework for the attainment of the knowledge and skills needed for college and career readiness. However, there are barriers to these publications being highly effective in promoting efficacy. Grade level and course expectations

are complex and some of the publications' descriptive approaches do not explain the goals in a way that complements the *Seven Keys*. In addition, there are not adequate strategies and practices to support student achievement. Together, these barriers limit the comfort of parent and non-school individuals and organizations that support students in their efforts to engage in the educational process. Effective communication goes beyond outlining an array of course sequences. A focus on the specific knowledge and tasks that students should be able to perform enables everyone who interacts with the student to provide the targeted support needed to help close the student's knowledge and skill gaps. Establishing the relevance of the coursework to the types of careers students can expect to reasonably pursue with and without that learning is essential. Students especially need clear messages about the consequences of not meeting learning expectations for each grade level. Expectations should be clearly and consistently communicated in all publications. Finally, as described below, communications needs to be two-way.

There will be situations were a student may not attain one Key or several Keys. Children are unique and how quickly or how much they progress will vary. Although attaining all seven Keys does increase a student's chances of being ready for college, missing a Key does not close the doors to college for any student. It is important that communications stress the need to look at all of a student's strengths, as well as the student's motivation to succeed.

It is equally important for all students to know that college is a realistic option. All students who are willing to take challenging courses and work hard can go to college, succeed in college or other postsecondary training, and ultimately succeed in the 21st century workplace. There are many routes a student can take to earn a college degree, engage in postsecondary training, or be career ready and many programs to help families pay for college. Students can even earn college credit while still in high school.

Community Communications and Engagement. Student success often requires support and interventions by a number of school-based and community individuals and entities, including teachers and counselors; parents, guardians and other caregivers; before and after school programs, community organizations, libraries, and churches. When such individuals and organizations that serve as a students' support system are excluded from educational information pipeline of minority students, MCPS fails to capitalize on community resources that can address minority student needs.

Communication methods vary from school to school which diminishes the effectiveness of school-home partnerships that foster all students' achievement. Some schools use *ConnectEd*, newsletters, and extensive websites while others have less consistent and infrequent communication patterns. MCPS should increase efforts to assist schools in developing communications methods that effectively address the needs of the schools' populations. MCPS has a robust website to communicate school events and other system messages. However, because every family does not have access to, or the knowledge and skills necessary to obtain critical school information through the Internet, MCPS' or schools' web-based communications is not a substitute for improving other communications methods.

Communication networks and school structures are designed to include teachers and other staff members. However, communication about learning outcomes to a student's entire support system is limited. MCPS should increase its efforts to develop and disseminate the standards it uses to assess student knowledge, skill, and progress and the relationship of these standards to college and workforce preparedness using user-friendly language. Such communications to students and to people and organizations that comprise students' support systems will help improve student motivation and accelerate student success rates.

Recommendations

Drawing upon national and state documents, a two-way communication intervention which effectively implements the ideas outlined below and is aimed at students, schools (including administrators and teachers), families, and communities (including public and private constituencies such as community-based organizations, libraries, philanthropies and businesses)—all of which have a stake in all students achieving at high levels is essential to closing the minority student achievement gap. Therefore, the Council makes the following specific recommendations:

1. *Communicate curriculum expectations at each grade level in ways that are understandable to all audiences (staff members, students, parents/guardians, and community stakeholders).*

MCPS must improve the ways that it indicates what students need to know and be able to do at each grade level. To do this, MCPS needs to map specific learning objectives that address cognitive, personal, and social dimensions, and broadly disseminate these maps. MCPS and school-based leadership should:

- Provide professional development to support staff members in culturally responsive methods of teaching and assessment, including identifying textbooks and other learning tools with culturally competent components and multi-cultural role models to support academic achievement.
- Utilize differentiated methods to communicate the relevancy of academic achievement to students, parents/guardians, and community stakeholders (i.e., academic, social, personal, and behavioral expectations and responsibilities schools have for students). These elements will facilitate student development of a positive academic identity which fosters school and college success.

2. *Provide family and community members tools to adequately support student achievement and help students to engage in and take responsibility for their learning.*

Families, as well as other individuals and organizations, want to help students succeed, but often lack an understanding of what academic areas are most important. MCPS should:

- Identify and develop user friendly, jargon free, documents and resources that describe key areas where student coursework lays the foundation for academic achievement.
- Extend current systemic communication mechanisms of improving student academic

progress to include all stakeholders that are part of the student's support system — community partnerships such as before and after school programs, libraries, and community organizations.

- Increase opportunities for families to receive practical examples of constructive ways to help their students with assignments
- Increase engagement of student support system partners by implementing programs that help communities better understand their role in the learning process and providing them with the same instructional targets and strategies utilized in the classroom so that efforts are aligned.
- Establish cluster learning centers (in collaboration with community groups) with evening and/or weekend access to computers, teachers, tutoring, career guidance, etc.

3. ***Set high expectations for all student learning by deepening student, family and community understanding of the pathways to being successful in college and future careers and helping students attain those goals.***

Students, families as well as other individuals and community organizations that support students need to intervene when students do not meet benchmarks on pathways for success, especially if the students are unaware that they have not done so (for example, if a student is not taking AP courses). MCPS should communicate not only what pathways lead to success, but also alternative pathways as soon as the need for such pathways presents itself. MCPS should:

- Communicate to students and their families as soon as it becomes apparent that they are not meeting academic expectations and collaboratively develop strategies for students' success.
- Facilitate networking and collaboration among the schools, sharing knowledge and tools especially relevant to transitioning between grade levels.
- Encourage and facilitate active family participation in the decisions that affect students, such as student placement, course selection and individual personalized education plans.

4. ***Develop and administer a measurement tool to assess the clarity of communication process, practices, and procedures for all audiences.***

For a variety of reasons, well designed and well-intentioned programs nevertheless may not achieve their desired results. Program evaluation should be a built in component to any efforts to improve communications. MCPS should:

- Administer evaluation to a stratified, random sample of students, families, teachers, and community members.
- Measure communication of academic expectations at each selected grade level, grade level promotion processes, and academic, cognitive, social, personal, and behavioral changes.

GOAL AREA 3--Fairness. Increase efforts to implement systemic remedies to decrease disproportionality in suspension to provide more learning time, increase educational equity, and increase student engagement.

Background and Overview

Recent suspension data from the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights show that across the country African Americans were about three times more likely to be suspended than other groups (as cited in APA Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2006, Gregory, Weinstein, 2008). In the State of Maryland suspension data obtained over the past nine school years indicates that African American students accounted for 55 to 60 percent of all suspensions annually (Maryland State Department of Education, 2008). Not only is this percentage greater than the rest of the population combined, African American students account for only 38 percent of total enrollment in the State of Maryland which means that nearly 16 percent of all African American students enrolled in school were suspended last year, roughly 50,000 children (MSDE, 2008). Hispanic students in the State accounted for nearly 7 percent of all suspensions last year (MSDE, 2008). This number has more than doubled since 1998.

School suspension has long been considered a strategy for discouraging "bad" or "undesirable" behavior. Despite the popularity of suspension as a disciplinary intervention there is little scientific research to show that zero-tolerance or other tough measures are effective in reducing students' behavior problems or increasing school safety (Flanagain, 2007). Suspensions are detrimental to achievement, may reinforce rather than deter behavior and the lack of supervision during suspension may increase rather than deter negative behavior (Arcia, 2007). Gregory and Weinstein report that, "the negative impact of suspension from class should not be underestimated. Whether labeled as a behavior problem or tracked into lower-level classes (Watts & Erevells, 2004) referred students can miss instructional time (Scott & Barrett, 2004), develop a negative academic identity (Townsend, 2000), become truant (Newcomb, et al., 2002), or eventually drop out of school (Jimerson, Egeland, Sroufe, & Carlson, 2000)." Being suspended or expelled is one of the top three school-related reasons for dropping out and an important area of concern for minority achievement.

Despite this acknowledgement, each year thousands of minority students lose hundreds of hours of learning time as a result of school suspension. Disproportionality in suspensions place African American and Hispanic students at greater risk for truancy, and for dropping out of school. While the immediate consequence is the lost opportunity for learning, resulting in poor academic achievement, these students are often involved in high risk behaviors including substance abuse, crime and sexual activities. Further down stream, these students are not qualified for higher learning, become low wage earners, and are often incarcerated. Eventually these students become our nation's impoverished as they suffer from disparities in income and healthcare.

MCPS may be among the first school systems in Maryland to address the issue of disproportionality in suspensions. MCPS has invested considerable resources in efforts to reduce disproportionality and suspensions in general. MCPS has testified before the Board of Education on numerous occasions and has made many efforts to implement school based programs

addressing the disproportionality of minority students reflected in the suspension data. The focus of the MCPS Suspension M-Stat work group is to address the issue and has since made it a priority to include suspension as a data point in the system's continuous improvement efforts. As a result of these efforts, MCPS has been able to reduce overall suspensions by nearly 50 percent system wide. Many schools at every level are implementing programs that help decrease suspensions, some of which have led to the development of best practices. MCPS has also begun efforts to inform the community regarding the data points as related to the disproportionate rate of minority student suspensions, as well as, the MCPS' efforts to combat said data points. Despite these efforts, suspensions of African American and Hispanic students continue to account for at least 70 percent of all suspensions.

Recommendations

Therefore, the Council makes the following specific recommendations:

1. ***Continue efforts to define and clarify suspendible offenses for administrators, students, teachers, staff members, and parents/guardians.***

While the M-Stat process has resulted in favorable results, disproportionate rates of suspension continue to exist and may be directly related to fragmented approaches used by schools to identify suspendible offenses. Although there is a systemic definition for suspendible offenses, each school has discretion to determine if the offense is "disruptive and detrimental". Schools also have the autonomy to implement alternative disciplinary models. This creates opportunities for confusion, misapplication, and improper implementation. MCPS should:

- Work to strengthen and clarify guidelines for determining if offenses are both disruptive and detrimental thereby establishing a minimum practice standard for use by administrators.
- A work group consisting of stakeholders representing parents, students and other relevant parties, including representation from African American and Hispanic communities should be convened to develop the minimum practice standard.
- Provide periodic professional development on suspension guidelines that incorporate best practices and evidence based findings to school-based administrators and staff members to ensure consistency in how schools identify suspendible offenses.

2. ***Identify programs and models that have produced sustainable outcomes and positive behaviors in students to implement as part of school improvement programs***

Specific criteria should be applied in the selection and implementation of behavioral intervention and support programs and models used by schools to produce sustainable outcomes. Comprehensive programs and models should include structures that are community based; culturally relevant, individualized, strength based, family centered, and address multiple life domains across home, school, and community. MCPS should:

- Provide guidance to school-based administrators and staff members in the selection of research based alternative practices that consider school level, demographics, cultures

and other characteristics to reduce the disproportionate rate of suspensions of minority students.

- Require continuous monitoring of the implemented programs to include systemic data analysis to provide timely and effective interventions and supports for the students.
- Create flexible structures that allow teams to engage in the planning process to build constructive relationships and support networks designed to reduce the disproportionate rate of suspensions of minority students.

3. *Implement professional development that increases opportunities for teachers and staff to develop knowledge and skills necessary to institutionalize programs and practices focused on academic development, behavioral interventions and alternatives, and build cultural competence.*

As MCPS works to engage teachers and staff in the institutionalization of programs and practices focused on culturally competent academic and behavioral structures, there needs to be an understanding regarding a) the history of the problem and the implications for teachers and school staff; b) the culture of MCPS and the implications; c) best practice and evidence that have been used to address the problem; d) what is being done at MCPS and how teachers and school staff will be involved. Teacher beliefs and expectations for students are key aspects of the solvent to reduce the disproportionate rate of suspensions among African Americans and Hispanic students. Providing a comprehensive training and education program that includes parents/guardians, community members, teachers, and support staff will allow them to share ownership of the problem and collaboratively explore opportunities for resolution. MCPS should:

- Include specific goals for teachers on cultural competency in the school improvement plan.
- Provide training for staff members and parents/guardians on collaborative partnering, cultural competency, and shared decision-making. Include lessons learned from Study Circles regarding what the focus groups have found about race, culture and ethnicity in MCPS.
- Establish behavioral intervention cohorts for school based administrators, staff members, and parents/guardians using the same programs and models. Meet periodically to share best practices.
- Build the capacity within the system to support programs by collaborating with local researchers to determine ways to enhance teacher and staff trainings and securing technical support resources, within or outside of MCPS.

4. *Expand efforts to promote parent/guardian and community engagement.*

When developing the new suspension standard, a work group consisting of stakeholders representing parents/guardians, students and community members is essential. Schools have the responsibility to include families as full partners in decisions that affect their children and their family. All stakeholders should have access to the impending outcomes for students who have either singular or multiple suspension records. There needs to be relationship building beyond what is currently practiced. MCPS staff must become more visible and more embedded in

communities. MCPS should

- Seek out individuals and groups who have not typically been engaged in school processes and decision making to ensure that fresh perspectives are heard.
- Use social marketing as a strategy to educate the African American and Hispanic community about the impact of school suspension on communities of color.
- Provide understandable, accessible, and well-publicized processes for influencing decisions, raising issues or concerns, appealing decisions, and resolving problems for all audiences.

CONCLUSION

The Council is convinced that in order to close, and eventually eliminate, the achievement gap MCPS needs to undergo a paradigm shift and transform itself into an organization guided by a customer service orientation. In support of such shift, the Council emphasizes that MCPS needs to articulate such orientation as part of its vision, build alignment and commitment behind it, and seek the opportunities to make itself accountable for its implementation. The Council believes that MCPS must strengthen its customer service by improving its capacity to interact with its customers and stakeholders utilizing a two-way communication approach. Under such an approach, MCPS is fully engaged in conversation and partnership with students, parents/guardians and community members building long-lasting relationships under a philosophy/approach of service to its customers. Supporting the customer service objective, the Council specifically recommends that MCPS develops and holds itself accountable for implementing a philosophical approach that includes engagement, clarity and fairness, as set out in the specific recommendations contained in this report.

To aid in that effort, and in addition to any other tasks set out by the Deputy Superintendent, the Council makes itself available to the Deputy Superintendent, if deemed desirable, to continue working for an additional period of two years (reconstituted with a combination of existing and new members) with a dual mandate: a) to monitor and produce semiannual reports documenting implementation and impact of those recommendations contained in this report; and b) to continue providing advice to the Deputy Superintendent, as deemed needed and appropriate.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Goal Area 1—Engage schools, families and communities. Implement a systemic approach that integrates school and nonschool individuals and organizations that support students to increase family engagement that positively impacts minority student achievement. Specifically, MCPS should:

1. Promote family engagement as a shared responsibility;
2. Foster equitable access to information for all audiences; and
3. Evaluate the implementation and impact of efforts to increase school and home partnerships, especially within minority communities.

Goal Area 2—Communicate a clear roadmap to college and career success. Improve how MCPS communicates student requirements to achieve college and career readiness for minority students. Specifically, MCPS should:

1. Communicate curriculum expectations at each grade level in ways that are understandable to all audiences (staff members, students, parents/guardians, and community stakeholders);
2. Provide family and community members tools to adequately support student achievement and help students to engage in and take responsibility for their learning;
3. Set high expectations for student-learning by deepening student, family and community understanding of the pathways to being successful in college and future careers, as well as helping all students attain those goals; and
4. Develop and administer a measurement tool to assess the clarity of communication processes, practices, and procedures.

Goal Area 3--Fairness in disciplinary measures. Increase efforts to implement systemic remedies to decrease the disproportionate suspension rates for minority students; thus, increasing learning time, educational equity and student engagement. Specifically, MCPS should:

1. Continue efforts to define and clarify suspendible offenses for administrators, students, teachers, staff members, and parents/guardians;
2. Identify programs and models that have produced sustainable outcomes and positive behaviors in students to implement as part of school improvement programs;
3. Implement professional development that increases opportunities for teachers and staff to develop knowledge and skills necessary to institutionalize programs and practices focused on academic development, behavioral interventions and alternatives, and build cultural competence; and
4. Expand efforts to promote parent/guardian and community engagement.

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