



MONTGOMERY COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS
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MARYLAND

January 22, 2015



To: Members of the Board of Education

From: Joshua P. Starr, Superintendent of Schools

Re: Current Status and Future Work

Since you are meeting in closed session on January 23, 2014, I thought it would be useful to provide you with my views regarding our accomplishments over the last three and a half years and my vision for the future of our district. It has been a privilege to serve as superintendent since 2011 and to work with you to prepare our district for greater success in the years to come. We have spent the last three years creating the conditions for Montgomery County Public Schools to ensure that every child is prepared to thrive in his/her future and I believe we have created a foundation for success that will transform the system to ensure that academic outcomes are not predictable by race, ethnicity or socioeconomic status.

When I became superintendent of MCPS, the district was embarking on a significant transition. This included enrollment increases, demographic changes, resource challenges and the advent of more rigorous academic standards. At the same time, our community rightly expected that we continue to have high academic standards, expectations and outcomes for all of our students.

In my first year, I engaged in a robust and comprehensive outreach plan to ensure that we were hearing the many voices across our community. Quite simply, I wanted to make sure that as we planned our work going forward, we understood what worked well and where improvements were needed. We brought in the community to help us develop a new vision for our graduates, delineated in the Strategic Planning Framework (SPF). Our SPF redefines what we expect our graduates to know and be able to do by including Creative Problem Solving and Social Emotional Learning as core competencies. Very few districts have approached student outcomes in such a comprehensive way. The SPF also states our expectations for adults, the conditions for success that we expect to be in place in each school through our School Support and Improvement Framework, and our accountability Milestones.

Our SPF and all of our work are deeply grounded in our five core values. The Board and my team worked hard to jointly develop these values that reflect our collective beliefs about how we want to lead the district. For example, our equity value states:

WE BELIEVE that each and every student matters; outcomes should not be predictable by race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status; equity demands the elimination of all gaps; and creating and maximizing future opportunities for students and staff is necessary.

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THEREFORE, we will hold high expectations for all students and staff; distribute resources as necessary to provide extra supports and interventions so all students can achieve; identify and eliminate any institutional barriers to students' success; and ensure that equitable practices are used in all classrooms and workplaces.

Equity drives my work every single day and that of every leader on my team. All that we do is devoted to closing the achievement gap and ensuring that all children thrive in their future.

While our elementary and middle school assessments and indicators of success have changed during the time I've been here, our high school indicators have remained stable and we have seen improvement since 2011. For example, since 2011, the combined average SAT score of MCPS graduates has increased by 13 points to 1650, while national and state scores have declined. Additionally, we have seen significant improvements for African American and Hispanic students. For example in 2014:

- 63 percent of African American MCPS graduates took the SAT—an increase of nearly two percentage points and they scored an average of 1403, a one-year increase of six percentage points. This is significantly higher than their peers in the state, who had an average score of 1246 and than their peers in the nation, with an average score of 1278;
- The average SAT score for our Hispanic graduates jumped 10 percentage points, from 1451 to 1461, which is significantly higher than scores for the state and nation; and
- The gap in SAT performance between MCPS White and African-American students narrowed by eight points while the gap between White and Hispanic students narrowed by twelve points.

We've seen similar progress in Advanced Placement scores. Slightly more MCPS students took AP exams in 2014, and our students earned a college-ready score on 74 percent of those exams, an increase of about one percentage point compared with 2013. And, MCPS students continue to outperform their peers across the state and the nation. In 2014, 61 percent of AP exams taken by students Maryland earned a college-ready score. Nationally, only 57 percent of the AP exams taken scored a three or higher.

In addition, more African American MCPS students took AP exams in 2014 than in 2013 and half of those exams earned a college-ready score of 3 or higher, an increase of nearly three percentage points. This was considerably better than the performance of African American students in Maryland (33 percent) and the nation (29 percent).

More Hispanic MCPS students also took AP exams in 2014 than 2013 and almost 58 percent of Hispanic test-takers earned a college-ready score, an increase of nearly two percentage points. This was also higher than the results for Hispanic students across the state (53 percent) and the nation (42 percent).

Graduation rates have also continued to increase from 2011 to 2014, especially for our students of color and students who receive FARMS or are classified as LEP and SPED. Although the Maryland State Department of Education has not yet released graduation rate data for the Class of 2014, I've included our preliminary estimate, pending state confirmation, below:

- Our overall graduation rate has increased by two percentage points to 89 percent
- African-American graduation rates increased four points from 81 to 85 percent
- Hispanic graduation rates increased five points from 75 to almost 80 percent
- FARMS graduation rates increased six points from 75 to 81 percent
- SPED graduation rates increased 7.5 points from 62.5 to 70 percent
- LEP graduation rates increased 3 points from 49 to 52 percent

While we have much to be proud of, we must increase our urgency in serving our students with the greatest needs, as persistent performance gaps remain. To address our gaps and increase overall student achievement we have created the SPF District Implementation Plan based upon five core strategies that will enable us to better serve our students over the next four years. The five core strategies are:

1. **Academic rigor and cultural proficiency.** We continue to implement common-core aligned curriculum and provide professional development and targeted support to schools to meet new standards. We have expanded the work of our equity team and have made it a clear expectation that schools and offices understand the impact of race and serve all children at the highest level. We have established an equity certificate program in partnership with MCEA and McDaniel College to expand and deepen our work in this area. One example of how we have shifted our approach is in our reduction of discretionary suspensions by almost 50 percent. I introduced Michelle Alexander's work to our leaders and they have embraced the idea that we must break the school to prison pipeline.
2. **Equitable funding and support.** We have a long-standing tradition of providing more resources for the students who have the greatest need, and my administration has continued that effort at elementary schools and expanded it to secondary schools with increases in funding and support to middle and high schools with the greatest needs. We also have overhauled our alternative programs and home and hospital program and we have invested in problem/project-based learning at Wheaton High School (our high school with the highest percentage of FARMS students) as a model for other schools.
3. **Human capital management.** Our most recent contract negotiation with our three associations laid the groundwork for increased innovation, especially with our teachers. The establishment of our career lattice incentivizes teacher leaders in our most impacted schools to take on additional work intended to close the achievement gap. And the inclusion of student voice in teacher evaluation is a manifestation of how much we value the perspectives of our students. Our new teacher workforce diversity initiative will

transform the makeup of our district over time and reflects our commitment to ensuring that our students have adults before them who can serve as role models.

4. **Community engagement.** We have established multiple community engagement efforts, in partnership with the Board. Our joint engagement plan delineates how the Board and my team will communicate with and learn from our community. We have established community engagement teams and interagency collaboration with our county agencies and non-profits to deepen our work with our most vulnerable students and families. And, with the Latino and African-American communities, we have established action groups that serve as critical friends to us as we shape our direction.
5. **Operational Excellence and Continuous improvement.** MCPS has a long-standing commitment to operational excellence and accountability through the use of data. Our school improvement planning process reflects and builds on the Baldrige process and our budget work is explicitly aligned to our needs. We have designed and implemented new approaches to data-based decision making, including the establishment of five milestones for student achievement, an Early Warning Indicator system, publication of on-line School Support and Improvement Framework reports and the creation of OpenDataMCPS.

We have accomplished much together and positioned the district for great success in the coming years. I am deeply appreciative of the Board's commitment to shared governance and the establishment of multiple formal and informal processes that ensure we are on the same page. We have set the stage for a powerful transformation of MCPS so that we can actually accomplish what we all are so committed to—eliminating achievement gaps once and for all and preparing our students to thrive in their future.

I became a superintendent because I believe in social justice, that students from all backgrounds can achieve at high levels and the power of school communities to provide each and every student with the knowledge and skills they need to thrive in their future. I came to Montgomery County because of our deep commitment to ensuring that those who need the most get the most and because we have the capacity, the will, and the people to do what few other districts can do.

Over the next four years, my vision is that we:

- Ensure that all third graders are reading on grade level. We must focus intensive support on early reading, as we are seeing trends that concern me. This is one of our milestones and we have set system and school-level targets to achieve it;
- Continue to close achievement gaps and raise academic standards by meeting our gap-reduction and overall achievement targets.

- Expand our career readiness efforts through partnerships with industry, strengthening of career pathways and project-based learning. In particular, we must strengthen traditional pathways like medical careers and the trades while providing new pathways in cyber security and other twenty-first century careers;
- Transform all classrooms into vibrant learning communities where teachers and students use technology to plan, teach, assess, access and demonstrate knowledge, and share ideas. This must rest on strong teacher leadership and school-led innovation;
- Expand our interagency collaboration and community engagement work so that we have a seamless countywide web of services for our students from birth through college completion;
- Increase system-wide use of comprehensive data systems that enable us to identify and build on what is working and stop doing what is no longer achieving the desired outcome; and
- Provide our children with a workforce that is the most talented, culturally proficient, and more closely resembles our student population. Through our continued focus on equity and race with our employees and community, I believe we can continue to be the model school district in how we embrace diversity.

Most importantly, my vision is that every single one of our students graduates with more opportunities than when they arrived. This means attending a two or four year college without having to take remedial classes, pursuing public service such as the military, or entering into the labor force prepared to pursue a career.

We have so much to be proud of in our district. We have set a clear direction for the future of our district by building on our strengths, engaging our stakeholders and organizing for the future. By sharing the governance, we have established clear targets for student achievement and non-negotiable expectations for adults. We have managed to increase performance and seed innovation without major increases in financial resources. We talk explicitly about race and cultural competency and we are prepared to meet the demands of the future. It has been my privilege and honor to lead MCPS for the last three and a half years.