

Lessons for PreK-3rd from Montgomery County Public Schools



A N F C D C A S E S T U D Y

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FCD Case Studies

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Reading achievement in the United States has stagnated. In 2009, only 33 percent of Fourth Graders were proficient or above in reading—a mere two percentage points higher than in 1998.¹ At the same time, double-digit achievement gaps between African American and Latino/Hispanic students and their white counterparts have changed little in nearly two decades.² More troubling, there are few examples of system-wide success stories—school districts that have improved equity and overall student achievement.

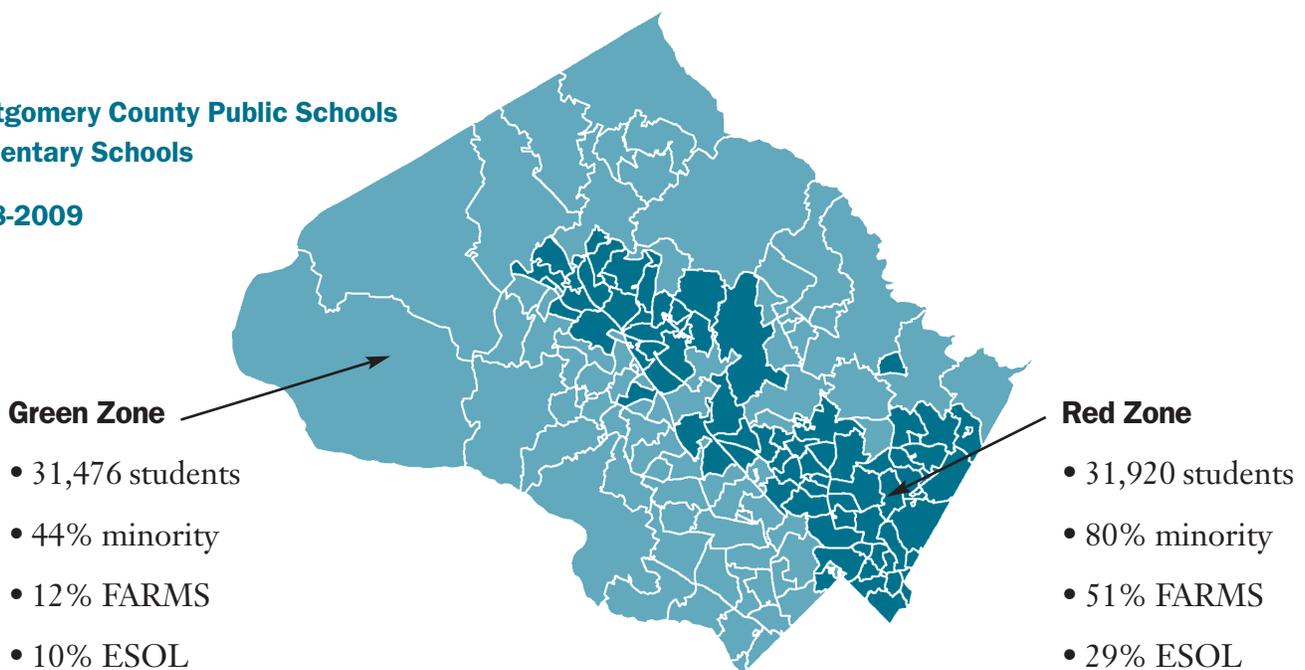
Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) in Maryland is one such example.³ Since 1998, the district's population of English Language Learners increased 103 percent and the number of students receiving a free or reduced lunch went up 44 percent. During the same period, MCPS improved the proportion of Third Graders reading proficiently or above to 88.9 percent, shrank its Third Grade reading achievement gap by 29 percentage points, and increased the number of students taking at least one Advanced Placement exam by 25 percentage points to 61.5 percent—almost 2.5 times that of the national average.⁴ In addition, nearly 77 percent of all graduating seniors enroll in college.⁵

So, how did MCPS accomplish this even as its demographics rapidly changed? It started early, at the beginning of the education “value chain” and made large and consistent investments in early learning. Today, 91 percent of MCPS Kindergartners enter First Grade ready to learn, reading at text level 4 or above according to the standards-based Assessment Program in Primary Reading. The leader of MCPS's reform efforts, Superintendent Jerry Weast, puts it simply:

“Once we fixed the system, the kids were suddenly okay. Same kids, just a different system. And we started at the bottom of the value chain—early learning.”

Montgomery County Public Schools Elementary Schools

2008-2009



What Weast envisioned, and the district's staff put into practice, is what researchers and economists like Nobel Laureate James Heckman have written about for years.⁶ Systemic, integrated, high-quality early learning is the first and most important step to improving reading performance, closing the achievement gap, and competing internationally in science and math.

Fortunately, MCPS not only blazed a trail for other school districts to follow, but it also designed a detailed road map on how to develop, implement, and improve an integrated district-wide early learning strategy.

After dozens of interviews, numerous school and classroom visits, and analyses of hundreds of pages of memos, strategic plans, and research reports, five important early learning lessons emerged from the MCPS early education story. Adapted and applied to local contexts, these are lessons that district leaders, policymakers, and nonprofit executives will not have to learn the hard way.

The first step to developing a comprehensive and integrated early learning strategy is to establish a clear and compelling goal. MCPS set its sights on the goal of 80 percent college-ready by

2014, as determined by an ACT score of 24 or combined SAT of 1650 or higher. Per Weast's charge, Janine Bacquie, Director of Early Childhood Programs and Services, and other MCPS leaders worked to design and integrate early learning and K-12 strategies to meet this bold goal. Traditional departments and ways of doing things were aligned with the new strategies, while early learning teachers

and staff were supported and respectfully held accountable as they adapted to the changes.

Finally, MCPS worked hard to continuously improve performance through innovations such as its online integrated curricula platform and "just-in-time" professional development, while at the same time closely monitoring and analyzing the progress of current efforts.

For Weast and his leadership team, it was more than just starting early; it was intentionally connecting early learning to K-12 education with the ambitious goal of college success. As Weast summarized:

"You have to take the same old bottle of time and

resources and put in new wine of a clear and compelling goal-aligned people, systems and structures, and innovation and monitoring."

Five Key Lessons from Montgomery County

- 1.** Establish a clear and compelling district-wide goal that maps back to early learning.
- 2.** Craft integrated district-wide early-learning strategies to meet the clear and compelling goal.
- 3.** Align early learning programs and services with the integrated K-12 strategies
- 4.** Balance teacher support and accountability to ensure effective and consistent implementation.
- 5.** Innovate and monitor for continuous improvement.

LESSON 1: Establish a clear and compelling district-wide goal that maps back to early learning.

When Weast arrived at MCPS in 1999 as superintendent, he really found two districts – one largely urban, high-poverty, mostly Latino/Hispanic and African American and another predominantly white and well-to-do. The differences in achievement between the two were stark, but both had one thing in common. None of the schools in the “Red Zone” or “Green Zone” had a common vision.⁷ Many, but not all, of the Red Zone schools were failing, and most of the Green Zone schools were doing well.

One of the first steps Weast took was to establish a system-wide goal that everyone could get behind, a target that could serve as a “North Star” to guide teaching and learning from early education through high school graduation.

For Weast and his leadership team, the demands of 21st Century citizenship and careers required most students to be college-ready by the time they graduated from high school. In MCPS, they set the target high; 100 percent of students would graduate and 80 percent would be college-ready by 2014. College readiness would be determined by scoring at or above 1650 on the SAT or 24 on the ACT.

Weast believed that the aggressive internal goal not only served as a North Star around which to align MCPS’s people, systems, and structures, but it was also motivating. In contrast to other goals in education, 80 percent college ready was both clear and compelling. Weast elaborated:⁸

No Child Left Behind has institutionalized the expectation that student progress will be measured (it’s clear), but the standard against which progress is measured is low (not compelling). Ideally, the expectations your district agrees upon will be measurable (clear) and set to a high and meaningful standard (compelling).

At this point, one might ask what setting the clear and compelling goal for high school graduates has to do with crafting and integrating a comprehensive early learning strategy. The 80 percent college-ready goal had significance for MCPS’s youngest learners for two important reasons. First, it set an end point to which steps along the PreK-12 education path could be aligned. As discussed in the following section, MCPS used research to reveal the Seven Keys to College Readiness that students needed to achieve in order to have a decent chance of earning a 24 on the ACT or a 1650 on the SAT by the time they graduated.

Figure 1: Clear and Compelling Goals⁹

	No Child Left Behind + -	80 Percent College Ready + +
Clear	Pre-No Child Left Behind - -	Typical Mission and Vision Statment - +
	Compelling	

Secondly and most importantly, backward mapping the college-readiness goal disabled philosophical battles about what was taught in Kindergarten and PreKindergarten. The false dichotomy of academic preparation versus play prevalent in early learning was reframed with the guiding question: What does it take for our children to be ready for college?

Weast explained the approach:

It's not a program, it's a system of thinking that avoids the warfare that tends to go on in early childhood about what is developmentally appropriate or not. So, we had to show the whole value chain and break it down into its component parts. Then we did something that was very well done by our people. We showed the beginning part and how important it was in a concrete way that could be depicted and correlated to future success.

Thus, MCPS began to develop a plan that linked the day-to-day activities of its early learning teachers, specialists, and staff to the system-wide goal of college readiness. The next step was to craft specific early learning strategies with an emphasis on foundational skills that mapped on to the district's core plan for improving student learning.



LESSON 2: Craft integrated district-wide early-learning strategies to meet the clear and compelling goal.

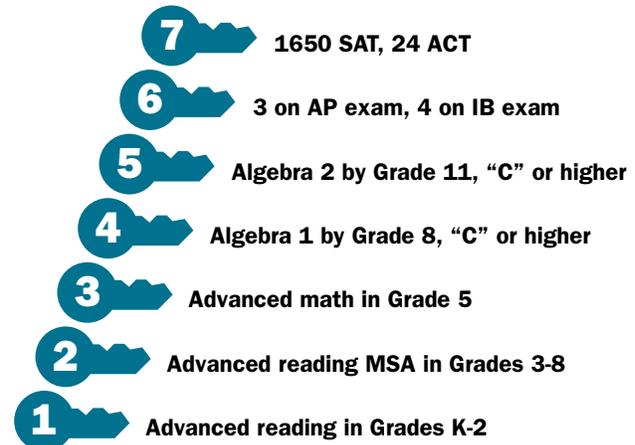
Over a decade ago, school board members, senior leaders, community members, business partners, faith communities, and local government groups were called together to provide key input and share their thoughts, concerns, and expectations for the future of MCPS.

Weast and his deputy level leadership team incorporated the input into MCPS's first comprehensive strategic plan: *Our Call to Action: Raising the Bar and Closing the Gap*. The plan targeted each end of the education value chain. This “push/pull” approach funneled resources to reduce K-2 class sizes, implemented Full-Day Kindergarten in high-poverty schools, and introduced a rigorous and aligned common research-based curriculum in early grades, while at the same time increasing participation in AP classes for high schools.

The theory was that better-prepared elementary school students would push up achievement in middle school, and more demanding high schools would pull in higher-achieving middle school graduates. Essentially, middle school standards would get squeezed upwards as pressure mounted from elementary and high schools. Updated annually, the district's strategic plan now includes the Seven Keys to College Readiness (Figure 2). Incorporating research¹⁰ that linked outcomes at each grade level to later success, the Seven Keys identified reading on grade level by Third Grade as a critical step to college readiness.

Figure 2: Seven Keys to College Readiness

Seven Keys to College Readiness



The result was an even greater emphasis on what the youngest learners were doing in classrooms across MCPS. As Weast said,

“Looking down the value chain, we had to go back to the beginning if we wanted to elongate time, increase efficiency, decrease variability, and reduce the isolationism.”

As *Our Call to Action* gained traction, MCPS launched the Early Success Performance Plan: Closing the Opportunity Gap for Our Youngest Learners (Figure 3) during the 2000-2001 school year.

The comprehensive early learning strategy was implemented under the leadership of then Early Childhood Director, Pam Prue, and built on a 1999 study of MCPS’s Kindergarten program that first identified the need for Full-Day Kindergarten and reduced class sizes.¹¹ The research-based plan

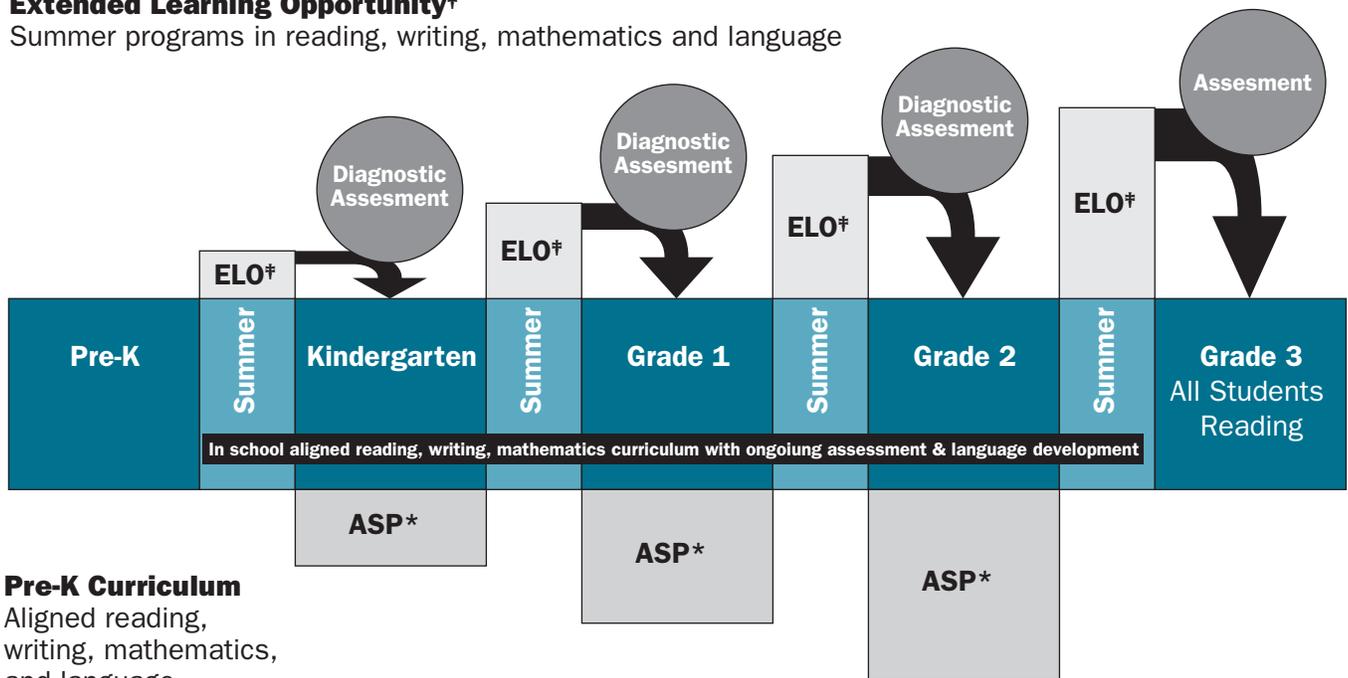
integrated early elementary and early learning programs into MCPS’s overall strategy by linking Third Grade reading outcomes back to PreK and aligned with the benchmarks in the Seven Keys to College Readiness.

Figure 3: Early Success Performance Plan¹²

Montgomery County Public Schools Early Success Performance Plan

Extended Learning Opportunity†

Summer programs in reading, writing, mathematics and language



Pre-K Curriculum
 Aligned reading, writing, mathematics, and language instruction in all preschool programs

Afterschool Programs*
 Congruent and focused instruction in reading, writing, mathematics, and language

Curriculum, Assessment, Professional Development, Technology, Research, and Parental Involvement
Continuous Improvement

Weast, Prue, and the MCPS leaders asked the question: What does it take to have all students reading by the end of Third Grade? The answer they came to identified four important components to a successful early learning strategy.

1. More Time is Critical for the Youngest Learners

The most vulnerable children in MCPS were already significantly behind their peers upon entering Kindergarten. The Early Success Performance Plan implemented Full-Day Kindergarten beginning with the most impacted Red Zone schools and eventually in all MCPS elementary schools. Early elementary class sizes in the highest-need schools were reduced to student-to-teacher ratios of 15 to 1. Because research showed that many at-risk children fall behind during time away from school,¹³ MCPS implemented after-school and summertime extended learning opportunities from Kindergarten through Fifth Grade. The programs focused on reading, writing, math, and language development. In the summer, students received four hours of instruction each day over four weeks, transportation to and from school, and meals at no cost to all students enrolled. The program also provided continuing English language instruction for students for whom English was a second language.

2. Time Must Be Well-spent on Standards-based Activities

Any successful early learning strategy starts with excellent teachers working with a standards-based curriculum and using diagnostic assessments to inform their instruction. All early learning teachers were carefully screened, had at least a bachelor's degree, were fully certified to teach early education in the state of Maryland, and were employed as regular teachers, earning the same pay as any other teacher in the district.

An initial curriculum audit conducted by Phi Delta Kappa in 2000 uncovered inconsistencies throughout the K-12 program. Addressing these concerns, MCPS then worked with the Council for Basic Education to align and translate state standards into grade-level indicators. The result was a comprehensive MCPS PreK-12 Curriculum Framework that carefully aligned and integrated the early learning system with MCPS's K-12 curriculum. Specifically, curricula, literacy and math programs and associated professional development overlapped from PreK well into elementary school. Furthermore, established benchmarks in each grade used many of the same assessments and were cumulative, building off each other each subsequent year. Thus a three-year-old attending Head Start for the first day could expect a seamless academic transition until he or she graduated from high school. The College Board, the maker of the AP tests, confirmed that the Curriculum Framework sufficiently prepared students to succeed in high school honors and AP classes.

With an aligned standards-based curriculum replete with measurable benchmarks, MCPS developed its own PreK-2 diagnostic assessment, the Montgomery County Public Schools Assessment Program in Primary Reading (AP-PR), which allowed teachers to adjust their instruction to an individual child's needs. The dramatic changes required new training for all PreK-2 teachers in MCPS. In the first few years of the Early Success Performance Plan, Kindergarten teachers received more than 100 hours of training in curriculum and assessment; a similar roll-out followed for PreK and Head Start teachers. In addition, MCPS's comprehensive Teacher Professional Growth System (TPGS) incorporated consulting teachers, staff development teachers, job-embedded professional development, and a peer assistance and review program for all new and struggling teachers.

3. Consistency at the Same School Matters

Children who attended the same school from Kindergarten through Second Grade learn more.¹⁴ This was especially true for those who entered Kindergarten with limited foundational literacy skills. To diminish the negative consequences of school transitions, MCPS worked to establish early learning classrooms in all its highest need schools. Consequently, most young children in an MCPS early learning program went to the same school where they would attend Kindergarten through Fifth Grade. At the same time, it was inevitable that some families would move. In these cases, consistent curriculum and diagnostic assessments ensured that when children moved to another school's attendance area, they could pick up right where they left off.

Involve Parents and Community to Support Early Learning

From the very beginning parents were involved in crafting the Early Success Performance Plan. They helped draft the initial strategy, revise the Kindergarten program, and redesign the Kindergarten report card. But, this level of parent engagement was not spontaneous. With 140,000 students from more than 165 countries speaking 134 languages, MCPS needed to communicate to families in multiple languages through numerous channels.¹⁵ A guide to the new Kindergarten curriculum was printed in six languages and disseminated throughout the district. Family service workers, instructional specialists, and teachers reached out to families through regular parent meetings and home visits. Advisory boards, parent academies, newsletters, guides, a wide selection of school system TV programming in numerous languages, and welcome packages rounded out MCPS's efforts to involve families.

MCPS also partnered with local businesses, nonprofits, faith-based organizations and other governmental agencies to deliver on its early learning strategic goals. Two "Judy Centers," named after the late Judith Hoyer, a revered early learning leader of Prince George's County, Maryland, located within MCPS schools linked comprehensive Full-Day year-round services to the county's neediest children birth to five and their families. Partnerships with local businesses and nonprofits through the Montgomery County Business Roundtable for Education and the Ruth Rales Comcast Kids Reading Network¹⁶ provided managerial expertise and trained reading tutors.

Coordinating communication among all early learning partners across the county were the Montgomery County Collaboration Council for Children, Youth, and Families and the Montgomery County Early Care and Education Congress (MCECEC). These county-level collaborations were complemented by innovative public and private neighborhood-based coalitions such as the Kennedy Cluster Project, a formal partnership between local governmental agencies, the School Board, non-profits, university partners, after-school and summer free lunch programs, a health center, three elementary schools, a middle school, and John F. Kennedy High School.

MCPS's Early Success Performance Plan and its four essential components – more time is critical, time must be well spent, consistency matters, and involve parents and community – emerged after years of hard work from local researchers and dedicated early learning and education leaders in Montgomery County. The comprehensive early learning strategy tied directly into the district-wide strategy outlined in Our Call to Action and was benchmarked in the Seven Keys to College Readiness. The Early Success Performance Plan illustrated in Figure 3 appears deceptively simple. But as described in the following section, the bulk of the work to be done remained in implementation.

LESSON 3: Align early learning programs and services with the integrated K-12 strategies.

With a comprehensive early learning strategy tied directly into the district-wide Our Call to Action plan and benchmarked in the Seven Keys to College Readiness, implementation—where even the best strategies go to die—was next.

In early learning, competing local, state, and federal statutes create a dizzying governance landscape, making implementation particularly challenging. Children and families are typically served through a fragmented service provider system dictated by confusing income requirements, means testing or the diagnosis of a developmental delay or disability. In Maryland, the Bridge to Excellence in Public Schools Act of 2002 mandated that all four-year-olds living at or below 185 percent of the federal poverty level be provided early learning services. In Montgomery County, district- and community-based federal Head Start programs targeted the neediest of these families, serving about 650 children.¹⁷ MCPS-funded programs enrolled another 2,500 students in PreK classrooms. In addition, 350 non-income-eligible four-year-old children were provided a preschool experience through a high school early education internship program. Over 1,000 home-based and nearly 450 center-based providers completed the backdrop of early learning services in Montgomery County. To align all these programs and services with the strategies set forth in the Early Success Performance Plan and Our Call to Action was a challenging task.

Even at full capacity, MCPS only served a fraction of the young children in the county. To achieve the ambitious goal of 80 percent college-ready, MCPS had to rely on the entire community's resources, not just those it could control.

Leverage Established Collaborations to Build Early Learning Momentum

To build a more coherent countywide early education system, Weast and Bacquie first leveraged established collaborative groups like the Montgomery County Collaboration Council for Children, Youth and Families, and the MCECEC, which were already working to coordinate communication among early learning partners.

In 1989, under the Systems Reform Initiative, Maryland Governor William Schaeffer mandated that each of the state's 24 jurisdictions create an interagency service coordinating body for children, youth, and families.¹⁸ Thus, Local Management Boards (LMB) came into existence. Operating under a formal partnership agreement with the Governor's Office for Children, each LMB was composed of representatives from the local Health and Human Services Department, Department of Juvenile Services, public school system, Department of Social Services, and other public and private organizations.

In Montgomery County, the nonprofit Collaboration Council for Children, Youth, and Families was established as the LMB. Through the 1990s the Collaboration Council worked to define its role, eventually working together with Montgomery County early learning leaders, including Weast and Prue, to integrate into one document a birth-to-age-five community-wide plan for early learning. This and other efforts resulted in the development of the Montgomery County Early Childhood Initiative Comprehensive Plan which set a vision for the county's youngest children:¹⁹

All children from before birth to age five will attain their full potential through quality early care and nurturance, participation in appropriate programs, and the commitment of their families and communities.

Building off the momentum created by the Early Childhood Initiative, the Collaboration Council and other county leaders then crafted the Children’s Agenda, a set of seven actionable goals around children, youth, and families in Montgomery County.

Soon after, in the early 2000s, MCPS and the Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) worked together with the County Council and County Executive to secure \$1 million in local funding to support the school-readiness goal. The initial outlay was used by DHHS to create childcare scholarships; develop ChildLink, a one phone number early learning information and referral service; and lay the foundation for countywide early learning services.

The Collaboration Council continued to play an important role in communicating about all of the child and youth services across the county, thereby encouraging new forms of early learning collaboration. In 2006, the Collaboration Council received a grant from the Annie E. Casey Foundation to establish a Leadership in Action Program (LAP). The LAP engaged more than 20 public and private community partners around the topic of early learning and launched MCECEC.

The specific focus of MCECEC was on the county’s most vulnerable families and children. As Bacquie said: “The question was, what are we as a county going to do to work with the parents of our most underserved students? We needed to get all of our arrows pointing in one direction to help the students and families most in need.”

MCECEC met for the first time in April 2008, and developed an Action Agenda to mobilize the entire early learning community around meeting the needs of the most impacted children and families in the county. Bacquie described the link between the

Action Agenda and Children’s Agenda: “The two agendas are closely linked. The MCECEC Action Agenda extends the Children’s Agenda to those most in need. The goal is to better coordinate efforts rather than duplicate them. Also, it serves to communicate to the public about our ongoing early education efforts and encourage their participation.”

During this time, district representation on the Collaboration Council ensured that the Children’s Agenda and its strategies aligned with MCPS’s Early Success Performance Plan and Our Call to Action. It was imperative that the district’s and county’s early

learning strategies reinforced each other. Beth Molesworth from DHHS explained: “The whole thing really depended on linking what was going on in the community with what was going on in the school system. That Kindergarten year was really the test for our early childcare system.”

Weast and his team were then able to use the fragmented nature of early learning services to their advantage, developing a

differentiated service delivery system that targeted children and families, based on their individual needs.

Develop a Differentiated Early Learning Service Delivery System That is Linked to K-12 Benchmarks

While the Action Agenda and Children’s Agenda helped build a common early learning vision for Montgomery County, there still remained the challenge of bringing together separate programs into a coherent service delivery system that could prepare students for Kindergarten and later school success.

When Weast first arrived to MCPS, only a fraction of young children living in poverty had access to PreK services, and those who did were largely served in the traditional half-day Head Start program.

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Judy Centers

Within three years, MCPS had significantly strengthened its Head Start programs, established its own PrK program, and secured two state-supported Judy Centers. In 2002, Senate Bill 793 allocated \$7 million dollars to create the Judith P. Hoyer Early Child Care and Education Enhancement Program, a statewide effort to help young children enter school ready to learn. Around Maryland, school-based Judith P. Hoyer Early Child Care and Family Education Centers – Judy Centers – offer comprehensive wraparound services to children birth to five and their families.

Montgomery County’s Judy Centers were located in Summit Hall Elementary School in Gaithersburg and Rolling Terrace Elementary School in Silver Spring.

Each involved more than a dozen community partners including Montgomery College, public libraries, city governments, DHHS, Collaboration Council, local nonprofits, and family- and center-based providers. Family literacy programs, adult English language and GED classes, early identification, health referrals, staff training, play groups, and after-school tutoring were just a few of the services available at the Judy Centers. Extensive and ongoing technical assistance toward attaining early childhood accreditation was also provided to community child care partners. The Gaithersburg Judy Center had even started an award-winning intergenerational program matching local senior citizens with young children. And because the Judy Centers were located

within elementary schools, families also had access to the full range of PreK and Head Start programs. Thus, the Judy Centers not only served as clearing-houses of early learning information and services, but they also acted as powerful integrating systems for schools and community partners.

The Bridge to Excellence Act, mandating that four-year-olds from low-income homes receive early learning services, also helped spur the significant increase in those services. So while some districts struggled to adapt federal and state early learning to their local context, Weast and Bacquie viewed the state mandates as an opportunity to target differentiated early learning services to families and children’s individual needs.

Today, in addition to the Judy Centers, MCPS offers a number of programs for three- and four-year-olds and their families, designed to serve different families and children’s needs. Those families living at or below the federal poverty line and in need of more specialized wraparound services were encouraged to enroll in MCPS’s Head Start programs. Families with higher incomes living at or just above poverty were served through the MCPS PreK program. Table 1 illustrates the characteristics of the children and families enrolled in each program.²⁰

Traditional and Full-Day Head Start

Many school districts face an incredibly complicated network of community Head Start providers – but not MCPS. The district was the main delegate agency for Head Start programs in Montgomery County,

Table 1 Family Characteristics by Program Type

	Half-Day Head Start	Full-Day Head Start	MCPS PreK
Children Enrolled	200	460	2563
Classrooms	11	24	97
Median Family Income	\$13,200	\$15,523	\$28,000
Special Education	7.7%	9.2%	4.1%
English as a Second Language	32.5%	63.5%	57.1%

operating under contract to the grantee agency, the Montgomery County Community Action Agency.²¹ That meant that all school-based Head Start teachers and staff were full MCPS employees, receiving the same compensation and participating in the same comprehensive professional development and evaluation system as all other MCPS teachers.

As the delegate agency, MCPS also has control over the curriculum and schedule. Though, the district must still abide by federal Head Start regulations, which at times can be challenging. Restrictive meal-serving and transportation regulations force MCPS to create idiosyncratic differences between the essentially similar Head Start and PreK programs. In the end, however, the positives far outweighed the negatives as MCPS has been able to blend local, state, and federal funds to create a differentiated system of traditional and Full-Day Head Start classrooms.

In its traditional Head Start program, MCPS served about 200 children in 11 classrooms. The program consisted of 3¼ hours of educational services and standard health and social services stipulated by Head Start regulations. In a typical day, children arrived to school around 9 a.m. and started off with a brief morning meeting, during which they went over the daily schedule and talked about the question of the day. This was followed by a 30-minute literacy block, which was broken down into 5 minutes of oral language and vocabulary development, 15 minutes of read-aloud or shared reading, and 10 minutes of small group literacy lessons. Children then spent the next 35 minutes in center time either painting, cutting, manipulating magnets or magnifying glasses, working with counting blocks, or engaging in dramatic play. The latter part of the day included outdoor time and math activities. Before going home children shared a family-style lunch

Children were involved in many different kinds of activities within subject area time blocks, providing opportunities for movement, song-singing, play, and verbal language development. As one Head Start teacher remarked, “We are all tired at the end of the day after learning so much, but we have fun doing it.”

together with their teacher and support staff.

MCPS also operated 21 full-day Head Start classrooms located in 18 of the neediest schools in the district. Because MCPS was the delegate agency, it was able to blend federal Title I funds with those from Head Start to serve 460 children in a full-day early learning program. The \$1 million annual investment was substantial and represented about 5 percent of MCPS’s overall Title I allocation. However, the marginal per-pupil cost for the full-day program over the traditional program was only \$3,720, bringing the total per pupil cost to approximately \$10,558, 40 percent of which was paid for using Title I funds.²² These funds covered the additional salaries for the full-day program, supplemental instructional materials, and paid for substitutes so teachers and para-educators could attend professional development sessions. Extra ancillary services associated with the full-day program were paid for using Head Start and MCPS funds.²³

In terms of curriculum, the 6¼ hours-per-day program significantly expanded the literacy, math, social skills, and center time in the traditional program. Children received an additional 35 minutes in both literacy and math lessons, and 30 minutes extending concepts learned in the math and literacy blocks.

While the schedules for the traditional and half-day programs were ambitious and perhaps even tiring for three- and four-year-olds, learning was not didactic skill drilling. Children were involved in many different kinds of activities within subject area time blocks, providing opportunities for movement, song-singing, play, and verbal language development. As one Head Start teacher remarked, “We are all tired at the end of the day after learning so much, but we have fun doing it.”

A recent evaluation of the full-day program demonstrated that MCPS's approach to early learning was paying off. Children made significantly larger gains in reading when compared to their peers in the half-day Head Start classes and more than doubled their reading scores by the end of the year.²⁴ The biggest benefits were for Latino/Hispanic students and those learning English.

MCPS PreK and Special Education PreK

The majority of MCPS's early learners attended the district-funded PreK program. By February 2010, the MCPS PreK program was providing more than 2,500 three- and four-year olds in with 2.5 hours of educational services, 180 days a year. The PreK schedule mirrored that of the traditional Head Start program, though less time was dedicated to centers and outdoor play.

While children with disabilities were in Head Start and MCPS PreK classrooms, the district also ran a number of special early learning classes for children with disabilities. The preschool special education program served 801 students with a range of disabilities, giving them the extra services they needed and opportunities to learn and interact with their non-disabled peers. In several designated collaboration sites, children received co-teaching with children in traditional PreK and Head Start classes. The program was further differentiated for higher and lower needs special education students. An intensive needs class was designed specifically for students with very specialized needs; class sizes were very small with only four to five students.

The ultimate goal of the PreKindergarten special education program was for all of its students to matriculate to a regular Kindergarten classroom, and the program's components were set up to make the transition as smooth as possible. Staff collaborated regularly with Head Start and PreK teachers on planning and shared instructional activities. They also used the same curriculum, and students were given the same assessments. As Deann Collins, Principal at Montgomery Knolls Elementary School, said, "The special education program is designed

for boys and girls with a range of disabilities. They are working on explicit goals in their IEP, but the curriculum and expectations are the same as for other students."

Aligning All Early Learning Programs

The Judy Centers, Head Start, and PreK programs were integral components to the Early Success Performance Plan, but bringing consistency—shared high expectations, common standards, and uniform high-quality pedagogy—across the distinct programs was a challenge. To ensure that all children received a similar foundation, all teachers used a common early learning math, literacy, science, social studies, art, music, physical education, and ESOL curricula outlined in MCPS's Curriculum Framework.

Detailed lesson plans that targeted school readiness indicators set forth in MCPS's Curriculum Framework were included in a common PreK-level instructional guide. The framework and instructional guide then relied partly on resources found in literacy and math programs. In this way, using the same curriculum and assessments facilitated PreK and Head Start teachers working together. The only real adjustments necessary were for the length of day.

Early learning teachers also had exactly the same resources. As MCPS built its early learning program, it convened a panel of teachers and support staff to compile a list of supplies every Head Start and PreK classroom needed. The result was a comprehensive early education classroom inventory, which had the added benefit of providing accurate start-up costs for each new classroom. Taken together, the uniform classroom materials, curricula, and assessments meant that Head Start and PreK teachers within schools and across MCPS could learn how each other taught a particular activity and easily apply it to their own teaching.

The end goal for all early learning programs was to prepare children for success in Kindergarten and beyond. MCPS was able to accomplish this by integrating its early learning curriculum and assessments with those of grades K-12.

Integrating Early Learning with K-12

Full-Day Kindergarten.

One of the first major actions Weast and his team took after developing Our Call to Action was to implement Full-Day Kindergarten in the district's highest-poverty schools. The rollout was accompanied by a system-wide audit and redesign of the Kindergarten curriculum to make it more rigorous and relevant.

But, not everyone was happy with the heightened expectations for Kindergarten. Some parents and teachers thought that Kindergarteners should only spend their time socializing and playing; others believed the curriculum was too demanding.²⁵ For the leaders in MCPS, reform was necessary if 80 percent of MCPS students were to be college-ready.

As Dale Fulton, the Associate Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction, said at the time, “We weren’t going to pay for mats anymore. Kindergarten wasn’t just going to be a place for kids to come and socialize. It was a place to come and build their skills and be prepared for more challenging curriculum.”²⁶

Resistance to the plan also came from parents residing in the wealthier parts of Montgomery County. Some felt it unfair that the Red Zone schools would get Full-Day Kindergarten first. Weast’s response: Parents were free to move to Red Zone schools’ attendance areas in order to receive Full-Day Kindergarten.²⁷ Eventually teachers and parents adjusted, and the full-day program was rapidly implemented across MCPS.

The move to a full-day program was key as Kindergarten came to play a crucial role in integrating early learning in Montgomery County with elementary, middle, and high school grades. Only one-third of Kindergarteners attended MCPS early learning programs, but by the end of the year all were expected to have reached the same benchmarks before entering First Grade. An aligned standards-based curriculum and diagnostic assessments

were two key components to making this happen. Monthly vertical school team meetings between PreK, Head Start, Kindergarten, and First through Fourth Grade teachers established communication links between programs and grades.

Aligned Standards-based Curriculum and Benchmarks.

The MCPS Curriculum Framework was not only aligned with state standards, but it also incorporated more rigorous national and international standards. It was designed to answer four critical questions based on Rick DuFour’s Professional Learning Communities at Work:²⁸

1. What do students need to know and be able to do?
2. How will we know if they haven’t learned it?
3. What will we do if they haven’t learned it?
4. What will we do if they already know it?

Instructional guides, materials, and textbooks helped teachers apply the curriculum to their students’ learning. For Kindergartners, reading and math were central in the curriculum with a 90-minute literacy block and two 30-minute math blocks during the day. By the end of Kindergarten, MCPS students were expected to be reading at Level 4, (see Figure 4) which includes demonstrating a host of reading skills such as identification of all the letters and their corresponding sounds, blending of one-syllable words, and even reading orally from a familiar text. These skills were translated into objective benchmarks throughout the year assessed by MCPS’s homegrown reading assessment (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Reading Benchmarks Kindergarten through Fifth Grade

Grade Level	End of First Quarter	End of Second Quarter	End of Third Quarter	End of Fourth Quarter
Kindergarten	(Not Applicable)	Level 1 (A)	Level 2-3 (B-C)	Level 4 (C)*
First Grade	Level 5-7 (D-E)	Level 8-11 (E-G)	Level 12-15 (H-I)	Level 16-17 (I)
Second Grade	Level J	Level K	Level L	Level M
Third Grade	Level M	Level N	Level O	Level P
Fourth Grade	Level Q-R		Level S-T	
Fifth Grade	Level T-U		Level V-W	

*Text level 6 has been identified as the stretch goal for the end of kindergarten, in accordance with the 7 Keys to College Readiness Advanced Reading in Grades K-12.

Integrated Diagnostic Assessments.

Since Weast and his team had set a new standard for literacy in Kindergarten, there were few available standard assessments for measuring student progress at this level, so the district developed its own reading assessment, the MCPS Assessment Program in Primary Reading (AP-PR), for students in PreK through Second Grade.

Mapped on to the Terra Nova standardized test taken by students at the end of Second Grade, the AP-PR included foundational reading and text-reading components. Foundational reading included oral language, letter identification, print concepts, phonemic awareness, hearing and recording sounds, and word recognition. Fluency, oral reading, and comprehension were assessed in the text-reading

component. Teachers administered the assessment three times a year in PreK, Kindergarten, First Grade, and Second Grade. End-of-year benchmarks for Grades K-2 were based on the assessment, and teachers tracked student progress.

A simple description of each benchmark illustrates the high expectations MCPS had for its youngest students.²⁹

- **Kindergarten Text Level 4 (C):** The book has simple three- and four-word sentences with many familiar words repeated throughout. Students are learning to read and write 25 to 30 familiar words, use beginning consonant sounds to read unknown words, accurately read the words as if talking, and retell the story in their own words.

- **Grade 1 Text Level 16 (I):** The book has longer simpler sentences and longer compound sentences that may include clauses and prepositional phrases. There are a wide range of familiar words and many words with endings and multiple syllables. Students are learning to self-monitor for meaning and sentence structure, apply phonetic skills to unknown words, self-correct errors, and gain speed during reading.
- **Grade 2 Text Level M:** The book has sentences of varying length, with some very long complex sentences containing introductory clauses, and nouns, verbs, or adjectives in a series. There is unfamiliar content supported or extended by illustrations, a variety of layouts in informational text, and a combination of graphics providing information that matches and extends the text, such as captions that provide important information to supplement the body of the text. Students are learning to think about what they already know about the topic or subject, preview the text before reading, and make predictions. They also self-monitor for meaning, apply strategies when meeting challenges while reading, and demonstrate literal, inferential, and critical comprehension orally and in writing after reading.

The common K-2 assessment connected MCPS's early learning programs with Third Grade outcomes in two ways. First, it was an observable link to what children needed to be able to do before entering Kindergarten in order to meet later elementary school benchmarks, which were connected to success in high school and college. Secondly, it gave teachers a common language to use when talking about student progress, facilitating communication and providing for smooth transitions between grade levels.

Vertical School-based Early Learning-Fourth Grade Team Meetings

Elementary school teachers in MCPS participated in monthly vertical school-based team meetings. Teachers and staff from Head Start and PreK programs sit down with their counterparts in Kindergarten through Fourth Grade to discuss curriculum, assessment data, instructional strategies,

and individual students. Teachers find the meetings to be a powerful way to connect and learn from their colleagues. One Second Grade teacher commented on the benefit of vertical team meetings: "The vertical meetings are really neat. You get to see what everyone is doing at their grade level. So, you can see how you can accelerate in your class and help those kids who don't quite have it yet."

The meetings also developed a sense of shared accountability. As Montgomery Knolls Principal Deann Collins explained:

We meet as a staff, but sit in vertical teams. We look at data, and we talk about our kids and have a focus. This year we have been focusing on writing and have a study group focus. We talk about what does it look like in preschool and what should it look like by Third Grade. The philosophy here is it doesn't matter what grade you teach, we're all responsible for the kids.

Develop Strong School-Family Partnerships.

To Bacquie and her team in Early Childhood Programs and Services, strong family partnerships were at the core of the Early Success Performance Plan. The relationship often started during MCPS's first recruitment efforts to register children for its Head Start and PreK classrooms. But, while MCPS has added hundreds of slots in the last few years, a recent report put the number of eligible but unserved four-year-olds in the county at 1,300.³⁰ It is a problem prevalent in early learning across the country—finding children to fill open seats in Head Start and PreK classrooms.

Thus, Bacquie and her staff viewed recruitment and registration as one of their most important jobs as early learning educators. If children were not in the classrooms, they couldn't get the services they needed. Recruitment went on year-round, incorporated a team approach with other early childhood stakeholder agencies, and started even before birth. Referrals from Judy Centers, churches, community centers, pediatricians, and parent groups helped recruit families who might have missed one of the hundreds of

community outreach efforts that the Early Childhood staff held each year. The recruitment strategy was so detailed that Bacquie and her staff had identified hundreds of poster locations to advertise for early learning informational meetings, the specific staff group responsible for putting up the poster, and when they were to do it.

Once registered, a family service worker was available to the family to guide them through the process and refer them to additional community services. The service worker along with the classroom teacher also helped develop a Family Partnership Agreement, which included a strengths and needs assessment and incorporated personal goals. The Family Partnership Agreement plan helped address individual family needs before the child even entered the classroom.

When school started, family service workers and teachers followed up with phone contacts and home visits. A typical month found family service workers and related staff making 200 home visits, 1,000 phone contacts, and 300 direct contacts at school or conferences. In the process, nearly 1,000 referrals were made to community services, many of which were emergency interventions dealing with food, clothing, and housing.

Direct contact with families and caregivers was accompanied by parents' guides, tool kits, and newsletters published in six different languages.

One colorful easy-to-read guide, "Getting Ready for Kindergarten: What Parents Can Do," offered parents suggestions for learning activities to do with their children to develop oral language and reading skills. Another, "A Parent's Guide to Kindergarten Curriculum," presented learning objectives for seven subjects in Kindergarten and guided parents

to additional resources. Parent tool kits included the DHHS's, "Help Me Grow" prenatal packet, and MCPS's "PAL Kits," which included books, a CD of sing-along songs, a zippered pouch for medical documents, and helpful hints for new parents.

There were also opportunities for parents to get involved in shared governance, program planning, and parent training. Parent representatives on the MCPS Head Start/PreK Policy Council helped

arrange guest speakers, plan family outings and picnics, and prepare the budget for the parent activity fund. In addition, a district-wide Parent Advisory Council, established through the Department of Family and Community Partnerships, composed of 30 parents serving on two-year terms, gave MCPS feedback on how to improve its communication with parents with the goal of increasing engagement and also facilitated parent advocacy trainings held on a regular basis throughout the year.

By better engaging families in the early learning of their children, MCPS was able to

reinforce the classroom learning activities and open a clear

communication channel between the school and home. The idea was not to push the responsibility of teaching on to the parents, but to identify the strengths and challenges of each child by building a holistic perspective of his or her learning. The Family Partnership Agreement plans, parents' guides, and early learning tool kits helped facilitate such relationships by giving parents and teachers a common language and structure in which to learn from each other.

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LESSON 4: Balance teacher support and accountability to ensure effective and consistent implementation.

With a clear and compelling goal of 80 percent college-ready, a comprehensive early learning strategy integrated with the district-wide Our Call to Action, and aligned programs and services, MCPS was poised for success. But, the most important lesson – where the rubber meets the road – remained. Meeting ambitious performance targets and closing the achievement gap meant changing people’s behavior, especially in early learning.

Often, discussions around getting teachers to change center on accountability measures – firing, tenure promotion, walkthroughs, evaluations, and reviews of standardized assessment scores. Not surprisingly, Weast, Bacquie, and their leadership teams did things differently. In MCPS, it was first about supporting the professionalism of all teachers, support staff, and administrators. Ambitious professional development opportunities, a comprehensive peer assistance and review system, and access to high-quality curriculum and materials formed the foundation of a professional learning community in every school in MCPS.

MCPS was not without its accountability systems. Underperforming teachers and support staff were quickly placed on improvement plans, which could ultimately lead to dismissal if progress was not made. Monitoring from the Office of School Performance, regular administrative monitoring visits, teacher team meetings, and an expectation to use data to drive instruction also held teachers accountable for their students’ learning. Thus, there was a balance of support and accountability that ensured the Early Success Performance Plan and its corresponding programs and services would be implemented with fidelity.

Supporting the Professionalism of Early Learning Teachers

Every early learning teacher, regardless of program, was employed as a regular MCPS teacher, receiving the same pay, benefits, and professional development opportunities as any other teacher in the district. Thus, two teachers with the same years of experience and level of education, one a high school AP chemistry teacher showing her students how to extract DNA from a banana, another a full-day Head Start teacher singing with 15 four-year-olds about the letter “B”, received the same compensation. More importantly, the AP chemistry teacher, the Head Start teacher, and all other MCPS teachers participated in the district’s Teacher Professional Growth System (TPGS).

Administered by a joint union/district team, the TPGS incorporated formal evaluations, professional development plans, teacher observations, courses, mentoring, and staff development teachers. In their first two years, beginning early learning teachers were formally evaluated by their principals and peer assistance and review consulting teachers; tenured teachers entered a multiyear cycle that included formal evaluations and professional development plans. The system also integrated school-based staff development teachers, who helped coordinate professional development, monitor professional development plans, and guide teachers to resources.

From Early Childhood Programs and Services, Bacquie’s team of three instructional specialists partnered with the staff development teachers and consulting teachers to provide early learning expertise. Thus, a new early learning teacher entering MCPS had an assigned consulting teacher, and no less than six experts to turn to for help, as well as on-site staff developers and reading specialists. In addition, TPGS ensured teachers had time to learn from their peers. Funding for permanent substitute teachers

at every school facilitated ongoing peer-to-peer classroom observations.

At the same time, teachers had access to ambitious and comprehensive professional development courses. All MCPS teachers were required to go through the 36-hour Skillful Teacher training. Designed by the educational consulting group Research for Better Teaching, the Skillful Teacher program instilled a common understanding of high-quality teaching across all grades and subjects in the district, while also incorporating an early learning section specific to PreK, Head Start, and Kindergarten teachers. One of its main components was establishing the notion that academic ability was not set, but could grow depending on teacher expectations. As one teacher said about the program:³¹ “I think it had a huge impact...just the whole theory about effort and us switching to believe that you are not just smart because you were born smart.” As the Skillful Teacher program set a strong common foundation for quality teaching in the district, more specialized professional development opportunities met the needs of MCPS’s English Language Learners.

Research shows that speaking more than one language is an asset for learning.³² But, often districts treat non-English speakers as if they are at a disadvantage. In MCPS, early learning teachers were trained to build off young children’s home language through a cooperative model for English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) instruction.

In Head Start and MPCPS PreK classrooms, ESOL-specific staff development teachers worked in collaboration with classroom teachers to design individualized student learning objectives to meet curriculum standards. Together, they used research-based ESOL curriculum “blueprints” to divide content into four thematic units, each aligned with standards outlined in the MCPS Curriculum Framework. The blueprints also give guidelines for

assessing students’ oral language development. At the Kindergarten level, ESOL staff development teachers continued to co-plan and team-teach with the regular classroom teacher using the ESOL curriculum blueprints. For students with specific language acquisition needs, ESOL teachers also conducted individual pullout sessions.

Hold Early Learning Teachers Accountable for Student Learning

While early learning and Kindergarten teachers were treated respectfully and offered professional support, MCPS also held them accountable for their students’ learning through a peer assistance and review (PAR) program, focus on data-driven instruction, and a strong

Office of School Performance.

All new teachers and struggling veteran teachers were required to participate in the PAR program. Governed by a joint union/district panel, the PAR program assigned each teacher an expert consulting teacher. The consulting teacher supported and observed teachers over the school year, and together with the school principal made one of four recommendations to

the PAR panel, which made the final employment decision. The panel could recommend teachers for continued employment, another year of PAR support, nonrenewal for nontenured teachers, or dismissal for tenured teachers.

At the same time, relentless focus on data and regular school team meetings focused teachers on illustrating and explaining their students’ progress on standards and benchmarks. Teachers used advanced reading running record monitoring and math multiple measures reports to analyze student progress on PreK and Kindergarten indicators. Results were color-coded and aggregated so individual trouble areas and class-wide trends were easy to spot. The incentives to stay up-to-date on assessment and reporting were strong.

As one teacher said about the program: “I think it had a huge impact...just the whole theory about effort and us switching to believe that you are not just smart because you were born smart.”

Early learning and Kindergarten teachers were expected to keep their plan-books out and accessible along with the class data monitoring sheets, so that a principal could walk in and find evidence of data-driven instruction at any time of the day. But, weekly team meetings proved to be the strongest accountability mechanism influencing Head Start, PreK, and Kindergarten teachers. As one Kindergarten teacher said: “There is an agenda for every meeting. It’s not just about your own students, but teachers could tell you where other students are at.”

And the pressure to perform was not just on teachers. In the beginning of the year, the MCPS Office of School Performance established a monitoring calendar telling principals when they were expected to submit regular student performance reports. These were augmented by supervisory visits from community superintendents and directors of school performance.

With a balance of support and accountability, Head Start and PreK teachers in MCPS were able to meet the increased expectations articulated by the Early Success Performance Plan and the 80 percent college-ready goal. Most importantly, MCPS’s comprehensive professional development and accountability system helped integrate early learning with K-12 education. Head Start and PreK teachers were given the same supports as any other teacher in the district – and held to the same high expectations. Essentially, the development of early learning teachers was fully embedded in the larger K-12 system. The result was an integrated PreK through high school experience in which students continually exceeded the ambitious targets set before them each year.



LESSON 5: Innovate and monitor for continuous improvement.

To meet the challenges of an increasingly diverse society and demanding labor market, established systems and structures needed to be improved and new innovations implemented. Technological systems to improve teaching and learning, such as online integrated curriculum platform, just-in-time professional development, and curriculum archives were already being rolled out across MCPS starting with Kindergarten. Yet, these structural and systemic innovations were not enough. The efficacy of current efforts needed to be monitored and benchmarks revised. It was truly a never-ending process of continuous improvement.

One innovative collaboration that represented the future of cross-organizational cooperation in MCPS was the Kennedy Cluster Project, an inter-agency collaboration involving five MCPS schools, Montgomery County DHHS, and after school and summer programs. Named after the geographic attendance area that fed into John F. Kennedy High School, the collaboration's sole focus was on closing the achievement gap between African-American and white students.

The collaboration began with the Kennedy Cluster Project Workgroup, established in 2007 with backing of the County Council and Board of Education. After developing mission and vision statements, the group conducted research, held focus groups, and created an inventory of service providers operating in the Kennedy Cluster. Eventually a list of school-based, out-of-school-time, and collaborative strategies demonstrated to close the achievement gap were compiled.

Weast discussed the importance of innovative collaborative projects like the Kennedy Cluster:

Schools in and of themselves, while important, are still only 10 percent of a child's time. What else is going on in the ethos? How can we make the community less reactive? We went into neighborhoods and started to look at all the reactive conditions. We found problems with health, transportation, recreation, no protocols, no sharing of information. The difference between a rich community and a poor community is the number of silos. Every silo had its own database, its own protocol. We needed to break down the silos.

Based on the work, ten "low-hanging" and six "big-idea" recommendations were proposed. Several of the low-hanging recommendations have already been implemented, including the development of an inter-agency legal memorandum of understanding (MOU) between MCPS and DHHS to share information. Long-term big ideas include the creation of a parent outreach coordinator position at each school in the project, and Voluntary Universal Preschool for all three- and four-year-olds in the targeted area. Several years ago, state legislators asked the Maryland State Department of Education and its Division of Early Childhood Development to convene a Preschool For All Task Force. The Task

Force concluded that statewide Voluntary Universal Preschool was feasible, developed ten benchmarks for quality early learning programs, and proposed a model for delivering services that partnered school districts with early education providers.

The recession hit and plans to implement the model were delayed, although a pilot program testing the Task Force’s recommendations operates at 11 sites across the state. MCPS had to turn the fragmented nature of early learning on its head to deliver high-quality services to its young children. State-wide expansion of the Preschool For All pilot program could help bring greater coordination within the complex early learning landscape in Montgomery County and Maryland.

Use Technology to Support Early Learning Instruction.

MCPS has been a first-mover in leveraging technology to improve teaching and student learning. Its data warehousing Instructional Management System and handheld wireless reading assessment tool, Reading 3D, were two early efforts that have been well-documented.³³

The district has continued blazing a trail for teacher-friendly technology with its development of a comprehensive online integrated curriculum and lesson-planning platform. The one-stop online platform contained everything a teacher needed to

plan a lesson aligned with state standards. Drop-down menus linking benchmarks to specific classroom activities and exemplary sample lessons meant teachers did not have to reinvent the wheel of good instruction. Eventually, MCPS will add videos of the lessons being taught so teachers can get “just-in-time” and timely professional development the night before teaching the lesson themselves.

Keep Monitoring and Improving.

Weast quotes actress and novelist Carrie Fisher whenever anyone suggested that the district could take a break from its hard work: “There is no point at which you can say, ‘Well, I’m successful now. I might as well take a nap.’” In fact, MCPS is constantly in the process of revising its benchmarks and asking for more from its teachers, principals, students, parents, and business community. After initially setting the Kindergarten reading benchmark to text Level 3, MCPS revised it to text Level 4 with a stretch goal of Level 6. Payoffs were evident in Third and Fifth Grade reading achievement. Students reading proficient or above were steadily increasing. However, as Figures 5 and 6 show, there was still a sizable gap between students of different racial groups – even though that gap had decreased by more than 29 and 24 percentage points in Third and Fifth Grade, respectively. As Weast always says:

“The work is never finished.”

Figure 5: MCPS Third Graders Reading Proficient or Above on the Maryland State Assessment³⁴

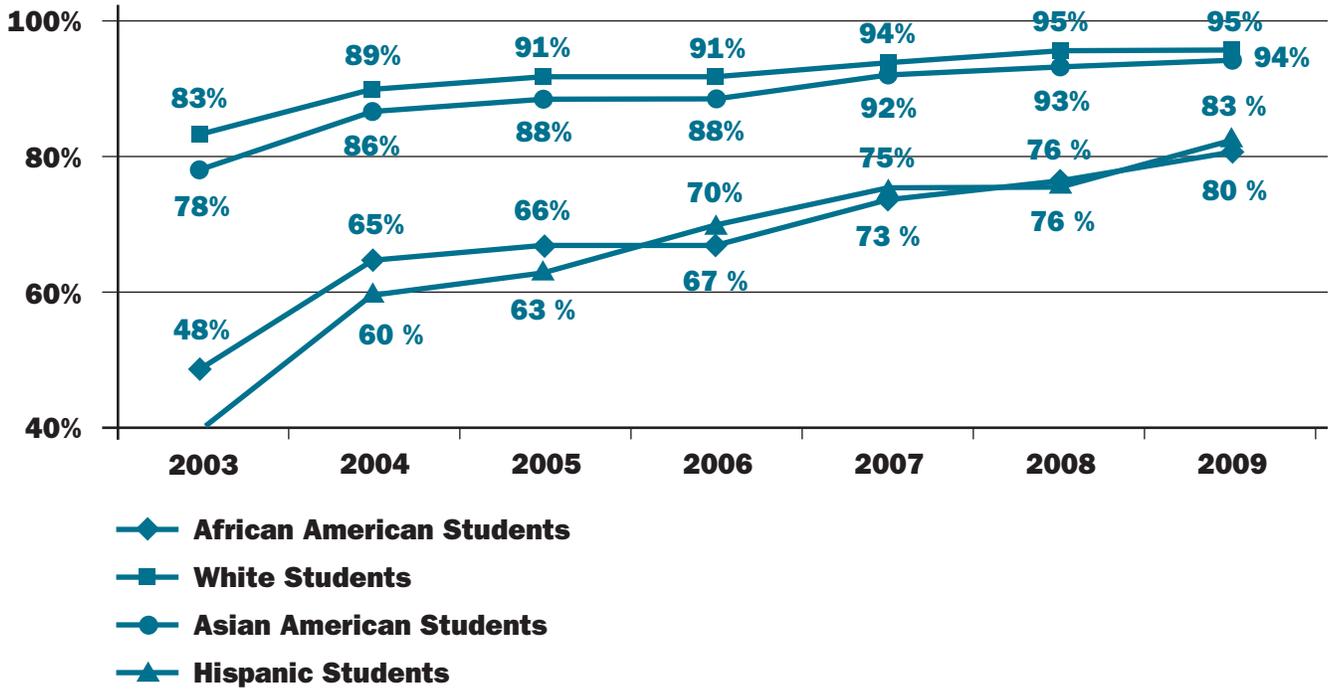
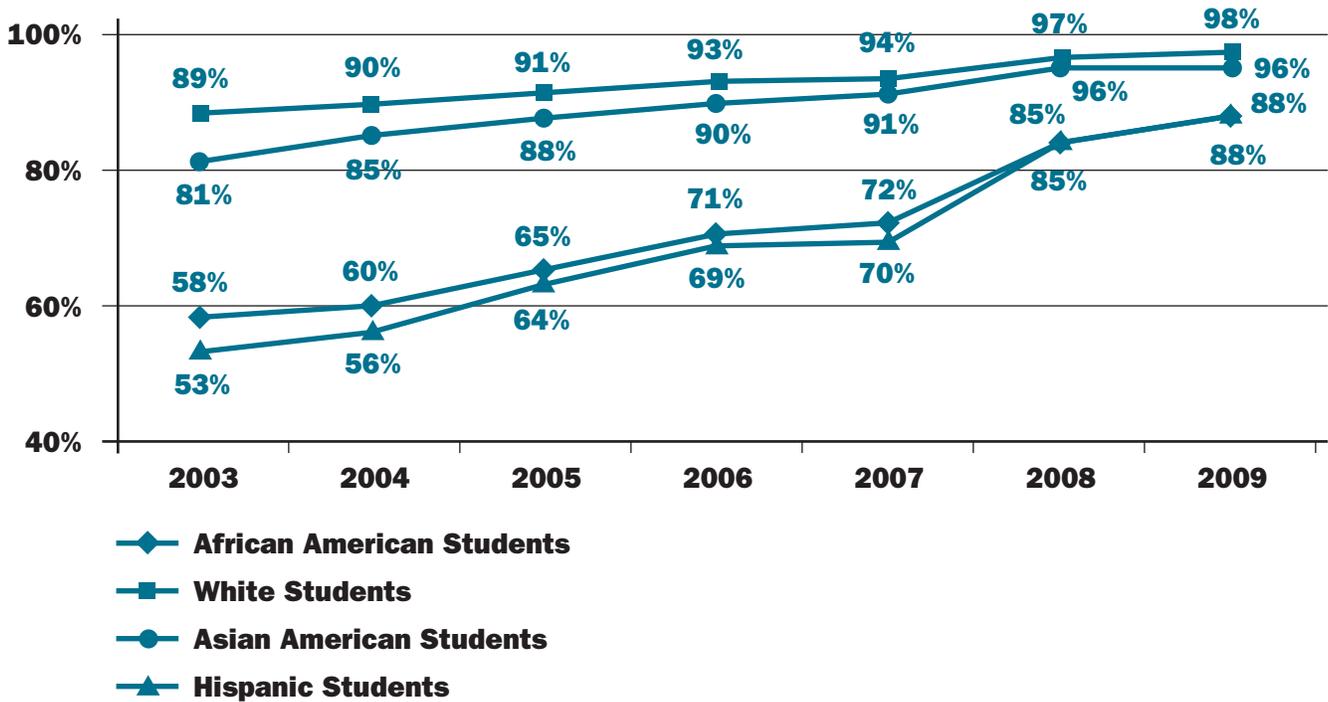


Figure 6: Percentage of MCPS Fifth Graders Reading Proficient or Above on the Maryland State Assessment³⁵



Enduring Challenges and Opportunities

For school districts across the country, the story of early learning in MCPS offers important lessons on developing a comprehensive and integrated early learning strategy. MCPS began with a clear and compelling goal of 80 percent college-ready, which set a clear North Star and disabled philosophical arguments about what was appropriate for PreK and Kindergarten students.

This formed the foundation for the Early Success Performance Plan, MCPS's comprehensive early learning strategy that linked directly to the district-wide Our Call to Action and Seven Keys to College Readiness. Programs and services from PreK to Grade 12 were aligned to accomplish the goal of 80 percent college-ready, and MCPS balanced professional development with accountability to ensure that early learning teachers knew what to do and how to do it. Today, MCPS continues to innovate with new systems and monitor its progress. To foster continuing improvement and high expectations, MCPS revises its targets as they are achieved.

These lessons extend beyond the boundaries of the school district. Weast's successful navigation of the complex landscape of early learning sheds light on the roles that states and the federal government can play in helping the youngest learners prepare for school and career excellence. States can encourage cross-sharing of information, program coordination, and rapid expansion of services through innovative early learning legislation. In addition, the federal government can help support high quality early learning and its integration into K-12 education by explicitly incorporating early learning in the funding and professional development sections of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA).

The state of Maryland took leadership in early learning, passing legislation to establish Judy Centers across the state and require districts to provide the neediest families with early education services. As the MCPS early learning story illustrates, the Judy Centers facilitated interagency collaboration by providing a structure for communication among early learning leaders from multiple groups. At the same time, Maryland's statute that all four-year-olds living at or below 185 percent of the federal poverty level be provided early learning services moved the state closer to making Voluntary Universal PreK a reality.

With reauthorization of ESEA approaching, the opportunity to enhance early education has never been better. In terms of funding, Weast and MCPS made the tough choice of investing Title I dollars to support full day Head Start and the professional development of its early learning teachers. Additional federal funding set aside specifically for three- and four-year-olds would ensure that resources are targeted in high impact early learning programs.

Finally, the MCPS story demonstrates the power of embedding early learning in larger school reform efforts. Because MCPS was the main coordinating agency for the county's Head Start and PreK programs, all early learning teachers received the same professional development, compensation, and respect as any other teacher in the district. They were also held – and held their students – to the same high expectations. The federal government can help replicate MCPS's success in early learning by specifically mentioning early learning teachers in the professional development and training sections of the ESEA.

Furthermore, efforts around accountability and assessment should be carefully adapted to fit the early education context. As MCPS showed with its own reading assessment, early education teachers can and must use data to improve their teaching and students' learning.

The evidence is clear. High-quality early learning integrated into the K-12 education continuum is vital to raising critical elementary reading skills, narrowing the entrenched achievement gap, and preparing all students for college and career success. Investments in early learning have the highest rates of return, and MCPS has shown us how to spend those resources wisely by sustaining early learning investments with quality elementary education.

With greater commitments and support from states and the federal government, more local communities can meet the needs of diverse populations, build a quality early education workforce, improve student performance and effectively reform publicly funded education for the 21st Century.

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Glossary of Programs, Plans, and Initiatives

Assessment Program in Primary Reading (AP-PR): Standards-based reading assessment developed by MCPS for PreK through Fifth Grade.

Children’s Agenda: Seven actionable goals focused on children, youth, and families in Montgomery County crafted by county leaders.

Early Success Performance Plan: Closing the Opportunity Gap for Our Youngest Learners: MCPS’s comprehensive early learning strategy developed over the 2000-2001 school year. It linked Third Grade reading to quality early learning opportunities and identified the need for Full-Day Kindergarten.

Kennedy Cluster Project: A formal partnership between after-school and summer programs, a health center, three elementary schools, a middle school, and John F. Kennedy High School aimed at narrowing the achievement gap.

Montgomery County Collaboration Council for Children, Youth, and Families: The Local Management Boards responsible for interagency collaboration around early learning. It was composed of representatives from the local Health and Human Services Department, Department of Juvenile Services, public school system, Department of Social Services, and other public and private organizations.

Montgomery County Early Care and Education Congress (MCECEC): County-wide partnership between 20 public and private organizations with a focus on early learning.

Montgomery County Early Childhood Initiative Comprehensive Plan: Plan developed in the late 1990s that set the vision for early learning in Montgomery County.

Our Call to Action: Raising the Bar and Closing the Gap: MCPS’s comprehensive strategic plan developed in 1999. It set specific academic benchmarks and six concrete steps to achieve the goals.

Seven Keys to College Readiness: Seven research-based benchmarks linking early learning outcomes to college readiness, outlined in Our Call to Action.

Teacher Professional Growth System (TPGS): Comprehensive professional development and evaluation system for all teachers in MCPS. It incorporates peer assistance and review, job-embedded professional development, and staff development teachers.

Endnotes

- 1 U.S. Department of Education, (2010). *Institute for Education Sciences National Center for Educational Statistics*, “NAEP Data Explorer.” Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/naepdata/report.aspx>.
- 2 On the NAEP, in Fourth, Eighth, and Twelfth Grades, in all 50 states and the nation, there are large average performance differences – achievement gaps – in reading and math between African American and Latino/Hispanic students and their white counterparts and subsidized lunch-eligible students and their non-eligible peers. For example, in 2007 about 20 percent of African American and Latino/Hispanic Fourth Graders in Massachusetts were proficient or advanced in reading according to the NAEP. On the same test, 75 percent of white and 78 percent of Asian American students in the state scored proficient or advanced – an achievement gap of more than 50 percentage points. These gaps also follow students as they enter and graduate from college. Of young adults in the United States, 42 percent of whites enroll in college compared with 32 percent of African Americans and 23.5 percent of Latinos/Hispanics (Fox, Connolly & Snyder, 2005). Six years after enrolling in college 55 percent of white and Asian American students graduated from college, while only 40 percent of Latino/Hispanic and 38 percent of African American students did so in the same period (U.S. General Accounting Office, 2003). See Fox, M.A., Connolly, B.A. & Snyder, T.D. (2005). Youth indicators: Trends in the well-being of American youth. *National Center for Educational Statistics, U.S. Department of Education*. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2005/2005050.pdf>; Swanson, C.B. (2004). Who graduates? Who doesn't? A statistical portrait of public high school graduation, Class of 2001. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute; U.S. Department of Education. (2009). Grade 4 NAEP national results. Institute of Education Sciences. Retrieved from http://nationsreportcard.gov/math_2009/gr4_national.asp; U.S. Department of Education. (2009). NAEP state comparisons. Institute of Education Sciences. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard>; U.S. General Accounting Office (2003). College completion: Additional efforts could help education with its completion goals. US General Accounting Office, No. GAO-03-568. Retrieved from <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d03568.pdf>.
- 3 MCPS's successes have been well documented in Harvard University and Harvard Business School case studies, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the book, *Leading for Equity*, by Harvard professors Stacey Childress and David Thomas, and education writer Denis Doyle. Cite HBS and PELP case studies, and *Leading for Equity* book. See Childress, S., Doyle, D.P. & Thomas, D. (2009). *Leading for Equity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press; Childress, S. & Goldin, A. (2009). The turnaround at highland elementary school. *Harvard University Public Education Leadership Project*. Boston: Harvard Business Press; Mapp, K., Thomas, D., Cheek Clayton, T. “Race, Accountability, and the Achievement Gap (A),” Case PEL-043 (Boston: Harvard Business School, 2006); Mapp, K., Thomas, D., Cheek Clayton, T. “Race, Accountability, and the Achievement Gap (B),” Case PEL-044 (Boston: Harvard Business School, 2006).
- 4 “2010 Maryland Report Card - Assessments: Montgomery County,” Maryland State Department of Education, <http://mdreportcard.org/Assessments.aspx>; “Graduation: Montgomery County,” in 2010 Maryland State Report Card, Maryland State Department of Education, <http://www.mdreportcard.org/Graduation.aspx>?
- 5 Based upon student reports. See: “Graduation: Montgomery County 2009 Grade 12 Documented Decision,” in 2010 Maryland State Report Card, Maryland State Department of Education, <http://www.mdreportcard.org/StatDisplay.aspx>.
- 6 Rolnick, A. & Grunewald, R. “Early Childhood Development: Economic Development with a High Public Return,” *Fedgazette* (March 2003), <http://www.minneapolisfed.org/pubs/fedgaz/03-03/earlychild.cfm>, accessed July 2008; W. Steven Barnett, Benefit-cost Analysis of Preschool Education: Findings from a 25-year follow-up,” *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 63, No. 4 (1993): 25–50.
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