

Annual Forum October 7, 2004

PK - 3: A Strategy to End the Need for Social Promotion and Improve Academic Achievement

2004 Annual Forum Transcript

Scandinavia House, New York City

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PK - 3 in a School District: Montgomery County, MD

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Janine Bacquie, Director of the Division of Early Childhood Programs and Services for Montgomery County, Maryland

RACHEL JONES: Let's move now to Janine Bacquie. Janine is currently the Director of the Division of Early Childhood Programs and Services for Montgomery County Public Schools in Rockville, Maryland. She has an undergraduate degree in Early Childhood and Special Education from the University of Maryland at College Park and a graduate degree in Elementary Education Administration and Supervision from Bowie State University.

As Director she advocates for early childhood education reform and helps to shape programs and policies on both a local and national level which will work to ensure a strong start for our youngest learners.

Prior to serving in Montgomery County Public Schools Ms. Bacquie served as Early Childhood Supervisor, Assistant Principal, Coordinator and classroom teacher for PK through Grade 2 in Prince George's County Public Schools.

I think it's a wonderful transition to go from Leonard Golubchick to Janine Bacquie because we've been talking about an individual school and its efforts to work with students. We're now going to move to the county level and look at what Montgomery County, Maryland is doing. I've lived in D.C. for the past 10 years, and I know that Montgomery County has often been pointed to as a district that has taken that extra effort and has a little bit more insight into this issue than others.

So I'm eager to learn more about what Janine is going to tell us.

JANINE BACQUIE: I'm excited to talk about early childhood reform in Montgomery County. Over the past several years there have been a number of reform efforts that have surrounded early childhood education. I'd just like to talk for a brief second about what the reform has included.

Early success is really the focus of what I'm going to talk about today. But the early childhood reform has been a part of the ongoing school system reform which has included a standards-based curriculum for PK through Grade 2 ensuring a quality workforce with ongoing professional development and training for teachers.

Our system of shared accountability includes an infrastructure of a data management system that is very state of the art. We're able to take assessment data from PK through grade 12 and really have the assessment data ready to use at the county administration level and even at the level of the classroom for the teacher to be able to make decisions in terms the day-to-day teaching of our students. And we've spent an awful lot of time and energy with family community partnerships specifically in early childhood education, outreach to the communities, to our families and working in conjunction with other public and private agencies to serve the needs of the youngest learners.

I'm going to talk about **our early success performance plan** - and it's pretty comprehensive. I'm trying to condense it into just a few minutes here. But we serve approximately 2,600 students in our PK and Head Start programs, and those are really targeted primarily at low income families -

children who are impacted by poverty, and English language learners. Out of that group of 2,600 children we have about 1,000 who are identified as receiving ESOL services, and I would say probably about 600 of those students are Spanish-speaking and then the other three or four hundred represent families from about 48 different countries. So we have a very, very diverse group of children.

In addition to the impact of the poverty, mobility is also an issue for our three- and four-year-old students. Because of the impact of poverty we have a lot of families moving very frequently, and so we're really trying to make sure that we are able to provide services for them and to link them to the closest services once they move.

The early success performance plan is very comprehensive. It's been in place for several years, and there is a county-wide focus on early childhood education. The reform efforts that have moved forward have really been under the leadership of the superintendent Dr. Weast, but there's been full support from the county council, the county executive, and many other community and ethnic groups have really come together and shored up the support for the early success plan.

The plan includes a standards based curriculum beginning with PK. The PK-3 curriculum and assessments are aligned and we're able to track the student's progress through the data collection to make sure that they're prepared for the next grade level. We're starting really early with four-year-olds, but we also target children from birth in some of our community partnerships.

The professional development for teachers has been ongoing. We took a look at some of the findings of the National Reading Panel in terms of early literacy skills and other skills we knew children needed to master in order to be successful and be on grade level by Grade 3 in reading. So we really took a look at Phonemic awareness, phonological awareness, alphabetic principle and especially the oral language development because there's a lot of research about oral language as a predictor for later achievement.

So we continue to provide the training for our teachers. We have diagnostic assessments that look at the foundational skills and try to monitor the progress of students. This year we are in the process of piloting a new PK assessment which is going through a validity and reliability study. But we've really been able to take a look at those essential foundational skills of our students when they enter PK and then look at where they are by the time they exit at the end of the year to be sure that they are ready to begin kindergarten.

We know that children in poverty may enter kindergarten with a vocabulary of, say, 500 words or less, as opposed to other children from higher income families who may enter with vocabularies of 7,500 words. So, how can we start to close that gap and make sure that when they enter kindergarten they're fully prepared and they're on an even playing field with other children who are not impacted by poverty?

The instructional management system has been the driving force behind a lot of what's happening in the classrooms. The teachers have received extensive training surrounding the assessments. And when you assess students in certain skills based on specific score ranges it helps you to make decisions about what skills you need to teach or to re-teach so that children can master those skills by the end of the year.

The system gives teachers hands on information that's at their fingertips in real time so they can go back and continue to make decisions about the ongoing instruction from day to day. The Policy Council has done extensive outreach to bring the parents into the process, not only through PK and Head Start, but through different ethnic communities. We have so many different countries represented that our ESOL department has been working double time to make sure that all of the materials and information going out to parents are translated into all of the different languages and dialects. We want to make sure that especially the information about early literacy skills are translated in all of these different languages and that they're really at a level for children to read.

We started with a full-day kindergarten initiative in 2000, and each year we continue to add 17 schools. We're going to meet a "bridge to excellence" mandate in the state of Maryland. Right now

we have 73 schools that offer full-day kindergarten. We have smaller class sizes in kindergarten and First and Second grade in the schools that are highly impacted, and we offer extended learning opportunities, such as summer programs or tutorials after school, in the schools that are most impacted.

You can take a look here at [some of the results of the full-day kindergarten study](#). We revised the curriculum in kindergarten, making sure that it had a strong literacy focus based on what the research has said about what children need to master. And you'll notice here that our half-day and full-day kindergarten students have made significant progress as a result of the revised curriculum. You can see that percentages of students who are at the text reading benchmark level have increased for both half-day and full-day students.

Our longitudinal study in Montgomery County has shown that children who had a PK and Head Start experience fared better than those who did not. I'm going to just quickly move through the slides and you can see that all students made progress.

Here we see the [text reading gains made by our targeted students](#) in the study. We started from the year 2000 so we were able to track those students who participated in this early intervention. You can see here each different ethnic group - Asian, Hispanic, white, African-American - each made significant progress, with African-American and Hispanic having the highest levels of increase. We can [go on to the next one](#).

More recently we've been able to correlate the progress of the students in that full-day Kindergarten initiative with the Third Grade Maryland State assessment scores. And, again, you can see results from the targeted schools, and you can see the district wide scores in math as well. On to [the next slide](#).

You can also notice here that the African-American and Hispanic students have made the highest gains. Okay, there are [four things that we have learned in Montgomery County](#). More time is critical, but by 2007 all of our kindergarten students will be in full-day programs in the state of Maryland.

There are many factors influencing student progress. How the time in school is spent is important. Our PK Head Start programs are about three hours and 15 minutes, so we have to maximize that instructional time. Consistent time in the same school matters, and we're also taking a look at the impact of mobility. And the time before kindergarten is decisive. Our longitudinal studies in Montgomery County have shown that it's very important for children to have good learning opportunities before they enter kindergarten. If they do, they will continue to make progress and they'll be on reading grade level by Grade Three.

I think my time is finished. But I will conclude by reiterating that there's support for early intervention which proves it to be effective with our students in every single ethnic group.

RACHEL JONES: With my journalistic ear what I'm hearing so far from the first two presentations, and correct me if I'm wrong, is that the needs of immigrant children may be driving this discussion about making sure that the time before kindergarten is well spent and that children are prepared. Let me ask you very quickly - Montgomery County obviously is known as one of the wealthiest counties overall in the country. Is that what has made this effort possible in Montgomery County? The fact that there are perhaps more educated, affluent people who might be supportive of this kind of initiative?

JANINE BACQUIE: That may be. But I think that within the county we still had to make some difficult decisions about how resources would be used. Early childhood programs were really made a priority, therefore funds were diverted to support early childhood initiatives. But Montgomery County also is very diverse. There is increasing immigration and it's sort of known as a place where a lot of immigrants want to move because they know the school system is very good. And so when you start to look at the changing demographics, and you start to look at the needs of the students who are coming in, I think that's also been a large driving force.