

Education Reform Series
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Lessons in Early Learning: Building an Integrated Pre-K-12 System in Montgomery County Public Schools

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Once we fixed the system,
the kids were suddenly okay.
Same kids, just a different system.
And we started at the beginning
of the education value-chain –
early learning.

Superintendent Jerry Weast,
Montgomery County Public Schools

90%

Almost 90 percent of kindergarteners enter first grade with essential early literacy skills

88%

Nearly 88 percent of third graders read proficiently

90%

About 90 percent of 12th graders graduate from high school

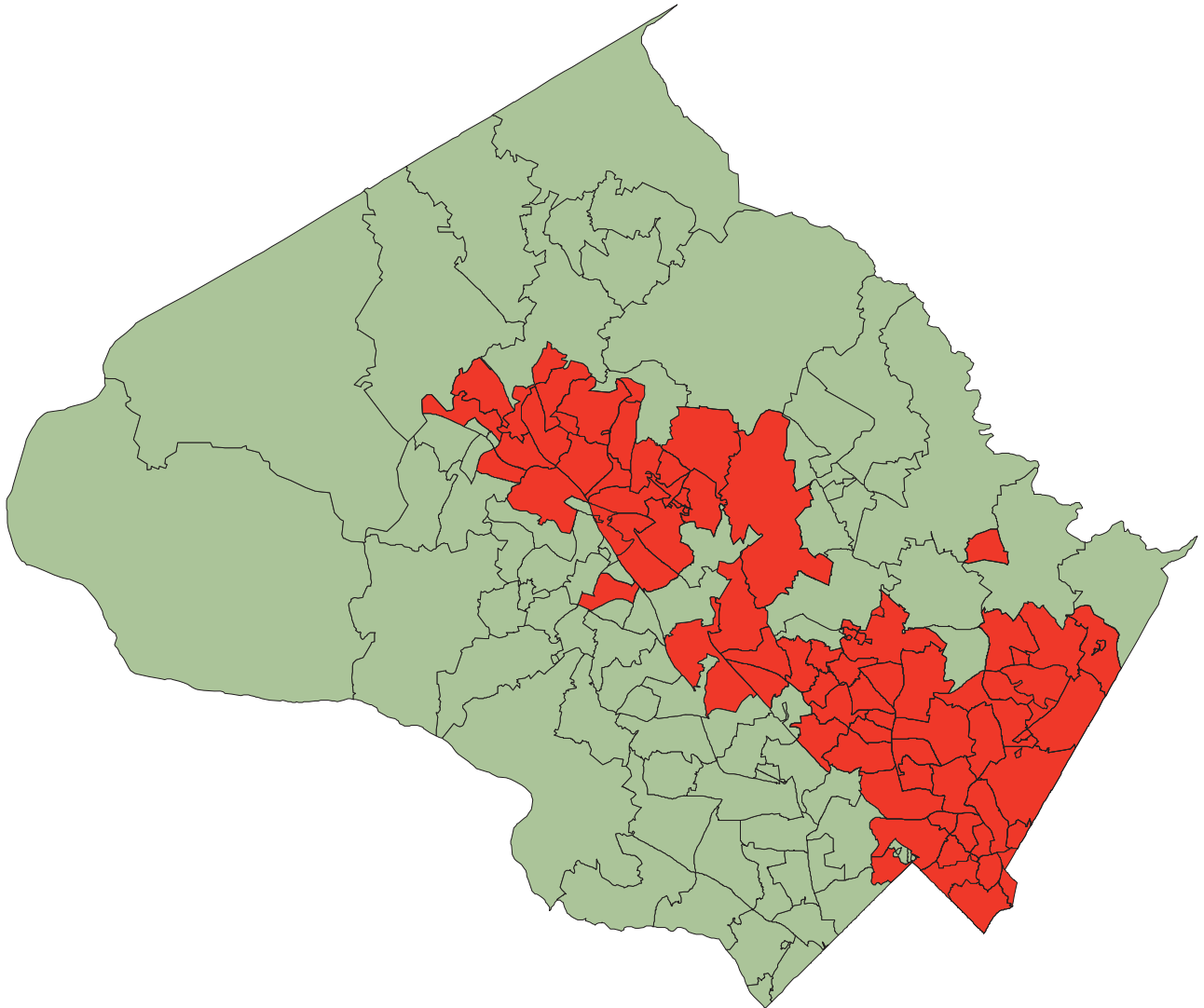
77%

77 percent of graduating seniors enroll in college

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Montgomery County Public Schools: Designated Red and Green Zones, 2008-2009^a



This map of Montgomery County, Maryland shows the “Red Zone” and “Green Zone,” first named by Superintendent Jerry Weast in 1999 following a county-wide demographic analysis designed to inform a needs-based, strategic allocation of district resources. The Red Zone is urban, high-poverty, with a mostly Hispanic and African American population. The Green Zone is predominantly white and well to do. When Weast first established this zone system, many Red Zone schools were performing poorly and their students were achieving at low levels. Green Zone schools and students were generally succeeding. Importantly, though the Red Zone comprised a comparatively small area of the county, it included slightly more than half of MCPS elementary school students as of the 2008-09 school year.

- Red Zone**
 - Elementary school student population: 31,920
 - 80 percent minority
 - 51 percent eligible for free and reduced-price meals
 - 29 percent English language learners
- Green Zone**
 - Elementary school student population: 31,476
 - 44 percent minority
 - 12 percent eligible for free and reduced-price meals
 - 10 percent English language learners

^a Based on: Jerry Weast, “Montgomery County Public Schools” (presentation for Pre-K Now National Call: Investing Title I Funds in Pre-K, May 6, 2009), 3. http://www.preknow.org/documents/MCPS_National_Call_5_04_09.ppt.

Introduction

What can happen when a school district integrates high-quality early learning across the system as part of a comprehensive pre-k-12 reform plan? Almost 90 percent of kindergarteners enter first grade with essential early literacy skills,¹ nearly 88 percent of third graders read proficiently,² achievement gaps between different racial and ethnic groups across all grade levels decline by double digits,³ about 90 percent of 12th graders graduate from high school⁴ and about 77 percent of graduating seniors enroll in college.⁵

Over a decade, the Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) in Maryland accomplished these impressive results by setting ambitious objectives for student achievement, providing more children with a critical early learning foundation and linking the skills gained in pre-k with the later grades to significantly strengthen college readiness. And these gains were realized even as the district’s population of English language learners grew 103 percent and the number of students receiving a free or reduced-price lunch increased 44 percent.⁶ 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 beginning of the education value-chain – early learning.”

What Weast envisioned and district staff put into practice is what researchers and economists like Nobel Laureate James Heckman have written about for years.⁷ High-quality early education is the first and most important step to improving learning, increasing economic competitiveness and developing a healthier society. Fortunately, MCPS not only blazed a trail for other school districts to follow, it also left a detailed roadmap for developing, implementing and improving an integrated, district-wide early learning strategy.

Dozens of interviews, numerous school and classroom visits, and analyses of the district’s extensive planning and strategic documents revealed five important lessons from the MCPS early education story. Adapted and applied to local contexts, these are steps that district leaders and policy makers can follow as they expand and improve early learning programs:

Figure 1: Timeline of MCPS’s Pre-K-12 System Strategy and Planning



1. Establish a clear and compelling district-wide goal that links to early learning.
2. Craft integrated district-wide and early learning strategies.
3. Align early learning programs and services to create a seamless pre-kindergarten-12 system.
4. Balance support and accountability to ensure effective and consistent implementation.
5. Innovate and monitor for continuous improvement.

The MCPS story, as discussed in this report and in the recent book, *Leading for Equity* by Stacey Childress, Denis P. Doyle and David Thomas, is instructive, not only from an implementation standpoint, but also philosophically and institutionally. Weast’s approach assumed all children could succeed academically, set an ambitious goal based upon that assumption and put the onus squarely on the school system – from pre-k through high school graduation – to meet that goal.

Importantly, in pursuing this agenda, MCPS strategically blended existing local, state and federal dollars to maximize the reach of each of these flexible funding

sources. To ensure its reform plan included a robust early education component, MCPS allocated federal Title I dollars, which can be used for early learning, to extend Head Start programs from a half day to a full day⁸ and to enhance their services through additional professional development and instructional materials.⁹

Throughout the reform process, Weast and his team looked at what the system was doing and how it was affecting student performance. This fundamental commitment to the success of all children and the willingness to entirely re-imagine both the structure and the purpose of the education system were vital to the success of the MCPS effort and that of the district’s students. For Weast and his leadership team, it was more than just starting early; it was intentionally connecting early learning to primary and secondary education with the ambitious goal of college readiness. 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.”

2000

Early Success Performance Plan^a

Comprehensive early learning plan that linked successful third grade reading to quality early learning

Montgomery County Early Childhood Initiative Comprehensive Plan^f

Strategy that set the vision for early learning

a See: http://www.collaborationcouncil.org/about_html.asp?nid=113&lid=1.

b See: <http://www.collaborationcouncil.org/News/2007databook.pdf>.

c See: <http://www.eric.ed.gov/PDFS/ED455334.pdf>.

d Personal communication with Janine Bacquie, MCPS Director of Early Childhood Programs and Services, Aug. 12, 2010.

e See: http://www.collaborationcouncil.org/strategic_html.asp?nid=208.

2000 continued

Teacher Professional Growth System^g

Comprehensive professional development and evaluation system for all teachers

2008

Montgomery County Early Care and Education Congress Action Agenda^h

Strategy for coordination and support produced by a countywide nonprofit partnership with a focus on early learning

f Bacquie, Aug. 12, 2010.

g See: http://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/departments/superintendent/docs/early_success.pdf.

h See: http://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/content/council/pdf/Pre_school/early_care.pdf.

i Bacquie, Aug. 12, 2010.

Lesson 1:

Establish a clear and compelling district-wide goal that links to early learning.

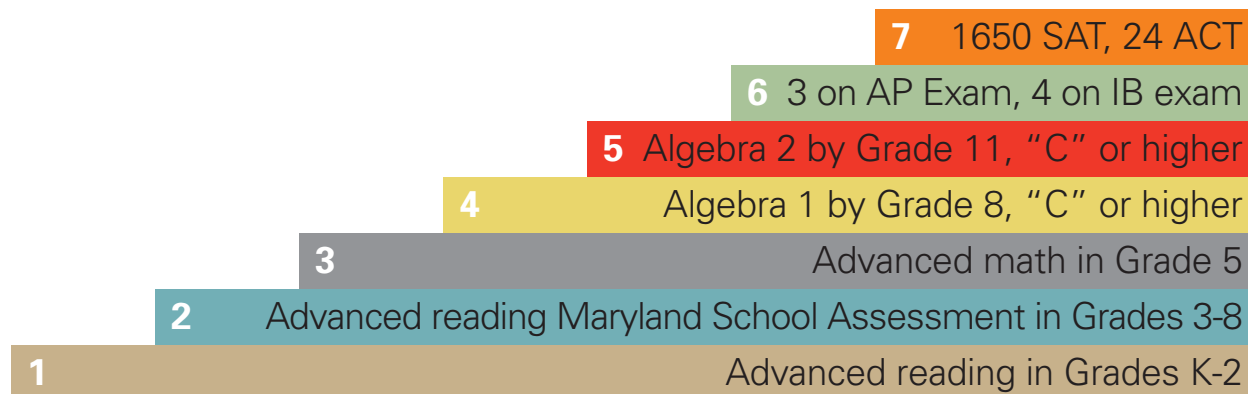
When Weast arrived at MCPS in 1999 as superintendent, he undertook an extensive demographic study to determine how to strategically allocate district resources according to need. This research really found two districts – one largely urban, high-poverty, mostly Hispanic and African American, which he called “Red Zone,” and another predominantly white and well to do, which he labeled “Green Zone.” The differences in achievement between the two were stark, but both had one thing in common: None of the schools had a shared vision.¹⁰ 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 learning through high school graduation.

For Weast and his leadership team, the demands of 21st century citizenship and careers required 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 graduate¹¹ with 80 percent college ready by 2014.¹² “College readiness” was

deemed scoring at or above 1650 on the SAT or 24 on the ACT (roughly the 70th percentile).¹³ Weast believed that the aggressive internal goal not only served as a guiding star around which to align MCPS’s people, systems and structures, but it was also clear and compelling. As Weast noted: “The expectations your district agrees upon should be measurable (clear) and set to a high and meaningful standard (compelling).”¹⁴

At this point, one might ask what college readiness has to do with crafting and integrating a comprehensive early learning strategy. The 80 percent goal had significance for MCPS’s youngest learners for two important reasons. First, it set an end point to which steps along the pre-k-12 education path could be aligned. To reach its North Star, MCPS used research to establish benchmarks for every grade, including school readiness indicators for pre-k and advanced-reading targets for kindergarten, first grade and second grade. These were then aligned with MCPS’s “Seven Keys to College Readiness,”¹⁵ which were conveyed community wide (See Figure 2). Immediate changes included system-wide use of ongoing and end-of-year

Figure 2: Seven Keys to College Readiness



Based on “The Results Book 2010,” (Rockville, MD: Montgomery County Public Schools, 2010), iii.
<http://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/info/pdf/apdataslides2009.pdf>.



assessments that could be reviewed at the classroom, school and district levels; a single, consistent daily schedule and curriculum frameworks with a clear scope and sequence for early learning teachers.

Second and most importantly, working backward from the ultimate goal of college readiness put a stop to philosophical battles about what was taught in kindergarten and pre-k. The false dichotomy of academic preparation versus play prevalent in early learning was reframed with the guiding question: What do our children need for both healthy cognitive and social-emotional development in the early years so they can succeed throughout school and 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.

Thus, MCPS began to develop a plan that aligned the instructional 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 tied directly 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, Montgomery County school board members, community members, business partners, faith communities and local government groups were called together to provide 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, Because All Children Matter."¹⁶ The plan targeted each end of the pre-k-to-12 value chain. 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. This "push/pull" approach funneled resources to reduce K-2 class sizes, implemented full-day kindergarten and expanded pre-k access beginning in high-poverty schools and introduced a rigorous, standards-aligned, research-based curriculum across all early grades, while at the same time increasing participation in advanced placement classes for high schools.

Updated annually, the district's strategic plan now includes the "Seven Keys to College Readiness." Incorporating internal MCPS research that linked outcomes at each grade level to later success,¹⁷ the "Seven Keys" identified advanced reading by third grade as a critical step to college readiness.¹⁸ The result was an even greater emphasis on the youngest learners across MCPS.

As "Our Call to Action" gained traction, MCPS launched its "Early Success Performance Plan" during the 2000-01 school year.¹⁹ The new, research-based plan integrated early elementary and early learning programs into MCPS's overall strategy by linking third grade reading outcomes back to pre-k. Driving the development of the plan was this question: What does it take to have all students reading by the end of third grade? Weast, former Director of Early Childhood Pamela Prue and other leaders in MCPS identified four essential components of a successful early learning strategy:²⁰



- **More Time is Critical for the Youngest Learners**
The most vulnerable children in MCPS, e.g. English language learners and those from low-income families, were already significantly behind their peers upon entering kindergarten. The performance plan implemented full-day kindergarten, beginning with the district's most underperforming Red Zone schools and eventually expanding to all elementary schools. In the highest need schools, early elementary student-to-teacher ratios were reduced to 15 to 1. Because research showed that many at-risk children fall behind during time away from school,²² MCPS implemented after-school programs from kindergarten through fifth grade; additionally, students received extended learning opportunities every summer from pre-k through fifth grade.²³

- **Time Must Be 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 pre-k and kindergarten teachers are required to have at least a bachelor's degree, are fully certified to teach early education in the state of Maryland and earn the same pay as any other teacher in the district.

“Early Success” also called for a revised early learning curriculum based on rigorous standards that were aligned with the expectations set forth in the “Seven Keys.” An initial curriculum audit uncovered inconsistencies throughout the K-12 program. Addressing these concerns, MCPS then worked to align and translate state standards into grade-level indicators. This change in the K-12 curriculum necessitated adjustments to MCPS’s pre-k curriculum so students could meet the increased rigor of kindergarten and beyond.

With an aligned, standards-based curriculum replete with measurable benchmarks, MCPS developed its own pre-k-second grade diagnostic assessment, which allowed teachers to adjust their instruction to an individual child’s needs. The dramatic changes required new training in curriculum and assessment for all pre-k-second grade teachers in MCPS, including Head Start teachers, who, in Montgomery County, are all district employees.

- **Consistency at the Same School Matters**

According to MCPS’s own internal evaluations, children who attend the same school from kindergarten through second grade learn more.²⁴ This is especially true for those who enter kindergarten with limited early literacy skills. To diminish the negative consequences of school transitions, MCPS worked to establish early education classrooms in all its highest need schools. Consequently, most young children in an MCPS early learning program are now able to attend that same school from pre-k all the way through fifth grade.

- **Involve Parents and Community to Support Early Learning**

From the very beginning of the reform efforts, parents were involved. They helped draft the initial strategy and provided input on the kindergarten and other early learning programs. But, this level of parent engagement was not spontaneous. With 140,000 students from more than 164 countries,²⁵ speaking 134 languages, MCPS needed to communicate to families in multiple languages through numerous channels. Family service workers, instructional specialists and teachers reached out to pre-k and Head Start 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.

The new, research-based plan integrated early elementary and early learning programs into MCPS’s overall strategy by linking third grade reading outcomes back to pre-k.

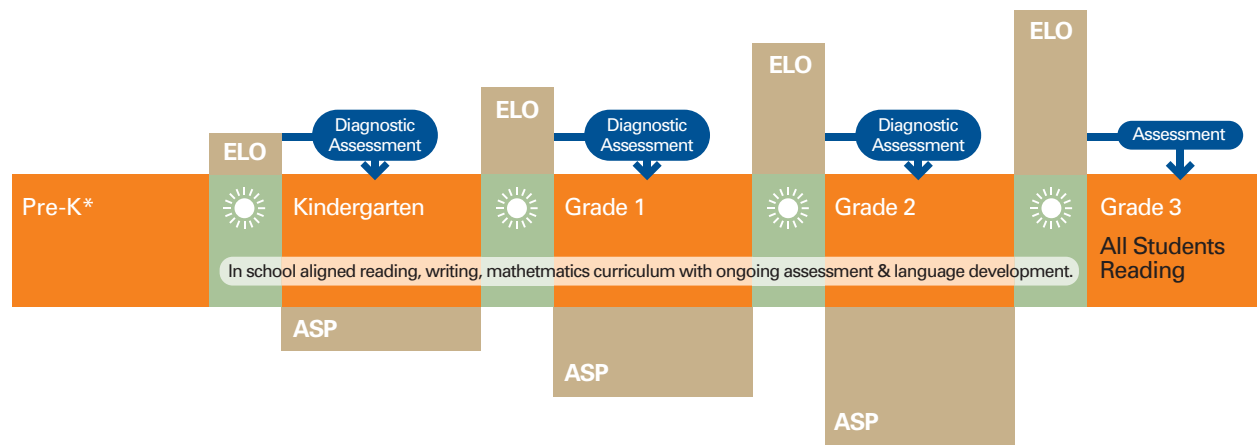
Lesson 2

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MCPS also partnered with local businesses, nonprofits, faith-based organizations and governmental agencies to deliver on its early learning goals. Two state- and locally supported early learning centers, located within MCPS schools, linked community-based, comprehensive, full-day, year-round services to the county’s neediest children, birth to five, and their families. Coordinating communication among these and all other public and private early learning partners across the county were two nonprofit collaborative groups: the Montgomery County Collaboration Council for Children, Youth, and Families and the Montgomery County Early Care and Education Congress.

MCPS’s “Early Success Performance Plan” and the four essential components discussed previously emerged after years of hard work by local researchers and dedicated early learning and education leaders in Montgomery County. The comprehensive pre-k work tied directly into the larger district-wide strategy, which included the seven key performance targets for college readiness. The performance plan, illustrated in Figure 3, appears deceptively simple, but as described in the following section, the bulk of the work remained to be done in implementation.

Figure 3: Early Success Performance Plan



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

Continuous Improvement

* **Pre-Kindergarten Programs**

Aligned reading, writing and mathematics curriculum.



Summer

ELO Extended Learning Opportunity

Summer programs in reading, writing, mathematics and language.

ASP Afterschool Programs

Congruent and Focused instruction in reading, writing, mathematics and language.

Based on “Early Success Performance Plan: Educational Reform in the Montgomery County Public Schools,” (Rockville, MD: Montgomery County Public Schools, 2003), 13. <http://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/info/CTBS2003/PDF/EarlySuccessPerformancePlan.pdf>.

Lesson 3:

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

Implementation is where even the best strategies can falter. 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 system, dictated by conflicting household-income requirements 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 threshold be provided early learning services.²⁶ In Montgomery County, district- and community-based federal Head Start programs targeted the poorest of these families, while MCPS-funded pre-k programs served those not enrolled in Head Start.²⁷ Over 1,000 home-based and nearly 450 center-based providers completed the backdrop of early learning services in Montgomery County. Aligning all of these programs and services with the strategies set forth in the district's planning documents was a challenging task.

To build a more coherent early education system, MCPS collaborated with diverse stakeholder groups, reshaped its pre-k-12 curriculum, instituted intense professional development and established common grade-level benchmarks and assessment protocols across the county. In doing so, Weast and his leadership team were able to unify fragmented early learning services while retaining a mixed delivery system that targeted children and families based on their unique needs. This inclusive approach also allowed school leaders to build key alliances with the county's early education community, thereby avoiding many of the turf battles that are often associated with implementing publicly funded pre-k at the state and local levels.

Leverage Established Collaborations to Build Early Learning Momentum

In 1990, the state of Maryland mandated that each of its 24 jurisdictions create an interagency service-coordinating body for children, youth and families, and, as a result, Local Management Boards (LMB) came into existence.²⁸ 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 partnering with Montgomery County early learning leaders, including Weast and Prue, to help the district integrate its community-wide plan for early learning for children, birth to age five, into a single document.

This and other efforts resulted in the creation of the "Montgomery County Early Childhood Initiative Comprehensive Plan," which set a vision for the county's youngest children²⁹ and guided development of the "Children's Agenda," a set of seven actionable goals around children, youth and families in Montgomery County.³⁰ The Council, together with more than 20 public and private community partners, launched the Montgomery County Early Care and Education Congress. The specific focus of the Congress was on the county's most vulnerable families and children. As Janine Bacquie, MCPS director of early childhood programs and services, said: "The question was, 'What are we as a county going to do to work with the parents of our most underserved students?'"

The Congress 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 at-risk young children and families in the county.³¹ Bacquie described the link between the "Action Agenda" and "Children's Agenda" this way: "The two agendas are closely linked. The Congress's 'Action Agenda' extends the 'Children's Agenda' to those most in need. The goal is to better coordinate efforts rather than duplicate them." During this time, district representation on the Collaboration Council ensured that the county's two agendas and its strategies aligned with MCPS's "Early Success" and "Our Call to Action."

Lesson 3

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Develop an Early Learning Service Delivery System that Addresses the Array of Child and Family Needs

While the “Action Agenda” and “Children’s Agenda” helped build a common early learning vision for Montgomery County, school leaders still faced 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 at MCPS, only a fraction of young children living in poverty had access to pre-k and those who did were largely served in the traditional half-day Head Start program. Within three years, the district had significantly strengthened its Head Start programs, established its own pre-k program and secured two neighborhood-based comprehensive early learning centers.

Leading the significant increase in early learning access through the 2000s were two state statutes: the previously mentioned Bridge to Excellence Act and Senate Bill 793, which created the Judith P. Hoyer Early Child Care and Education Enhancement Program offered at service sites known as “Judy Centers.”³² While some districts struggle to adapt federal and state early learning policies to their local context, Weast and Bacquie viewed the statutory mandate to provide pre-k for all low-income four year olds as an opportunity to target appropriate early learning services to families and children’s individual needs. Today, MCPS both meets the state requirement and also serves thousands of higher-income three and four year olds and their families in a range of programs offered through a diverse provider network.³³

Taken together, the common classroom materials, curricula and assessments provide a shared vocabulary and context that help Head Start and pre-k teachers within schools and across MCPS more easily and effectively learn how each other teach a particular activity and apply those practices to their own instruction.

- **Judy Centers.** Named for the revered early learning leader, Judith Hoyer of Prince George’s County, Maryland, the state-supported Judy Centers offer comprehensive, wraparound services to children birth to five and their families. Montgomery County’s two Judy Centers involve more than a dozen community partners including Montgomery College (the county’s community college), public libraries, city governments, the county department of health and human services, the Collaboration Council, local nonprofits and family and center-based providers.³⁴
- **Traditional and Full-Day Head Start.** When pursuing collaborations, many school districts must navigate a complicated network of community Head Start providers, but not MCPS. The district is the main delegate agency for Head Start programs in the county.³⁵ This means that all school-based Head Start teachers and staff are MCPS employees, receiving the same compensation and participating in the same comprehensive professional development and evaluation systems as all other district teachers.³⁶

During the 2009-10 school year, MCPS served about 200 children in its traditional Head Start program.³⁷ It also operated 24 full-day Head Start classrooms located in 18 of its poorest schools.³⁸ 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, providing an additional three hours per day of instruction and services, above and beyond the traditional half-day program.³⁹ MCPS committed a substantial annual investment of \$1 million, which was about 5 percent of the district's total Title I allocation but paid for 40 percent of the per-pupil, full-day Head Start cost.⁴⁰ These funds supported additional salaries for the full-day program, supplemental instructional materials and substitutes so teachers and aides could attend professional development sessions.⁴¹

While the schedules for the traditional and full-day programs were ambitious, learning was not based on didactic skill drilling. Children were involved in many different kinds of activities, providing opportunities for movement, singing, play and verbal language development and for instruction in early math and science. 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 intensive approach to early learning was paying off. The district's developmentally appropriate assessments showed 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. The biggest benefits were for Hispanic students and English language learners.⁴²

Table 1:
Child and Family Characteristics by Program Type, 2007-08 School Year^a

	Half-Day Head Start	Full-Day Head Start	MCPS Pre-K (half-day)
Median Family Income	\$ 13,200	\$ 15,523	\$ 28,000
Special Education	7.7%	9.2%	4.1%
English for Speakers of Other Languages	32.5%	63.5%	57.1%

^a Median family income, percentage special education and percentage English language learners are findings from: Huafang Zhao, Shahpar Modarresi, and Shihching Liu, "Impact of Full-Day Kindergarten Program on Student Academic Performance," (Rockville, MD: Montgomery County Public Schools, 2009). http://www.preknow.org/documents/MCPS_Full_day_Head_Start_study.pdf.

- **MCPS Pre-K and Special Education Pre-K.** The majority of MCPS's early learners attend district-funded pre-k. By February 2010, the program was providing more than 2,500 three and four year olds with two and a half hours of educational services, 180 days a year. The pre-k schedule mirrored that of the half-day Head Start program.⁴³

While special needs children attend both Head Start and the MCPS pre-k classrooms, the district also runs its own special education pre-k. This program served 801 students with a range of disabilities in the 2009-10 school year,⁴⁴ giving them the extra services they needed as well as opportunities to learn and interact with their regular education peers.⁴⁵

This array of programs was specifically designed to serve families and children's different needs. Those families living at or below the federal poverty line and in need of more specialized wraparound services are encouraged to enroll in MCPS's Head Start programs. Families with higher incomes living at or just above poverty are served through the MCPS pre-k program. Table 1 illustrates the characteristics of the children and families enrolled in each program.

Lesson 3

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Aligning All Early Learning Programs

The Judy Centers, Head Start and pre-k are integral components of the “Early Success Performance Plan,” but bringing consistency – shared expectations, common standards and uniform high-quality pedagogy – across the distinct programs was a challenge. To ensure that all children receive a similar foundation, all teachers use common early learning curricula, as outlined in MCPS’s comprehensive curriculum framework, and have access to detailed sample lesson plans that target specific school-readiness indicators set forth in the curriculum.

Using the same curriculum makes it easier for pre-k and Head Start teachers to work together. These early learning teachers also all start with exactly the same resources.⁴⁶ Taken together, the common classroom materials, curricula and assessments provide a shared vocabulary and context that help Head Start and pre-k teachers within schools and across MCPS more easily and effectively learn how each other teach a particular activity and apply those practices to their own instruction.

Fully Integrate Early Learning with K-12

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.⁴⁷ The move to a full-day program was key as kindergarten came to play a crucial role in integrating early learning with the elementary, middle and high school grades. Integrating early education programs with the new full-day kindergarten as well as the other early elementary grades involved three major components.

- **Aligned Standards-Based Curriculum and Benchmarks.** The MCPS curriculum framework is not only aligned with state standards, but it also incorporates more rigorous national and international standards.⁴⁸ Instructional guides, materials and textbooks help teachers apply the curriculum to student learning. For kindergartners, reading and math are central; by the end of kindergarten, students are expected to demonstrate a host of reading skills, including identification of all the letters and their corresponding sounds, blending of one-syllable words and even reading aloud from a familiar text. These skills were translated into periodic objective benchmarks that link directly to what students need to know in subsequent grades and are measured using a district-developed reading assessment.⁴⁹

This common pre-k-5 assessment connects MCPS’s early learning programs with third grade outcomes in two ways. First, it provides a clear link to what children need to be able to do before entering kindergarten in order to meet later elementary school benchmarks that are associated with success in high school and college. Second, it gives teachers a common language to use when talking about student progress, facilitating communication and providing for smooth transitions between grade levels.

- **Early Learning and Elementary Instructional Team Meetings.** Educators in each MCPS elementary school participate in monthly meetings with teachers and staff from Head Start and pre-k programs to discuss curriculum, assessment data, instructional strategies and individual students. Teachers report that the meetings are a powerful way to connect and learn from their colleagues and share a sense of accountability for all children in the school. One second-grade teacher commented: “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.”



• **Strong School-Family Partnerships.** To Bacquie and her team in Early Childhood Programs and Services, meaningful family engagement is at the core of the performance plan. The relationship often starts with recruitment efforts to register children for MCPS Head Start and pre-k classrooms.⁵⁰ Recruitment goes on year-round and involves collaboration with other early childhood stakeholder agencies. Referrals from Judy Centers, churches, community centers, pediatricians and parent groups supplement the hundreds of community outreach efforts that the early childhood staff undertakes each year.⁵¹

Once a family registers for a pre-k or Head Start program, a service worker is available to guide them through the process and refer them to additional community services. The service worker, along with the classroom teacher, may also help develop a Family Partnership Agreement to address individual family needs before the child even enters the classroom.

When school starts, family service workers and teachers follow up with phone contacts and home visits.⁵² In the process, during the 2009-10 school year, nearly 1,000 referrals were made to community services, many of which were emergency interventions dealing with food, clothing and housing.⁵³ Direct contact with families and caregivers is augmented with take-home materials, including parent guides, toolkits and newsletters published in six languages.⁵⁴ Parents also have opportunities to get involved in shared governance, program planning and parent training.⁵⁵

By better engaging families in the early learning of their children, MCPS has been able to reinforce the classroom learning activities and open up a clear communication channel between the school and home. The parent guides and early learning toolkits help facilitate these relationships by giving parents and teachers a common language through which to learn from each other.

Lesson 4:

Balance support and accountability to ensure effective and consistent implementation.

With a clear and compelling goal of 80 percent college ready by 2014, a comprehensive early learning strategy integrated with the district-wide master plan and aligned programs and services, MCPS was poised for success. But, the most important challenge remained. Meeting ambitious performance targets and narrowing the achievement gap meant changing people's behavior, especially in early learning. In many states and districts, as well as at the federal level, teacher-effectiveness discussions often center on accountability measures: firing, tenure promotion, walkthroughs, evaluations and reviews of standardized assessment scores.

Weast, Bacquie and their leadership teams have done things differently. In MCPS, teacher effectiveness efforts are organized around the joint responsibilities of requiring and facilitating excellence among all teachers, support staff and administrators. Ambitious professional development opportunities, a comprehensive peer assistance and review system and access to high-quality curricula and materials form the foundation of a professional learning community in every school in MCPS.

In conjunction with its robust professional development, MCPS also employs strong accountability systems to ensure effective teaching. Underperforming teachers and support staff are quickly placed on improvement plans, which can ultimately lead to dismissal if progress is not made. Monitoring from the Office of School Performance, regular administrative site visits, teacher team meetings and an insistence on using data to drive instruction also hold teachers accountable for their students' learning. Thus, district leaders have created a system that balances support and accountability and ensures the performance plan and its corresponding programs and services are implemented with fidelity.

Support the Professionalism of Early Learning Teachers

Every MPCs Head Start and pre-k teacher is employed as a regular district teacher, receiving the same pay, benefits and professional development opportunities as any other teacher in the district, including the Teacher Professional Growth System (TPGS). Administered by a joint union-district team, the TPGS incorporates formal evaluations, professional development plans, teacher observations, courses and mentoring. During their first two years, beginning early learning teachers are formally evaluated by their principals and "peer assistance and review" (PAR) consulting teachers. The system also integrates school-based staff development teachers, who help coordinate training, monitor professional development plans and connect teachers to resources. Funding for permanent substitute teachers at every school facilitates ongoing peer-to-peer classroom observations.

To provide further early learning expertise and support, Bacquie's team of six instructional specialists partners with the staff development teachers and consulting teachers in the TPGS program. Thus, each new early learning teacher entering MCPS has an assigned consulting teacher and a range of experts to turn to for help, in addition to on-site staff developers and reading specialists.

In MCPS, teacher effectiveness efforts are organized around the joint responsibilities of requiring and facilitating excellence among all teachers, support staff and administrators.

At the same time, early education teachers have access to ambitious and comprehensive professional development courses. All MCPS teachers are required to go through the 36-hour Skillful Teacher training, which instills a common understanding of high-quality teaching across all grades and subjects in the district and offers an early learning section specific to pre-k, Head Start, kindergarten and other primary teachers.

More specialized professional development opportunities are designed to meet the needs of MCPS's young English language learners. In Head Start and pre-k classrooms, staff development teachers with English as a Second Language expertise collaborate with classroom teachers to design individualized student-learning objectives to meet curriculum standards.⁵⁶

Hold Early Educators Accountable for Student Learning

Even as early education and kindergarten teachers are treated respectfully and offered professional support, MCPS also holds them accountable for their students' learning through a peer-assistance-and-review (PAR) program, a focus on data-driven instruction and a strong Office of School Performance. Governed by a panel including both union and district representatives, the PAR program assigns an expert consulting teacher to all new and struggling veteran teachers. The consulting teacher supports and observes teachers over the school year, and together with the school principal, makes one of four recommendations to the PAR panel, which makes the final employment decision. The panel can recommend teachers for continued employment, another year of PAR support, non-renewal for non-tenured teachers or dismissal for tenured teachers.

A relentless commitment to data and regular team meetings focuses teachers on illustrating and explaining student progress on standards and benchmarks. Teachers use reading and math monitoring tools to

analyze student progress on pre-k and kindergarten indicators. Results are color-coded and aggregated so individual trouble areas and class-wide trends are easy to spot. The incentives to stay up-to-date on assessment and reporting are strong. In addition, like all teachers in MCPS, early learning and kindergarten teachers are expected to keep their plan-books out and accessible with the class data monitoring sheets, so that a principal can walk in and find evidence of data-driven instruction at any time on any day.

Importantly, weekly team meetings have proven to be the strongest accountability mechanism. As one kindergarten teacher said: "There is an agenda for every meeting. It's not just about your own students, but teachers could update each other on how their students are doing."

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

With a balance of support and accountability, Head Start and pre-k teachers in MCPS have been able to meet the increased expectations articulated by the performance plan, and the percentage of children entering kindergarten ready to learn is going up significantly each year.⁵⁷ Additionally, the district is making progress toward its 80 percent college ready goal.⁵⁸ Most importantly, MCPS's comprehensive professional development and accountability system has helped integrate early learning with K-12 education. Head Start and pre-k teachers are given the same supports as any other teacher in the district – and they are held to the same high expectations.

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 need to be constantly improved and new innovations tested and, if successful, implemented. Technological systems to raise the level of teaching and learning, such as an online integrated curriculum platform, timely professional development and an online “curriculum archive” – a database with standards-aligned lessons and units – are already being rolled out across MCPS starting with kindergarten. Yet, these structural and systemic innovations are not enough. The efficacy of current efforts needs monitoring and benchmarks require revision. It is a never-ending process of evaluation and adjustment.

Use Technology to Support Early Learning Instruction

MCPS has been a leader in leveraging technology to improve student learning. Two early efforts, a longitudinal data warehouse, the Instructional Management System, and a handheld, wireless reading assessment tool, Reading 3D, have been well documented.⁵⁹ Employed in pre-k through fifth-grade classrooms, these technologies help teachers effectively use data to inform their classroom practices.

The district has continued blazing a trail for teacher-friendly technology with its development of a comprehensive integrated curriculum and lesson-planning platform. The one-stop online platform contains everything a teacher needs to plan a lesson aligned with state standards. Drop-down menus linking benchmarks to specific classroom activities and exemplary sample lessons mean teachers do not have to reinvent the wheel of good instruction. Eventually, MCPS will add videos of the lessons being taught so teachers can get professional development whenever they need it.

Keep Monitoring and Improving

MCPS is constantly in the process of raising its benchmarks and asking for more from its teachers, principals, students, parents and business community. With greater access to high-quality pre-k, MCPS has helped children achieve ever-increasing levels of reading competency. Payoffs began to be evident in third- and fifth-grade reading achievement as early as 2004. The number of students rated as “reading proficient” or above is steadily increasing. Despite these gains, however, as Figures 4A and 4B show, as of 2009, a sizable gap still existed between students of difference racial groups. As Weast often says: “The work is never finished.”

Figure 4A: Percentage of MCPS Third Graders Reading Proficient or Above on the Maryland State Assessment^a

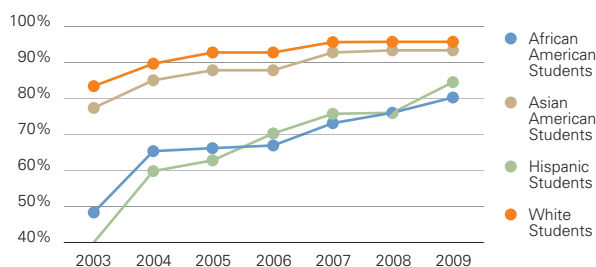
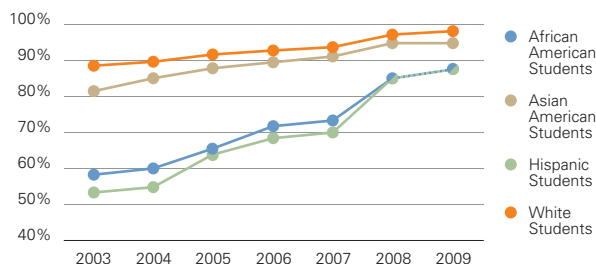


Figure 4B: Percentage of MCPS Fifth Graders Reading Proficient or Above on the Maryland State Assessment^b



^a “The Results Book 2010,” (Rockville, MD: Montgomery County Public Schools, 2010), 5. <http://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/info/pdf/ap-dataslides2009.pdf>.

^b *Ibid.*, 13.

The Roles for the States and the Federal Government

For school districts across the country, the MCPS story offers important lessons on developing a comprehensive and integrated early learning strategy. The district began with a clear and compelling goal of 80 percent college ready, which set a North Star and helped school system leaders articulate the “Seven Keys to College Readiness.” This, in turn, formed the foundation for the “Early Success Performance Plan,” MCPS’s comprehensive early learning strategy that linked directly to the district-wide master plan. Programs and services from pre-k to grade 12 were aligned to ensure that children’s learning, from the first step to the last, ultimately led to college readiness. MCPS also balanced professional development with accountability, to guarantee that early learning teachers knew what to do and how to do it. Today, MCPS continues to innovate with new systems and to monitor its progress, revising achieved targets upwards to foster ongoing improvement and high expectations.

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 important roles that states and the federal government can play in helping the youngest learners prepare for school and career excellence.

States can encourage greater district-level pre-k investment, cross-sharing of information, program coordination and rapid expansion of services across the pre-k-12 continuum by enacting innovative early learning legislation and policies:

- Maryland took a leadership role in early learning, passing legislation to establish Judy Centers across the state. The Judy Centers facilitated interagency collaboration by providing a structure for communication between early learning leaders from multiple groups.

- Maryland’s legislature also enacted a statute requiring that all four year olds living at or below 185 percent of the federal poverty level be provided high-quality early education and ensuring sustainable financing by integrating pre-k in the state’s school funding formula.
- The Maryland State Department of Education and its Division of Early Childhood Development convened a Preschool for All Taskforce. The Taskforce concluded that statewide pre-k for all children was feasible given available funding, developed 10 benchmarks for quality programs and proposed a model for delivering services that partnered school districts with early education providers.⁶⁰
- Beginning in 2008, the state’s Department of Education began a pilot program testing the Taskforce’s recommendations for collaborative pre-k models. The pilot currently operates at 10 sites across the state.⁶¹

With the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) due for reauthorization, the opportunity for the federal government to support high-quality early learning and its integration into the national school reform effort has never been greater. At the federal level, the government can help replicate MCPS’s success in early learning by:

- Including early learning in the reauthorization of the ESEA,⁶² and
- Dedicating funding specifically for three and four year olds that can leverage state and local resources, provide incentives for greater investments and ensure that dollars are targeted to high-impact early learning programs.

Conclusion

The evidence is clear. High-quality early learning, integrated into the broader public education system, is vital to raising critical elementary reading skills, closing the entrenched achievement gap and preparing all students for college and career success. Investments in early learning have the highest rates of return,⁶³ and MCPS has clearly demonstrated how to spend those resources wisely. 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.



Endnotes

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- 9 Personal communication with Janine Bacquie, MCPS Director of Early Childhood Programs and Services, Aug. 16, 2010; Chrisanne Gayl, Marci Young, and Kathy Patterson, "Tapping Title I: What Every School Administrator Should Know About Title I, Pre-K and School Reform," in *Federal Policy Series* (Washington: Pew Center on the States, 2010). http://www.preknow.org/documents/TitleI_PartII_Jan2010.pdf.
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- 23 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 learning English as a second language.
- 24 Weast, "Early Success: Closing the Opportunity Gap for Our Youngest Learners."
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- 27 In addition, 350 non-income-eligible four year olds were provided a pre-k experience through a high school early education internship program. See: The Montgomery County Universal Preschool Implementation Working Group, "Investing in the Future: A Balanced Approach toward Preschool Expansion in Montgomery County, Maryland," (The Montgomery County Universal Preschool Implementation Working Group, 2009).
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- 33 Personal communications with Janine Bacquie, MCPS Director of Early Childhood Programs and Services, Nov. 12, 2009.
- 34 Family literacy programs, adult English language and GED classes, early identification, health referrals, staff training, play groups and after-school tutoring are just a few of the services available for young children and their families at the Judy Centers . Extensive and ongoing technical assistance toward attaining early childhood accreditation are also provided to community child care partners by the centers. See: Division of Early Childhood, "Judy Centers," Montgomery County Public Schools, <http://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/departments/earlychi/judycenters.shtm>.
- 35 Personal communications with Chrisanne Gayl, Nov. 12, 2009.
- 36 As the delegate agency, MCPS also has control over the curriculum and schedule, although the district must still abide by federal Head Start regulations, which at times can be challenging. For example, restrictive meal-serving and transportation regulations force MCPS to create idiosyncratic differences between the essentially similar Head Start and pre-k 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 comprehensive system of traditional and full-day Head Start classrooms.
- 37 Personal communication with Janine Bacquie, MCPS Director of Early Childhood Programs and Services, Feb. 22, 2010. The traditional program consists of 3¼ hours of educational services and standard health and social services stipulated by Head Start regulations. In a typical day children arrive at school around 9:00 am and start off with a brief morning meeting, during which they went over the daily schedule and talked about the question of the day. This is followed by a 30-minute literacy block, which is broken down into five minutes of oral language and vocabulary development, 15 minutes of a read aloud or shared reading and 10 minutes of small group literacy lessons. Children then spend 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 includes outdoor time and math activities. Before going home children share a family-style lunch together with their teacher and support staff.
- 38 Bacquie, Feb. 22, 2010. In terms of curriculum, the 6¼ hours-per-day program significantly expands the literacy, math, social skills and center time of the traditional program. Children receive an additional 35 minutes in both literacy and math lessons, and 30 minutes extending concepts learned in the math and literacy blocks.
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Endnotes

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- 45 The ultimate goal of the pre-k special education program is for all of its students to matriculate to a regular kindergarten classroom and the program's components are set up to make the transition as smooth as possible. Staff collaborate regularly with Head Start and pre-k teachers on planning and shared instructional activities. They also use the same curriculum and 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 (Individual Education Plan), but the curriculum and expectations are the same as other students."
- 46 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 pre-k 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.
- 47 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. For the leaders in MCPS, reform was necessary if 80 percent of MCPS students were to be college ready. 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. Eventually teachers and parents adjusted, and the full-day program was rapidly implemented across MCPS. See: Childress, Doyle, and Thomas, *Leading for Equity: The Pursuit of Excellence in the Montgomery County Public Schools*, 41.
- 48 The curriculum was designed to answer four critical questions: 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? These questions drawn from: Richard DuFour and Robert Eaker, *Professional Learning Communities at Work* (Bloomington, IN and Reston, VA: National Education Service and Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1998).
- 49 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 AP-PR, for students in pre-k through second grade. Correlated 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 that are aligned with the early grades. 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 pre-k, kindergarten, first grade, and second grade. End-of-the-year progress toward benchmarks for each grade K-2 was based on these assessments.
- 50 While MCPS has added hundreds of slots in the last few years, a recent report put the number of eligible but un-served four-year-olds in the county at 1,300. See: The Montgomery County Universal Preschool Implementation Working Group, "Investing in the Future: A Balanced Approach toward Preschool Expansion in Montgomery County, Maryland."
- 51 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 staff group responsible for putting up the poster, and when they were to do it.
- 52 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.
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- 54 One colorful easy-to-read guide, "Getting Ready for kindergarten: What Parents Can Do," offered parents suggestions for learning activities that they could 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 toolkits included the Help Me Grow Prenatal Packet from DHHS, and MCPS "PAL Kits," which included books, a CD of sing-along songs, zippered pouch for medical documents, and helpful hints for new parents.
- 55 Parent representatives on the MCPS Head Start/Pre-K 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 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. The Parent Advisory Council, established through the Department of Family and Community Partnerships, also facilitated parent advocacy trainings held on a regular basis throughout the year.
- 56 Together, they used research-based ESOL curriculum "blueprints" to divide content into four thematic units, each of which was aligned with standards outlined in the MCPS Curriculum Framework. The blueprints also give guidelines for assessing English language learners' oral language development. At the kindergarten level, ESOL staff development teachers continued to co-plan and team-teach with the regular classroom teacher using these blueprints. For students with specific language acquisition needs, ESOL teachers also conducted individual pullout sessions.
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Methodology

Data sources for the report included a mixture of in-depth interviews and over 1,000 pages of published research reports, internal Montgomery County Public School documents and website content. In the initial wave of data collection, the superintendent, associate superintendent, budget director, early childhood director, pre-k supervisors, and early childhood specialists were interviewed in person using semi-structured protocol with open-ended questions. Using a similar interview format, four focus group interviews were also conducted with pre-k and Head Start teachers, family outreach and related services staff members, Judy Center partners, and Montgomery County Early Care and Education Congress members. These interviews were supplemented by site visits to two schools with pre-k and Head Start classrooms. In all, 35 people associated with early learning in Montgomery County Public Schools were interviewed. Data were then analyzed using case-study methodology. The guiding research question focused on the inner-workings of early learning in Montgomery County Public Schools. The source materials were then analyzed to address this research question. Preliminary findings were checked with one interviewee and one non-interviewee.

About the Author and Acknowledgements

Geoff Marietta is a doctoral student at the Harvard Graduate School of Education studying inter-organizational collaboration in public education, particularly in early childhood settings. He is a former special education teacher, school administrator and researcher with Harvard University's Public Education Leadership Project. Geoff graduated with highest honors from the University of Montana and holds an MBA from Harvard Business School.

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