

Strategies

FOR SCHOOL SYSTEM LEADERS ON DISTRICT-LEVEL CHANGE

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Breaking the Links Between Race, Poverty, & Achievement

It is a disturbing truth that race and class are highly predictive of student achievement in our schools. It is almost as though the literal chains that restrained African slaves have been transformed into figurative chains that form an iron-clad connection between children's social and economic circumstances and their prospects for success in school and life.

Let this issue of *Strategies* be a stake in the ground with the following words posted: *The links can and will be broken.* It's a matter of will, moral courage, strategic acumen, applied knowledge, and persistent work at every level of the system.

To blame inequality of educational outcomes on the race and class of children and their families is to ignore extensive and ever-growing data revealing that, on the whole, public education is hardwired—consciously or not—to perpetuate the inequalities that children are born into. The Education Trust and others have documented often-huge disparities in teachers' qualifications with respect to content-area knowledge and in the rigor and quality of assignments that students at the same grade level receive, depending

on whether they attend an affluent suburban school or an impoverished urban or rural school. Another aspect of the systemic hardwiring concerns access to courses such as Advanced Placement, honors, and International Baccalaureate.

Although economic and social self-interest may support the creation of equitable systems, the commitment to breaking the links between race, poverty, and educational outcomes is primarily a matter of principle and a moral imperative. As Linda Darling-Hammond has argued, "We need to pay off the educational debt to disadvantaged students that has accrued over centuries of unequal access to quality education" (see May 21, 2007 issue of *The Nation*).

For public school districts, breaking the links is also a huge systemic challenge. If the links are broken in a single classroom, the accomplishment may be attributed to an exceptional teacher. If they are broken schoolwide, the school almost certainly has strong leadership. But to develop and sustain a whole system of schools where student achievement cannot be predicted by race or class involves many additional challenges. The district's culture, structures, systems, capacity, and environment must be "rewired" to focus on high-quality teaching and learning for all. In an organization as political and bureaucratic as a public school district, that is no mean feat.

The Public Education Leadership Project (PELP), a joint initiative of Harvard's Graduate School of Education and its Business School, has developed a Coherence Frame-

work (<http://www.hbs.edu/pelp/framework.html>) that district leaders can use as a guide for ensuring that actions taken at the district, school, and classroom levels are logically integrated and aimed at the singular goal of improving results for students. The framework recognizes that the work of teaching and learning that goes on in the classroom, the *instructional core*, needs to be at the center of all efforts to create coherence. The instructional core is the relationship between teacher and students around challenging content.

By focusing on integrating all parts of the system around an articulated strategy to improve teaching and learning, the framework can strengthen efforts to break the links between race, poverty, and educational outcomes. Strategy is the driver of coherence; but the framework does not prescribe a strategy. It defines *strategy* as a coherent set of actions aimed at improving student achievement by strengthening the instructional core. Strategy is pivotal because it identifies what leaders should and *should not* be doing in terms of five key organizational

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From the Executive Editor

On a recent school district visit, I listened as district and community leaders extolled the achievements of a high-performing school in the system. The district has schools with high levels of poverty and children of color and schools with fewer children of color and higher levels of affluence. They reasoned that if they simply replicated the instructional practices of the successful school located in an affluent area, they would have the formula to resolve performance concerns in their low-performing, high-poverty schools.

If only it were as simple as transplanting strategies from one school to another. Perhaps we would have more state and federal initiatives pushing expectations significantly higher than minimum levels of proficiency that only perpetuate outcome gaps and constrain the future for graduates. Fortunately, a growing number of school districts are demonstrating what's involved in successfully scaling up best practices systemwide and exposing the fallacy that race or family background are viable predictors of student performance.

This issue of *Strategies* features the story of a district that has worked hard to transform itself from a system that served some students well to a district committed to achieving high performance for *all* students.

This story involves many people: a passionate and gifted superintendent, a school board that views its role as stewardship of equity and excellence for *all*, union leaders who work collaboratively with the board and administration on school system improvement, a central office staff that provides resources to schools in ways that build capacity and add value, principals who are unwilling to accept race and class as explanations for low performance, teachers who use data in powerful ways to plan and deliver instruction, students who see themselves capable of higher performance, and a community willing to support equity by weighted funding that is intended to wipe out the impact and influence of disadvantage. Most of all, it is a story of courageous conversations that feed courageous actions every day.

The systemic approach to establishing a coherent framework focused on equity is not a formula that can simply be lifted from Montgomery County Public Schools to your community. However, the portrait of MCPS's work should stimulate thinking about what *can* be translated in a variety of settings—urban, rural, or suburban—to eliminate the disturbing truth that race and class have become highly predictive of the educational outcomes for students in America's schools. ◀

—Larry Leverett, Executive Director,
Panasonic Foundation

the links between race, poverty, and educational outcomes. MCPS, a member of the PELP network of districts, illustrates the Coherence Framework in action. We invite you to explore the framework and the MCPS story, to press forward with the moral imperative to break the links in your own school or district, and to tell us about your experiences.

— Scott Thompson, Editor

About the PANASONIC FOUNDATION

The Panasonic Foundation was established in 1984 by the Panasonic Corporation of North America. It works in long-term partnership with a select number of school districts that serve a large proportion of children in poverty to help them develop the system-level policies, practices, and structures necessary to improve achievement for ALL students: All Means All.

About the AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

The mission of the American Association of School Administrators, the organization of school system leaders, is to support and develop effective school system leaders who are dedicated to the highest quality public education for all children.

About the UNIVERSITY COUNCIL FOR EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION

The University Council for Educational Administration is a consortium of higher-education institutions committed to advancing the preparation and practice of educational leaders for the benefit of schools and children.

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elements: *culture, structures, systems, capacity, and environment.*

In This Issue

This issue is devoted to the morally grounded and systemic efforts of Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) in Maryland, which has made substantial strides toward breaking

Montgomery County, MD:

Raising the Bar, Closing the Gap

“I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.” “If a traffic cop pulls me over, or if the IRS audits my tax return, I can be sure I haven’t been singled out because of my race.” “I can choose blemish-cover or bandages in ‘flesh’ color and have them more or less match my skin.”

As part of a diversity workshop, Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) staff members respond to these and 21 other prompts using a scale aimed at gauging their experience of race and ethnicity. After tallying their scores, they write the final number in large print on a card, stand, and sort themselves into a line from the highest number to the lowest. White people end up at the high end of the line and African Americans at the other end. In the middle is a white woman with an Asian woman on either side of her.

While standing in line, holding their cards in front of them, they talk about what they are seeing and experiencing. An African American participant says she didn’t need an activity to know that people have different experiences depending on their race. “I live it every day,” she says to her fellow workshop participants. “I’ve spent 41 years trying to figure out how to get what I need from a system not built for me.” An Asian woman says, “It will never be as bad for us as African Americans. We’re used to blending in and not being seen.” A white man holding a card with a high number says, “I’m embarrassed that I’m here and my boss [an African American woman with the lowest number of

all] is at the low end.” The facilitator says, “There’s going to be discomfort. Sometimes we don’t like what we see. How can we bring awareness back to the classroom?”

This and similar workshops aimed at developing cultural competence happen nearly every day in the district, because district leaders believe that taking on institutional racism and white privilege is essential to meeting the goal of closing achievement gaps and raising the bar for every student.

In fact, in public schools in Montgomery County, achievement gaps—whether defined by race, class, language, or ability—are narrowing. In some schools, gaps have narrowed dramatically. In kindergarten there is a negligible gap between racial and economic groups or subgroups. At Ronald McNair Elementary School, the gap for 2nd grade reading between students qualifying for free and reduced-price meals (FARMS) and those not qualifying shrank from 43 percentage points in 1999–2000 to 9 percentage points in 2004–2005. The district’s investment in developing the cultural competence of its staff and in cultivating skills for having courageous conversations about race and ethnic differences is a significant part of its response to the moral imperative to improve academic achievement of students who have been chronically underserved.

Montgomery County, which borders the Northwest area of Washington, D.C., has a racially and economically diverse population of nearly a million residents. Its public school system serves about 138,000 students from 165 countries, who speak 134 languages. About 41 percent are white, 23 percent are African American, 21 percent are Hispanic,

and 15 percent are Asian American. Slightly less than 26 percent of students receive free and reduced-price meals, and about 11 percent are English-language learners.

A few decades ago, Montgomery County was an overwhelmingly white, affluent suburban area, but over the last 30 years the population has climbed steeply, and the growth has been among people of color, while the white population has dipped from 95 percent to 65 percent. Today, 40 percent of Maryland’s immigrants settle in Montgomery County.

It wasn’t long after Jerry Weast arrived in Montgomery County Public Schools as the new district superintendent in 1999 that he made a demographic discovery. The central portion of the school system was essentially a newly urbanized district of more than 67,000 students surrounded by a suburban district of nearly 73,000. Minority students and those who qualify for FARMS or who are learning English as a second language are heavily concentrated in a swath that runs from the D.C. border up through the center of the county.

Weast is “all about data,” according to former MCPS Deputy Superintendent John Q. Porter. “He has a phenomenal mind in terms of slicing the data in different ways.” Weast quickly discerned stark resource and performance gaps between the schools in the newly urbanized central portion of the district and those outside that area. He found a school system and a community that had not yet reckoned with the changes in the county and the wider world. “The world was spinning at a faster pace, and the local student population was beginning to change at an exponential

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Focused Use of Data

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In MCPS, using data is not a single event or a sporadic activity. It is the high-octane fuel that powers the district's change engine. To organize data gathering and analysis to attack key leverage points for continuous improvement, the district developed M-STAT. Modeled after the New York City Police Department's Computerized Crime Comparison Statistics (ComSTAT) and using a Baldrige Plan-Do-Study-Act cycle, M-STAT provides a structure for in-depth analysis, monitoring, problem solving, and identification and implementation of best practices. The Office of School Performance (OSP), which is charged with the oversight of 199 schools, uses M-STAT to explore the interrelation-

ships between data, race, ethnicity, class, and student achievement, and to design and implement best practices to close achievement gaps.

For MCPS, key leverage points toward college and work readiness are the following:

- Kindergarten reading
- Grade 3 reading on grade level for all students
- Grade 5 advanced mathematics
- Grades 6–8 proficiency or above in all areas of the Maryland State Assessments (MSA)
- High school passing all subjects on the MSA
- High school Advanced Placement course participation and performance for all groups and subgroups of students
- Grade 12 SAT score of 1600 or higher

Through M-STAT the district took on the key leverage point of AP course participation and performance. Based on the research, the team knew that if a student got a certain score on the PSAT test, he or she had the potential to be in high-level, rigorous courses. It also follows that participation in rigorous coursework improves performance on the SAT, another key leverage point. The team used the data to identify the PSAT participation rates at all 23 high schools and found that in many schools the participation rate was low.

Tackling low participation on the PSAT as their first challenge, the team set the goal of 100 percent participation in every school. Although the team encountered resistance from schools around the goal's high level, they required each school to devise its own plan for increasing participation. Schools came up with creative

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pace," says Weast. A tacit agreement had emerged with the district's middle class: "Don't remove any of our privileges, maintain good press, and we won't join others around the country in white flight," says school board member Sharon Cox.

Part of this tacit agreement played out in a preoccupation with treating things equally across schools. For teachers of the underserved, this amounted to a version of "fairness" that was not fair at all. To appease the middle class, the district divided resources equally regardless of need. For example, instead of concentrating Title I funds at the schools with only the highest levels of poverty, Title I monies were spread across approximately 50 schools with poverty levels of about 35 to 85 percent.

When Dr. Weast arrived, he chose to concentrate federal funds in schools that had the highest poverty rates, beginning at 50 percent. This action resulted in the identification

of fewer Title I schools (21 versus 50) and allowed schools to receive enough funding to make a difference in student achievement. In addition, Title I schools transitioned from targeted-assistance models to schoolwide programs that allowed flexibility to respond to the needs of students and families and a focus on comprehensive school reform.

At the same time, a committee was formed to recommend systematic, "scientifically based" strategies to support student achievement. The Title I model that was developed included an extended-day and extended-year program and specified staffing such as a part-time math content coach, a gifted and talented teacher, and supplemental ESOL teachers, as well as training in using data to improve student achievement.

In terms of district organization and culture, what Weast found was highly decentralized but by no means collaborative. Principals described themselves as "mayors." Instead of acting as a community

of leaders invested in the success of the entire district, principals acted more as autonomous czars charged with "controlling" their own communities. According to Weast, like a teeter-totter that had moved too far off its fulcrum to one side, the system had moved so far to the side of site-based autonomy that it could no longer function coherently.

When Weast was hired in 1999, he and the board brought a new level of intensity to attacking the achievement gap. The district had some foundations to build upon, having long had a progressive board of education, according to Chief Operating Officer Larry Bowers. Quality Integrated Policy, which aimed to address changing racial and economic demographics, had been in place since the mid-1970s. In the 1980s, magnet programs were developed to address increasing racial isolation. Under Weast's immediate predecessor in the 1990s, the board adopted Success for Every Student, which lowered class size

strategies to raise participation, such as having pancake breakfasts the morning of the test and eliminating test avoidance by informing students that any student not in school on test day would be required to take the test on the next day they came. PSAT participation improved more than 20 percent in the first year.

Once schools knew that full participation was not optional, the team had the scores they needed to analyze patterns and understand inequities in course taking among specific groups. What they found across the board were high-scoring African American and Hispanic students who were not enrolled in honors or AP classes. Deputy Superintendent and M-STAT team member Frieda Lacey believed that the best way to find out why this was happening was to visit schools and talk with students. When

M-STAT team members met with students one on one, they heard a variety of explanations, including that students were told that there was no room in AP classes.

Lacey recounts the story of Arthur, a Latino student who scored 63 on the math portion of the PSAT. She told him, "You have the highest score of all the students I am visiting; you should be in AP and honors courses." Arthur told her, "I'm a little lazy and [have] ADD and don't want to work that hard." Lacey asked him what he would take if he could choose anything. Arthur replied, "Statistics." They went to the counselor's office and enrolled him in the AP Statistics class. He passed the class with a B, scored a 4 on the AP exam, and now attends American University. The M-STAT team continues to follow

up with the students they have moved into rigorous courses.

The Office of School Performance (OSP) developed a user-friendly tool called the Honors AP Information Tool (HAPIT), which they expect principals and guidance counselors to use to access data related to course enrollment, PSAT performance, course selection, standardized test scores, marking-period grades, and overall grade-point averages. HAPIT ensures that schools quickly identify students who are not enrolled in high-level courses but who have the profile to be successful.

The M-STAT team is currently taking on high-level math performance at 5th and 8th grades as yet another key leverage point in closing achievement gaps.

—Deborah Winking

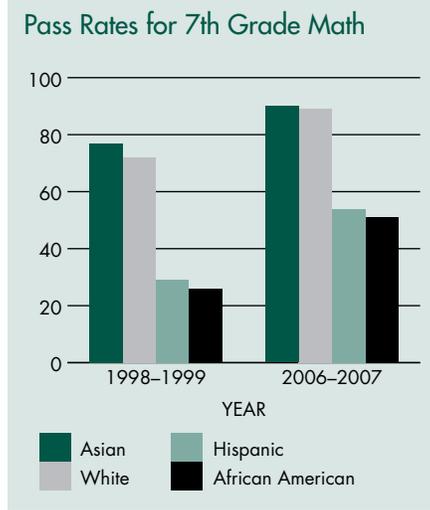
in 1st and 2nd grade and increased time devoted to reading. During this period the district worked with the University of Maryland's Center for Quality and Productivity; and under Weast, Total Quality Management processes continued to improve efforts to monitor data for continuous organizational improvement.

Although problems had been identified, the district needed a sharper, more systemic approach if yawning achievement gaps were to be substantially narrowed and ultimately eliminated. Before 1999, according to Chief Academic Officer Jody Leleck, the district was "looking at data that made us feel good. For example, we would compare African American children in a school to all African American children in MCPS instead of to all children in MCPS. It was a way of not seeing the racial gap." At the same time, a mentality that Deputy Superintendent Frieda Lacey termed "missionary-like" toward poor, black, and Hispanic children—"we have to protect and

help these unfortunate ones"—co-opted and undermined progress among these groups.

Sizing up dramatically shifting demographics, the urbanization of a suburban district, and a long-standing focus on appeasement, Weast described the changing forces in MCPS as a mathematical quandary: "Over time the ratio among different groups of students with different subscores had changed. Folks could no longer hide behind averages; even the averages were going down."

According to a 1999 *Washington Post* article, "African American and Hispanic students' scores lag behind their white and Asian peers'. For example, on the seventh-grade math test, 77 percent of Asian students met the standard and 72 percent of white students did. But the standard was met by only 29 percent of Hispanic and 26 percent of African American students. And county data show those gaps have remained stubbornly consistent over the years."



Those gaps had narrowed considerably by 2007, when the Maryland Report Card included the following pass rates for MCPS on the Maryland School Assessment for 7th grade math: Asian and Pacific, 90.2 percent; white, 89.1; Hispanic, 54.2 percent; and African American, 51.2 percent.

A critical leverage point for narrowing gaps and improving achieve-

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Leveraging Technology to Improve Reading

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Montgomery County Public Schools' efforts at systemic improvement emphasize student performance in the early years, beginning with full-day kindergarten. Superintendent Jerry Weast and former Deputy Superintendent John Porter were looking for a tool that would give them a handle on early reading performance and help early-elementary teachers to improve their instruction in literacy.

A joint venture between Wireless Generation and MCPS led to the creation of mCLASS:Reading-3D, which uses Palm Pilot technology to put the power of comprehensive literacy assessment in the hands of every primary teacher. The assessment itself has two parts. The first is an

automated version of the Assessment Program—Primary Reading (APPR), a paper-and-pencil reading fluency and comprehension assessment that was developed and validated within the county and used since 2002. The second part is an automated version of the nationally recognized foundational skills assessment DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills) developed at the University of Oregon.

Some hand-held-technology applications have been justly criticized for oversimplifying the complexities of teaching and learning. mCLASS:Reading-3D, however, assesses reading in-depth and takes into account whole-language and phonetic approaches to reading. It includes phonemic awareness, letter recognition, segmentation, fluency, comprehension, and writing, allowing teachers to better understand their students as readers from all dimensions, hence the moniker "3D."

mCLASS:Reading-3D has helped teachers at Bel Pre Primary School better meet the needs of all their children. Bel Pre, which serves mostly African American and Latino students, began schoolwide use of mCLASS:Reading-3D in fall 2005, along with 120 other elementary schools in MCPS. The tool showed compelling advantages. According to John Porter, "Teachers no longer had to manually juggle a pencil, paper, and a stopwatch while listening to readers."

Bel Pre uses mCLASS to assess each student at the beginning of the year and to reassess all students quarterly thereafter. Depending on students' individual needs, they are monitored on specific skills as frequently as every 10 to 14 days. Palm sync stations make data available immediately and with a few clicks generate individual student, group, and classroom reports. These reports let teachers, the reading

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ment for all students has been a tight focus on the instructional core.

Enhancing the Instructional Core

According to the founders of Harvard's Public Education Leadership Project, or PELP, three interrelated elements form the core of a coherent system of public education: (1) teachers' knowledge and skills; (2) students' engagement in their own learning; and (3) academically challenging content. Concentrated work in these three areas, and aligning the system to coherently support them, has been central to the progress that MCPS has made.

Teachers. To improve pedagogy and build a high-performing teaching force, MCPS began requiring that all teachers take the Skillful Teacher course. Developed by Research

for Better Teaching and using an effort-based intelligence model, this 36-hour course aligns with the district mantra that all students can achieve high standards with effort, practice, and a carefully scaffolded curriculum. It focuses on cultivating collegiality and experimentation among teachers, expands teachers' repertoire of instructional strategies, and teaches effective skills for peer support and observation.

Recognizing that to sustain teaching improvement they had to build the capacity of administrators to lead for instructional improvement, the district adopted the Observing and Analyzing Teaching (OAT) course, in which participants examine knowledge of teaching, are introduced to MCPS professional standards, and develop skills in effective communication with teachers about teaching to promote improvement. The district also

encouraged and tracked numbers of national board-certified teachers within its ranks.

Student engagement. MCPS is using relevance, acceleration, and student voice to increase student engagement in the learning process. Gaithersburg High School (see p. 11) has a career-focused structure that combines real-life relevance, workplace experiences, and high standards to capture and hold student interest.

Content. Before 1999, at least 14 different reading series were being implemented at various schools, and although the district's Department of Curriculum and Instruction did develop curriculum and lists of district-approved instructional programs, schools were free to opt out and choose their own approaches. An early priority of the Weast administration was the development of a common curriculum. The shift

specialist, and the principal see at a glance where each child is as a reader. All reports are color coded. Blue indicates above grade level; green signifies at grade level; red and yellow indicate students below benchmark. The vivid visual pictures help teachers stay on top of students who need support. The tool provides information for teachers to use in generating an individual action plan for every child below benchmark. According to the principal, Carmen van Zutphen, "The red and yellow kids are the ones we are talking about all the time."

Beverly Belin, Bel Pre reading specialist, reports that mCLASS has helped her better target professional development for staff. She and van Zutphen have administrative access to all teacher reports and so can see where each class is at any particular time. "Having all the information for all students in each teacher's class in one place lets me

see where I need to give support. If I see students stuck at a Level 6 for three or four weeks, I am able to offer teachers new strategies for working with these kids." She uses reports generated by mCLASS in meetings with each teacher three times a year to help them develop goals for their children.

Because the system allows for the sharing of information county-wide, reading performance records follow children when they change schools. According to van Zutphen, for a high-mobility school like Bel Pre, this is critical. "The minute a new child joins us, we have their data and can begin planning instruction."

Use of mCLASS has greatly increased the amount and quality of feedback that is available for the teacher and the child. The principal reports that it has led to a higher degree of professionalism among her teachers. Teachers are coming together around the data, and when

they do so they are speaking a common language. Grade-level teams are tracking their progress toward shared goals. For example, pre-K students must identify 30 letters and letter sounds, kindergartners must know 25 sight words, 1st graders must know 75 sight words, and 2nd graders must develop brief constructed responses from what they have read.

Finally, using technology has helped the principal in her role as instructional leader. "Now whenever I observe a teacher, I look at a whole-class scan to see if there are patterns. I can look at a snapshot of five children that are struggling in her class. I can see if the teacher is regularly monitoring progress, and, if necessary, I can give her more supports. With the data in hand, there are more questions I can ask. "

—Deborah Winking

has led to predictability, vertical alignment of content, and increased rigor. Under Weast the curriculum has been homegrown, with teachers helping to write curriculum and assessments that are aligned with both state and national standards. The rollout of the common curriculum is deliberate as well. A long-range plan projects out to 2014 for curriculum revision and adoption. Additionally, the district requires all schools to devote a minimum of 90 minutes to reading and 60 minutes to math for all students daily.

Theory of Action

Jerry Weast is most at home with a chalkboard or a whiteboard when he's talking about his district's change journey. As he talks, the loops, arrows, and waves grow more elaborate. But the MCPS theory of action can, in fact, be boiled down to a few sentences: If students are

going to achieve high standards, then the workforce that powers that system must be excellent. Workforce excellence is the fusion of high expectations and an aligned and rigorous curriculum that is taught by content-competent educators under the guidance of strong leaders. Leaders at all levels must be relentless at parsing the data to understand what is and isn't working to advance the achievement for all students.

The following strategies flow from the MCPS theory of action:

- Communicating the need for change
- Publicly addressing issues relating to race, ethnicity, and class
- Varying inputs to create equitable results for all
- Purposefully sequencing reforms
- Using data regularly and strategically to attack key leverage points
- Collaborating and sharing power
- Holding high expectations for all

- Maintaining careful balance between site-based management and centralization

Communicating the Need for Change

Weast describes systemic educational improvement as successive waves that leaders have to get in front of: "As you have one wave washing ashore, you have another wave inbound." For him, the first of those successive waves was to accurately and clearly communicate the problem. He visited with 8,000 teachers and held 13 community forums where he illustrated that Montgomery County comprised two distinct zones. As a student, teacher, or administrator, depending on the zone in which you lived or worked, you experienced vastly different racial, cultural, and

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socioeconomic conditions. To build a sense of urgency for change, it was essential to communicate this reality internally and externally in a way that the average citizen could understand. Weast did this by naming these areas the “red zone” and the “green zone.” The red zone, encompassing the urban core of the county, serves a student population made up of 75 percent minority students, 37 percent FARMS, and 14 percent English language learners. In the red zone, educational achievement was comparatively poor. In the green zone, 38 percent of students are minority, 9 percent qualify for FARMS, and only 5 percent are English language learners. There, achievement levels were, on the whole, significantly higher.

Green Zone	Red Zone
72,944 students	67,129 students
38% minority	75% minority
9% FARMS	37% FARMS
5% ESOL	14% ESOL

Next, senior district leaders developed “Our Call to Action: Raising the Bar and Closing the Gap,” which was published in 1999 and widely distributed. This 34-page report used charts, graphs, and maps to paint a concrete picture of demographic differences and achievement disparities in the two zones.

Calling Out Race Directly

In MCPS, communicating the problem required calling the question of race directly. Jerry Weast points to two forms of racism that school system leaders must contend with: institutional racism (comprising the structures and systems that perpetuate inequities) and individual racism. Weast is open about

grappling with his own mental model regarding race: “Being a white male I assumed a certain reality,” he says. “I started examining myself and learning about the privileges I take for granted and the expectations I have.”

For Weast, acting to undo institutional racism meant systematically modeling the moral courage he expected of his staff by making public what had been heretofore ignored. A large share of the problem was complacency about the lagging achievement of students who did not look like the upper-middle-class power base within the district. Deputy Superintendent Frieda Lacey noted that whenever this middle-aged white man got up in front of colleagues and business people and talked about race, initially his words would be met with complete silence and looks of disbelief. Former Deputy Superintendent John Porter recalls one of Weast’s first meetings with county politicians, nearly all of them white. “Showing his maps of the red and green zones, Weast said, ‘Our district doesn’t look like you.’” Past superintendents did not put too much emphasis on minority achievement. According to Porter, “What made it different for Dr. Weast was that he was ‘one of them.’ It is like a family member saying we have a problem within our family.”

Once the race question was out in the open, district leaders knew they had to create the capacity to change beliefs and behavior patterns on a large scale. The district’s Office of Organizational Development (OOD) includes a Diversity Training and Development (DTD) team led by Donna Graves. According to Graves, “Issues around race and class are so deeply entrenched that unless you change your knowledge base you won’t change practice. For most of us, our own understanding left us with an incomplete and inaccurate understanding of the issue. Without

deep knowledge, you’ll have a superficial fix.”

In MCPS, diversity trainings are not just a politically correct nod to multiculturalism. Each session is purposefully designed to get to the heart of changing patterns of interaction in schools and classrooms. Each session strives to promote culturally competent teaching and learning by requiring participants to (1) build a better understanding of their own culture, (2) build a better understanding of students’ cultures, and (3) use new understandings to create culturally sensitive learning environments and adopt culturally sensitive instructional practices. So, for example, in each workshop participants receive modeling and direct instruction in a culturally sensitive learning practice that they can use in their school or classroom.

The DTD team works to accomplish big goals with a small staff (Graves and four others) by equipping all 104 of the district’s staff development teachers with the skills to infuse equity and diversity training within all content and subject-specific training that they provide. Every staff development teacher is required to be trained in cultural competence and is expected to integrate the learning into the sessions they provide.

Varying Inputs to Create Equitable Results for All

Under Weast the district redefined equity; resources allocated to schools had to vary according to need if there was to be any hope of achieving equitable results for all. Historically, inequality of educational outcomes had been perpetuated by dividing resources evenly regardless of greater needs in some areas. Once the disparity in needs had been clearly communicated by the identification of the red and green zones, a defensible rationale

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The Viers Mill Story

In 2004 Viers Mill Elementary became the second Title I school in Montgomery County ever to be honored as a Maryland Blue Ribbon School of Excellence. The previous year Viers Mill had joined the top 30 percent of schools statewide on the Maryland School Assessment. It has since been selected as a 2005 National No Child Left Behind Blue Ribbon School.

It's hard to know what to be more impressed with—the levels of achievement or the rate of progress in gaining those levels. The school wiped out its achievement gap between African American and white students in 3rd grade reading, with both groups attaining a proficiency rate of 100 percent in 2005. Lifting African American students to this level involved nearly doubling their proficiency rate in just two years. During that same two-year period, 3rd graders with limited English proficiency rocketed from a reading proficiency rate of 10 percent to 90 percent. And during those same two years, Hispanic 3rd graders more than doubled their proficiency rate in reading to 89 percent.

Also in 2005, Viers Mill bested its own previous record among Title I schools by achieving a minimum proficiency rate of 76 percent for every racial and ethnic group in reading and mathematics in grades 3, 4, and 5. Not surprisingly, given these various statistics, the school has met all requirements for AYP for several years running.

Of the school's 674 students, 63 percent qualify for free or reduced-price meals; 57 percent are Hispanic, 16 percent are African American, 14 percent are white, and 11 percent are Asian American. Nearly a third of

the students (30 percent) are English language learners, and the school has a mobility rate of 24 percent. Students arrive at Viers Mill from 42 countries, speaking 32 languages. The attendance rate is 96 percent.

Six Key Characteristics

One ingredient contributing greatly to the Viers Mill success story is the district's strategic efforts to improve school performance with strong emphasis on elementary education and in schools in the "red zone," where the school is located. Through these district initiatives,

 **It's hard to know what to be more impressed with—the levels of achievement or the rate of progress in gaining those levels.**

Viers Mill benefited from full-day kindergarten, reduced class size, a full-time staff development teacher, standards-based curriculum, diagnostic assessments, parent involvement, and extended learning opportunities.

Perhaps equal in importance to districtwide factors are site-specific attributes. A case study of Viers Mill developed by the district's Professional Learning Communities Institute identifies six key characteristics without which such breathtaking results would not have been achieved:

1. Leadership
2. Culture
3. Resources
4. Instruction and interventions
5. Data-driven focus
6. Professional development¹

#1: Leadership

James Virga was the principal of Viers Mill during its steep ascent to state and national Blue Ribbon status. Matthew Devan, who had worked under Virga's tutelage, is now the principal. Devan sees his charge being to "refine and move forward."

Members of the school's staff identify the principal as playing an essential role in their success. Teachers and parents, according to the district-developed case study on Viers Mill, "point to the principal and the staff development teacher as examples of the kind of leaders who continually raise expectations and challenge the status quo through an analysis of data."

There's also a general recognition that every staff member has leadership responsibilities. The case study identifies four leadership characteristics specific to Viers Mill:

1. A drive to seek information for staff and students
2. An ability to prioritize
3. A devotion to success
4. An ability to motivate and provide feedback

#2: Culture

Viers Mill has a culture of collaboration, support, and high commitment, in which current staff members, not just the principal, are engaged in hiring new staff. Teaming is a critical success factor at Viers Mill; it's a focal point in the process of hiring new staff, and it illustrates why culture is so influential. Team participation is a key source of professional satisfaction in this school, and so it contributes to staff stability. That continuity, in turn, contributes to a

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much more consistent instructional program than would otherwise have been the case.

#3: Resources

As a Title I red zone school, Viers Mill receives both federal and district resources beyond what some other elementary schools in the district receive. That's true of a number of MCPS schools whose results have not been as noteworthy.

According to the district case study on the school, "Decisions on where to direct the prioritized funding are made collaboratively by the staff at Viers Mill and parent leaders. Paraprofessionals, teachers, and administrators say they each play an important role in the discussion and decision-making process." That decision-making process has led, for example, to increases in staffing focused on assistance to students who have limited English proficiency.

#4: Instruction and Intervention

Viers Mill places a high priority on developing strong beginning-reading abilities in its youngest students and then ensuring that grade-level or higher proficiency is sustained from year to year. In a school with 24 percent mobility, it is perhaps significant that particular attention is given to new arrivals who are not yet reading at grade level. The emphasis on reading is evident in all subject areas and at all grade levels.

Viers Mill staff members are encouraged to be flexible and innova-

tive in addressing students' individual needs. This approach might entail moving students into classrooms where one teacher is better able to meet their needs than the other. And teachers seek help—problem-solving advice, teaching tools, and different perspectives—from colleagues in addressing the needs of their students.



Members of the school's staff identify the principal as playing an essential role in their success . . . There's also a general recognition that every staff member has leadership responsibilities.

#5: Data-Driven Focus

Collecting and analyzing data to improve instructional practice and school programs has become integral to the Viers Mill way of doing things. Teachers routinely develop formative assessments to gauge the quality and extent of student learning, and they use the results to adjust their instruction as needed. The school leadership team collects and analyzes student performance data and uses the data to prioritize schoolwide efforts and to address any lapses in consistency or alignment across and within grade levels.

#6: Professional Development

Ongoing professional learning is a crucial part of Viers Mill's suc-

cess. Former principal Virga, who is currently the district's associate superintendent for organizational development, says that "having a full-time staff development teacher changed my life." He indicates that the school's staff development teacher, Susan Freiman, is nearly always in classrooms, observing and coaching teachers.

And according to the district-generated case study, "The principal and staff development teacher are credited by staff for having worked diligently to ensure that training activities are relevant and useful. As a result, teachers say positive things about the types of professional development activities they receive at the school. They appreciate being challenged by thoughtful activities on new instructional practices and reassessments of established methodologies."

A Multifaceted Effort

The success at Viers Mill is the result of a change effort with many elements. The dramatic, rapid, and sustained improvement in student performance at the school is the product of a combination of school factors and district supports, each contributing to significant benefits for all students. ◀

—Scott Thompson

¹ *Moving Beyond Stereotypes: The Case of Viers Mill Elementary*, by Brian J. Porter, Daniel Curry-Corcoran, and Kecia Addison-Scott, can be obtained by contacting Brian Edwards at 301-279-3381.

The Gaithersburg Story

Imagine you are a 9th grader at Gaithersburg High School in Montgomery County and you are opening the letter you have been anxiously awaiting. The first line reads, “Congratulations, your application for participation in the Academy of Finance at Gaithersburg High School has been approved.” Your response: “Yessss!” The letter enumerates the benefits of academy participation, including the possibility of paid summer internships, use of state-of-the-art technology, scholarships, and opportunities to enroll in coursework that yields college credit.

Gaithersburg is diverse, with just over 2,100 students who represent 40 countries and 19 languages. This school, whose student body is 27.2 percent African American, 10 percent Asian, 29.6 percent Hispanic, and 32.8 percent white, uses choice, personalization, high standards, and acceleration to increase student engagement for success—and the data show it is working.

According to former principal Darryl Williams, Gaithersburg, a “red zone” school in which 53 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price meals, has not always held such high expectations for kids: “The school’s reputation in the county was ‘Gaithersburg can’t be that great—not with that mix of students.’” To the contrary, Gaithersburg has leveraged its diversity as a strength in becoming a world-class school.

Williams describes at first not liking being labeled a “red zone” school. “At principal and community superintendent meetings, they forced us to look at the data and explore the impacts of institutional racism using a framework drawn from *Courageous Conversations About Race* by Glenn Singleton and Curtis Linton. Dr. Weast kept explaining

the importance of identifying the zones—not to stigmatize us, but to get us the resources we needed to be successful with all kids.”

Gaithersburg has taken seriously the mantra of the new 3 Rs for secondary education: relevance, rigor, and relationships. The first step was moving from a comprehensive program organized around subject-area departments to a schoolwide interdisciplinary academy structure. Williams set the stage at a memorable staff meeting at which he pinned a picture of every senior on a bulletin board. Teachers and staff were asked to use post-it notes to list three things they knew about individual students beyond name and grade. When the entire staff and faculty had completed the task, the board was only sparsely dotted with post-its. This experience created a compelling reason for teachers to change how they related to students.

Moving to four academies, each with multiple career pathways, meant changing the classroom schedule and what teachers were doing with time during classes, and raising the quality of instruction throughout the school. Gaithersburg leaders fueled initial changes by building on the success of the Academy of Finance, the only existing academy in the otherwise comprehensive high school. “If it can be done with finance, it can be done elsewhere” became the rallying cry. To build momentum and commitment, teachers were given the option of choosing an academy that held interest for them. School leaders began to hear discussions in the halls and in teacher’s lounges about how instruction might be shaped in particular academies, and creative ideas for how electives could be used to support the instructional

core. Although they recognized that departments would remain an important vehicle for monthly meetings around familiar content, the faculty came to see the move to academies as essential to building the student ownership necessary to raise achievement.

Relevance

The academy structure is made up of four overarching Signature Academies: the Academy of Leadership and Education, the Academy of Business Studies, the Academy of Arts and Communication, and the Academy of Science and Technology. Multiple career pathways within each of these allow students to specialize in fields such as early childhood education, finance, auto body entrepreneurship, marketing, broadcast media, journalism, information technology, and sports medicine, among others. Academies combine real-life relevance and high standards to capture and hold student interest. For example, a drive through a Gaithersburg neighborhood showcases a block of high-end homes built by students in the construction trades pathway. Via a grant from NASDAQ, students in the Academy of Finance work on a real-time trading floor with a stock ticker and TV screens tuned into the global financial news.

Rigor

Two of Gaithersburg’s academies are National Academy Foundation (NAF) Academies. NAF sets the “gold standard” for high school academies nationwide. According to Dyan Harrison, Gaithersburg academy coordinator, “Having NAF academies on campus has raised the bar for all academies schoolwide.”

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The Information Technology Academy (ITA) is open to all Gaithersburg students, but the program is so packed with content and the requirements for graduation are so challenging that the academy spans 9th through 12th grade instead of beginning in 10th grade, as do most high school academies. To recruit students, staff go to the middle schools and invite students who have a strong interest in technology. But interest alone is not enough. Completion of algebra before 9th grade is a prerequisite. Once in high school, ITA students enjoy the safety net available to students in the schoolwide self-contained 9th Grade Academy, but their coursework focuses on higher math and technology courses. As members of an NAF Academy, in addition to successfully completing advanced math and technology coursework, all ITA students must complete at least one college-level course and a paid internship before graduation. In their junior year, ITA students seek internships in Web design, local area network (LAN) management, and networking in small and large businesses within the community. With an internship under their belts, as seniors ITA students are enrolled in a combination of high school and college-level courses.

The academy structure uses interest to temper the fear that many students harbor around subjects in which they feel weak. For example, within the Academy of Business Studies, students interested in cosmetology entrepreneurship must take chemistry, math, anatomy, and physiology. Like cosmetology, other course sequences in the trades pathways include honors and AP English, math, and science courses.

High expectations across academies translate into postsecondary options for students. Kayla, a graduate from the cosmetology entrepre-

neurship pathway, is now enrolled in a four-year university pursuing a degree in secondary education. She describes being prepared well: "In addition to anatomy, biology, and physiology, my counselor encouraged me to take AP Psychology and English Literature—so I had a lot of options open to me."

Gaithersburg has worked diligently to meet the district goals for all high schools of 100 percent PSAT participation and eliminating the participation and performance gap between white and nonwhite students in AP and honors courses. Gaithersburg staff describe various indicators that they use for targeting students with ability to perform well—not necessarily only those students who have high test scores. According to staff, many times these students didn't even realize they had AP potential. High interest can fuel the motivation to stick with and succeed in an AP course for which students may otherwise feel they do not have the aptitude.

According to Dyan Harrison, "One place we look for AP potential is within students with strong motivation related to a particular area." Other indicators include parent support and course history. The school's AP coordinator notes that each year the number of students participating in AP courses has increased. Teachers and counselors also encourage students to take honors courses as opposed to lower-level math and English courses as a way to ease them into AP courses.

Counselors are trained to coach all students toward increasingly rigorous programs. According to an African American girl in the Academy of Finance, "My counselor has always pushed me into AP courses." She seemed perplexed when asked how race has affected her ability to achieve at Gaithersburg. After considering the question, she responded, "Race has been a non-barrier at Gaithersburg."

Relationships

At Gaithersburg, failure is not an option; it is an opportunity to learn. Gaithersburg now boasts 600 students on the honor roll and 1,000 students who have improved their GPA by one or more points.

Academies have allowed faculty to break the school into manageable units so teachers can get to know students one-to-one and follow their progress over time. Another important way that Gaithersburg teachers are getting to know students personally is by using data to understand individual student needs. Ninth Grade Academy lead teacher Edith Verdejo says, "Now when we have problems, we look to the data to figure out how to address them. We analyze the problem, look for causes, and talk with other teachers. We are no longer satisfied with the explanation 'This student does nothing.'"

In the academies, teachers have the opportunity to meet twice weekly to plan and discuss student needs. The 9th Grade Academy uses collaborative action planning to analyze problems, collect data, and determine what is happening in the lives of students that is impeding their success. For some students who have struggled for years, the end goal is to address problems and support them through graduation. When these students move to 10th grade, teachers are alerted so that supports are seamless. Another important piece is enlisting parents in supporting students. Through their award-winning school Web page (designed by students), Gaithersburg is educating and involving parents sooner.

District Support

Like all MCPS schools, Gaithersburg is part of a feeder pattern that includes one high school, two middle schools, and seven elementary schools. Each feeder pattern is led by a community superintendent

and staffed with one to three performance directors. The feeder pattern structure lends itself to K–12 vertical articulation via ongoing meetings and joint professional development.

District-provided professional development is described as “very intentional and long-range.” Each piece includes clearly delineated goals and steps and is aligned with the district’s overall vision and mission. Professional development has included teacher involvement in curriculum revision, coursework, site-embedded offerings, and supports such as making substitutes available so that teachers can observe in other classrooms and plan together.

The district also provides a full-time literacy coach and an algebra lead teacher. Carolann M. Engel, a staff development teacher, describes a multifaceted approach to coaching: “Literacy coaches work mainly with English teachers; algebra coaches work with the algebra team, analyzing student data, modeling lessons, and encouraging peer observations.” Coaches have also joined teachers during their planning sessions.

Gaithersburg is building its capacity to implement instructional change using informal structures like literacy “Chat and Chews” that teachers attend voluntarily during their planning time and formal

structures like the schoolwide rotational staff meetings. During these meetings, teachers not only share their own best practices, but they also are required to choose from 10 sessions based on their interests. Increasingly, faculty meeting time has become instructional time. Engel notes, “We do not have to stand and deliver anymore. All professional development is instruction-oriented and builds in teacher choice.” ◀

—Deborah Winking

[Editor’s note: Darryl Williams is now the principal at Montgomery Blair High School, the largest high school in MCPS.]

Raising the Bar, Closing the Gap

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emerged for giving more resources to areas with greatest need.

The directive to raise the bar *and* close the gaps created a paradox for some. How could the district raise standards for all and at the same time provide the intensive supports necessary to move up those in the bottom tier? Educating the district began by having the board look at disaggregated data. According to board member Sharon Cox, “There was a lot of interest in the green zone; people wondered, ‘How are you going to do that without taking away resources from us?’ We just kept hammering that this issue is not about equity of resource allocation, it is about equity of results. We had to assure people who were happy with the status quo that their children would not lose anything.”

It was difficult to break the mindset that every school needed to get the same level of resources. According to Deputy Superintendent Lacey, “What Dr. Weast did was unbelievably courageous. He had to get tremendous buy-in to get the support of affluent parents.”

District leaders first identified the 60 most highly impacted elementary schools, which represented about half of the elementary schools in the system. All were located in the red zone, and concentrated in these schools were 80 percent of the district’s elementary-level FARMS students, 75 percent of ESOL students, 78 percent of Hispanic students, and 70 percent of African American students. In all, an additional \$16 million was allocated to the focus schools. These funds were used to reduce class size and improve the quality of teaching by beefing up professional development. All focus schools had full-day kindergarten and received a full-time reading specialist, a half-time math content coach, and a half-time gifted and talented teacher.

Creating equitable results was also about smarter use of existing resources. Jody Leleck recounts that because of an enabling attitude people had told themselves that they could not expect too much from “these kids.” Schools had not been using their resources to focus on the core mission. As expectations began to rise, money that in the past was used for field trips was targeted

directly at improved instruction for the students who needed it.

Purposeful Sequencing of Reforms

The complexities of whole-system transformation sometimes lead districts to one of two responses: do nothing because of the sheer enormity of the task or introduce a rapid-fire succession of disconnected initiatives that burn out staff and minimize success. In MCPS, change processes have been thoughtfully sequenced to ensure success.

Weast says that interventions must fit within an overall strategy, be strong enough to handle constant change, and be well enough understood to be faithfully enacted. “They have to be measurable,” he adds, “and you have to build the capacity to execute them; and they have to be understandable and something that every employee decides to contribute to.”

To determine interventions, leaders had to identify the “trend benders.” Weast and his executive staff asked themselves, “What are the two or three things that, if changed, would actually bend

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Professional Learning Communities Institute

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Building on successes of individual schools like Viers Mill Elementary and Broad Acres Elementary, leaders of MCPS developed the Professional Learning Communities Institute (PLCI). As part of a collaborative effort of district administrators and the leadership of all three professional associations, a cross-functional team was developed to discover how MCPS might access the untapped resources residing in many of its schools.

Schools apply to participate in the institute, and about 10 or 11 schools are accepted into each cohort. Each participating school identifies a team of 12 to 15 educators, and the full cohort of school teams comes together for a full day of professional development every two months. The expressed mission of the PLCI is “to increase student achievement and to eliminate the achievement gap in all PLCI schools.”

Participants read education and business case studies before sessions, including case studies of three MCPS elementary schools, and then engage in small-group reflec-

tion and whole-group debriefing to explore implications for improving their own schools. They also engage in activities aimed at establishing and supporting a professional learning community culture back home. School teams have opportunities to work individually on school assessment and action planning. PLCI staff members make themselves available to teams as facilitators and resources.

In between the day-long sessions, participating schools receive ongoing, school-specific support from the PLCI team via site visits or phone or e-mail consultation. In some cases PLCI staff conduct professional development workshops for the full staff of PLCI schools as a follow-up.

All PLCI schools are eligible to apply for as much as \$10,000 for Baldrige-Guided School Improvement planning. These funds can be used for supporting collaborative work among teachers, instructional enhancements, academic interventions, and family-school-community partnership efforts.

To date, two cohorts of schools have gone through the program, and it is beginning to yield results with groups of students who traditionally have not been well served. ◀

—Scott Thompson and Deborah Winking

Using Data to Attack Key Leverage Points

Weast describes himself as always trying to discern truth. “When I find ‘truth’ the question is, what do I do about it?” He needed to be able to look at both leading and lagging indicators and to put data in front of administrators and teachers.

At MCPS the Department of Shared Accountability (DSA) uses the district’s extensive data warehouse, incorporating student information and performance data, human resources data, financial data, and trend analyses, to provide the superintendent and district leaders with information on leading and lagging indicators of progress. The department is also developing a Professional Development Organization system that not only will allow all staff to manage professional development activities, but also will enable leaders to ask more complex questions about professional development and its impact on achievement. To get the information to those who need to make changes, DSA develops brief documents that are reviewed by the Executive Leadership Team, the board, principals, and teacher leaders and are posted on the district’s Web site.

DSA and the Office of Curriculum and Instructional Programs are also taking the lead in developing online assessments. While NCLB requires annual testing in grades 3 through 8 and in at least one grade in high school, the district had an interest in assessing student literacy development in kindergarten through 2nd grade, where much of the district’s educational investment is concentrated. The district partnered with Wireless Generation to develop a unique Palm Pilot version of Running Records, which has increased the reliability and validity of assessment results and has given teachers a more efficient way to assess and guide reading instruction for each child.

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the trend?” What would change the long-standing pattern of poor, African American, and Hispanic students almost always ending up at the bottom in terms of achievement? MCPS surveyed students and graduates and used the data to identify what they thought to be their best shots at bending the trend.

What emerged were early childhood education and college and work readiness. MCPS determined that by beginning at both ends of

the K–12 continuum and working toward the middle they would have the greatest chance of altering the achievement trajectory. They believed that by starting at the ends and connecting the dots they would force the middle to change.

Interventions include determining what college readiness and work readiness look like, ratcheting up standards K–12, increasing AP and honors participation in high school, introducing a common curriculum for all, and providing smaller class sizes and all-day kindergarten.

Collaboration and Shared Power

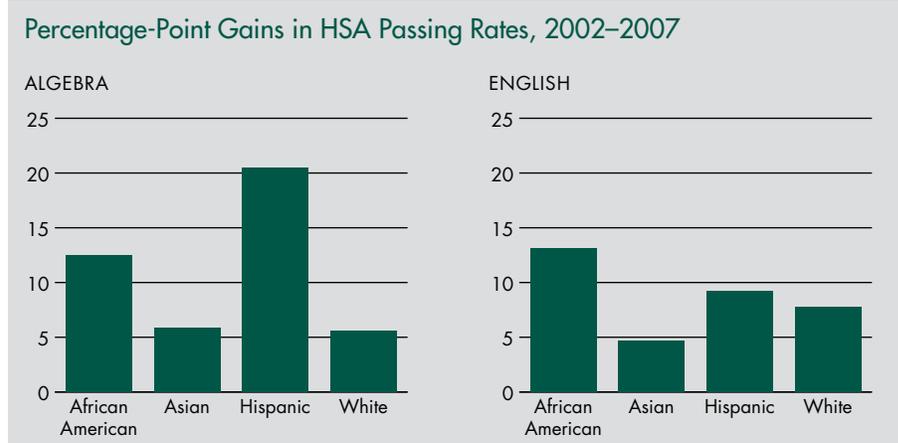
Bonnie Cullison, president of the Montgomery County Education Association, and Rebecca Newman, president of the Montgomery County Association of Administrators and Supervisory Personnel, describe a “we’re in this together” attitude in how they work with the superintendent and the school board. According to Cullison, “Dr. Weast brought the associations in from square one. There is complete transparency. The unions sit down at the table with the district leaders to craft the budget.”

According to Weast, power is something to be shared, not hoarded. “Power is replenishable. The team thinks better than an isolated leader.”

High Expectations for All

When student data show low achievement, the tendency is to try to remediate to bring struggling students to an average level because of local and state pressure. A common adult response to the failure of so many poor, African American, and Hispanic children has been “Back to basics!” But MCPS is not satisfied with “basic,” “average,” or “acceptable.” Instead of lowering standards for “those poor children,” the district accelerated standards.

Chief Academic Officer Jody Leleck says that building a culture of high expectations for students as well as adults was “the painstaking work of changing heads and hearts.” According to Deputy Superintendent Frieda Lacey, “Each time higher expectations were set there was a new battle to fight. There was always a group ready to say that it could not be done.” The district moved from having little or no concrete expectations for kindergartners to expecting them to read a minimum of 25 sight words. Now students leave kindergarten reading, and the gap in reading level between African American,



Hispanic, and white kindergartners has been virtually eliminated.

As students meet and exceed expectations, the focus continues on acceleration for all. As the district works from primary grades and high school toward the middle, the goal for intermediate-level students is to master 6th grade math in 5th grade. To date, the number of 5th graders taking Math A (a 6th grade math course) has increased from 193 in 2000 to 4,500 in 2006. Similarly, the goal for the completion of middle school is that all 8th graders master Algebra I so that they enter high school prepared for Geometry and Algebra II. In the 2006–2007 school year, 56 percent of the district’s 8th graders completed Algebra I, up from 43 percent in 2000–2001. The goal at high school is 100 percent participation in PSAT and eliminating the gap between white and nonwhite students in participation in AP and honors courses.

The targets are rigorous. MCPS believes that they must increase rigor to be successful—that is the essence of their promise to raise the bar as well as close the gap.

Balancing Centralization and Decentralization

Given the long history of fragmentation, leaders had much work to do to develop systemwide cohesion. Weast says this was essential to realize change. “If fragmentation is not addressed, there comes a time

when your system becomes unable to metabolize change,” Weast says, “and the system shoots off a lot of disjointed activity. A series of solo leaders emerge, eventually dissolving into charters and other subunits that vie for stakeholders.”

Results

Although much work remains and Weast would say another wave of change is on the horizon, MCPS has come a long way in breaking recognizable patterns between race, class, and achievement. The latest gauge of indicators shows progress and opportunities for improvement on most of the key leverage points the district has identified for college and work readiness.

Kindergarten reading. In 2002, fairly wide gaps separated kindergarten students who were at or above end-of-year benchmarks in text reading: 65 percent of white students in the green zone were at or above the benchmarks, compared with 56 percent of African American students in the red zone and 48 percent of Hispanic students in the red zone. By 2006, all students were performing significantly higher, and the gaps had nearly disappeared: 90 percent of white students in the green zone were at or above the benchmarks, compared with 87 percent of African American students in the red zone and 85 percent of

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Hispanic students in the red zone. On the whole, the percentage of kindergarten students at or above the performance standard in reading climbed from 39 percent in 2001 to 88 percent in 2006.

Participation in higher math in elementary school. In 2006–2007, 45 percent of 5th grade students were enrolled in Mathematics A or a higher-level mathematics course, representing an 8.6-percentage-point increase from 2005–2006. In 2007–2008, there are 4,809 grade 5 students (48 percent of the class) in higher-level math courses; this is in contrast to the 196 grade 5 students enrolled in 2000–2001.

Performance in AP courses. In MCPS, 16 percent of African American and 33 percent of Hispanic students in the class of 2006 scored a 3 or higher on at least one AP exam, exceeding the national average of 15 percent for all students. This may be explained in part by an exceptionally high participation rate: half

of African American students and nearly half of Hispanic students in the class of 2006 enrolled in at least one honors or AP course.

Performance on High School Assessments (HSA). Since 2002, gains in the passing rate on High School Assessments made by African American and Hispanic students have outpaced gains made by white and Asian students.

In 2006–2007, 77.8 percent of all Algebra 1 HSA test-takers passed the test. Although a larger percentage of Asian and white students passed the exam than African American and Hispanic students, the gap is narrowing. Since 2002, African American and Hispanic students showed greater gains in their percent passing than Asian and white students. (Percentage-point increases for African Americans were 12.5; Hispanics, 20.5; Asians, 5.9; whites, 5.6.)

In 2006–2007, 77.2 percent of all English HSA test-takers passed the test. Again, although a gap remains, African American and Hispanic students showed greater gains in

percent passing than did Asians and whites. (Percentage-point increases for African Americans were 13.1; Asians, 4.7; Hispanics, 9.2; whites, 7.8). Similar patterns of narrowing gaps were found on the biology and government exams.

SAT participation. Between 2001 and 2005 the total number of MCPS students taking SATs increased 21 percent. The total number of African American students taking the test increased 40 percent, and the total number of Hispanic students taking the exam increased 49 percent. In 2006–2007, MCPS's initiative to place more students on the pathway to college yielded the largest number of students taking the SAT in the history of MCPS (79 percent of the senior class). African American and Hispanic students accounted for more than three-fourths of the 469-student increase, representing the largest participation in district history for either group. ◀

— *Scott Thompson and
Deborah Winking*

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