



# Smart INVESTMENTS<sup>SM</sup>

IN MINNESOTA'S STUDENTS

## Montgomery County School District's Targeted Approach Raises the Bar and Reduces the Gap

By Matt Kane & Amelia Cruver  
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Success in the suburban school district of Maryland's Montgomery County demonstrates how a sustained and multi-faceted effort to both raise the academic bar and close gaps in learning can significantly boost academic performance by students of color and increase it for white students as well.

Tapping into talent at all levels, Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) has

- emphasized equality in educational outcomes instead of inputs
- set high expectations
- measured and monitored progress
- invested in teachers
- set higher education as the goal and mapped out benchmarks from early childhood onward for the path to college readiness.

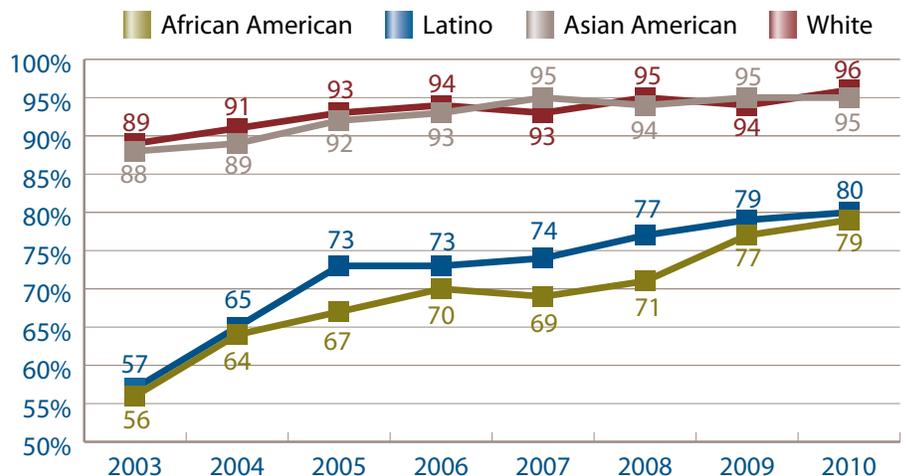
The school district identified a "red zone" where academic achievement lagged and where both students of color and low-income students are concentrated. District leaders built broad support for action to concentrate more resources on red zone students and schools.

The impressive and measurable impacts of the reforms have prompted national attention and several prestigious awards for MCPS.

### A Call to Action

Under leadership from Superintendent Jerry Weast, MCPS in 1999 issued a formal call to action on school reform, highlighting the disparities that plagued the school system and identifying the district's red zone where schools and students struggled. This large school district – one of the 20 largest in the country – had previously downplayed distinctions by race and ethnicity, with the school board approving an improvement plan in the early 1990s only after language about gaps between groups was softened. At the time that "Our Call to Action" was issued in 1999, MCPS was considered a top school district despite challenges, in part because of high-quality education and high achievement scores for students in the middle- and upper-income areas of the county.

### Percentage of Montgomery County 3rd Graders Scoring at Proficient or Advanced for Math on the Maryland School Assessment



Source: Montgomery County Public Schools, The Results Book 2011.



The call to action and its emphasis on disparities within the district set the stage for reforms and progress over the next 10 years. Change did not come quickly or easily, and it involved many different elements. But the key factors for MCPS's success include those examined below.

## Aiming for Equal Outcomes Instead of Equal Inputs

Disparities in educational achievement led district leadership to focus on equality in outcomes for students instead of equal inputs. MCPS has allocated more district funds and other resources for students who face significant obstacles to learning, including poverty and high rates of relocation from school to school. And while MCPS has raised the bar for academic achievement, teachers and schools are expected to adopt varied instructional approaches to best educate their students.

MCPS set common, district-wide standards more rigorous than the State of Maryland's, it assumed that every child can meet rigorous standards, and it acknowledged that different levels of resources and different teaching strategies are needed because children start from different points along the learning spectrum.

The district made a very strong push to win broad support throughout Montgomery County for increasing resources to red zone schools. Some parents in the district's green zone – where students generally score high marks for achievement – worried that increased resources for the red zone would short-change their kids. District leaders argued that the community could no longer ignore the poor education provided to so many of MCPS' students of color and low-income students. But district leaders also coupled the shift in resources for red zone schools with a district-wide move to higher academic standards, providing assurance to parents in the green zone that MCPS would aim to increase achievement for all students. District officials also noted that improvements at the district's struggling schools would lead to increased property values for homeowners throughout the county.

## Setting College as the Goal and Mapping Backward

The Montgomery County school district set a goal that all students finish high school ready for college and well-paid careers. This goal allowed MCPS to map backward – all the way to early childhood programs and interventions – and identify key skills that students must master in order to be college-ready by the end of 12<sup>th</sup> grade. The focus on college readiness provides all students with the chance to pursue a college education, and it prepares those who won't attend college for a world of careers that now demand higher skills, critical thinking, and often post-secondary training for jobs with good pay. Workers with college degrees or other post-secondary training earn significantly more than those with only high school diplomas.

With college readiness as its stake in the ground, MCPS established benchmarks from early childhood through high school graduation that form a path to college success. Dubbed a “value chain approach” by Harvard University, this backward mapping by MCPS set up a string of educational activities, all aimed at adding value to meet the end goal. Building on its own 2004 indicators, the district now uses Seven Keys to College Readiness to push achievement levels more ambitious than those set by the State of Maryland. The keys to college readiness call for students district-wide to:

- read at advanced levels in kindergarten through 2<sup>nd</sup> grade
- score “advanced” in reading on the Maryland School Assessment in grades 3 to 8
- complete advanced math in grade 5
- complete algebra with a C grade or higher by 8<sup>th</sup> grade
- complete algebra 2 with a C grade or higher by 11<sup>th</sup> grade
- score 3 on an Advanced Placement (AP) exam or 4 on an International Baccalaureate exam
- score 1650 on the SAT college entrance exam or 24 on the ACT.



## Measuring and Monitoring Progress

To use benchmarks effectively, MCPS needs to measure student progress. In 2005, shortly after MCPS established seven indicators for a Pathway to Success plan, district leaders concluded that systematic data collection and analysis was the most important next step to drive improvement in the schools. Interestingly, MCPS officials tapped as a model the CompStat program used by the New York City Police Department to reduce crime, with the district building its own M-Stat program for measuring and analyzing educational progress.

M-Stat provides ongoing, data-based evidence of student progress on key targets tied to the seven pathway indicators. Educators use the data to analyze results and trends and continuously improve educational outcomes. The data offer a measure of accountability for teachers, the schools and the district, and more importantly, M-Stat allows MCPS staff at all levels to monitor progress and identify needed changes.

## High Expectations for All Students

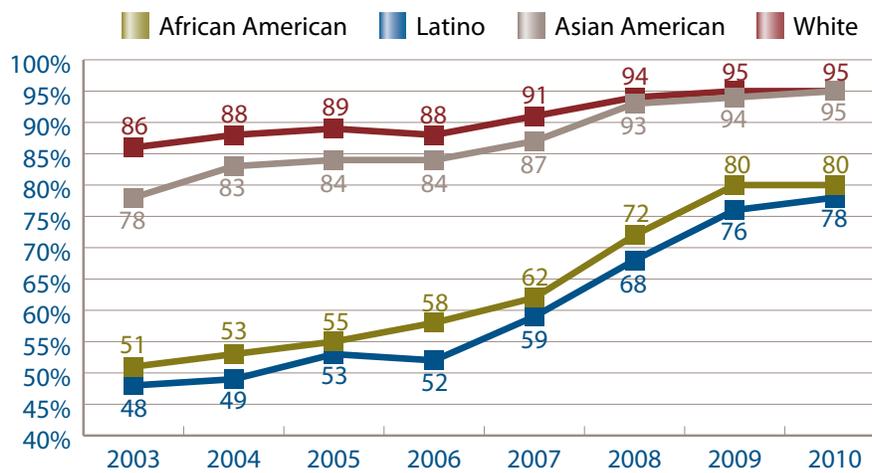
Despite MCPS' emphasis on disparities in the district's 1999 call to action, it was some years later when district officials engaged in a concerted and explicit effort to tackle the challenges of race and ethnicity. The district had narrowed the gaps between African American and Latino students and their white counterparts, but large gaps remained. And while the rhetoric in schools throughout the district acknowledged that every child can learn, MCPS staff worried that many teachers and school administrators set low expectations for students of color.

The district's executive team identified three elementary schools and a middle school where students of color performed ahead of the pack, and the district analyzed

possible reasons why. All four schools drive educational behaviors in line with the belief that every child can take on challenging subject matter and master high-level skills. The importance of high expectations – coupled with concerns that too few high school students of color were taking AP tests and the preparatory PSAT test for college entrance – led to new MCPS initiatives. The district instituted training to help teachers work

with kids from other cultures; added formalized, school-based cross-cultural discussion circles for teachers, parents and students; engaged in better analysis of racial and ethnic issues flagged by assessment data; and set up forums and protocols to help school teams better determine if the behaviors and beliefs of adults in the schools are creating institutional barriers for students of color.

## Percentage of Montgomery County 8th Graders Scoring at Proficient or Advanced for Reading on the Maryland School Assessment



Source: Montgomery County Public Schools, *The Results Book 2011*.

## Investing in Teachers

Because teacher quality drives student success, MCPS reorganized its teacher development efforts. The district has put in place a comprehensive system of training, mentoring and standards-based evaluation in order to match the district's demanding expectations with high levels of support for teachers and administrators. Superintendent Weast tripled the district's budget for training and development. MCPS aims for training that spurs real results for students, focusing on cooperative action by school staff to deliver rigorous instruction in varied ways that can meet the needs of different students. The teachers' union – the Montgomery County Education Association (MCEA) – has been involved in these steps to improve teacher quality.

MCPS adopted a rigorous system of peer evaluation and provides personalized help to struggling teachers. The district's Peer Assistance and Review Program is run by a joint panel of teachers (recommended by the MCEA)



and principals (recommended by the county's professional association for school principals). Supports are in place to help new teachers and experienced-but-underperforming teachers, but if those teachers don't improve enough during a set probationary period, they are let go or choose to leave. From 2005 to 2009, the peer review program worked with 6,000 teachers that were counseled and given intensive professional development, and of that number, 400 left the district. MCEA works with the school district on this peer evaluation system because it provides teachers with ample opportunities for support and improvement.

## District's Efforts Raise Achievement and Narrow the Gap

Montgomery County Public Schools has created effective district-wide systems for continuous improvement and has produced measurable academic progress for students of color, as well as white students. While gaps remain and more progress is needed, MCPS students are scoring higher on the Maryland School Assessment (MSA) tests for critical reading and math skills. The percentage of African American 3<sup>rd</sup> graders scoring at proficient or higher in reading rose to 78 in 2010 from 48 in 2003, and the percentage of 3<sup>rd</sup> grade Latino students hitting that mark increased to 79 from 40 over the same period. For math, the percentage of African American 3<sup>rd</sup> graders at proficient or higher for the MSA test rose to 79 in 2010 from 56 in 2003, and the percentage of Latino 3<sup>rd</sup> graders reaching that benchmark increased to 80 from 57. The gap has narrowed, even as the percentage of white 3<sup>rd</sup> graders scoring at proficient or higher in reading and math has also increased over that time frame – to 95 from 83 for reading and to 96 from 89 for math. Scores for Asian American students have increased, too, closely mirroring the trend for white students.

At the 8<sup>th</sup> grade level, the share of African American and Latino students registering at proficient or above on the MSA reading and math tests also has increased significantly. The gap between the percentage of white and African American 8<sup>th</sup> graders scoring at that level for reading and math has narrowed, as has the gap between the percentage of white and Latino students – even as the share of white students scoring at proficient or above has increased. That said, the gap remains large for 8<sup>th</sup> grade math. And for all these MSA tests – 3<sup>rd</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade reading and math – smaller shares of African American and Latino students than white students are registering at the advanced levels.

The positive actions and results in the Montgomery County schools won the district a 2010 Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award for excellence in innovation and leadership. And Harvard University's Public Education Leadership Project has studied MCPS as a national model for district-wide improvement.

## Learn More About Montgomery County Public Schools

Much of the information in this Growth & Justice case study was compiled from the book [\*Leading for Equity: The Pursuit of Excellence in Montgomery County Public Schools\*](#) from Harvard Education Press. Other sources used for this write-up and of potential interest to readers include [Jerry Weast's article](#) "Beyond 'Heroes and She-roes': The Success of Montgomery County Schools"; an [MCPS memo](#) about the M-Stat process; an [MCPS parents' guide](#) to the Seven Keys to College Readiness; the Broad Prize [fact sheet](#) about MCPS; and [The Results Book 2011](#) from MCPS.

## Smart Investments<sup>SM</sup> in Minnesota's Students

For information about Growth & Justice's initiative on *Smart Investments<sup>SM</sup> in Minnesota's Students*, click [here](#).

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**GROWTH & JUSTICE**

2324 University Ave. W., Suite 120A  
Saint Paul, MN 55114  
Phone: 651-917-6037  
[info@growthandjustice.org](mailto:info@growthandjustice.org)  
[www.growthandjustice.org](http://www.growthandjustice.org)