

**CLASSICAL PROGRAM REVIEW
SPECIAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS AND SERVICES
MONTGOMERY COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

OVERVIEW

On November 11, 1997 Superintendent Paul L. Vance presented an action resolution to the Montgomery County Board of Education outlining a number of studies and other activities regarding the school system's special education programs and services. Among other items noted, the resolution called for a "classical program review" that would encompass an "analysis of present situations, past trends, and future projections involving relevant laws, regulations, and policies; and characteristics of the program including services offered, budgeted dollars, personnel involved, and students" (See Attachment A). Following affirmative Board action, consultants from the University of Maryland were employed to design and conduct the review with input and assistance from selected individuals/groups with expertise in various aspects of special education and services.

The review was conducted in three overlapping phases during the 1998-99 school year. Phase I began in the fall of 1998, focusing on defining critical areas as well as questions that needed to be answered. Opinions, observations, facts, information were obtained from a variety of individuals in face-to-face meetings and discussions during the fall and winter. The consultants encouraged participants to solicit input from others, and the review was publicized by MCPS through a number of communication outlets.

Individuals/groups that responded to the invitation represented parents and families, general and special education teachers, principals, psychologists, and the education committee of the Montgomery County Chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). (See Attachment B that also includes a summary of issues identified.)

As a result of these inputs and specific questions, data elements were identified unique to each area to be studied by the consultants. Additionally, MCPS program administrators indicated a desire to use the review to create a performance indicator system for special education.

The specific areas targeted for review were:

- Characteristics of students receiving special education and procedures for identifying these students
- Placement and programs, including decisions for determining which students are placed where
- Performance of students with disabilities
- Staffing
- Transition services
- Parent satisfaction
- Resource allocation

- Organization

Attachment C is the list of questions and indicators, as well as the data sources that were used to answer questions. These were reviewed with the Maryland State Department of Education personnel, key administrators, parents, Corrective Action Plan committee representatives, and individuals that were interviewed. Revisions, corrections, and suggestions were considered and changes were made if needed--additional questions or data indicators were added or specific indicators were removed because data were not available.)

During Phase II, interviews and focus groups were held with teachers, principals, parents, psychologists, speech and language therapists, and central office administrators representing the Department of Special Education, Department of Academic Programs (DAP), Transition Organizational Development Team (TODT), and the English for Speakers of other Languages (ESOL) division. The consultants visited 11 schools, and analyzed a variety of data and reviewed a number of documents (Attachment C). Attachment C information was obtained from:

- Three focus group meetings with parents of special education students and a meeting with the Special Education Advisory Committee
- A meeting with the Education Committee of the Montgomery County Chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)
- A meeting with the MCAASP Special Education Committee
- Visitations to 11 schools, including Mark Twain and the Regional Institute for Children and Adolescents (RICA)
- Interviews with 33 individual teachers
- Meeting with Montgomery County Education Association Special Education Committee
- Interviews with 8 principals, 4 speech and language specialists, 4 guidance counselors, 9 psychologists, and 15 central office individuals or program directors
- Review and analyses of existing MCPS reports/documents/data regarding programs, services, staff, and budgeting

Phase III involved the analysis of information and identification of key issues and recommended actions.

REVIEW LIMITATIONS

The review was limited in several areas. First, only programs and services for kindergarten to age 21 (K-21) students were examined. While a review of infant and toddler and preschool programs may be warranted, it was considered to be beyond the scope of the current effort.

In addition, early in the process, the consultants determined that it would not be appropriate to address compliance issues because compliance monitoring is a Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) responsibility and is based on a set of legal and procedural indicators. In addition, MCPS also was developing a process to address specific compliance issues that had been identified by MSDE during its last monitoring and will involve a separate committee.

REVIEW METHODS

Three consultants from the University of Maryland, Dr. Margaret J. McLaughlin, Dr. Debra Neubert, and Dr. Sherrill Moon, conducted all interviews and focus group meetings and reviewed and analyzed all documents. They followed the standard procedure of recording comments and information and periodically reviewing these to identify common themes. Every effort was made to “triangulate” themes through use of documents as well as by asking other groups of individuals to comment on an identified issue.

Findings presented below represent issues identified through the procedures detailed above. In the case of the issues obtained through interview, at least half of the relevant individuals interviewed (e.g., parents, teachers, principals) must have identified the issue.

Due to both time constraints and administrative decisions, surveys of individuals other than two parents surveys were not conducted. The Department of Special Education administrators indicated that future surveys of target groups might be conducted to further investigate specific issues of concern. The present review was considered a baseline.

FINDINGS

The general issues that guided the review organize the findings. Key questions are addressed and relevant data and observations are provided.

Characteristics of K-21 Students Who Receive Special Education

As of December 1, 1998, 15,891 students ages 3-21 were identified as receiving special education. This represented 12.4 percent of the student population for fiscal 1999. Special education funding for that school year was 11.89 percent of the MCPS operating budget. The percentage of students served was well within the boundaries of what is considered to be a typical proportion of school age students identified as special education. Of the total number, 7,088 (45percent) were classified as receiving Intensity IV-V services compared to a state average of 35 percent, meaning that they received more than 15 hours of special education and related services per week. The remaining 8,803 students (55percent) received Intensity I (indirect services, consultation only); Intensity II (up to 5 hours of special education and related services per week); or Intensity III (between 6 and 15 hours of special education and related services per week). Between fiscal years 1990 and 1999, the population of students receiving special education increased from 10 percent to 12 percent, and the percentage of Intensity IV-V students increased from 4.6 percent to 5.5

percent. Special education spending increased from 10.7 percent of the budget to 11.8 percent. Current screening and identification procedures used by MCPS follow generally accepted practices. There are several issues in MCPS, however, that involved who receives special education and how a student may move within codes or categories of disability.

Representation

A significant issue is the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education, particularly males and particularly in the disability categories of Mild Mental Retardation (MMR), Specific Learning Disability (SLD), and Emotional Disabilities (ED). MCPS data indicated that while African American students accounted for 20.9 percent of the population, they accounted for 27.9 percent of the SLD category, 46.5 percent of students with mild mental retardation, and 37 percent of students with Emotional Disabilities (ED). The data also pointed to an emerging concern about the proportion of Hispanic students, who represented 14.2 percent of the population, who are identified as SLD, an increase from 14.6 percent in 1997 to 16.4 percent in 1999. In addition, interviews with middle and secondary school special educators indicated a perception that Hispanic students were being re-coded and/or placed in Fundamental Life Skills (FLS) classes at higher rates.

A number of studies and initiatives have been directed at these issues. It is clear from existing documents and data that MCPS has made a substantial effort to reduce the numbers of African American students identified as needing special education. Among the significant steps taken were creating a Success for Every Student (SES) goal and increasing the attention and scrutiny of building administrators. Efforts to improve the pre-referral intervention, or Educational Management Team (EMT) process, included a revised set of procedures for EMT. They also included the creation of a pilot program during the 1999-2000 school year to provide case management and comprehensive support to individual students at risk of being identified as needing special education. Despite these salutary efforts, a number of issues remain.

The foremost barrier identified by almost all teachers, principals, and psychologists is that special education is virtually the only supplemental resource available to students who experience academic and/or behavioral difficulties. Schools reportedly have few options for assisting students who need either short- or long-term academic support, counseling, or direct behavioral interventions outside of turning to special education. Currently, special education services are available to a small number of students (around 2,000) who are not formally identified as disabled. These services are provided through school-based Intensity I-III teachers and are largely diagnostic and short-term in nature. The students are identified within their schools as perhaps needing special education, but are provided short-term services to observe the response to remediation and to gain more information. The fact that MCPS provides these services is excellent. The perception, however, seems to be that because these services are supported by special education, the students are viewed as special education's responsibility. There is a wide variance in general education's response to supporting instructional interventions for these students.

Nonetheless, some principals interviewed recognized the need for general education teachers to know and use a wide range of strategies and techniques to accommodate a range of diverse learners. Many of those principals interviewed cited conditions in general education classrooms, such as large class sizes, the lack of professional supports, the lack of a variety of instructional strategies (particularly at the middle and high school levels), a perception that the curriculum is increasingly demanding, and greater pressure for higher levels of student achievement. According to many teachers and principals interviewed, these pressures in schools create greater demand for more remediation and academic support for academically at-risk students. The major group of these students is reportedly poor and maybe African American or Hispanic. According to program administrators and teachers, among the latter are those students who have "tested out of ESOL" due to their general English language competence but who still require support with more advanced vocabulary and concepts in the academic areas, especially in secondary schools.

It is important to note that it was not possible to examine either referral rates on a school-by-school basis or to examine the relationship between poverty, race/ethnicity, language and special education due to lack of data. However, these demographic factors, based on national data, are known to interact with special education referrals and identification.

Among the supports that school administrators, psychologists, and staff members believe are necessary to assist students in general education classrooms are opportunities for:

- More intensive and differentiated instruction
- More time to gain mastery of important skills or concepts
- More assistance for teachers in terms of specific instructional approaches that may be useful for specific students, and most importantly
- Follow up to ensure that teachers understand and can implement the approach

Currently, there is reported to be a lack of time among key personnel (e.g., psychologists, special education teachers, pupil personnel workers, etc.) to provide the assistance, follow-up, and monitoring in general education classrooms. Only 76 school psychologists are available to provide services to schools (about 1 psychologist for every 2,000 students). They report that most of their time is taken up with mandatory evaluations of special education students. The amounts of time special education teachers have for consultation, support, or pre-referral varies widely according to teachers interviewed. In some of the schools with larger proportions of students of color, language minority students, and students receiving free and reduced priced meals, there reportedly are long waiting lists for EMT services.

Another contributing factor is the perceived lack of accountability on the part of general education teachers for keeping students in the general classroom and addressing needs. Some principals as well as special education personnel reported this as an issue. Identification as needing special education frequently results in removing students from the classroom, particularly students of color who, as noted above, tended to be

disproportionately placed in special classes. It also can mean moving accountability for that student's performance from the referring school.

Once a student is referred to EMT, or to the Individual Education Program (IEP) screening committee, the issue of assessment bias is a concern. While the IEP evaluation procedures are both comprehensive and multidisciplinary, there is not a strong emphasis on either ecological or curriculum assessment or on family or community inventories. This is also lacking in the EMT assessment procedures. As a result, there is a heavy reliance on educational assessments that focus on academic achievement and IQ scores. In the literature there are well-documented problems associated with the classification of students with more mild disabilities. Bias in the use of IQ testing may result in over identification of students as MR. Similar problems may occur when assessing potential Specific Learning Disability (SLD) students.

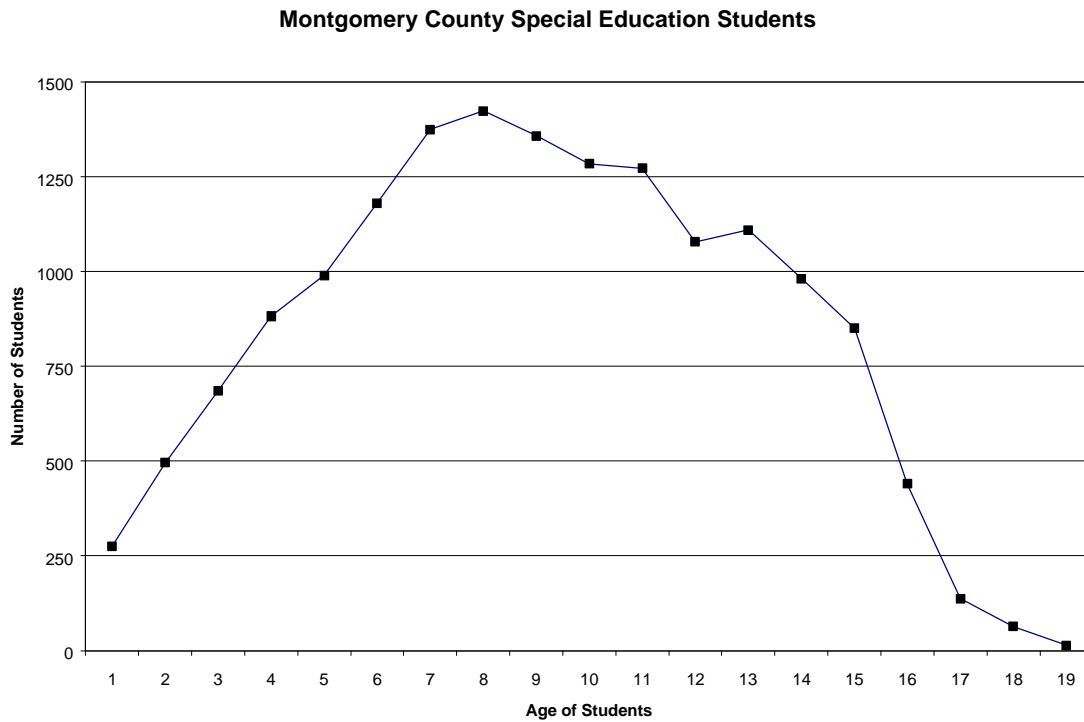
For the most part, MCPS has clear criteria and guidelines for determining eligibility and identifying a student's disability. The Diagnostic Manual, for the identification of students with Emotional Disabilities (ED) and schools with mental retardation students that was developed as a result of the Assessment Review Committee (ARC), is particularly good with respect to the guidelines for the types of student assessment that should be conducted. There is a concern among many teachers and psychologists, however, about the level of knowledge among special education teachers who are conducting educational assessments. Some teachers reported needing more staff development in this area, particularly with the increased demands of the new Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), and increased release time for classes to conduct educational assessments and attend EMTs.

Determining Disability

Determining eligibility for special education may occur early at a preschool level. However, the majority of students were identified during school years. As evidenced by the data, a large percentage are identified at fifth, sixth and seventh grades (See Table 1). The identification appropriately is the responsibility of the ARD committee at the local school level. Certain disability codes are more prominent at certain ages. A typical change is in the numbers of students identified as having only speech and language disabilities that decreases after elementary school due to remediation.

There apparently has been a history within MCPS of coding elementary age students as speech and language only in order to provide some academic supports and then maintain them in a resource program without a full educational or psychological assessment. This becomes a "back door" into special education for students who may require more support but are not likely to meet the full eligibility requirements for special education. This "compassionate coding" as it is referred to, becomes problematic at middle school if staff members seek a more specialized program or more intensive services. The student must have a full evaluation, which is costly, and reportedly it is not unusual to find that the student is not eligible for special education despite having received those services through elementary school. Again, the source of this problem is seen as the lack of adequate

supports to general education to accommodate a wider range of students who have learning problems.



While the majority of students are identified and coded during elementary school, referrals and identification continue to occur at the middle and high schools. Also, a number of students reportedly are referred to the EMT in middle and high schools, particularly it appears, in those schools which have high proportions of students receiving free and reduced price meals, and students of color. Managing this process according to high school teachers interviewed can drain the resources of the high school resource teachers for special education, many of whom may spend a majority of their time conducting educational assessments as opposed to teaching or working with general education teachers.

(Several high school RTSEs report that some number of the referrals come from parents seeking special education identification to obtain Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) accommodations. Schools reportedly feel compelled to respond, further burdening staff with assessment tasks.)

Currently, there is no process to monitor or track referrals to EMT or screening ARD meetings at the system level. Therefore, it was not possible to document patterns of referrals or EMTs. However, it is important to capture the extent of this problem as it has major implications for how staff time is used at the building level.

Summary of Issues Pertaining to Child Characteristics

- African American students are overrepresented in special education, notably in the categories of Mild Mental Retardation (MMR) and Emotional Disabilities (ED). There is concern that increased numbers of Hispanic students are being identified as Specific Learning Disabled (SLD) that may lead to overrepresentation of this population of students in special education. While identification of minority youngsters is known to be linked to a student's socioeconomic status, the system was able to examine this relationship.
- MCPS has initiated a strong response to the issue of overrepresentation. The various initiatives are consistent with recommended practices and have the support of the MCPS leadership. Additional resources also are being committed to this effort. However, concerns remain among those interviewed about the capacity and willingness of some general education teachers and principals to respond to the needs of students with more serious learning and behavior problems, particularly those who may be racially or culturally diverse. It is important to note that this issue has been raised in three previous reports related to special education, including those addressing disproportionate identification. Recommendations from those reports appeared to have been only marginally implemented.
- The EMT process, while providing a sound system for problem solving and assisting general education teachers with problem learners, is less effective than it could be due to several factors:
 - a) inadequate school-level supports, including psychologists and special education teachers (or other specialists) who can conduct comprehensive educational and ecological assessments and provide feedback and follow-up to general classroom teachers;
 - b) lack of sufficient time for teachers to consult on strategies;
 - c) inconsistent monitoring of how well the strategies are being implemented by general education teachers;
 - d) Lack of clear and consistent expectations regarding general education's responsibility for addressing learning difficulties.
- Both the EMT process and the evaluation and initial identification of students for special education rely too heavily on IQ and traditional academic testing. There is a lack of emphasis of a broader ecological assessment, as well as curriculum-based assessments that are more sensitive to instructional modifications and more consistent with recommended practices. However, these assessment approaches require more time and the current lack of staff time is a major problem reported by those interviewed in schools.

How are Special Education Programs, Services, and Placements Organized?

The legal and philosophical foundations of special education rest on the premise of individualization and appropriateness. Decisions about what services, supports, and placement of an individual student are to be guided by that student's goals as determined by the IEP team. In addition, the law requires that, after determining the appropriate

education and related services, the placement shall be in the *least restrictive environment*. The recent amendments to federal special education policy (IDEA Amendments of 1997) and to Maryland law create several new standards for special education that impact on how services and programs are defined. Among these are the requirements that students with disabilities have access to, and progress in, the general education curriculum and have access to, and participate in, extra-curricular activities of the school. Individualized education programs (IEP) must reflect this. There is a strong statement regarding how placement must be uncoupled from disability or achievement or administrative convenience.

The IDEA regulations (34 Code of Federal Regulations, March 12, 1999) state: *In all cases, placement decisions must be individually determined on the basis of each child's abilities and needs, and not solely on factors such as category of disability, significance of disability, availability of special education and related services, configuration of service delivery system, availability of space, or administrative convenience. Rather, each child's IEP forms the basis for the placement decision.*

Further, a student need not fail in the regular classroom before another placement can be considered. Conversely, IDEA does not require that a student demonstrate achievement of a specific performance level as a prerequisite for placement into a regular classroom. (Appendix A, p. 12472).

Currently, MCPS special education for school-aged students is comprised of 37 "programs" or classes that provide Intensity I through V services. They include resource room programs and several types of special classes, including those for students with learning disabilities, emotional disabilities, autism, and mental retardation who receive a Fundamental Life Skills (FLS) curriculum. Other programs provide community-based services to students with significant multiple disabilities, a multi-class "learning center" unit within selected schools, classes for the deaf and hearing impaired that offer three models of communication instruction, and several special schools. In addition, there are services provided by Transition Support Teachers (TSTs) and other related services staff members in various ways. According to MCPS data, an increasing number of students are provided special education in inclusive settings and not as part of a specific "program." Across all of the programs, there appears to be an emphasis on providing more education and experience in general education environments. However, based on interviews in schools, this appears to vary across programs and individual teachers and schools.

Special education programs and services were developed over time in response to both MSDE policies and changing philosophies and demands of special education. Examples include the community-based programs developed as a comprehensive neighborhood school program for students with significant multiple disabilities that were moving out of special centers. The goal of these programs is to provide inclusive education and instruction that stresses skill development in community settings. The programs for students with emotional disabilities include Regional Institute for Children and

Adolescents (RICA), which offers an intensely therapeutic environment for a limited number of students; Mark Twain, a special education school; Twain satellite programs; and school-based cluster programs. Learning Centers were designed for students with more severe learning disabilities (e.g., students whose IQ was in the normal range but with severe discrepancies in achievement). Learning Centers provide supportive environments that involve a "parallel" or modified curriculum, small class sizes, and an array of related services. These programs provide Intensity V services. In addition to these programs, students may receive Intensity I-V services, defined in terms of hours of special education and related services in several environments or settings including full-time in the general education classroom, resources rooms or self-contained classrooms.

Placement of Students with Disabilities.

In recent years, MCPS has made significant strides toward moving services closer to neighborhood schools. For example, two centers have closed and students have moved into community-based programs (e.g., classrooms) and to their home schools. (See Attachment D for an analysis of placement data)

Additionally, during the past five years there has been a significant reduction in students being educated in non-public schools. For example, according to MCPS data, four years ago more than 782 students were in non-public placements at an average cost of \$30,000 per year. As of December 1, 1998, this number had been reduced to 598. Each school now has at least one special education teacher who provides Intensity I-III services. The administration also has a long-range plan to develop a continuum of programs within each cluster and tri-cluster to avoid extensive busing of all but a small number of students who may require highly specialized programs.

Placement decisions appear to be influenced, however, by several factors. According to interviews with special education administrators, special classrooms for Intensity IV and V students can be moved from school to school if space becomes a problem. Assignments for these programs are considered first on the basis of a child's neighborhood school but may be influenced by space and available slots. Students may be moved from school to school if space is not available. It is clear that the MCPS special education administration recognizes the need to improve access for students to their home school and to less restrictive settings and is moving in that direction. Yet, while there has been improvement, there still appeared to be some barriers, including general acceptance and responsibility for programs in all schools. Currently, 30 percent of MCPS Intensity I-IV special education students are served outside of their home school, as are most students receiving Intensity V services.

Complexity of Current Programs.

Special education in MCPS is a complex system of services, intensities, and programs. The current structure evolved over time in response to the needs of various sub-populations of students. Collectively, the various options provide a wide array of services and program models. Yet some teachers at all levels reported that some students in these programs are different and "don't fit" the program services.

During this review, the consultants were told by teachers and special education administrators about instances where some students were assigned to a specific class, program, or set of services because of their IQ or other characteristics, or because they were considered to need a modified curriculum, instructional assistant, or other supports that program administration had available only in certain types of settings or programs.

There was also variability within specific programs (e.g., Learning Centers, FLS) in terms of students served and orientation of the services. Special education and related services need to be flexible and portable and able to match a student's needs. Some special educators indicated that some children did not seem appropriate for a particular program because of IQ or curricular needs, or some other characteristic. But, if a child requires significant modifications in curriculum, intensive individualized instruction, physical or behavioral support, assistive technology, or various related services, these should be tailored to the child, the child should not be moved to match a program. Placement cannot be legally determined by program needs, nor is it possible to provide adequate staffing or supports that can meet both the needs of the program (e.g., adequate staff to maintain the model) and the needs of individual students, particularly with respect to more inclusive placement.

Currently, placements are managed through a Central Individual Education Program (CIEP) process that employs specialists to determine and/or authorize placement of students. Once the CIEP determines eligibility and makes a program placement recommendation, the placement specialist must find a "slot" for the student. While preference is given to the proximity of a student's neighborhood school, such is not always possible. MCPS is moving toward a cluster model that would provide all but a few programs within each cluster or tri-cluster area to alleviate the need for extensive busing of students. The CIEP provides accountability and control for placements. However, based on interviews it appeared to the consultants that it also reinforced the notion of matching children to programs as opposed to individualizing the services for a child.

Access To and Progress In the General Education Curriculum

Regardless of placement or program, special education students must have access to the general education curriculum and to the supports and services necessary to allow them to progress in the general education curriculum. In this area, MCPS has some excellent initiatives at the administrative level, as well as a program structure that either removes students from the general curriculum to provide a parallel curricula or provides limited supports to students in general education classrooms. There is limited data on how well students with disabilities are accessing the general curriculum. Several indicators that were available are participation rates in Advanced Placement (AP), and high school honors courses. Of the 3,706 students with disabilities at Grades 9-12, 12 percent enrolled in one or more of these courses as compared to 55.5 percent students without disabilities.

The Department of Academic Programs (DAP) has several notable initiatives in progress. First, a special education curriculum specialist is assigned to the office to provide input

and guidance to curriculum development and students with disabilities. An excellent publication, *The State of the Art*, has been developed that addresses the instructional needs of students with disabilities and other diverse learners in general education classrooms. Math curriculum specialists have also developed a core set of algebraic skills and concepts (MAPS I & II) that could limit but not "dumb down" the content provided to students with IEPs and allow them to meet the MCPS algebra coursework requirements. This is an excellent example of the type of curriculum guidance that will be needed in special education. Additional work is underway in several other curricular areas. These efforts have been mostly focused at the secondary level. DAP also is revising the Fundamental Life Skills curriculum to provide more academic content and align it with the state alternate assessment, Independence Mastery Assessment Program (IMAP).

In addition to academic content courses, students with disabilities also have the option of applying to career and technology courses offered in high schools and at the Thomas Edison High School of Technology. MCPS offers career development programs (programs that meet the criteria for state career and technology programs and are a planned sequence of programs) and career focus programs (students plan a more individualized approach to courses within a career cluster). Not all programs are located in every high school; transportation is provided to career and technology programs at three sites—Damascus and Gaithersburg high schools, and Edison Technology high school.

Data provided by the guidance counselor indicated that 230 students with disabilities attended Edison during the 1998-99 school year (754 students were accepted during this year). A total of 294 students with disabilities applied for admission during 1998-99 year and 230 were accepted (78 percent). The majority of students were from Walter Johnson High School (67percent). Students with learning disabilities, serious emotional disabilities, and speech and language disabilities attended programs at Edison with the greatest frequency.

At the elementary level, every special education teacher who was interviewed, particularly those for Intensity IV-V students, report implementing parallel curricula, often choosing their own texts, materials, and goals. The result appears to be mostly an ad hoc curriculum that follows the broad MCPS framework but is modified by individual teachers based on their beliefs about what skills students may "need" in life as well as their own interests and content knowledge. Some programs, e.g., community-based classrooms, and the FLS program, are defined almost entirely by the curriculum they deliver. However, it appears that special education teachers have great flexibility in determining which goals a student will master in the general education curriculum. Decisions regarding the placement of individual students were reported by special education teachers to be influenced by a student's curriculum "needs." Students who required a functional curriculum and/or significant modifications to the general academic curriculum were reportedly most often placed in more separate or specialized classes or programs.

Placement by Gender and Race

Of the 15,891 students enrolled in special education in December, 1998, .3 percent were American Indian, 5.2 percent were Asian, 26.8 were African Americans, 52.9 percent were White and 14.8 percent were Hispanic. About two-thirds were male and one-third female. According to analysis of MCPS data, representation in intensity service levels and programs were not always consistent with their proportional representation in the special education population. (See Attachment E)

Intensity of services was roughly proportional to representation of males and females in special education across grade levels. About two-thirds of the students served in each of the intensity levels I-V were males and about one-third females. One small exception is for Intensity IV services at middle school where 28 percent of the students receiving these services were females and 72 percent were males. Enrollment in some programs substantially differed, however, for males and females by school level. For example, in elementary and secondary schools males far outnumbered females in the programs for students with autism (85 percent vs. 15 percent and 72 percent vs. 28 percent, respectively). Programs for students with emotional disabilities also enrolled more males than females at elementary and secondary levels, while resource programs serve about two-thirds of the males and one-third of the females. Other programs, such as FLS classes and programs for sensory or orthopedically impaired, are roughly equal in terms of male and female enrollment.

Patterns for students of different race and ethnicity differ in terms of both the intensity of service they received as well as program enrollment. While Asian students were about evenly distributed across intensity levels, White, Hispanic, and African American proportions differed. Overall, there was a lower percentage of African American students receiving Intensity I-III services at elementary school where 61 percent of those students were White, 13 percent were Hispanic, and 19 percent were African American. By middle school, the proportions change for Intensity I-III to 52 percent White, 18 percent Hispanic and 25 percent African American. By high school, the proportions for Intensity I-III were 53 percent White, 30 percent African American, and 13 percent Hispanic. Among elementary school Intensity IV students, Whites made up 41 percent, Hispanics 21 percent, and African American students 33 percent. At middle school, African American students represented 38 percent of all Intensity IV students, Whites 36 percent and Hispanics 22 percent. In high school this changed to 38 percent White, 40 percent African American, and 18 percent Hispanic.

The move to higher intensity levels usually means a move to more special classes that is evident in the data on program enrollments. African American students represented 32 percent of the students in elementary school learning centers, 39 percent in special classes, 33 percent in FLS classes, and 45 percent in cluster classes for students with emotional disabilities. At middle school, this population represented about the same proportion in the same classes, and similarly in high school, except that the percent in special classes increased to 43 percent and 37 percent for FLS classes and only 23 percent in classes for students with emotional disabilities. Hispanic students represented 14.8 percent of the special education population, and at elementary school they represented 23

percent of special class enrollments and 23 percent of students in FLS. By middle school, Hispanic students represented 23 percent of the students in learning centers and 24 percent of enrollments in special education classrooms. Interestingly, the proportion of Hispanic students enrolled in any of the programs generally is proportional to the overall percentage of special education population. These numbers of students in secondary level programs might be interpreted in light of the declining numbers in the overall special education population at those levels as well as the drop out rate, which is higher for Hispanic students.

Summary of Issues of Placement and Program

- MCPS is making steady progress to reduce the segregation of students with disabilities. Two special centers have been closed since 1991. There also is a reduction in the number of students placed in non-public schools. Furthermore, increasing numbers of students receiving Intensity IV and V services are being provided with opportunities for more inclusive education.
- Despite progress, nearly one-third of all Intensity I-IV students were not served in their home schools. Most students receiving Intensity V services are not in their home school. Given that MCPS identifies more Intensity IV and V students than the state average, this appears to result in extensive busing of students. The MCPS special education administration provided an estimate of \$2,500-3,000 per student for special transportation. Busing the 7,074 students who were receiving Intensity IV-V services was conservatively estimated at more than \$6 million. Moreover, such busing results in extended time in transient and disruption to students' instructional time.
- Some parents interviewed indicated that a lack of communication often occurs between families of children in a special class and the "host" school. Most principals interviewed indicated that managing the special buses and coping with transportation schedules can consume extensive amounts of time (e.g., one principal who had several special education classes in his building estimated that 50 percent of his time during the first few weeks of school was taken up with special education transportation issues).
- The current system of services, special classes for Intensity IV-V students, and programs staffing allocations, was complex and many parents reported being confused by the program titles and how they relate to their child's placement. Some programs appeared to be better staffed than others.
- Placement of individual students appeared to be based on a combination of the specific needs of the student, parental preference, curriculum focus, and may be influenced by the child's IQ. Placement decisions for most Intensity IV-VI services are managed through a centralized IEP process. The need for central direction was viewed by those in administration as a necessary tool for accountability in decision making. At both the school and central administrative levels, the focus appeared to be on matching a student with the "right" place and not on how to bring services and supports to a

student. In addition, some teachers who were interviewed, when asked to define who should be placed in certain programs or classrooms, too often referred to the students' IQ levels and not to curricular focus or educational goals.

- IDEA requires that students receiving special education and related services be assessed and have programs developed that will allow them to access and progress in the general education curriculum. For most of the programs and classrooms providing Intensity IV-V services, there appears to be limited access to the general curriculum and many teachers offer a parallel or some type of modified curriculum. However, modifications reportedly are made, for the most part, on a teacher-by-teacher basis with limited guidance from general educators (either teachers or curriculum supervisors). While DAP has begun some excellent work toward defining a curricular framework in some of the high school content areas, much more will be necessary to ensure that special educators are fully informed and able to ensure that students who are placed outside of general education truly receive access to the general education curriculum.
- The planned revision of the FLS curriculum, in the opinion of the consultants, needs to be reconsidered in light of how it will differ from or expand the MCPS curriculum. The concern is that the curriculum will serve to separate children from general education. Similarly, the community-based program "curriculum" needs to be conceptualized to reflect the continuum of access to the general curriculum. While some students require instruction in more "functional life" skills, there is a risk in creating multiple curricular "tracks" for students with disabilities that may move them into a separate system of placement, instruction, and accountability.

Performance of Students with Disabilities

The amendments to IDEA put into place several new requirements that enhance the accountability for students receiving special education. These included the provision that all students participate in state and district assessments or, for those few students for whom the general education assessment may be inappropriate, an alternate assessment. Furthermore, MSDE is now required to report the performances of students with disabilities on state assessments and to develop other performance goals and indicators for students. For students in MCPS, the relevant assessments are the Maryland School Performance Assessment Program (MSPAP), Maryland Functional Tests (MFT), and Criterion-Referenced Tests (CRT). The alternate assessment in use is the Independence Mastery Assessment Program (IMAP).

The consultants examined a variety of data on the performance of students with disabilities on a number of key indicators. In addition, some teachers were interviewed about perceived outcomes of students in their programs.

Scholastic Performance

According to data, students in special education are performing significantly below their MCPS peers. This is not unique among students with disabilities. Based on data from 13

states reported by the National Center on Educational Outcomes at the University of Minnesota, 30-50 percent fewer students with disabilities are meeting the state performance standards on their state assessments (e.g., above the passing score or "adequate" level) than students in the general population. Within Maryland, the MSPAP scores for students with disabilities in MCPS are among the highest of the 24 local education agencies (LEA). In addition, as the data below show, the number of students who were exempted from the test, or whose scores were not reported due to non-standard administration, is high.* Of note are the MSPAP scores for 3rd versus 8th graders that showed dramatic decreases, particularly in reading (42.2 at Satisfactory in 3rd grade compared to 8.7 in 8th grade). These reading scores are consistent with what teachers reported during interviews and their perceptions that additional reading classes were necessary at middle and high schools. Passing rates for the MFT for students with disabilities were generally high.

Perhaps most disturbing was the course failure rate for students with disabilities as well as the number of students who lost course credit. Of 3,713 middle and high school students enrolled in regular middle or high schools, RICA, Mark Twain, or Rock Terrace, 20.6 percent received a failing mark in one or more courses. This compared to 10.5 percent of the students without disabilities in the same grades/ages. For the same groups of special education students, 23.4 percent received a Loss of Credit in one or more courses, compared to 13.4 percent of the students without disabilities. Interviews with a few teachers and administrators strongly pointed to a lack of adequate resource staff support in special education in middle and high schools. Equally noted, however, was the perception that general education teachers at both middle and high schools provide little diversification in instruction and are inflexible about providing instructional or assessment accommodations to any student.

* MSDE data include 600 students who may have received accommodations under Sec. 504 and not receiving other special education services.

Maryland School Performance Assessment Program					
Statewide					
(Source 1998 MSPP Web)					
1997-1998 Baseline Grade 3 MSPAP Percent Satisfactory					
Reading	Writing	Lang. Usage.	Mathematics	Science	Soc. Studies
30.5	36.3	28.6	34.7	33.7	33.4
Montgomery County					
School Performance Assessment Program					
(Source 1998 MSPP Web)					
1997-1998 Baseline Grade 3 MSPAP Percent Satisfactory					
Reading	Writing	Lang. Usage	Mathematics	Science	Soc. Studies
42.2	51.0	48.0	50.5	47.3	46.1

Statewide					
Maryland School Performance Assessment Program					
(Source 1998 MSPP Web)					
1997-1998 Baseline Grade 5 MSPAP Percent Satisfactory					
Reading	Writing	Lang. Usage.	Mathematics	Science	Soc. Studies
22.4	22.7	21.3	27.9	32.9	27.0
Montgomery County					
School Performance Assessment Program					
(Source 1998 MSPP Web)					
1997-1998 Baseline Grade 5 MSPAP Percent Satisfactory					
Reading	Writing	Lang. Usage	Mathematics	Science	Soc. Studies
31.9	35.2	42.3	42.2	45.6	36.9

Statewide Maryland School Performance Assessment Program (Source 1998 MSPP Web)					
1997-1998 Baseline Grade 8 MSPAP Percent Satisfactory					
Reading	Writing	Lang. Usage	Mathematics	Science	Soc. Studies
4.8	12.0	11.0	16.4	16.3	12.2
Montgomery County School Performance Assessment Program (Source 1998 MSPP Web)					
1997-1998 Baseline Grade 8 MSPAP Percent Satisfactory					
Reading	Writing	Lang. Usage	Mathematics	Science	Soc. Studies
8.7	20.9	21.5	29.6	25.9	20.1

Statewide Functional Test Percent Passing (Source 1998 MSPP Web)					
1997-1998 Base Year Grade 9			1997-1998 Base Year Grade 11		
Reading	Mathematics	Writing	Reading	Mathematics	Writing
87.1	70.7	69.4	96.4	90.3	90.1

Montgomery County Functional Test Percent Passing (Source 1998 MSPP Web)					
1997-1998 Base Year Grade 9			1997-1998 Base Year Grade 11		
Reading	Mathematics	Writing	Reading	Mathematics	Writing
94.2	88.8	81.5	99.3	97.2	95.4

Attendance, Dropouts, Diplomas and Certificates.

Other important indicators of student performance that were examined relative to students with disabilities were attendance rates that were 94.4 percent for Grades 1-6, meeting the state standard for satisfactory, and 92.1 percent for Grades 7-12, below the standard.

Significantly, special education students had a lower dropout rate than the overall population (1.61 versus 1.96). The dropout rates, however, varied across disability and race. According to data presented to the Office for Civil Rights, dropout rates for the three largest categories of students with disabilities showed that 2.5 percent of students with mild mental retardation drop out; 4.5 percent of students with emotional disabilities; and 2.3 percent of the students with learning disabilities. Within categories, dropout rates differed by race and by year. MCPS data showed that for fiscal years 1996 and 1998 "African American students coded MMR had the highest dropout rates: 5.6 percent (3 students) in FY 96 and 6 percent (3 students) in FY 98. In FY 97, white students coded ED had the highest dropout rate: 6.8 percent (36 students)."

According to data for FY 98, 88.6 percent of all students registered for Grade 12 received a diploma and .7 percent received a certificate. While there are few national comparative data, the diploma rates for students with disabilities in MCPS were above those reported in at least one national study. Within categories, however, differences were evident. For example, 4.2 percent of students classified as MMR received a diploma and 62.5 percent received a certificate; 63.7 percent of students with emotional disabilities received a diploma and 2.4 percent received a certificate; 81.2 percent of students with learning disabilities received a diploma and 3.1 percent received a certificate.

Lack of Valid Performance Data for Certain Students.

Results of assessments, such as MSPAP, MFTs, and CRTs, provide important data relative to the overall system success in educating students with disabilities. These are important accountability indicators. There is a concern of some parents and teachers, however, who provided anecdotal information citing successful outcomes for specific students that are not captured in the assessments. The consultants heard of examples from special education teachers of some students who had made great progress in academics but were still scoring low on the CRTs or MSPAPs. Also of concern to many parents and most special education teachers interviewed was that students who achieved great success in non-academic areas received no recognition from the system.

Presently, no systemwide assessments captured all of the domains (e.g., social, vocational, etc.) that are considered critical to the success of many students with disabilities. At the high school level, there is no school-level accountability for the majority of students who will receive a certificate as they are exempt from the MFT and coursework requirements and are not likely to take the high school assessments. This group of students was larger than that taking the Independence Mastery Assessment Program (IMAP) designed to assess functional skills. While the IMAP provides some system data on student performance, the population was small. There was a larger group of students who received academic and functional skills. The soon-to-be revised FLS curriculum may

provide the framework for developing some systemwide performance indicators that can expand the assessment data currently available.

Some teachers and parents the consultants talked with considered the lack of an expanded set of indicators to be a problem. They indicated a desire for some way to assure that there is accountability for these students as well as a way to benchmark an individual student's progress to similar students. In addition, while the consultants did not review individual IEPs, there was some indication based on interviews with teachers that the assessments that special education teachers use to measure progress of students on IEP goals are not aligned with the system assessments.

Summary of Issues Related to Student Outcomes

- MCPS has a lower dropout rate for students with disabilities than for the general population, and certainly lower than rates reported in nationally representative studies. Furthermore, a high percentage of students with disabilities are receiving a diploma or a Certificate of Completion, nearly comparable to the rates for students without disabilities. There are a number of inconsistencies, however, in data provided from sources--MSDE, MCPS, and OCR. Nonetheless, even when one uses the more conservative numbers, the overall school completion data for MCPS special education students is very positive.
- Until recently, there has been little data related to the scholastic performance of students with disabilities. With the reauthorization of IDEA, states will be required to report on a variety of performance indicators for students receiving special education. At present, however, there are few benchmarks or performance standards for acceptable progress by students with disabilities. MCPS assessment data should be interpreted as baseline data from which appropriate performance goals can be set.
- Course failure and loss of credit rates for students with disabilities are about twice that of non-disabled students. These data suggested a need to examine more closely the adequacy of the instructional supports secondary students with disabilities are receiving. However, course failures are linked to dropping out, yet there is no evidence that the failures are causing students to drop out nor are they impacting on successful completion of graduation requirements. MCPS assessment data should be interpreted as baseline data from which appropriate performance goals can be set.
- There is a lack of performance indicators that can assess student progress in important non-scholastic domains, as well as in functional academics and which can be aggregated to the school and system levels.

Transition Services

MCPS has provided various transition services to students with disabilities through Transition Support Teachers (TSTs) since the mid 1980s, nearly a half a decade before they were legally mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1990. This law states that "...beginning at 16 (or younger, if determined appropriate by

the IEP team), a statement of needed transition services for the child, including, when appropriate, a statement of the interagency responsibilities or any needed linkages.” This requirement continued with IDEA amendments in 1997 that further required that "beginning at 14, and updated annually, a statement of the transition service needs of the child under the applicable components of the child's IEP that focuses on the child's courses of study (such as participation in advanced-placement courses or a vocational education program)."

The MCPS IEP incorporates the identification of post-secondary outcomes, types of needed transition services, transition activities, transition linkages, and anticipated services students will require after exiting school. Interviews with middle and high school personnel confirmed that all students with disabilities have some statement of transition need or activities in their IEPs.

Each high school and all special schools have a TST assigned to serve students. Most of the TST positions are .5 per building. TSTs usually teach several classes in addition to their responsibilities and, in some cases, divide their transition duties between more than one school. While the intent is that every student who has an IEP will receive transition services, a TST's caseload may include 150-200 students and the provision of transition services fluctuates among students with various intensity levels.

Most often, Intensity IV or V students, who will receive a certificate and participate in FLS or school community-based programs, garner the most direct transition services (such as job development, placement assistance, and links to adult service programs that may serve the student after exiting). Staff members in the unit and the TSTs have worked hard to devise ways for all students to receive some services and planning for the transition from school to adult life. For Intensity I-IV students this can include career awareness, post-secondary planning, and self-advocacy skill development

Many TSTs have developed links with middle school special education personnel to facilitate articulation from middle to high school. As part of a grant from the Maryland Transition Initiative, several of the transition cluster support teachers have talked with middle school teachers and have worked on revising the MCPS curriculum "Suggested Activities at the Mid-level." This curriculum includes career education, self-determination, and career planning skills. Some middle school personnel also use the Life Centered Career Education curriculum that is a competency-based approach to infusing daily living, personal/social, and occupational skills into the curriculum (available from the Council for Exceptional Children). However, there were no TST staffing allocations at the middle school level.

There are some encouraging practices that enhance the articulation from middle to high school including visits by students and teachers and guidance counselors. However, middle and high school teachers and many parents interviewed identified the transition to middle school as a major issue.

Transition Services at Community Colleges

There are two Transition Training for Independence Programs located on Montgomery College campuses in Rockville and Germantown. During the 1998-99 school year, the Rockville program served eight students and the Germantown program five students between the ages of 19-21. Staff for these programs included two special education teachers, two special education instructional assistants, and one TST (.5 position that served each campus). The Rockville program has existed for three years and the Germantown site for two years. Ideally each program could serve 12 students.

Students enter these programs at age 19 after they have participated in graduation activities at their home schools. In general, students must be able to use public transportation to get to work and activities in the community and must be able to work with natural supports. The TST linked a number of students with social and mental health services and Medicaid. Most students have paid employment before they leave these programs, and about half will keep their job when they transition to an adult program. However, other options for 19-21 year olds are reported to be needed.

Transition Services in High Schools

Transition services appeared to differ in each high school visited. Reportedly this depended on the staff, student population, and administrative support. Most TSTs held half-time positions with a caseload of 150-200 students. Many also indicated that they taught two-three courses in addition to their professional responsibilities. Some TSTs served more than one school and indicated that they were not able to spend adequate time in the community (developing job sites, providing training to students on the job) due to their high caseloads and paperwork responsibilities.

While the nature of the .5 TST position precluded many students from receiving direct services, staff members described a number of innovative ways for all students to have a statement of needed transition services on their IEP and received varied transition activities and services.

Students in Intensity IV and V programs generally received the most comprehensive transition services. There were a number of reasons for this. First, these students generally received a certificate of attendance and were not bound by the content curriculum to earn a diploma. Intensity I - III and, in some cases, Intensity IV students spent their time in general education or parallel curriculum classes mastering content and earning credits towards a diploma. Second, the scope and sequence of the FLS and school community-based instruction programs generally included academic and community functioning skills, preparing and participating in work, and linking students with appropriate adult resources when they exit the school system. Providing transition services was simply a better match with these students' IEPs. Finally, students in these programs generally were in some self-contained classes making it easier for the TST to access them. (But, some TSTs interviewed expressed frustration at not being able to

access Intensity I-IV students who were working on a diploma. Concerns were expressed about how to “pull” the students from general education courses and about helping teachers understand the importance of transition planning activities for all students.)

An overriding issue identified by TSTs interviewed as well as special education administration was the high case loads which limited the ability to provide on-the-job training and support that many students require.

Student Participation in Transition Services Discussions

The IEP form has a place to indicate if the student attended the discussion regarding transition. TSTs often provided instruction or practice for students to participate in IEP meetings.

Some encouraging practices to enhance participation were found in the high schools visited. But, teachers interviewed identified middle school as an area where greater participation needs to be developed. For example, at one middle school, staff emphasized self-advocacy skills and 7th and 8th graders were invited to their IEP meetings with between 50-75 percent of the students attending. At another middle school, staff reported that all 8th graders attended their IEP meetings.

Summary of Issues Pertaining to Transition

- Transition from middle to high school was considered by some teachers interviewed to be their "weak" area. Middle and high school special education teachers interviewed stressed that the philosophies of middle schools and high schools were different. For example, in middle schools teachers work in teams by grade level, thus offering a sense of comfort and support to students and their families. In high schools, there are no "teams" and some students (along with their families) often feel lost. These teachers indicated that articulation from middle to high school was difficult for many students and it was especially difficult for students with disabilities. A number of parents also identified this transition to be a problem. More needs to be done in this area.
- Staff members interviewed at several high schools felt that placement and program issues were the major issues for students articulating from middle to high school who were going to receive a certificate of attendance. The lack of guidelines for determining which students go to FLS, school community-based, or learning center programs was the pressing issue. In addition, the content of these programs varied greatly by school, further compounding the problem and adding to confusion among families about which programs were the best fit for their children.
- Transition services were most comprehensive for students receiving Intensity IV-V services in FLS and community-based programs. Some TSTs interviewed felt that these students would benefit from more direct services such as job placement assistance, practice with interviewing skills, and job training and support.

- Large TST caseloads appeared to be the major barrier to providing transition services. Also, determining when and how TSTs could access these Intensity I-IV students was identified as a problem because the majority of the students' day is spent in regular education courses. There is a growing number of students who are in the MCPS academic curriculum but also require some specific instruction in functional and independent living skills and job training. It should be noted that some TSTs indicated some frustration because some special educators and administrators saw them as the only person responsible for transition services. It would appear that many principals and general education teachers need a better understanding of the role and responsibilities of TSTs.

Characteristics of Special Education Teachers and Support Staff Members

Given the widespread need for special education personnel, MCPS has an extraordinarily high number of certified individuals and very low vacancies in special education. As of December 1, 1998, MCPS employed 715 special education teachers to serve students ages 6-21. Of these, only 20 were not fully certified. There were 36 vacant positions.

During FY 1999, MCPS also supported a total of 733.5 hours of instructional assistants (IA). A six-hour IA is equivalent to a full-time aide, meaning that 122.25 full-time equivalent positions were funded. Slightly more than seven full-time equivalent aides were supporting students on 504 accommodation plans. Other staff members employed during the 1998-99 school year included 76.5 psychologists, 36.7 occupational therapists, 30 physical therapists, 218.6 speech pathologists, 3 social workers, 1 brailist, and 29.17 interpreters.

Staffing allocations were based on a model that used average case loads and class sizes for various programs and classrooms and a combination of student populations and services received. Because one student may receive a variety of special education and related services, allocations must consider a student's program or intensity of services, as well as related services delivered by specialists. Based on MCPS staffing applications for FY 1998, MCPS ratios are present in Attachment D.

The data in Attachment D presents a picture of growth in both professional staff and instructional assistants. When compared to student enrollment by program or intensity of service, there generally is a match between an increase in students and staff members. This is particularly evident in the autism program. There also have been increases at the secondary school level. This compares to the school-based Intensity I-III services where personnel have remained relatively flat. Yet, across programs and intensity levels, case loads and work loads vary. For example, learning center coordinators and the resource teachers for special education for students with emotional disabilities report to have few instructional responsibilities. The secondary learning centers also have secretarial support. Teachers at these levels have few educational assessments to conduct because most students are placed in the center and arrive with the requisite assessments. RTSEs for school-based middle and secondary level Intensity I-IV services may have varied class sizes or case loads, are responsible for instruction and general education collaboration,

have no regular secretarial support and must conduct education assessments and support the Educational Management Team (EMT) process. Other staffing problems appear to exist based on data and interviews at elementary levels for the same programs and often are dependent on the numbers of general and special education students in a school.

Staffing Allocations.

Staffing ratios are not used to assign resource teachers or TSTs. The cluster model designed to move all students closer to their home school provides a minimum of one resource teacher per school regardless of enrollment. A set number of TSTs are provided in schools but are not based on the number of students receiving transition services.

A number of issues were identified through the data and corroborated by interviews that related to staff, staffing allocations, class size, and case load. First, staffing allocations of Intensity I-III teachers are consistent with and follow MSDE policies, but result in varied case loads or class sizes among schools. This appeared to impact particularly Intensity I-III services. There also appears to be a lack of adequate instructional assistant time for high incidence students. The lack of adequate school-based support that is more resource and consultative is viewed as contributing to the placement of students in special classes, removes them from their home school, and is a far more expensive option due to both the high staff/student ratios and specialized transportation. The imbalance in case load and responsibilities discussed above also is a major concern to some principals, special education teachers, and parents who were interviewed. It is perceived to contribute to placement in more specialized settings, reduced emphasis on consultation and support in general education and the poor performance of many students with disabilities in general education classes.

Lack of Flexibility

A second issue is the inflexibility in the allocation and use of instructional assistants. The budget category for SEIAs results in a fixed pool of resources (e.g., full-time equivalents). These are reportedly assigned in September with little latitude to add or revise assignments during the year as children's needs change. The lack of flexibility in personnel categories means that staff must be allocated as specified in the budget (e.g., teacher and instructional assistant) leaving little room to adjust the relative ratio of teachers and assistants in a school or program. Instructional assistant time is cited in interviews as a critical factor in determining how much "mainstreaming" or inclusion students in Intensity IV-V programs may receive. Yet, the issue of what supports can and should be provided in general education by the general education teacher, the special education teacher, and instructional assistants is perceived differently by individuals interviewed. Some of those interviewed believe that general educators can and should take more responsibility for providing accommodations and modifications. However, most of the special educators interviewed believe that there are not enough resources in general education classrooms to support more inclusive education. This includes special education teacher time, instructional time, and school psychologists. Exacerbating the lack of professional time is the amount of paperwork that reportedly consumes much time of available staff.

Paperwork Burden for Teachers

As noted above, some teachers reported spending a great deal of time, particularly during the spring of the year, managing the voluminous amount of paperwork associated with annual IEP reviews. Psychologists interviewed reported spending the majority of their time conducting special education evaluations and, along with special education teachers, managing the documentation associated with those assessments. Little clerical support was available and some principals reported that they must find support for their special education teachers, including hiring additional substitutes and/or providing clerical assistance. The paperwork burdens limited time for direct service. In 1998-99 a six-hour secretary was provided to each middle and high school learning center. In addition, funds were distributed to schools through flexible spending accounts based on enrollment to support annual reviews and provide schools with resources for clerical or other support. Teachers interviewed reported this was helpful but additional assistance was needed.

Paperwork was seen as the major issue among all administrators we talked with. It requires a great deal of administrative and logistical support and reduces the amount of time available for instruction. There is a new computer-assisted process for IEP development that some teachers indicated that they find useful. However, teachers and administrators we talked with said that it was too early to know whether using the computer would significantly reduce paperwork.

Additional paperwork results from the EMT process that some teachers and principals believe has become "too formal" and requiring too much documentation. In addition, new IDEA IEP requirements, such as the need for functional behavioral assessments and behavior intervention plans, are increasing both assessment time and paperwork. The situation in the words of one principal "is a disaster and a disgrace."

Lack of Therapeutic Services

There are few resources outside of RICA and Mark Twain to provide therapeutic mental health services or counseling to MCPS special education students. This is particularly problematic given the increased numbers of students with emotional disabilities who are being served in school-based classes. While these special classrooms are well-staffed with educators and extra instructional assistants, there are few resources to support the teachers and school administrators in dealing with the students with emotional and behavioral needs. Most counseling and mental health services appeared to be provided through family-purchased insurance plans.

Professional Development

MCPS redesigned its staff training and developed a plan to implement continuous school improvement through strengthening the Quality Management Councils and the process of developing Success for Every Student (SES) plans. The MCPS plan calls for more school-based professional development and stresses collaboration and problem solving at the school level. The improvement process will be driven by data that will impact the SES goals and appears to offer an opportunity for special and general educators to engage in

more collaborative professional development. However, special education is not reported to be part of either planning or initial implementation.

Currently, there is only a modest budget with special education of about \$20,000 to support professional development programs for special educators. The general mode of professional development is a variety of workshops or events that address a comprehensive set of topics. There are seven supervisors who provide support and on-site assistance to more than 1,000 special education professionals. However, a number of teachers interviewed reported they often waited for assistance or had to solve specific problems on their own. Special education teachers who were interviewed said that they were welcome to attend or be part of any professional development offered in their school. Most school-based teachers interviewed considered that they had a number of professional development opportunities, but few felt that they or their general education colleagues had sufficient knowledge of new IDEA requirements. In addition, new IDEA requirements regarding behavior and other plans are the responsibility of teachers, yet psychologists interviewed were concerned about the level of training provided to teachers and their own lack of time to conduct those assessments or provide counseling. Principals and teachers interviewed indicated that general educators needed more professional development activities concerning IDEA requirements, instructional strategies, and behavior management practices. Some central office administrators were concerned that there were insufficient resources to support training in the new IDEA requirements and too little collaborative training with general educators. They also were concerned about new teachers who needed more than a one-shot orientation to MCPS procedures and practices.

Summary of Issues Related to Staff

- There appears to be great variability in the amount of services provided to Intensity I-III students. Some schools and some service providers have large case loads to manage and paperwork. Record keeping burdens limit the amount of direct service time as well as support for general education teachers.
- While average staffing ratios are within state guidelines, allocations vary across program/class type. Some of the differences appear to be justified by the nature of services provided and/or needs of particular types of students. However, observations conducted as part of this review revealed disparities across programs. In particular, there appeared to be too few teachers providing Intensity I-III services to high incidence students, most notably at middle and high school levels. In addition, the transition support teachers (TSTs) have extraordinarily high case loads. The school-based resource teachers have no clerical support and are responsible for providing direct services, managing all aspects of IEPs and transition plan development, including new IDEA requirements requiring both functional behavior and intervention plans. The demands on these teachers also include conducting educational assessments as related to the EMT process and ARD screening and identification. Time spent on instruction, collaboration, and support of general education teachers is diluted by assessment demands.

- While more instructional assistants have been provided, the demand for more time remains high. There seems to be an assumption that every "included" student needs a one-on-one aide. In some instances this appears to be due to a lack of sufficient teachers as well as lack of accommodations in general education. However, there was little evidence of more flexible use of existing resources to provide more natural supports. Furthermore, there were concerns that the reliance on one-on-one SEIAs foster dependence on the part of students.
- School psychological services were almost totally restricted to conducting psycho-educational evaluations as required for special education eligibility and/or evaluations. There was limited time available to support the new IDEA requirements in the area of behavioral assessment and intervention. Moreover, the lack of school psychological support services was perceived by principals and teachers interviewed to hamper the current EMT process as well as other pre-referral interventions.
- There was a lack of therapeutic mental health services available to students identified as having emotional disabilities who are in classrooms or programs outside of RICA and Mark Twain, according to data studied and interviews conducted.
- There appears to be limited professional development resources within special education. However, the MCPS plans for school-based professional development and continuous improvement offer an opportunity for special and general educators to be part of a whole school improvement model.
- Currently, specific linkages have not been made between special education needs and the comprehensive plan being implemented by the Organizational Development Team (ODT). Some teachers interviewed expressed a desire to receive training together on special education issues.
- There were administrative concerns about the amount of training and support that is provided to special education teachers who are new to the system. This was particularly problematic given the size of the district, the recent changes to the IDEA, and the scope of special education services and programs offered by MCPS.

Overall Integration with MCPS Administration

Among the issues identified during the first phase of this review was the perception, among some parents, central office, school-based special education personnel, and principals that there was an ambiguous if not often hostile relationship between special education and "general education" at both the administrative and school levels. Some parents interviewed perceived that their children often were disregarded or even resented in certain schools. Some special education teachers, when asked about various aspects of their program or practice, almost always volunteered how dependent they were on the goodwill and support of a principal and their general education colleagues. Sometimes teachers spoke of schools where they had been assigned in the past that had not been

supportive of special education and where they were expected to practice "special education" in isolation from the rest of the school. Some principals indicated that some of their colleagues were more "friendly" to special education programs than others.

The frequency with which the issue of the special education/general education relationship arose, suggested that there could be a deeper cultural or climate issue regarding beliefs and perceptions about special education that cut across many aspects of the program. While the consultants did some interviews directly focused on administrative issues and reviewed a number of reports and documents that had previously examined special education in MCPS, the question of how special education programs and services fit into a school was usually woven into the other topics addressed in this review.

As noted earlier in this report, the various special education programs and services in MCPS evolved over time in response to student, professional, philosophical, and legal demands. It was evident to the consultants through this review that special education appeared to develop on its own as a separate program, and in a fashion that was more reactive to need than directed by larger systemic vision or goals. During the past decade or more, however, several reports were developed that do specify goals for special education. Some are procedural, such as improving the placement process or addressing issues around disproportionate representation. Additionally, broader programmatic goals or a "vision" for special education have been articulated, most notably in the draft *Vision for Unification of General and Special Education* that puts forth some sound goals and recommended changes for bringing special and general education closer together. Some of the same goals and observations about special education's isolation within MCPS were also put forth in the *Report of the Budget Review Subcommittee on Special Needs* that cited the lack of programmatic goals and objectives in special education and the lack of data that can promote system accountability for special education.

These issues of separation are not unique to MCPS. They reflect a traditional and rather out-dated way of thinking about special education and the students who are served. In the "traditional" model, programs are viewed as qualitatively different from "mainstream" general education, and students were "placed in" or "go to" special education, presumably to get something uniquely different. The newer models, reinforced by changes in IDEA, suggest that special education must be a system of supports and services, including settings, that are linked to the general education curriculum, assessments, and accountability system. Instead of a separate program driven by a bundle of IEPs and a host of "programs," special education must be flexible and its goals must clearly relate to how services will support the progress and success in the general curriculum of each child receiving special education. This requires both a larger cohesive set of goals for special education and a broader understanding and integration of how explicit special education goals fit into overall MCPS administrative goals and directives.

The Department of Special Education (DSE) is one of three departments within the Office of Instruction and Program Development (OIPD). There are 126.5 staff members within the department, including 5 principals and 1 assistant principal of special schools and 15.5

clerical personnel, who support 15,891 students. The location of the department within OIPD is important as it links special education to curriculum and instruction.

Furthermore, there is a small unit within the Department of Academic Programs that is focused on special education instruction and alignment with the MCPS curriculum. This integration of staff was seen as a positive arrangement and has resulted in the production of some excellent curriculum-related documents. Similar linkages, however, in the areas related to professional development and school administration do not exist and special education does not appear to be evident in the planning or goal setting.

The four goals and key results specified in the Success for Every Student plan are inclusive for all students in MCPS. Specific performance measures, however, particularly those relating to academic performance measures, do not address students with disabilities, except for the reduction in the number of African American males identified for special education. Some parents of students with disabilities who were interviewed are aware that the goals and key results drive school-based SES plans. Yet, they and some special educators acknowledge that for some students with disabilities the academic milestones are not attainable or perhaps relevant. The system's focus on "all" students meeting the same academic standard (e.g., being able to read independently at the second grade level) seems to be indicative that the overall MCPS leadership is not willing to set additional goals or expectations for students with disabilities. Some parents who provided input expressed outright anger that their children would not "count" in school planning and may be perceived as a detriment to the school's performance.

The apparent lack of appropriate accountability goals and indicators is but one problem. Some administrators interviewed were concerned about the lack of resources for special education in their buildings and how they will be expected to meet performance goals for students. Some principals also felt that the lack of a comprehensive vision for special education in the system creates situations where some schools get the burdens of more special education classes because they are "friendly" to the program, while other principals can minimize the impact of these programs, almost at will. The move to a cluster and tri-cluster model for providing a continuum of services may alleviate some of these problems, but some principals included in this interview felt that even this model left too much variability across programs in terms of expectations, staffing, and impact on schools.

Some principals with cluster classrooms who were interviewed (e.g., Intensity IV classroom, one of various special education programs that serve students from a cluster) felt that they were particularly burdened by special education. Due to the larger numbers of special education students, they experienced large amounts of paperwork to manage, meetings to arrange, and transportation issues. Some of these principals felt that to be involved in the special education programs, they must take time from general education administration. This was a particular problem in elementary schools without assistant principals. As an example, one principal volunteered that she spends an average of 1½ to 2 days per week during March and April attending ARD meetings for her Intensity I-III students and two cluster program classrooms.

The need to examine the role and responsibility of general education in relation to special education had been noted in prior reports and is becoming more focused with the enhanced emphasis on EMT interventions and the reduction in the numbers of minority students identified as eligible for special education. The call for greater general education accountability and responsibility for meeting the needs of "diverse" students was reported by some teachers and principals involved in these interviews to be interpreted as all diverse students except for special education. Further, there was a perception among some teachers and psychologists that placement in special education relieved general education of the responsibility for the outcomes of these students. Thus, the EMT process, as well as the formal ARD screening and identification, apparently are seen as a way out of general education not as a way for students to obtain more support.

The issues surrounding the role of special education in schools with higher numbers of students receiving free and reduced price meals, ESOL, and Title I services appear to be even more pronounced. The need for additional academic and behavioral supports creates waiting lists in some schools for EMT interventions and places burdens on special education that bears the responsibility for educational assessments. The need for support appears to far outstrip existing special education resources. There is little evidence from any sources, however, that there are attempts to create school-based learning supports that coordinate resources and staffing. This appears to create a situation that requires that students be identified for special education to get more intensive supports. As noted under the section regarding characteristics of students in special education, for some special educators the unmet needs of low-achieving but not necessarily "disabled" students will create situations of "compassionate coding," particularly at the elementary level. This shifts resource demand and accountability, or lack of it, onto special education. Further, it often separates the students from the general education curriculum, thus appearing to set up a situation as the student ages that requires more restrictive special education placements and often a more limited or functional curriculum.

Summary of Issues Surrounding Administration of Special Education

- Special education operates as a separate administrative and instructional program within MCPS that only tangentially supports and is connected to the overall system goals and programs. There is little or no evidence of attention to special education within larger system initiatives, except under the broad references to "diverse" students or learners. However, many of the outcomes related to diverse learners do not recognize the unique learner characteristics of many students with disabilities.
- The current Success for Every Student plan has only one performance measure that relates to special education. While other goals may apply to *all* students, some do not seem appropriate for some students with disabilities. However, there are no special education programs or student performance goals or indicators that can be used by schools to develop SES plans. There also are no systemwide expectations for what special education should achieve that can be used to guide overall program accountability. Currently, some parents perceive that all that matters to MCPS

leadership is to reduce costs and administrative burden, not necessarily improve results for students with disabilities.

- Special education too often is viewed as the only program available to students with academic and behavior problems. Many teachers and administrators who were interviewed indicated that too often students are assessed and identified to get them *out* of general education, both physically and in accountability, not to provide additional services in general education.
- The percentage of central office staff members to student ratio was not inconsistent with other programs within MCPS. However, the responsibilities and expectations for staff members in terms of day-to-day decision making about student programs, resource allocations, and parental contact create a situation where the leadership in the department is both “steering” and “rowing.” That is, they are expected to provide leadership and yet almost all resource decisions and most placement and program management decisions are funneled through the department instead of through the tri-cluster organization or at the school level. The mix of heavy centralization of decision making in the absence of any influence over implementation in schools appeared to be very inefficient and is frustrating to parents, principals, and special educators.

Satisfaction and Experience of Parents of Special Education Students

Information regarding parental satisfaction was primarily obtained through two surveys conducted by the Department of Educational Accountability (DEA) within MCPS (Attachment F). Some input also was obtained through formal and informal interviews with parents and parent groups conducted during Phases I and II of the review, although these were not intended to be representative of all parents in MCPS.

The first survey, conducted during 1998, was of parents who had filed for proceedings regarding their child's special education program during the summer of 1997 and through the 1997-98 school year and following summer. The sample was comprised of 266 households divided according to the type of special education proceeding: administrative review; mediation only; mediation and due process hearing; and only due process hearing. The second survey was conducted during the 1998-99 school year and sought the perceptions of parents with children enrolled in special education during that year (with exception of parents included in the first survey and households with more than one student in special education). The sample consisted of 2,929 parents of children representing all of the 11 disability categories. Methodology and results for each of the surveys are fully described in separate reports available from DEA.

Perceptions of Parents Filing for Proceedings

According to the DEA data, during FY 98, 390 applications were filed for one of the four types of proceedings. This number decreased to 370 in FY 99, a 5 percent overall decrease. In order to obtain information regarding these proceedings, a telephone survey was conducted by a private research firm that was hired to seek information relative to

who was filing for proceedings as well as the reasons, sources of information, and satisfaction with the process and decisions.

Of the 266 households included in the DEA survey, 189 completed the telephone interview (82.5percent). Parents of white students were more likely to be involved in one of the four types of proceedings (67 percent to 81 percent) (as compared to 53 percent of Whites in the general school population). Parents of Asian American and Hispanic students least likely (0 percent to 9 percent), and African American parents were similar to the proportion of the school population (10.6 to 21.6). However, parents from different groups were more or less equally likely to file for any of the proceedings. Parents of secondary age students were more likely to file than elementary age students. Percentages of parents of students receiving FARMS (Free and Reduced Price Meals) and ESOL were similar to their proportion of the student population, although ESOL parents used mediation options somewhat less often.

Teachers and principals, as well as the school system, provided information and were the most common sources of information used by parents to select proceedings. Consultants, attorneys, and advocates were the source used to select hearings, and 72 percent of these parents were represented by attorneys as compared to 33 percent who used attorneys across all four types of proceedings. The use of attorneys increased as the level of proceeding moved from informal Administrative Review to due process hearing.

Parents cited appropriateness of special education services (33 percent) and placement of their child (28 percent) as the two most frequent reasons for filing for procedures. While parents expressed frustration about attempts to access services as a precipitating motivation, others indicated that filing for a particular procedure was useful in that it gave them an opportunity to open the dialog about their child and "to exchange ideas with central office staff." Some parents said that they had been advised by MCPS staff to file for proceeding to access the services or placement that they wanted.

About 60 percent of parents were satisfied or very satisfied with the outcome of their proceeding; the remaining 35 percent were dissatisfied. The highest level of dissatisfaction was with hearings (64 percent) followed by mediation (36 percent). About 73 percent of all proceedings resulted in the issue being resolved or partially resolved, settled, or withdrawn during hearing. Most hearings were resolved prior to the end of the proceeding; those that went forward usually resulted in a loss for parents. Most parents (92 percent) indicated that they understood what was said during the proceedings and 77 percent said they were informed of their rights. About equal numbers said that MCPS staff was courteous and professional and provided enough time for concerns to be heard.

When asked what could have been done differently to avoid filing for a proceeding, parents cited more timely decisions about parental requests for changes to programs or services and considered the special education process to be extremely arduous and time-consuming. Parents also believed that MCPS staff need more knowledge about mandated timelines and available programs and services and that there was more need for staff to

dialog with the parents and discuss needs. Some parents also felt that their local school IEP committee was not sensitive to needs of parents or children and was more concerned with controlling program costs.

Perceptions of Parents of Children Enrolled in Special Education

A similar survey, conducted by mail and telephone, was conducted to obtain:

- parent perceptions of service climate for students in special education
- academic instruction
- entry process and/or annual review process

- extent to which parents were satisfied about meeting their child's IEP goals
- extent to which the child's academic/social/emotional progress was being met

This was a mail survey consisting of 60 items. Those items pertaining to climate and academic instruction were taken from the MCPS general parent satisfaction survey to permit comparisons between parental groups. The initial mail survey was sent to 2,929 parents of children representative of the 11 disability categories. A total of 522 surveys (17.8 percent) were returned. Thus, a second sample of 600 non-respondents was randomly selected and telephoned using an abbreviated questionnaire. Three hundred parents completed the telephone survey. The overall completion rate for both mail and telephone survey was 46 percent. At the time that this report was prepared only the initial analyses of data had been completed. Responses by disability type, race/ethnicity, FARMS, ESOL, and grade level were not yet available.

About 85 percent or more of the parents were either very satisfied or satisfied with nearly all aspects of the special education service climate. Two areas that slightly fewer parents rated satisfactorily were staff members informing parents of ways to help in school (81.7 percent) and supervision of students on the school bus (78.2 percent). Even so, more than three-quarters of the parents were satisfied with these areas.

About 85 percent or more of the parents were satisfied with their children's academic instruction. Areas that received most parent satisfaction were teachers expecting the child to do well (93.7 percent) and teachers being interested and cooperative when the parent discussed his/her child (93.5 percent).

Parents reported being very involved in their children's education. Nearly all parents helped their children with homework (96.9 percent) and attended back-to-school nights and other school events (90.1 percent). Less than 70 percent of the parents, however, volunteered to help with school activities (69.4 percent) or attended PTA meetings (64.1 percent).

Special and General Education Comparison

One purpose of the survey was to compare the perceptions of parents having children enrolled in special education to perceptions of parents having children enrolled in general education. To do this, responses for parents in the current survey were summarized by three school levels--elementary, middle, and high--based on the grade level of their children who were receiving special education services. Data from countywide surveys of the parents having children enrolled in general education were reported for survey items similar to those in the current survey.

In both the special education and general education parent groups, levels of satisfaction with the school service climate and academic instruction were generally quite high. For both groups, the level of satisfaction across many of the survey items was high in elementary schools but progressively decreased in middle school and in high school.

Parents having children in special education were more satisfied with being kept informed of their children's academic progress than were parents having children in general education. For instance, 94.4 percent (elementary), 86.6 percent (middle), and 82.6 percent (high) of special education parents were more likely to report that school staff members kept them informed of their children's academic progress than parents having children in general education (90.3 percent, 77 percent, and 65.5 percent respectively).

On the other hand, parents having children in special education appeared to be slightly less informed about ways to help out in school and were less satisfied with their children getting good education than parents of general education students. Even so, 70.4 percent and 78 percent of the parents of special education students still were satisfied in these areas.

The involvement of parents having children in special education was considerably higher than that of parents having children in general education. Parents of special education children were more likely to volunteer to help out with school activities, to attend PTA meetings, and to help with their children's homework than parents having general education children.

Special Education Satisfaction

There were several survey items unique to special education services, and thus, no comparison data were available. However, there was interest in how parents having special education students enrolled in different school levels answered survey items.

Most parents (as high as 95.2 percent) were satisfied with various aspects of the entry process and/or annual review process. Specifically, parents were satisfied with:

- information regarding why an Admission, Review, and Dismissal (ARD) committee meeting was necessary (90.0 percent)
- feeling comfortable about talking about their concerns (93.6 percent)
- understanding the terms and technical language at the ARD meeting (94.8 percent)
- school staff members listening to their concerns at (95.2 percent)
- ease of asking questions for understanding at the ARD meeting (96.2 percent)

Areas rated by fewer parents as satisfactory were whether the ARD committee discussed ESY services (76.2 percent), transition services (71.4 percent), related special education services (67.2 percent), and participation in countywide and statewide testing programs (54.3 percent). Only 66.0 percent of the parents for whom the survey item was applicable reported having been told an interpreter would be made available if needed. Additionally, 74.4 percent of the parents said that they were given alternative meeting dates if they were unable to make the scheduled meeting.

Generally, parents felt that school staff had considered alternatives to their children's special education services. About 80 percent or more of the parents were satisfied that alternatives to their children's special education were considered. Parents agreed that

school staff (88.4 percent) considered their ideas. Parents were informed of appropriate program options (79.4 percent), that school staff discussed ways their children could receive instruction with general education students (82.8 percent). Parents knew who to go to with problems concerning their children's education (78.5 percent), and parents were informed how to make changes to their children's special education services.

Overall, three-quarters (73.5 percent) of the parents were satisfied with special education services. Eighty-two percent of the parents stated that their children were receiving all the special education services listed on their children's IEPs and 83.2 percent were satisfied that all of the IEP goals had been met. Parents tended to be more satisfied with their children's academic progress (78.7 percent) than with their children's emotional and social progress (75.6 percent).

Parents having high school students in special education were least satisfied in most areas. Specifically, they were less satisfied with their children's emotional and social progress (66.6 percent), with special education services overall (61.8 percent), with their children receiving all of the services listed in their children's IEPs (72.5 percent), and with their children meeting their IEP goals (78.2 percent). Parents of elementary school students in special education were most satisfied and parents of middle school students in special education generally fell in between.

Parents of elementary school students in special education expressed the most satisfaction with feeling comfortable about talking about their concerns (96.5 percent) and with decisions made in their children's IEPs (90.6 percent). On the other hand, these same parents were least satisfied with the ARD committee's discussion of countywide and statewide testing programs (52.2 percent). Parents of middle school students in special education were least satisfied with the ARD committee's discussions regarding transition services (64.9 percent) and ESY services (71.9 percent).

Parents having elementary school students in special education were most satisfied with school staff's consideration of their ideas (92.5 percent). They report satisfaction with the school staff informing parents how to make changes to their children's services (80.0 percent). They report satisfaction with the school staff informing them who to go to with problems concerning their children (89.2 percent).

Summary of Issues Concerning Parent Satisfaction

- A relatively small number of proceedings were filed given the numbers of students enrolled in MCPS special education. There has also been a reduction in the number of formal filings for proceedings, from administrative reviews to due process hearings suggesting that MCPS is improving both its adherence to procedural guidelines and timelines as well as perhaps responsiveness to student needs.
- The main reasons that parents filed for proceedings were disputes about the "appropriateness" of their child's IEP and placement decisions. Some parents also indicated that if the system had made a more timely response to their request for

review and perhaps entered into more dialog with them about their child's need, they would not have sought more formal means of dispute resolution.

- The majority of parents felt that they were treated courteously and were informed and understood the proceedings. Most also obtained information about their options for resolving disputes from MCPS parent literature and staff. Few relied on attorneys or advocates, although attorneys were most often involved at the hearing level.
- Most disputes were resolved before the formal due process hearing level. At hearing, the school system most often prevailed, which is consistent with national research related to dispute resolution.
- Overall satisfaction with programs and services was very high among parents of students receiving special education, although elementary level parents are more satisfied than parents of secondary level students.
- Parents of children in special education were more satisfied than parents of general education students in terms of being kept informed of child progress but were less informed of how to help out in school. Parents of special education students report being more involved in school through volunteer work, PTA and helping with homework than general education parents.

Fiscal Issues Confronting Special Education in MCPS

A component of the review was an analysis of resource allocation issues in special education. Issues related to costs as well as allocation formula are very prominent in special education. A member of the review team is a national expert in special education funding and is familiar with trends and data relative to costs and funding issues. Nonetheless, there are significant data limitations, both nationally and within MCPS, to allow for comparisons to other districts and/or national averages. For one, it is very difficult to obtain accurate data relative to various expenditures in special education. For instance, MCPS special education is 11.8 percent of its total budget to serve 12.4 percent of the ages 3-21 population. (This amount reportedly does not include transportation, for which only speculative estimates were available, nor psychological or pupil personnel services.) The budget does include legal expenditures, however. Based on national estimates, fully "loaded" special education costs should be about 1.5 to 2 percent above child count.

Based on the available data, it appears that MCPS' special education expenditures are well within, if not below, expected costs. However, it is important to note that transportation costs are high in MCPS and this item is not factored into the budget.

It is too simplistic and misleading to judge a special education program solely on expenditures; more funding does not necessarily result in better services or student outcomes. Therefore, the review did not focus on whether budget allocations were sufficient, but on how special education resources are allocated and the relation to

programs and services. Several issues were identified during this review that also were noted in a 1997 *Report of the Budget Review Subcommittee on Special Needs*. In discussion with special education administrators it appeared that recommendations of the subcommittee have not yet been addressed in the MCPS budget. Among the more significant issues identified during this review and noted in the 1997 Report is the mismatch between the special education staffing model and the allocation process.

Staff Allocations

The budget for special education staff is generated by ratios established by the administration. The ratios (staff/student) reportedly are based on some combination of program history, MSDE regulations, and available dollars. Ratios are then applied to a demographic projection of student growth. The result is a budgeted allocation of more than 90 job titles or position codes from which a special education budget is created. The budget creates a fixed ceiling for spending and for the number of staff within codes. This model of budgeting permits conversion of staff allocations from one code to another; however, it does not permit special education to exceed the total number of staff members even if the allocation is below the budget cap. Therefore, if certain positions with higher average salaries were to be vacant and not needed by a particular program, those positions could not be converted to other staff positions at a lower salary rate if that would exceed the budgeted staff allocation for the position. Furthermore, all allocations must be made at the beginning of a school year, leaving virtually no pot of resources for program adjustments later on. This allocation process reportedly locks in the special education program almost two years prior to the start of the school year in which the money is spent.

This inflexibility runs counter to the requirement that special education be responsive to individual needs. Some principals and special education administrators also noted it as a major decision-making bottleneck. Principals report that they cannot make decisions about services to meet children's needs in a timely fashion because they have virtually no control, or even knowledge of, what resources are available outside of their building. Furthermore, the central office administrators within the fixed pot of salaries and positions must juggle any request that might alter staffing allocations, such as an increase in allotment for instructional assistants. There appears to be a continuous shifting from one place to put in another. Not only is this enormously inefficient, it increases time for decision-making, a major factor identified by parents for filing for procedures, and results in inequitable class sizes/case loads during a year.

A second major concern is that the staffing ratios used to allocate staff members are not aligned with the cluster model ratios that were approved by the Montgomery County Board of Education. The cluster model is designed to move special education programs and services closer to a student's home school and to provide consistency in the type of staff members available for each program or service. The cluster model identifies a base staffing capacity for each "program" or service.

For example, in the programs for children who are deaf or hearing impaired, there must be a minimum of 16 teachers to provide the three models of service required. The autism

classes require a minimum of 19 teachers if they are to be located in 4 middle and four high schools with proximity to the student's home school cluster. Budget allocations are less than program needs. In addition, the model specifies a resource teacher for each school, and some number of transition support teachers. However, these positions are not tied to ratios and thus the positions do not increase in the budget as population increases. Regardless of size or level of school, there is only one resource position budgeted. A Special Education Personnel Process Action Team was created to review personnel and allocation practices as they relate to special education and is reported to be addressing these issues.

General Education Class Size and Mainstreaming

An issue raised at the school-level by principals and teachers who were interviewed was the impact on general education class sizes of efforts to include students with disabilities for all or part of a school day. Because students in special classes are not part of general education class rolls, when such students are moved into general education classes they increase overall class size. This is a particular problem in schools that have cluster classrooms or programs. Having cluster classes increases the special education population in a building and can make it very difficult for general and special education teachers to work out an equitable distribution of students with disabilities in age-appropriate classes. In some middle and high schools, including several students with disabilities in content area classes significantly increases the general educator's class size and responsibilities. This is particularly problematic in schools that do not have the special education staff members to provide support services in general education classrooms or to team teach with the general educator.

Recovery of "Savings"

During the past three years, MCPS has seen a reduction in legal fees. According to data provided by MCPS, in FY 97, \$3.1 million was expended. This decreased to \$2 million in FY 98, and as of February 2, 1999, \$971,000 had been expended. Similarly, during the past four years, there were estimated savings due to the reduction in non-public placements. However, in response to questions about how savings have been applied, special education administrators reported that there has been only the one-time purchase of computers for special education teachers. Savings have not been recovered to the special education budget. In addition, as MCPS moves to implement a home school model, it is possible that there may be some reduction in the need for specialized transportation that could result in additional savings. It is important to examine all such reductions in light of program needs. For example, allocating some portion of savings to more staff members can maintain the current overall level of funding, but direct the resources to schools and to the support of students. Thus, savings realized through reduced busing can support more professional and instructional assistant staff time in the home school to the benefit of students and teachers. Increasing supports in special education and/or general education has the potential of further reducing disputes concerning appropriate services as well as emphasizing more home school services.

Summary of Fiscal Issues

- It is difficult to obtain the "total" costs of special education in MCPS and therefore difficult to judge the adequacy of funding. However, the percent of budget to students identified, as special education is not excessive. The adequacy of funding, however, rests with a determination of outcomes or results. Currently, there is little consensus among MCPS staff members and parents about what constitutes enough funding or services.
- The current budget process is highly centralized and rigid and does not match the staffing allocations required by program. The result is a process that is micro-managed by central office staff members and is inefficient. Some principals, parents, and special education administrators also perceive it as inequitable. The rigid adherence to detailed staffing allocations fosters accountability to ensure that funds are used precisely as budgeted, but is not responsive to program needs and to the creation of more flexible service options in school.
- The current allocation process is tied to student identification. Funds are generated only if students are identified as requiring special education. This process could stifle any attempts to implement the EMT pilot program designed to reduce the disproportionate representation of African American students in special education categories. It also likely results in schools requiring resources that are disproportionate to the true needs of students. For example, there is evidence based on both system data and professional opinions among almost all professionals who were interviewed that there are substantial numbers of students who are referred and identified as special education whose needs could be met if schools had more resources and incentives to look at creative options. This is particularly important at the elementary level given the wide spread beliefs about "compassionate coding" of students to get them some type of service.
- Cost savings realized through reduced litigation and non-public placement are not sufficiently reallocated to programs or services in the schools.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The special education programs and services offered by MCPS are noteworthy in several aspects. The county has a strong professional staff of teachers, administrators, and other specialists who provide services to students. The number of teachers not fully certified was remarkably low. Services are designed to meet the needs of specific disability types and are generally provided by teachers with expertise for the specific type of student. The county is to be commended for continuous progress toward reducing segregation of students with disabilities and to moving services into, or closer to, a student's home school. Reductions in litigation and non-public placements have resulted in cost savings to the county. Parent satisfaction is generally high, with up to 85 percent of parents satisfied or very satisfied with various aspects of their child's special education program. In addition, some student outcomes, specifically the low dropout rates and high graduation rates for students with disabilities point to areas of success for MCPS. Thus, while this

review has identified a number of issues within the program needing to be addressed, it is important to acknowledge the strengths.

This review of special education in MCPS has been guided by the purposes set down by the superintendent's memo to the Board and defined by questions identified by involved groups of individuals ranging from students, parents, teachers, administrators, and special education professionals.

This review was not designed to be evaluative in the sense that it would compare various aspects of the MCPS special education program to some established standard. In fact, there are few such standards available within special education, which until recently has been focused on the procedural and legal aspects to ensure that each eligible student received a "free and appropriate public education." The critical standard, therefore, is highly individualized, meaning that the quality of special education has come to be judged by whether each child's education is appropriate. However, in the absence of indicators that can report what might constitute appropriate, some have sought to examine special education programs by indicators such as staff qualifications, numbers and characteristics of students, characteristics of programs, parent satisfaction, costs to the district, etc. This review has attempted to provide a picture of current status in many of these areas. To the extent possible, some historic or trend data were also presented. The recommendations are based on the findings of this review as compared to knowledge of current professionally accepted practice and legal requirements. In addition, the recommendations do not attempt to address each of the findings. Rather, recommendations cut across key areas of the review and findings.

1. Develop an indicator system and key performance benchmarks or goals to track special education program performance.

The data presented in this report came from multiple MCPS documents and sources. Many of the ratios or analyses were either computed or compiled by the consultants. Thus, while MCPS has a rich database concerning students with disabilities, the data are not organized or aggregated in ways that permits the MCPS leadership and parents to have a clear picture of current trends and progress. The need to develop a system of critical indicators, including student performance and key processes (e.g., referral rates, placement rates, etc.) is necessary for special education to be part of the Success for Every Student plans and for staff members and parents to ensure continuous improvement.

This system should be developed in collaboration with parents, teachers, and administrators, such as the existing Corrective Action Plan committee. Also, MCPS must expand the performance indicators for students with disabilities beyond the required local and state testing programs and include measures that are sensitive to the goals and progress of certain students with more significant disabilities.

While it is important for students with disabilities to participate in the standard measures of achievement, it is also acknowledged that for some students, these measures will not be sensitive to performance improvements. Nor will academic performance encompass all of the important curricular goals of these students. Broader goals are necessary to better focus special education instruction and to ensure that these students' progress "count" (examples could include social skill development, post-school employment).

2. Eliminate the separation of special education in central office administration and within schools.

One of the most consistent themes emerging across all of the interviews was the perception that special education is a "step-child" within MCPS. Participating administrators, principals, teachers, and parents who were interviewed spoke of how some schools "failed to take responsibility for special education" and were permitted to refer out their special education students and let someone else educate them. There also were a number of perceptions about why this has occurred over time, including the proliferation of a variety of classes and programs that were administered out of the central office and were located in schools, but whose parents did not come from the neighborhood or attendance area.

The move toward a cluster model for programs along with an emphasis on a home school model (which two clusters are implementing) may begin to shift more ownership for students in special education away from the central administration and into schools. However, emphasis on creating a more unified and seamless system of general and special education will be required at the central administrative levels. The *Vision for Unification of General and Special Education* document provides a platform for examining how current initiatives, including the emphasis on developing SES plans and Quality Management Councils, can and should address special education students as well as support a more cohesive vision for special education services and programs.

3. Increase the capacity of general education classrooms to better support students receiving special education as well as other students with significant learning and/or behavioral needs.

This recommendation has appeared in at least three previous reports focusing on special education. The issue of general education's responsibility for making accommodations arose repeatedly during this review. The consultants believe that the recommendation to increase general educators' capacity to accommodate diverse students should be taken seriously. Without attention to this issue, the over representation issue concerning African American students and Hispanic students will continue. Accordingly, MCPS should:

- Increase the proportion of resource teachers, psychologists, and speech and language personnel to student population in schools most impacted by poverty and language differences. As demonstrated by analyses of a number of large state and/or national databases, special education identification, particularly in the categories of mild mental retardation and specific learning disabilities, are highly related to low socioeconomic status.
- Increase the emphasis and professional development on the use of ecological, functional, and curriculum-based assessments and decrease reliance on IQ scores for coding and placement. Teachers in eligibility decisions as well as placement reference IQ scores too frequently. In addition to concerns about cultural bias, IQ data are not sensitive to instructional changes and needs.
- Leadership training and professional development of general education teachers should include specific professional development on how to address the needs of diverse learners including explicit attention to students with disabilities. Also, all teachers need intensive professional development in models of collaborative planning and instruction and in how cultural and language differences influence learning.
- Define specific models or approaches to general/special education collaboration that are appropriate for elementary, middle, or high schools and establish a systemwide initiative to promote these practices. This should include providing adequate time for special education teachers to meet and plan appropriate monitoring for students with disabilities in general education.

4. Review the current array of special education programs and classes to reduce the sorting and placing of students and create a seamless and flexible continuum of settings and services.

The current system of programs appears to be overly complex and appears to be too inflexible. Placements of students are driven more by program "philosophy" than the true need of individual students. Many of these programs were developed 15 or more years ago. Placements are often made on the basis of a child's record, including IQ score, parent preference, or required services. In placement decisions, the child often follows the services, not the other way around. African American and Hispanic students in special education are disproportionately enrolled in certain special classes that offer a parallel or "functional" life skills curriculum.

Most of the special programs are not clearly defined in terms of their relationship to either general education curriculum or what services or supports they provide. Moreover, programs operate almost independent of each other and within schools. The geographical cluster concept, which tries to keep students with disabilities in their home school cluster, is logical. While the cluster concept is a positive start, MCPS needs to make greater efforts to provide individual services in the student's home

school. This is an opportune time for MCPS to critically review its program structure as the federal IDEA requirements begin to redefine special education in terms of its relationship to access to the general education curriculum. In addition, MSDE is changing its classification of services by intensity levels. Accordingly, MCPS should:

- Monitor placement of African American and Hispanic students with a goal of reducing placements that are segregated from general education classrooms and curriculum.
- Develop a clear vision for special education including establishing goals for how special education services can be blended in a school to support students with disabilities across all intensity levels. The programs for students with disabilities should be a shared responsibility among all special education professionals in a building.
- If MCPS chooses to keep programs in place such as learning centers, FLS classes, and school community-based programs, then the criteria for entry and exit must be standardized and teachers and parents must be made aware of the criteria. For instance, there also appears to be overlap in, and confusion regarding, the ED cluster programs and Mark Twain satellite classes. These programs should be consolidated or the distinctions between programs should be clearer.
- The emphasis on providing services in the general education classroom should be continued. The majority of students with high incidence disabilities appear to be included in general education classes. However, based on interviews and data there is still limited inclusion in general education classes of students with more intense needs (either receiving intensity IV-V services and/or pursuing a certificate).
- Develop a set of strategies for assisting students with disabilities to articulate from elementary to middle and from middle to high school. This should include opportunities for teachers and parents to meet and discuss student needs and academic and other expectations. Students should be offered opportunities to visit schools and talk with their peers who have already gone through these transition phases. Also, additional supports are needed, particularly at middle and high school levels, to help students with disabilities enrolled in general education classes.

5. Increase age-appropriate options for all students with disabilities, ages 19-21.

While MCPS has made an admirable start with the addition of the Training for Independence Transition programs at Montgomery College, these two programs serve a limited number of students ages 19-21 that receive certificates. Teachers who work with such students reported that the majority of these students are in high school

programs for as many as six years. These students have limited opportunities to select electives, interact with peers their age, and participate in meaningful job training.

6. Develop a curricular framework, as well as systemwide professional development program, to ensure that all students with disabilities, regardless of where they receive their education, have the opportunity to access the general education curriculum and extracurricular activities.

Based on current practice and interviews with special education administrators, there is extensive professional development needed in the general education curriculum. While the Department of Academic Programs has several notable initiatives underway, the level of professional development to ensure their implementation is minimal. Furthermore, it appears that special education teachers are making decisions about what to teach from the curriculum on an individual and ad hoc basis. This decision making has significant consequences for students as it may move them from a diploma "track" to a certificate track. Some special education teachers are rightfully concerned about how students with disabilities will fare on the new high school assessments unless they have more opportunities to learn the material in the general curriculum. MCPS must ensure that students have access to the content as well as effective instruction in the general education curriculum regardless of their placement. Therefore, MCPS should:

- Rethink its current planned revision of the FLS curriculum to avoid creation of a separate curricular track. Instead, the MCPS general education curriculum should be the framework for extending skills and modifying instruction in order to provide more functional academics. A separate curriculum will result in programs that are isolated from general education.
- Provide intensive staff development using the curriculum framework to assist special and general education teachers in making strategic decisions about curricular accommodations and modifications. Current practice appeared to be to "dumb down" the general curriculum through emphasizing basic rote skills. Research suggests that increasing the amount of instructional time while providing intensive instruction in a reduced core set of concepts and skills (similar to the work done by DAP related to Algebra) is effective in increasing student performance without lowering overall expectations.
- Provide clear guidelines to teachers and parents regarding instructional options available to students who pursue a diploma or a certificate. There are reportedly increasing numbers of students in the high schools who have been pursuing diplomas but find they cannot meet the requirements in the 11th or 12th grade. These students are considered by teachers too high functioning for the current FLS program and often sit in the general education classes without the benefit of vocational instruction or more intensive transition services. With the advent of the high school assessments, teachers and staff members interviewed anticipated that

there would be a significant group of students who were performing above the expectations of the alternate assessment process, the IMAP, who will not be able to meet all the requirements for a diploma. Thus, there needs to be careful planning for a range of individualized options for instruction and transition services for these students.

7. Address the discrepancies in staffing across classes and programs that serve students with high incidence disabilities, particularly those receiving Intensity I-III services.

Current staffing ratios are computed on a countywide average that do not necessarily reflect school-by-school needs for services. As examples, the learning centers and ED cluster programs appear to be reasonably well staffed. The learning centers have a coordinator and ED cluster programs have resource teachers at middle and high schools. These staff members have limited instructional responsibilities. In addition, these programs have smaller student/staff ratios and clerical support. Meanwhile, special education teachers who serve the majority of students with disabilities (Intensity I-III and school-based Intensity IV classes) can have high caseloads and responsibilities that include administrative duties, case management, and direct instruction. The disparities appear more extreme in middle and high schools. Staffing of programs, such as learning centers or ED cluster programs, should not be reduced, but increasing staff/student ratios and redefining responsibilities for staff in schools that provide primarily inclusion/resource programs is necessary. Accordingly, MCPS should:

- Increase professional staff and instructional assistant time available to provide Intensity I-III services. Allocation of resource personnel to schools, as well as TSTs, must be based on ratios that consider special education population and responsibilities of these staff members.
- Reexamine who administers educational assessments and attends EMTs. Too many teachers/RTSEs seem to be spending significant time conducting educational assessments and attending EMTs rather than providing instruction. A number of teachers, psychologists, and administrators also reported that many of the teachers doing educational assessments are inadequately trained. Furthermore, new requirements for functional behavioral assessments and behavioral intervention plans will put even more demands on teacher time and skills.

8. Engage in initiatives and exploration of how to reduce special education paperwork.

Paperwork burdens were perhaps the most frequently mentioned issue in special education by all professionals who were interviewed. Paperwork requirements represent a combination of state and local response to legal decisions and compliance monitoring. There are several approaches to reducing paperwork burden, including

discussing alternative ways to document certain compliance indicators rather than through individual student IEPs and accompanying documentation. MCPS currently is attempting to provide some support to schools through the flexible spending accounts as well as some computer-assistance in IEP development. Both of these efforts should be continued. In addition, MCPS should:

- Increase clerical resources to schools to assist both teachers as well as psychologists in meeting paperwork demands. In addition, how to provide additional administrative supports during the “peak” ARD development months in schools that have cluster programs or large concentrations of special education students needs to be explored.
 - MCPS should consider staggering the annual reviews across the school year to avoid the spring “log jam” of paperwork.
 - Additionally, MCPS should convene a group of interested parties, including MSDE representatives, parents, advocates, and attorneys in a discussion of how specific paperwork might be eliminated or reduced and still meet the legal or compliance standards. This approach has been successfully used in other districts.
9. **Revise the process for determining staff allocations and other resources with the goal of increasing flexibility at the school level *with appropriate accountability for specific program and student indicators*. These include both student performance data and other processes to be identified as part of the recommended indicator system.**

The current allocation formula is based largely on program history and cost estimates and does not offer the flexibility needed to individualize services. Furthermore, allocations are inconsistent with programs. Therefore, MCPS should:

- Determine total resources allocated to special education in the county, including transportation, litigation, non-public school placements, etc. Future allocations should be determined based on prior expenditures and/or changes in total enrollment, cost of living, or similar factors.
- Reduce the number of personnel codes to create broader allocation categories, and/or reduce the micro-management of positions versus allocation of dollars to provide more flexibility in assignment of staff and program revision. The Department of Special Education should be held accountable for operating within the budgeted allocation and for the results of the program, but schools should have greater authority over how to allocate resources to individual students.
- Develop a new allocation process to be used by the department in collaboration with principals, teachers, and parents to support an agreed-upon program model. For example, to support the move to tri-cluster and cluster programs, as well as

increased home school options, more allocation of staff members should be decentralized to the tri-cluster or cluster, or school, if not to schools, as part of a school wide budgeting process. An allocation model for resource personnel might be based on total school enrollment. Higher intensity services and programs would be funded according to a model that reflects the base capacity for each class “type” and takes into account the array of services that must be available. More expensive and unanticipated services could be funded from an excess cost reserve allocated to the tri-cluster or maintained centrally. The goal of decentralization is to move decisions about program needs, as well as resource allocation decisions associated with the IEP process, closer to the school where the child is being served. This model can only work when it is in conjunction with a stringent set of accountability indicators.

- MCPS should continue its efforts to reduce litigation and non-public placements and maximize provision of special education in neighborhood schools.
- The Department of Special Education should receive increased proportions of savings associated with reductions in non-public placements and litigation.

These recommendations do not address each finding or every aspect of the special education program within MCPS. However, they reflect the broader aspects of the program that need to be addressed. Further, within each of the recommendations there are limited specifics as it was not the intent of the consultants to micro-manage or prescribe “fixes” but to provide the goals and directions for the changes. It is particularly important that the MCPS leadership considers these recommendations and begins to develop more comprehensive strategies in one or more areas. The leadership will also need to engage parents and families and general educators in finding solutions. Future program directions and, indeed, the improvement of special education in MCPS rest on such a collaborative approach.