Office of the Superintendent of Schools
MONTGOMERY COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS
Rockville, Maryland

October 9, 2012

MEMORANDUM

To: Members of the Board of Education

From: Joshua P. Starr, Superintendent of Schools

Subject: Update on Professional Development Priority

Executive Summary

The purpose of this memorandum is to provide an update on the work of the new Office of Professional Development and School Support, including the district's implementation of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) as a key component of school improvement efforts. This memorandum also will describe the principles guiding the district's work as we seek to establish coherence and alignment in the area of professional learning.

Background

The findings of the Transition Team Report (the Report) articulated the need to establish clear direction for the district's work in the area of professional learning. Budget cuts and organizational changes over recent years have challenged the district's capacity to coordinate and design effective professional development initiatives for administrators, teachers, and staff across schools and offices. Specifically, the Report articulated stakeholders' concerns regarding the bifurcation of professional development and the absorption of the Office of Organizational Development mostly under two separate offices, leading to the formation of the Office of Professional Development and School Support. The Report identified specific goals for the district in providing high-quality professional development including: (1) establishing a focus on ongoing professional learning for all; (2) aligning professional development initiatives with school improvement plans; and (3) measuring the outcomes of professional development.

Since the publication of the Report, at the beginning of the 2012–2013 school year, the Board of Education has been rewriting its core values, and one of the five values identified is "Learning." The Board's consideration of learning as a core value aligns with our shift from thinking about professional development as one-time trainings to a system of ongoing *professional learning experiences*. We are all learners in Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS), engaged in a continual process to improve our practice as teachers, leaders, and support professionals. Research indicates that ongoing learning opportunities most contribute to adult learning, and thus, to improved student achievement *(Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 2004)*.

Formation of the Office of Professional Development and School Support

On July 1, 2012, the Office of Professional Development and School Support (OPDSS) was formed within the Office of School Support and Improvement (OSSI) to establish coherence in professional learning experiences across the district and to develop a clear strategy for next steps in this area. The placement of an office focused on improving adult capacity through professional learning within OSSI was intentional; school and district improvement is facilitated through adult learning. In the same manner in which we are asking schools to engage in an ongoing process of improvement, directly connected to opportunities for professional learning, we also are engaging in this process in OSSI. By establishing goals to guide our work, strategies to utilize in supporting schools and offices in working to achieve these goals, and a process by which we regularly analyze our progress toward achievement of these goals, OSSI will seek to engage in its own cycle of ongoing learning in an OSSI PLC throughout the year. Similarly, PLCs have been formed among leadership teams by the deputy superintendent of teaching, learning, and programs and by the chief operating officer as well.

Dr. Rebecca Thessin, associate superintendent of professional development and school support, has been building relationships across the system and assessing the current state of our many professional development efforts to begin the process of developing a district framework for professional learning. Central services and school-based leaders have been engaged in one-on-one and small group discussions with OPDSS staff members to share their perspectives on successes and challenges with the current state of professional development in the district.

 The following themes emerged in these discussions:
- Professional development that impacted principals' practice connected learning experiences to their daily work, afforded the opportunity for principals to apply their learning, and then included time for reflection and the development of next steps based on the outcomes.
- Professional development opportunities for administrators must be differentiated based on need.
- The staff development teacher is a key component of effective school-based professional development.
- Resource teachers and assistant principals are in need of more ongoing and systemic learning opportunities to build their capacity to lead.
- Support professionals must be included in school and district professional development plans, particularly instructional supporting services staff members who work with children in classrooms.
- Services and supports must be provided to schools in a coherent and coordinated manner.
- There is a great deal of variation in quality and effectiveness of professional development offerings across MCPS.

These themes are one source of data informing the work of OPDSS this year in the development of a districtwide professional learning framework. During October 2012, four teacher focus groups and two supporting services staff member focus groups will be held to gather input from these groups.

PLCs as the Starting Point

A PLC is an ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve (*DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Many, 2010*). Stoll and Louis (*2007*) distinguish that professional learning communities, as distinct from professional communities more broadly, have an agreed-upon objective of improvement. Therefore, PLCs are formed specifically for the purpose of improving student learning (*Roy & Hord, 2006*). By providing teachers with the opportunity to engage in collaborative ongoing learning, they have the opportunity to enhance their capacity to meet every child's needs and to know every child's needs better by discussing them with a team. Schmoker (*2004*) emphasizes this focus on results in stating, " . . . The moment teachers begin to closely examine their lessons and the results of those lessons, instruction improves and competence increases" (*p. 85*).

The six research-based characteristics of effective PLCs that are guiding our work in MCPS are:
1. focus on learning and results;
2. shared values and beliefs;
3. supportive and shared leadership;
4. culture of collaboration;
5. collective inquiry and learning; and
6. mutual respect *(DuFour, DuFour, and Eaker, 2008; Hord, 2004; Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006; Morrissey, 2000).*

During the April 2012 Superintendent's Administrative and Supervisory Meeting (A&S), timelines for expectations of PLC implementation for elementary schools, secondary schools, and central offices were shared with administrators. In May and June of 2012, all secondary school principals, staff development teachers, and other staff from each school site attended a required three-hour training entitled: "PLC: Developing a Common Understanding." The team members were then expected to share information about the training with their leadership teams and school staff members. We now are designing continuing professional learning opportunities for administrators at A&S meetings centered around the knowledge and skills that principals identified as essential for PLC work, including a common understanding of characteristics of effective PLCs, coaching and facilitation skills to engage and lead others in PLC work, and specific Curriculum 2.0 collaborative planning tools, as a few examples.

Next Steps in PLC Work

Our PLC work in the 2012–2013 school year is specifically focused on building the capacity of school-based and central services administrators to establish the necessary structures and conditions for PLC work and to facilitate the work of PLC teams. Beginning in March 2012, a PLC implementation team, including directors and administrative staff across central services, has been meeting regularly to plan for, implement, and lead district administrators' understanding of PLC work. This stakeholder group will continue to work throughout the year to identify resources to support schools in PLC implementation, including the development and administration of a PLC Assessment Tool to gather data on needed supports and the creation of a rubric for schools to use in

reflecting on their own PLC practice. In addition to the PLC implementation team, a PLC Advisory Committee comprised of principals, teachers, and supporting services staff members will begin meeting regularly this month to guide the district's PLC work.

It also is clear that principals cannot facilitate the development of effective PLCs alone. Teacher leaders have a critical role in facilitating the learning of teacher teams focused on improvement. These teacher leaders will need to include school-based staff development teachers, resource teachers, content specialists, and team leaders. In planning for the 2013–2014 school year, we will need to explore dedicating more time and resources to growing the capacity of these school-based teacher leaders to lead PLC work in subject and grade level teams. Additionally, we may want to consider ways in which these teacher leaders might further support the work of PLC teams within their subject and grade levels to learn PLC processes and to engage in ongoing work to support school improvement during the school day.

Development of a Professional Learning Framework

PLCs are one component of a districtwide professional learning framework that will be developed this year. In preparation for full implementation of PLCs, we are working with school-based and central services leaders, principals, teachers, and central services staff members to develop a comprehensive learning plan that balances a macro and micro learning continuum for adult learners that will impact student learning (*Curry & Killion, 2009*). Macro learning experiences include workshops, trainings, and conference sessions that deepen content and pedagogical knowledge. However, change in practice occurs through micro learning when teachers and leaders have the opportunity to apply what they learned while engaging in a collaborative, reflective, day-to-day application of new knowledge and skills. This platform of professional learning is necessary to have a common understanding upon which to build new learning and practices. As teachers learn new skills and develop a common understanding of curriculum goals, they are able to collaboratively plan for instruction, reflect on their practice, and adjust strategies to meet the needs of student learners. This learning continuum will be exemplified in our creation of a districtwide professional learning framework.

The Professional Learning Framework for MCPS will include:
- key components of effective professional learning;
- a description of the role of various types of professional development in contributing to adult learning;
- the connection between professional learning and school improvement processes;
- the role of central services supports in school-based learning; and
- expectations for the design, facilitation, and evaluation of professional learning in MCPS.

To facilitate the development of this plan, OPDSS will utilize data and recommendations from teacher and supporting services focus groups, the guidance of the OPDSS Montgomery County Association of Administrators and Principals (MCAAP) Advisory Group, and the coordinated input and work of teams across central services. The following timeline will guide the district's work in the development of a professional learning framework over the course of this year:

- **August to Mid-October**—Phase One: Current MCPS Professional Development Inventory and Professional Development Landscape Analysis
    - Gathering information on current professional development offerings/programs and strategies and scanning the broader education space for effective professional development frameworks and strategies.
    - Conducting interviews and entry conversations with staff responsible for district-led professional development and school-based administrators and central services, professional, supporting services, and administrative and supervisory staff.
    - Forming a MCAAP Advisory Group to provide guidance on development of the professional learning framework.
- **Mid-October to January**—Phase Two: Professional development strategy and framework development
    - Working to develop a theory of action to prioritize and coordinate systemic professional learning opportunities.
    - Implementing focus groups in collaboration with the Service Employees International Union, Local 500, the Montgomery County Education Association and central services staff members.
    - Reviewing entry data, inventory of strategies, and focus group findings to begin draft of districtwide professional learning framework.
- **February to May**—Phase Three: Review and revise framework with critical stakeholders
    - Reviewing the plan with stakeholders across MCPS.
    - Defining budget implications for Fiscal Year 2014 and revising plan as needed.

Conclusion

Throughout the year, we will be collaborating with multiple stakeholders to develop a districtwide professional learning framework to build the capacity of all leaders in the system to serve as leaders of learning for adults; to connect the work of school improvement directly to the work of PLCs; and to provide differentiated learning for principals, administrators, teachers, and supporting services and central services staff members to build their knowledge and skills to participate in and lead PLC work.

In preparation for the discussion, we ask that members of the Board read the attached excerpt from pages 37-39 of *Leaders of Learning: How District, School, and Classroom Leaders Improve Student Achievement,* by Richard DuFour and Robert J. Marzano (2011).

At the Board table to participate in our discussion today are Dr. Rebecca A. Thessin, associate superintendent, Office of Professional Development and School Support; Ms. Denise M. DeFiore, director, Staff Development Teacher Project Team; and Mrs. Myriam A. Rogers, principal, Francis Scott Key Middle School.

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