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

March 21, 2013

MEMORANDUM

To:             Members of the Board of Education

From:           Joshua P. Starr, Superintendent of Schools

Subject:        Update on Strategic Priority: Interventions

**Executive Summary**

Preparing all Montgomery County Public Schools' (MCPS) students for their futures requires a systemic and holistic approach to supporting learners' academic, social-emotional, behavioral, and intellectual needs. Although MCPS has a record of excellence in teaching and learning, we still are missing the mark for many of our students. For MCPS to close the racial and socioeconomic achievement gap, we must take deliberate action to coordinate our efforts, identify the essential components of an effective student support network, and build on current effective practices to decrease the variability among schools and individual students' learning experiences. This comprehensive and coordinated approach to address the needs of the students who need us most is inextricably linked with our two other strategic district priorities—professional development and community engagement.

Building on my transition team's recommendation to strengthen adult and student learning, the current strategic plan framework lays out *what* academic, social-emotional, and critical thinking skills all students and staff members must develop so that all students are college and career ready. The interventions work overlays the strategic plan, as it sets forth *how* MCPS will systemically and systematically address the needs of each and every student.

Supporting the success of all our children requires a new lens—a systemic focus on the individual learner—as we simultaneously build on existing successful practices. Closing the achievement gap demands a seamless community of support that wraps around each student, and it demands a culture that is explicitly predicated on the belief that all students can learn. Students must be engaged in meaningful learning experiences, designed to build on their strengths and address their needs, delivered by skilled and collaborative teacher teams, and executed within a school and community that places students at the center of each and every discussion.

To dramatically improve academic results in math and literacy and to decrease our dropout rate, we must implement a holistic, team based approach to supporting students.  Over the next three years, we will roll out a plan to meet all learners' strengths and needs within MCPS.  In 2013-2014, we will work closely with 15-20 schools, supporting their implementation of an integrated student support

team, bringing together families, communities, and school staff to identify students' growth areas and to support their academic, behavioral, and social emotional needs.

We cannot simply plug students into intervention programs. We must align supports to students' needs and deliberately monitor the progress students make with the supports, until they succeed.

**Background**

For more than a decade, MCPS has dedicated extensive human and material resources to improve teaching and learning through comprehensive initiatives, working to address the wide variance in student learning and the disproportionate rates of Black or African American and Hispanic/Latino students who were not meeting benchmark standards; who were suspended, ineligible, or referred for special education; and/or who dropped out of school. The school system designed and implemented a myriad of strategies, attacking the achievement gap from various vantage points. Curriculum resources, instructional materials, and professional development have been provided to teachers and principals. Tools to facilitate collecting and analyzing student performance data have been implemented. The district initiated extended day and year programs and funded support positions like math content coaches and reading initiative teachers.

As a result of these and many related efforts, MCPS has seen significant gains in student performance for all student groups, and yet the achievement gap persists. The past investments and the benefits that have accrued serve as the launching point for the next phase of our reform efforts. We need to use what we have built to push us further toward the ultimate goal of every student being college or career ready upon graduation. One of the investments over the years has been in supporting struggling students through a variety of interventions. The potential gains in student outcomes from leveraging this investment are why interventions is a strategic priority.

*Interventions*

A narrow subset of the district's efforts to improve student learning includes an approach referred to nationally and in MCPS as *interventions.* Historically, the district has defined interventions as tools, strategies, products, or programs that are implemented only after determining that a student is struggling academically or behaviorally. Interventions have been operationalized as reactions to a deficit, most often outside a student's classroom by a specialist, other than the homeroom teacher.

Intervention practices within and among schools have varied widely. Individual schools, with skilled, determined principals and dedicated, knowledgeable staff members have made tremendous strides. In response to federal and state laws or regulations related to interventions, work groups and project teams convened in MCPS have examined the issues and recommended, designed, or implemented plans to improve our approaches. These efforts have proven unsustainable or have not resulted in wide dissemination of information or practices. The following provide examples of recent efforts:

- School-based and central services staff members report inconsistent professional development on and implementation of the *Collaborative Problem Solving* process designed to identify the needs of students before selecting interventions.

- A limited number of schools use the *Document of Interventions* tool in *myMCPS*, which was developed to catalogue and monitor the use of interventions.

- Recommended reading intervention practices, materials, and programs evaluated by a cross-office project team have not been communicated to all schools.

A review of 63 studies or evaluations conducted by the Office of Shared Accountability (OSA) related to MCPS interventions implemented between 2008 and 2012 reveals the following recurring themes:

- Implementation of intervention programs and structures vary across sites.

- Students receiving interventions benefit from:
  - deep relationships and connections with adults and staff members
  - early and sustained interventions
  - frequent progress monitoring and check-ins by staff members.

- A number of students receiving interventions are transient within the district.

- Professional development is needed to build staff members' skill in:
  - examining student work
  - collaboratively planning instruction.

- Progress monitoring methods must be identified and implemented.

- Increased and improved technology is needed to track and monitor student performance over time.

- Ongoing support for staff members is beneficial, to spur continual improvement.

In MCPS, the challenge has been and continues to be scaling individual schools' successes. We must learn from successful school teams what they need to be even more effective, build the systems that support their work, and then extend the effective practices and systems to all schools. Without careful attention to holistic design, strategically scaled implementation cannot be sustained.

**Current State**

In December 2011, I announced three strategic priorities—Interventions, Community Engagement, and Professional Development, and these priorities provide focus and direction, so that we explicitly address and close our achievement gap in MCPS. Specifically, our interventions work must address the following:

- Only 27.4% of Black or African-American students and 25% of Hispanic/Latino students scored Advanced on the 5th grade Elementary School MSA in Reading in 2012, as compared to 59.7% of white and Asian students

- 40.9% of Hispanic/Latino students and 44.4% of Black or African-American students completed Algebra 2 with a C or better in 2012, as compated to 76.2% of white students

- 75.3% of Hispanic/Latino students and 81.3% of Black of African-American students graduated from high school in four years, as compared to 93.9% of white students

This current reality must be tackled, and our interventions strategy will focus on closing these three critical gaps.

From March 2012 to the present, substantial observation and analysis of the district's current approach to interventions have been conducted through teacher, principal, and staff member's interviews and review of current programs and training sessions.  The broad findings include:

- Variance in defining interventions. The term is used both for additional supports for struggling learners and to define additional scaffolding for excelling learners.

- Confusion about whether interventions are products, programs, teaching strategies, staffing models, or something else.

- Consensus that interventions are reactive and put in place to address students' deficits.

- No apparent systemwide approach to interventions in MCPS.

- Attempted practices and processes address the technical aspect of the challenge (i.e., creating new tools or buying new programs) and previous approaches have not dealt with the adaptive work (culture and mindsets) needed to change both practices and values.[i]
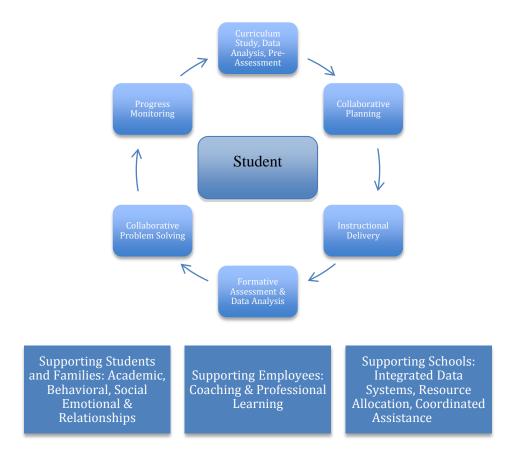
**Proposal: An Integrated System of Supports**

To move the district to a balanced, technical, and adaptive solution, I propose systemically supporting learners within a prioritized approach. We will move away from intervening reactively and will implement an *integrated system of supports*, where we place the student not only at the center of the process, but at the beginning and throughout; where we consider students' strengths and needs proactively; and how we refine our methods based on their effect on students' learning experiences.

This proposal requires an intentional shift in focus from processes or tools to focusing on the individual student. We must elevate the significant role that relationships, classroom climate, school culture, and an engaged community play in student success. Every member of a school or central service community must see himself or herself as part of the solution, responsible for the success of every MCPS student.  It is essential that we build our staff's capacity to hold high expectations for all learners, particularly our low-income, minority learners.  This requires that we strengthen our hiring, training, and ongoing support around equity and achievement.

We aim to make enhancements in three areas. First, we will reduce the variability of performance among student subgroups. Second, we will increase overall student performance in literacy and within graduation rates and Algebra 2 performance. Third, we will continue to refine our design (and ultimately implementation) of the integrated system of supports.

This proposal was designed through various engagement efforts that the Office of Teaching, Learning and Programs (OTLP) conducted, with teachers, principals, and central services staff. Throughout the 2012-2013 year, school-based staff were consulted, interviewed, and observed. Additionally, a cross-functional team of central services staff and principals have been involved in designing the interests and key ideas behind our proposed integrated system. The following represents the OTLP systemic approach to teaching and learning.

Curriculum Study, Data Analysis, Pre-Assessment

Collaborative Planning

Progress Monitoring

Student

Collaborative Problem Solving

Instructional Delivery

Formative Assessment & Data Analysis

Supporting Students and Families: Academic, Behavioral, Social Emotional & Relationships

Supporting Employees: Coaching & Professional Learning

Supporting Schools: Integrated Data Systems, Resource Allocation, Coordinated Assistance

The *integrated system of supports* is designed to bring together multiple effective elements that exist currently within MCPS, but in an isolated or nascent form. The continuum builds on systems and processes that work and may be taken to the next level of efficacy by intertwining them with each other. The continuum connects the collaborative problem solving approach to the collaborative planning, curriculum study, and instructional assessment vision of Curriculum 2.0. The continuum connects problem solving and instructional planning to current and future created district, state, and

published assessments and to the tracking systems within *myMCPS* and the Online Administrative Student Information System. The continuum connects all of these elements to existing models of professional development and coaching on leadership, curriculum implementation, instruction, and assessment.

The continuum capitalizes upon the successes and lessons learned in other districts grappling with similar challenges. An examination of Response to Interventions (RtI) and Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) implementation in school districts in Iowa, Minnesota, and Florida indicates that when designed and implemented well, an RtI approach may create,

> "a knowledge base, skills and a service delivery system . . . [that] provide[s] an educational experience to all students . . . focused on delivering effective education and intervention programs . . . frequent progress monitoring of student outcomes . . . [and] using those measured student outcomes to adjust . . . programs and interventions as necessary,"[ii]

On the other hand, as we move forward, we must stay mindful of a significant caution that recurs throughout the RtI and MTSS literature:

> "the pyramid and tiered approach do[es] not address the layered and connected challenges that many students face. It compartmentalizes academic challenges, and it presumes that academic challenges are one-dimensional and can be corrected with ramping up programs or intensity of instruction…. [a] programmatic default emerges where staff try to line up programs, services, and activities to address students' learning struggles."[iii]

MCPS will learn from our as well as others' experiences and we will refuse to oversimplify the challenge and therefore the solution.

We may no longer separate the academic, social, and behavioral challenges students face. Instead, we must holistically support our students and recognize that a daily reading intervention class may not address a student's set of needs, especially when his or her academic and social difficulties are linked. Dr. Ivory A. Toldson, associate professor, Howard University, conducted research on the success of African American males that reveals that the, "quality of life, as measured by overall feelings of happiness and self-worth, was the strongest emotional indicator of academic success among black males."[iv] Our approach to interventions must not separate students' needs into disconnected buckets; we must view students holistically and provide holistic support from our schools, communities, and families

On a case-by-case basis, we also must determine if we have a student learning challenge, an adult learning challenge, or both. It is possible that the challenge is not about the student, and instead is about the need to build capacity among our staff to improve instruction or their relationships between teacher and student.

Within OTLP, we have developed a systematic and systemic approach that we phase-in strategically. Our starting place will be proactive and preventive. Our goal is to support customized instruction, curriculum, and planning that considers student strengths and needs throughout the teaching and learning cycle that uses a collaborative and continuous problem-solving approach.

To succeed, we must invest in an intensive human capital strategy. We must build the capacity of our employees to deliver solid, data-driven instruction, and we must strengthen their ability to draw from a rich repertoire of in-class instructional strategies and resources and match them to students' strengths and needs.  We must build employees' skills in analyzing data throughout instruction and in selecting supplemental support strategies and resources based on information about individual students' learning.  Finally, we must build the capacity of all staff members to create a culture of inclusion, high expectations, caring, and respect that engages employees, families, and children. In this climate, all adults and children will be held responsible for—and will have the capacity to contribute to—individual students' success and particularly to closing all achievement gaps.  Specific differences in vision, practices, and beliefs that may be anticipated from this proposal are outlined in the attachment.

It is essential that our integrated system of supports yield concrete results and improvements within student outcomes.   Specifically, we aim to increase elementary and middle school reading performance, increase high school graduation rates, and improve Algebra 2 performance.  We will set specific targets, within these areas, with the prioritized schools we work with in 2013-2014.

Currently, a cross-functional work group, comprising principals and central services staff members representing all offices, has provided valuable insight used to inform the design of this continuum. During the 2012–2013 school year, this work group has identified the underlying interests shared by stakeholders with different perspectives. This group will continue to bolster our work by defining the key elements and characteristics of this model. Work group members will determine considerations for communication, professional development, and implementation plans necessary for success.

An advisory structure has been established to solicit feedback and increase engagement from teachers, school counselors, paraeducators, school administrators, educational psychologists, pupil personnel workers, parents, and students.  This advisory group, led by teacher input, will inform our implementation planning.   Beginning in spring 2013, the interventions work group also will meet with the Councils on Teaching and Learning, principal advisories, and parent advisories.

**Next Steps**

Moving forward requires both adaptive and technical work.  The adaptive work includes building the mindset and the deep capacity in all staff members, holding the belief that we may create the culture in which we meet the needs of all students. Additionally, adaptive and technical work must be accomplished to bring together the systems and processes across our technology, curriculum, student services, and programmatic offices.  I will engage executive staff members in discussions about how we organize around this work and how we communicate and collaborate between and among central services and schools.  At this time, I foresee creating a strong link between integrated teams at the school level and an integrated team at the central services level.

I propose a phased-in approach to the work, with three phases spanning the next three school years. The interventions work will closely align with the work of the chief school improvement officer within the Office of School Support and Improvement, as both will focus on enabling and supporting schools to accomplish the goals within their School Improvement Plans. Together, they will prioritize

schools where there are significant challenges, and they will collaborate to corral central services resources, providing support and coaching. The chief school improvement officer will focus at the school and leadership team level, and the interventions work will focus on the student outcomes level and work to prioritize student-specific supports.

- 2013–2014 school year—implement the *integrated system of supports in* 15 to 20 schools. These schools will create student support teams that meet regularly to diagnose, plan instruction, assess, monitor progress, and problem solve. These schools will receive support from the interventions supervisor and steering committee on their team structure set-up and on the tactical elements they need help with (including, but not limited to, assessment design, progress monitoring practices, problem solving practices, etc.). A subset of these schools will be identified based on their student performance results, both gaps between subgroups and overall performance. A subset of these schools will opt-in, based on their own focus on interventions. This will create both a learning network among schools and an opportunity for OTLP to refine systemic structures, based on learning from the set of 15-20 schools.

- 2014–2015 school year—expand implementation of the *integrated system of supports* to 60 to 80 additional schools refined based on the learning gained in phase one.

- 2015–2016 school year—implement the *integrated system of supports*, refined further as needed, in the remaining schools.

Throughout all three phases, OSA will coordinate action research, collaborating with school-based and OTLP staff members to develop the research questions and methodology. Staff members in OTLP will consult with the Office of School Support and Improvement (OSSI) and the Chief Technology Officer (OCTO) to co-create the appropriate systems, structures, tools, resources, and job-embedded professional development for schools participating in each phase.

The work group and advisory structure will continue into the 2013–2014 school year and will evolve into a steering group. Work group members will play a significant role as key thought leaders in the design and implementation phases of the work.

*Related Fiscal Year 2014 Budget Items*

- Funds have been identified in the Fiscal Year (FY) 2014 budget for a full-time supervisor position within OTLP to oversee this work, serve as a liaison between the integrated school teams and central services steering group, and to facilitate the collaborative coaching of school staff members.

- Funds have been identified in the FY 2014 budget for job-embedded professional development, to be delivered using a variety of strategies: including summer training, quarterly training, and job embedded coaching.

**Conclusion**

Our work to close the achievement gap by addressing the learning experiences of our students who need us most, connects deeply to the core values, mission, and vision of MCPS.  A new approach is required if the district's commitment to all students is to be realized. Such effort requires innovation, collaboration, and honest self-reflection.  We must move beyond narrow, reactive, deficit-based interventions. At this time we will begin the journey toward an *integrated system of supports*, fortified by our recommitment to all learners—adults and children.

Present at the Board table this evening are Ms. Betsy Brown, director, Department of Curriculum and Instruction; Ms. Vicky Lake-Parcan, principal, Neelsville Middle School; Ms. Samantha B. Cohen, doctoral resident, Office of Teaching, Learning, and Programs.

JPS:sbc

Attachment

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[i] Heifetz, Ronald. (1994). *Leadership Without Easy Answers*. The Belknap Press at Harvard University. pg. 35.

[ii] Prasse, D. P. (2009). *Why adopt an RTI model?* Retrieved from the RTI Action Network at www.rtinetwork.org/Learn/Why/ar/WhyRTI.

[iii] Adelman, H. & Taylor, L. (2011). Moving Beyond the Three Tier Intervention Pyramid Toward a Comprehensive Framework for Student and Learning Supports.  A Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA Policy Brief.

[iv] Toldson, I. (2009).  Breaking Barriers: Plotting the Path to Academic Success for School-Age African-American Males. Congressional Black Caucus Foundation.  pg. 21.

| Comparison of *Interventions* and *Integrated System of Support* ||
|---|---|
| **Current State** | **Desired State** |
| 1. Inconsistent communication and implementation of systemic vision and approach | 1. Clear vision communicated and implemented systemwide |
| 2. Isolated successes in individual schools | 2. Systemwide successes |
| 3. Multiple offices/departments communicating to schools about *Interventions* | 3. One lead office (OTLP) coordinating with OCOO and OSSI; Integrated central services teams facilitating support to schools; Cross-functional steering committee |
| 4. Varied coordination models in schools | 4. School staff members coordinating integrated teams |
| 5. Guidance and support to schools inconsistent | 5. OTLP supervisor facilitating link between school and central services integrated teams |
| 6. Perception of *Interventions* as a classroom or school responsibility | 6. Families, communities, staff members, and students engage in developing or contributing to solutions |
| 7. Perception of *Interventions* as a tool to only address learning problems | 7. Learning addressed in the context of relationships and culture in the community, school, and classroom |
| 8. Perception of *Interventions* as a special education or English for Speakers of Other Languages responsibility | 8. Integrated team facilitating analysis, problem solving, and design of instruction and support |
| 9. *Interventions* provided after a student does not meet goals (reactive) | 9. Data-driven instruction and support provided early and throughout instructional cycle (proactive) |
| 10. *Interventions* focused on academics, primarily reading and mathematics | 10. Supports addressing student's academic, social-emotional, behavioral, and intellectual strengths and needs |
| 11. *Interventions* occur outside a student's classroom, delivered by someone other than the student's teacher | 11. Integrated approach and shared responsibility among school staff members facilitate support and instruction in optimal settings |
| 12. *Interventions* limit a student's options to take art, music, and physical education or electives | 12. Flexible grouping, schedules, and staffing structures facilitate support and student options for fine arts, physical education, and electives |
| 13. *Interventions* aligned with Maryland School Assessment or rote, low-level skills | 13. Support aligned with Curriculum 2.0, Common Core State Standards, social-emotional, and creative problem solving skills |

| Comparison of *Interventions* and *Integrated System of Support* ||
|---|---|
| **Current State** | **Desired State** |
| 14. Perception of *Interventions* as products, programs, and resources used in isolation | 14. Dissemination and wide use of effective instructional and support strategies, and resources |
| 15. Limited availability or inconsistent use of tools to document *Interventions* and their effect | 15. Systemwide use of tools to document supports and their effect |
| 16. Limited availability of leading indicators and data to inform students' readiness, strengths, and needs | 16. Availability and wide use of leading indicators and diagnostic, pre-assessments, and formative assessments |
| 17. Limited progress monitoring tools | 17. Availability of progress monitoring tools |
| 18. Limited connection among data systems | 18. Availability of data analysis systems to facilitate problem solving and instructional planning |
| 19. Limited tools to facilitate analyzing individual student academic, behavioral, and social-emotional needs and connecting them to instruction and support | 19. Availability and wide use of tools to facilitate student needs and select instructional and support strategies |
| 20. Inconsistent capacity of school staff members to analyze data, problem-solve, plan instruction or support, and document effects | 20. Ongoing, job-embedded professional development, coaching, and support for school administrators and staff members in leadership, culture/climate/relationship-building, data analysis, problem solving, curriculum study, collaborative planning, assessment, strategies for instruction and support, progress monitoring, and documentation |