

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

March 22, 2018

MEMORANDUM

To: Members of the Board of Education

From: Jack R. Smith, Superintendent of Schools

Subject: Curriculum Review

Background

Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) is committed to improving teaching and learning and ensuring that all students achieve at the highest levels, prepared to succeed in postsecondary study, career, and community. Our student achievement data identify significant gaps in performance for our Black or African American students, Hispanic/Latino students, students in poverty, as well as students receiving special education and English for Speakers of Other Languages services. The pursuit of closing these gaps and improving educational outcomes for all students fuels MCPS' dedication to continuous improvement. Research suggests that using best-in-class instructional materials may improve student learning even more than other more well-known interventions. This reinforces the sense of urgency to ensure that instructional materials and curriculum are of the highest quality and aligned to changing standards.

During the 2009–2010 school year, MCPS initiated a process to revise the existing curriculum through a stakeholder feedback process. New curriculum development for elementary school began during the 2009–2010 school year. In June 2010, the Maryland State Board of Education adopted the Common Core Standards, later known as the College and Career Ready Standards. As a result, MCPS shifted away from the initial curriculum development process and began revising the written, taught, and learned curriculum to align with the new standards. MCPS developed the curriculum to respond to the existing conditions, feedback, and interests prevalent at that time, which included: using an internally developed online platform to house curriculum and resources; leveraging teachers currently or recently out of the classroom as writers of curriculum, resources, and assessments; and responding to strong interest from stakeholders in using lesson seeds and sample learning tasks as foundational elements to the curriculum as opposed to highly prescriptive curricula and daily lessons.

The revised curriculum, referred to as Curriculum 2.0, has been implemented over a multiyear period. MCPS is in the fifth year of full implementation of Grades Pre-K–5 in English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics, and the third year of full implementation in Grades 6–8. Staff members have shared the strengths and challenges of the curriculum, the complications of receiving the written curriculum through an online platform, as well as the varying amount of professional development that has been provided during often difficult budgetary times. The curriculum is predicated upon the expectation that the taught curriculum is delivered in a manner that stresses critical and creative thinking as well as deep understanding. Board Policy IFA, *Curriculum*, explicitly articulates the link between the written, taught, and learned curriculum. In addition, the policy requires reviews of all curriculum content areas on five-year cycles. This year marks the five-year review period for the elementary curriculum, thus making it the perfect time to reflect upon lessons learned and how to best position ourselves for the next iteration of curriculum and instructional resources in the coming years.

To better understand how we may build on what is working and identify areas for improvement, MCPS contracted with Johns Hopkins University (JHU) to conduct a comprehensive review and analysis of the MCPS written, taught, and learned curriculum. The review is intended to accomplish the following objectives: (a) assess the alignment of the MCPS written, taught, and learned curriculum with the Maryland College and Career Ready Standards (which incorporate the Common Core State Standards); and (b) provide technical advice and expertise to identify possible actions to address areas in need of improvement. The comprehensive review encompasses an analysis of three aspects of the MCPS curriculum—written, taught, and learned.

Written Curriculum Review

The written curriculum review is designed to determine whether instructional materials are aligned to the Maryland College and Career Ready Standards. The process involved a comprehensive review of the overall structure of Curriculum 2.0, including, for example, the scope and sequence as well as a review of a subset of the units in one grade per grade band (pre-K–2, 3–5, and 6–8) in both ELA/Literacy and mathematics up to Algebra 1. The reviewers assessed the availability, alignment, and quality of embedded supports within the curriculum for second language learners and other special populations.

Taught Curriculum Review

Teacher Survey

A teacher survey was conducted to gather information on teacher/user experience with Curriculum 2.0, including its accessibility on the MCPS platform. The survey focused on instructional materials and the taught curriculum, and any discrepancies between adopted instructional materials and instruction in the classroom.

Observations and Focus Groups

To identify the inconsistencies between the written and taught curriculum, the JHU team conducted focus groups with a variety of stakeholders, including a representative sampling of classroom teachers and a range of students. Approximately 80 classrooms in 20 elementary and middle schools were observed.

Learned Curriculum Review

Student artifacts gathered during classroom observations were analyzed to review the alignment of the written curriculum with classroom instruction. The JHU team also analyzed district-developed and external assessment student results to identify areas of strength and areas for improvement.

Timeline

The review began in July 2017 and continued through January 2018. The JHU team spent the last six weeks completing their report. MCPS staff members reviewed the findings and recommendations and have developed a preliminary action plan in response to the report. Despite the timing of the release of the report, while we are deep into the planning process for next school year, it is imperative we take action to address the report recommendations with the start of the 2018–2019 school year. Anticipating the need to address any findings, the Board included funding to respond to the curriculum review in the Fiscal Year 2019 budget. With five months before the start of the new school year, and funding in the budget to support curriculum changes, we are well positioned to initiate a change process this summer and into next year, in keeping with our shared sense of urgency to provide students with the highest quality educational experience.

Next Steps

MCPS has had a long tradition of writing curriculum, creating and delivering lesson resources, and developing assessments, through the expertise of teachers and central services staff. Overall findings and recommendations of this review reinforce the notion that in order for MCPS to maintain the highest quality instructional materials for teachers and students, the time is right for MCPS to move away from a model that relies on utilizing central services staff and teachers for writing curriculum and assessments, to a model based on adopting external curriculum developed by curriculum and assessment experts. Externally developed curricula also provide the benefit of frequent and ongoing modifications and online platforms that are regularly updated based on trends in technology and user feedback.

Through external evidence-based research and reviews, several ELA and mathematics externally developed curricula are highly rated for their alignment with the Common Core State Standards. This evidences a significant development since the early days of the Common Core when there were few external products of sufficiently high quality. Well-aligned curricular products were

not available when Curriculum 2.0 development was initiated in the 2009–2010 school year. The more recent externally developed curricula offer strong advantages in terms of readily available materials for struggling or advanced students, as well as various resources for special needs and English Language Learners.

Today, we will present the Board with an update on this changing philosophy, moving from an internally developed curriculum to an externally adopted curriculum that already is highly rated and proven. We also will hear from JHU staff members regarding their findings and recommendations as well as their perspective on the next steps for MCPS.

In addition, the MCPS team will share a proposed timeline for how to begin to transition away from Curriculum 2.0 toward an externally purchased curriculum that brings its own platform, constantly provides updated materials and resources written by experts, and employs an approach that aligns with our core values and instructional priorities. As we transition, feedback from stakeholders will be another important consideration as new materials are selected.

As recommended in the review, MCPS will transition over a multiyear period to ensure effective implementation and support to schools. The review of the written, taught, and learned curriculum offers MCPS a tremendous opportunity to learn and grow, and most importantly, positions us to improve teaching and learning for ALL our students.

JRS:MVN:EJL:mec