



# Evaluation Brief

September 2006

Department of Shared Accountability

## Implementation of the Montgomery County Board of Education Grading and Reporting Policy: Findings from the Spring 2006 Elementary School Parent Survey

Marjorie A. Innocent, Ph.D.<sup>i</sup>

### Background

Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) is implementing a standards-based grading and reporting policy districtwide. In addition to implementing the policy, 17 elementary schools volunteered to pilot a new electronic report card for students in Grades 1 and 2.

The Department of Shared Accountability (DSA) is conducting a multiyear evaluation of the implementation of the policy. As part of this evaluation, a survey was administered in spring 2006 to parents receiving the new report card. The purpose of the survey was to gauge parents' understanding and perceptions of the policy and report card, as well as their thoughts on ways to improve the report card. This brief provides a summary of key survey findings.

### Methodology

DSA conducted a series of focus groups and a survey with parents of Grade 1 and 2 students. The survey was added at the request of administrators in the Office of Curriculum and Instructional Programs (OCIP) to obtain additional parental feedback. Survey items were developed with input from OCIP administrators and members of the Grading and Reporting Evaluation Advisory Committee.

The schools surveyed were Ashburton, Beall, Bells Mill, Brookhaven, Cloverly, Darnestown, East Silver Spring, Flower Valley, Forest Knolls, Fox Chapel, Galway, Kemp Mill, Spark M. Matsunaga, Monocacy, Rock Creek Valley, Summit Hall, and Whetstone elementary schools. Staff from DSA worked with the grading and reporting contact at each school to distribute paper copies of the survey via student backpacks; an e-mail reminder was sent to

principals and grading and reporting contacts by OCIP administrators. The survey was translated into Spanish, French, Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese by the Division of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)/Bilingual Programs; in addition, staff from DSA and the Division of ESOL/Bilingual Programs provided English translations of open-ended comments received in other languages. Results were analyzed using quantitative and qualitative analysis software from the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

A total of 732 surveys were obtained during the five-week data collection period, for an overall response rate of 26%; the response rate by school ranged from 14% to 34% (Appendix Table 1). Approximately half were for Grade 1 and 2 (Appendix Table 2). Eighty-five percent of completed surveys were in English, and two thirds of the translated surveys were in Spanish (Appendix Table 3). Fourteen surveys were excluded because they were received after the end of data collection.

### Summary of Major Findings

Nearly three fourths of parents said MCPS was doing a good or excellent job implementing the policy—a rating far more positive than that given by parents interviewed in focus groups (Innocent, 2006). Most respondents reported not having a clear understanding of grading and reporting documents. The document parents understood most clearly was the two-page description on how to read the electronic report card.

Survey respondents were more positive than focus group participants in their rating of school-level opportunities to ask questions and provide feedback on the policy. Parents of students

receiving special services had mixed reviews of the level of communication they received on student progress.

Overall, survey respondents said that they found most of the policy procedures helpful in promoting student achievement. At the same time, up to one fourth of parents were unsure about the impact of the attendance/lateness and homework procedures on student achievement. Parents seem to have some doubts about the benefit of separating student performance from the academic grade.

A little more than half of parents gave high ratings to their understanding of key components of the electronic report card, and most said they received just enough information on student performance from the components. Yet nine in ten wanted teacher comments to supplement existing data on performance. Slightly more than half of parents reported that teacher comments gave them the most meaningful information on their child's progress; at the same time, about one tenth indicated that both teacher comments and essential learnings provided critical information on student performance. Most parents said that they would like other essential learnings added to the report card, particularly for science and social studies.

A number of parents cited challenges with reading and understanding the report card—notably the font size, the level of detail provided, and the clarity of the grading and learning skill codes. To address these issues, they suggested the use of a larger font size and less technical language. They also expressed concerns about the impact of assessments perceived as being associated with the policy on teachers and on instructional time.

## Discussion of Findings

### *Policy Procedures and Student Achievement*

Overall, survey respondents indicated that they found most of the grading and reporting policy procedures very helpful in promoting student achievement (Table 4 of the Appendix). The procedure rated as most helpful was *Learning is evaluated using varied tasks/assignments* (73%). At least half of parents also rated the following procedures favorably: *Teachers assess student learning in a variety of ways* (69%); *Grades reflect what students know and are able to do*

*based on their grade level* (67%); *Teachers give feedback in different ways* (67%); *Learning skills include behavior and effort* (63%); *Grades are based on multiple measures over time* (60%); and *Learning skills are reported separately from academic grades* (56%).

Only about a third of respondents thought that the following procedures promote student achievement: *Lateness and attendance are not part of the grade* and *Homework for practice is not part of the academic grade* (Appendix Table 4). Between 13% and 22% of parents were unsure about the impact of these procedures on achievement. These findings suggest that parents have reservations about the benefit of separating factors that can indirectly impact student performance from the academic grade.

### *Understanding of Policy-Related Documents*

Most survey respondents did not report having a firm understanding of four key policy-related documents distributed during the 2005–2006 school year: a flyer on policy procedures in elementary schools; a bookmark on procedures in Grades 1 through 5; a brochure on the policy in Grades 1 through 12; and a two-page description on reading the electronic report card (Table 5 in the Appendix). Between 40% and 50% of parents said they understood the flyer and two-page description very well, while 35% to 40% said they understood the bookmark and brochure very well. Between 30% and 40% reported understanding the documents somewhat well, and less than 10% reported understanding the materials not at all well. The bookmark was the least recognized document, with nearly a fourth of respondents indicating not having seen it or being unsure of how well they understood it.

### *Communication about Students Receiving Special Services*

One fourth of all survey respondents reported having at least one child in the study schools who was a recipient of special services (Appendix Table 6). Fifteen percent of all parents had children receiving ESOL services; 6% indicated their children were recipients of special education services; and 5% said their children received other services, including reading, speech therapy, mathematics, 504 plan, and gifted and talented program services.

Among parents of children receiving special services, 140 provided open-ended comments on how the school communicates with them about their child's performance and progress. The most commonly identified forms of communication were written documents (36%), such as periodic reports, e-mails, flyers, and notes; and individual meetings and parent-teacher conferences (26%). While some parents spoke favorably of the communication they receive ("ESOL communication is excellent," "Teachers communicate in a timely and informative fashion on speech therapy"), others indicated that communication with the school needed improvement. For example, one parent noted that "Special education communicates very infrequently and only when I inquire about a specific topic," while another wrote, "Need more information on ESOL progress on a regular basis." Another parent referred to the absence of teacher comments in the new report card: "The grading card used before the new one had teacher's comments and was better for ESOL information."

#### *Questions and Feedback on the Policy*

*Opportunities to ask questions and provide feedback.* Parents were asked about their level of satisfaction with opportunities to ask questions and provide feedback on the policy at their child's school (Appendix Table 7). Nearly half of parents (49%) said they were satisfied, and over one third (36%) reported being very satisfied with opportunities provided at the school. Less than one tenth (7%) said they were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied.

*Feedback on implementation.* Nearly half of parents (46%) said MCPS was doing a good job with implementing the grading and reporting policy, and one fourth said it was doing an excellent job (Appendix Table 8). A little more than a fifth (21%) thought MCPS was doing a fair or poor job, and nearly one tenth (8%) were unsure or did not answer the question. Compared with parents taking part in focus groups (Innocent, 2006), survey respondents were far more positive in rating MCPS' performance on implementing the policy.

#### *Electronic Report Card*

*Understanding of the report card components.* Overall, a slight majority of parents gave high ratings to their understanding of key components

of the electronic report card (Appendix Table 9). They felt most confident with their understanding of the reading level graph, learning skill codes, reading targets, and learning skills, with slightly over half indicating that they understood these components very well. Slightly more than half said they understood overall grading codes and essential learnings for mathematics very well. Half of parents reported understanding the essential learnings for reading and language arts very well. At the same time, about a third indicated understanding the components somewhat well, and about one tenth said they did not understand the components well at all.

*Information obtained from the report card components.* Regarding the information obtained from key components of the electronic report card, most survey respondents said the level of information they received was just enough (Appendix Table 10). Responses were comparable across components, ranging from 60% for essential learnings for reading/language arts to 63% for learning skill codes. On average, 16% reported not receiving enough information from the components, while 13% indicated receiving too much information.

Parents also were asked which report card component provided them with the most meaningful information on how their child is doing in school. A little more than half of parents indicated that teachers' comments gave them the most meaningful information (Appendix Table 11). Twenty eight percent said that essential learnings provided them with the most meaningful information, and 2% noted other details as the most meaningful source of information. Interestingly, nearly 10% of respondents indicated two components as providing them with the most meaningful information on their child's performance, despite instructions to select only one; most often, the two components chosen were teachers' comments and essential learnings. This suggests that, for a number of parents, both components are essential for providing critical information on student performance.

*Addition of other essential learnings.* The majority of parents reported that they would like to see essential learnings added to the electronic report card for subject areas other than mathematics and reading/language arts (Appendix Table 12). Essential learnings for

science and social studies were requested the most, with nearly three fourths of respondents selecting these subjects. Essential learnings for art, music and physical education were requested by a little more than half of parents. About one tenth did not want essential learnings added for science and social studies, and the same percentage was unsure or had no opinion about essential learnings for these subjects; on the other hand, a higher percentage—nearly one fourth—did not want essential learnings for art, music and physical education, and almost 15% were not sure or had no opinion. These findings suggest parents' clear preference for the addition of essential learnings for science and social studies.

*Addition of teachers' comments.* Despite indications of getting just enough information from current report card components, parents overwhelmingly reported wanting teachers' comments added to the electronic report card (Appendix Table 13). A little over 90% of parents responded "yes" to this question, and only 4% said they did not want to see the addition of comments. About the same percentage of respondents (3%) said they were unsure or had no opinion.

Among the 494 parents providing open-ended responses explaining their preference, 77% indicated that teachers' comments would provide them with important contextual and personal information on their child's overall performance and progress. Typical comments included: "We would like to receive comments from the teacher so we get some direct/personal feedback to give us an idea of what is behind and contributes to the actual grade"; "It gives teachers a chance to add any information that they may feel is important for us (parents) to know regarding our children's social and academic development"; "Teacher comments can explain particular strengths and weaknesses and areas to improve"; and "Teachers' comments let my child know that the teacher sees what is going on beyond the number grade or each bit of work." The remaining 23% of parents providing open-ended responses mentioned a range of issues that cannot be categorized.

#### *Additional Comments*

Parents were asked to share any additional thoughts in open-ended format, and 334 provided further comments. Nearly one fifth of

these parents (18%) indicated their satisfaction with the report card and the overall policy. As summarized by one parent, "I like the breakdown in each of the areas (reading, writing, mathematics). It helps me to understand specifically my child's strength or weakness in detail." Conversely, 14% of those commenting expressed their dissatisfaction with the policy and report card. They found the report card "way too detailed, to the point of being confusing" and thought that the revised policy "is not a major improvement from before."

Across the additional comments, a number of common themes emerged regardless of respondents' satisfaction with the policy. A little more than a fourth of parents (27%) talked about challenges with understanding the report card. Many referred specifically to the level of detail provided in the new report card and the interpretation of grading and learning skill codes. As noted by one parent, "I feel there are too many 'grades,' too many items." Regarding the interpretation of codes, parents indicated needing more clarity on the meaning and use of codes based on the school term ("What grade is appropriate for each marking period") and based on grade-level performance ("It is not clear whether the grades are for the current grade level or a more advanced level"). They also indicated that "the policy's objectives are understandable, but the grading/reporting document itself provides too much minutiae without enough overall context."

Moreover, about one tenth of parents (11%) expressed concerns about the unintended negative impact of the grading and reporting policy procedures on teachers and instructional time. In unequivocal terms, they described the policy as involving "constant assessing that is taking away from instruction," as well as "the joy of teaching and the joy of learning."

Lastly, 17% of parents providing additional comments offered suggestions for improving the electronic report card. They asked for a larger font size; less technical language; and the re-introduction of teachers' comments. Regarding the policy itself, they asked that homework count toward the overall grade, as "doing homework for practice affects the academic grade" and "homework needs to count or there is no motivation to do it."

### *Comparison with Focus Group Findings*

Parents responding to this survey gave more positive feedback about important policy implementation areas than those who took part in focus groups. Survey respondents were far more positive in rating MCPS' performance on implementing the policy. Also, they were more positive in their rating of school level opportunities to ask questions and provide feedback on the policy—even when compared only with focus group participants from schools implementing the new report card.

At the same time, a number of similar concerns about the policy were echoed by survey respondents and focus group participants. Both groups were unclear about the relationship between homework and the revised grading system. Both cited similar reasons for wanting teacher comments added to the electronic report card. Finally, concerns about the unintended negative impact of a perceived increase in assessments on teachers and instructional time were expressed by both groups of parents.

### **Recommendations**

The following recommendations are based on survey findings:

- Increase parents' understanding of the policy-related procedures. According to parents, this can be achieved by using less technical language in materials and organizing question-and-answer sessions.
- Make the electronic report card more readable and understandable. Suggestions include a larger font size; less technical language; the inclusion of teachers' comments; and the addition of essential learnings for science and social studies.
- Provide parents with clear information on the meaning and use of learning skill codes (such as I, LP, FP, R, and NI) and overall grading codes (such as 1, 2, 3, 4, NE, and NEP).
- Increase the level of information and frequency of communication on progress and performance to parents of students receiving special services.

- Continue to train and support school staff on implementing the policy and collecting data on the policy's impact on instructional time.
- Continue to solicit feedback from parents on the implementation of the policy.

### **Reference**

Innocent, M.A. (2006). *Implementation of the Montgomery County Board of Education grading and reporting policy: Findings from the winter 2005 elementary school parent focus groups*. Rockville, MD: Montgomery County Public Schools.

---

<sup>i</sup> The author wishes to thank the following individuals for their contribution to this work: Mrs. Donna Shipley of DSA, who coordinated the distribution of surveys to schools and entered data findings; Mrs. Trisha McGaughey and Mrs. Natalie Wolanin of DSA, who bundled surveys for distribution and entered findings; Ms. Suzanne Merchlinsky and Dr. Elizabeth Cooper-Martin of DSA, who bundled surveys for distribution; Mrs. Carolina Narvaez and Mrs. Ada Miranda-Morales of DSA, who translated open-ended comments from Spanish-speaking respondents; the staff at the Division of ESOL/Bilingual Programs, who translated the survey and open-ended comments; the school staff who coordinated the distribution of surveys via students; and the parents who graciously took the time to share their thoughts and insights.

THIS PAGE WAS LEFT BLANK INTENTIONALLY

**Implementation of the Montgomery County Board of Education  
Grading and Reporting Policy: Findings from the  
Spring 2006 Elementary School Parent Survey**

**Appendix**

Table 1  
Survey Response Rate by School (N=732)

Schools Implementing the Electronic Report Card	Response Rate (%)
Ashburton	26.9
Beall	26.4
Bells Mill	24.5
Brookhaven	32.3
Cloverly	32.7
Darkestown	25.4
East Silver Spring	13.7
Flower Valley	27.9
Forest Knolls	24.2
Fox Chapel	18.1
Galway	25.0
Kemp Mill	22.3
Spark M. Matsunaga	26.4
Monocacy	34.2
Rock Creek Valley	25.0
Summit Hall	14.6
Whetstone	25.1
No school identified*	1.3
Overall	26.2

\* 36 surveys did not include the school name and were therefore unable to be linked to a school.

Table 2  
Percentage of Respondents  
By Student Grade Level (N=732)

	Distribution (%)
Grade 1	42.2
Grade 2	48.9
Both	2.9

Table 3  
Percentage of Surveys Received by Language (N=732)

	Surveys Received (%)
English	85.0
Spanish	10.9
French	0.5
Chinese	1.1
Korean	0.5
Vietnamese	1.9

Table 4  
 Respondents' Ratings of the Helpfulness of the Grading and Reporting Policy Procedures  
 in Promoting Student Achievement (N=732)

Procedure	Very Helpful (%)	Somewhat Helpful (%)	Not at All Helpful (%)	Not Sure/ No Opinion (%)	Missing/ Ineligible Response*
Grades reflect what students know and are able to do based on their grade level.	67.3	26.0	2.9	2.5	1.4
Teachers assess student learning in a variety of ways.	69.3	22.3	2.9	4.0	1.6
Grades are based on multiple measures (many "snapshots" of performance) over time.	59.6	27.2	4.4	6.3	2.6
Learning is evaluated using varied tasks/ assignments such as paper/pencil, oral explanation, drawing, using objects to show understanding, demonstrating reading skills, completing charts or tables.	72.7	19.0	2.9	2.9	2.6
Lateness and attendance are not part of the grade.	34.8	25.3	13.5	22.4	3.9
Homework for practice is not part of the academic grade.	30.5	29.2	23.6	12.7	4.0
Teachers give feedback in different ways—for example, in writing or by talking with students.	66.5	21.2	3.0	7.4	1.9
Learning skills are reported separately from academic grades.	56.1	29.2	5.9	7.2	1.5
Learning skills include behavior and effort.	63.1	25.8	5.7	4.4	0.9

\*A response was considered ineligible if the respondent selected more than one option for an item.

Table 5  
 Respondents' Ratings of their Understanding of Grading and Reporting Policy Documents  
 Distributed by MCPS during the 2005–2006 School Year (N=732)

Document	Very Well (%)	Somewhat Well (%)	Not at All Well (%)	Not Sure/ No Opinion (%)	Have Not Seen (%)	Missing/ Ineligible Response*
Flyer on grading and reporting procedures in elementary schools (summer 2005 mailing)	40.7	38.0	7.2	6.0	6.3	1.7
Bookmark on grading and reporting in Grades 1–5	35.0	32.2	7.4	10.2	12.6	2.6
Brochure on grading and reporting in Grades 1–12 (fall 2005 distribution)	38.5	38.7	6.8	7.4	5.6	3.0
Two-page description of how to read the new report card (November 2005 report card conference)	48.5	34.3	7.0	4.0	3.6	2.8

\*A response was considered ineligible if the respondent selected more than one option for an item.

Table 6  
 Percentage of Respondents Indicating Whether  
 their Children Receive Special Services (N=732)

	Responses (%)
Special Education	5.6
ESOL	15.2
Other	5.1
Receipt of Special Services not Checked	74.1

Table 7  
 Respondents' Ratings of their Satisfaction with Opportunities  
 to Ask Questions and Provide Feedback about the Policy  
 at their Child's School (N=732)

	Rating (%)
Very Satisfied	36.1
Satisfied	49.0
Dissatisfied	5.2
Very Dissatisfied	1.6
Not Sure/No Opinion	5.2
Missing Response	2.9

Table 8  
 Respondents' Ratings of How Well MCPS Is Doing with  
 Implementing the New Grading and Reporting Policy (N=732)

	Rating (%)
Excellent	24.7
Good	46.3
Fair	16.5
Poor	4.1
Not Sure/No Opinion	4.6
Missing/Ineligible Response*	3.7

\* A response was considered ineligible if the respondent selected more than one option for an item.

Table 9  
 Respondents' Ratings of their Level of Understanding  
 of Specific Electronic Report Card Components (N=732)

Component	Very Well (%)	Somewhat Well (%)	Not at All Well (%)	Not Sure/ No Opinion (%)	Missing/ Ineligible Response*
Essential Learnings for Reading/ Language Arts	49.7	39.3	6.7	2.3	1.9
Essential Learnings for Mathematics	52.7	36.2	7.2	2.0	1.8
Grading Codes for Overall Academic Performance & Essential Learnings (1, 2, 3, 4, NE, NEP)	53.7	30.7	10.4	2.2	3.0
Learning Skills	54.1	34.2	6.4	2.2	3.1
Learning Skill Codes (I, LP, FP, R, NI)	55.2	30.3	8.2	2.9	0.6
Reading Level Graph	57.7	30.7	7.4	2.0	2.2
Reading Targets	54.1	31.4	9.2	2.9	2.5

\* A response was considered ineligible if the respondent selected more than one option for an item.

Table 10  
 Respondents' Ratings of the Level of Information They Receive  
 from Specific Electronic Report Card Components (N=732)

Component	Too Much (%)	Just Enough (%)	Not Enough (%)	Not Sure/ No Opinion (%)	Missing/ Ineligible Response*
Essential Learnings for Reading/ Language Arts	14.2	60.2	17.8	3.8	3.9
Essential Learnings for Mathematics	15.0	61.2	14.9	3.7	5.2
Grading Codes for Overall Academic Performance & Essential Learnings (1, 2, 3, 4, NE, NEP)	12.0	62.2	15.2	5.2	5.2
Learning Skills	11.3	62.4	15.6	4.4	6.2
Learning Skill Codes (I, LP, FP, R, NI)	11.6	63.3	14.6	5.6	4.9
Reading Level Graph	12.0	62.4	17.3	3.8	4.4
Reading Targets	11.9	61.1	18.4	4.6	3.9

\* A response was considered ineligible if the respondent selected more than one option for an item.

Table 11  
 Respondents' Selections of Which Electronic Report Card Component Provides the Most Meaningful Information on How their Child Is Doing in School (N=732)

	Selection (%)
Essential Learnings	28.0
Teachers' Comments	51.2
Other Details	2.3
Not Sure/No Opinion	5.2
Ineligible Response*	9.4
Missing Response	3.8

\* A response was considered ineligible if the respondent selected more than one option for an item.

Table 12  
 Respondents' Indications of Whether They Would Like to See Essential Learnings Added to the Electronic Report Card for Specific Subject Areas (N=732)

Subject Area	Yes (%)	No (%)	Not Sure/ No Opinion (%)	Missing/ Ineligible Response*
Science	74.3	10.1	10.8	4.7
Social Studies	72.0	11.5	11.5	5.1
Art	55.7	23.8	13.8	6.7
Music	53.6	25.3	14.3	6.8
Physical Education	52.7	26.0	14.9	6.4

\* A response was considered ineligible if the respondent selected more than one option for an item.

Table 13  
 Respondents' Indications of Whether They Would Like to See Teachers' Comments Added to the Electronic Report Card (N=732)

	Rating (%)
Yes	90.4
No	3.6
Not Sure/No Opinion	3.1
Missing/Ineligible Response*	2.8

\* A response was considered ineligible if the respondent selected more than one option for an item.