Montgomery County Public Schools
2004 U.S. Senate Productivity Award Winner

In Pursuit of Excellence

The MCPS Journey of Continuous Improvement

March 2005
Five years ago, Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) renewed its commitment to student success by developing a comprehensive reform initiative to boost academic achievement and solidify MCPS as one of the preeminent school systems in America, even in the face of rapid demographic changes.

MCPS developed a strategic plan that guides the reform initiative. The plan, Our Call to Action: Pursuit of Excellence, emerged through an inclusive collaborative process involving all community stakeholders with a clear mission—to provide a high quality, world class education that ensures success for every student through excellence in teaching and learning.

To achieve excellence and ensure success for every student, MCPS leaders knew it would take the coordinated teamwork of all its employees, not just those working in the classroom every day. While MCPS already used elements of total quality management in some operations, it was critical to adopt a strategy to maximize the performance of every employee to deliver the desired results. And so the Baldrige journey of continuous improvement began.

Using the Malcolm Baldrige Criteria for Performance Excellence, MCPS leaders have attained outstanding results—both in student and system performance. For example, students are enjoying unprecedented academic success with the highest average SAT score ever recorded (1102) in the county and the state. There has been measurable improvement of student performance across all grade levels.

Staff performance is continuing to improve on a variety of measures, and community perceptions of MCPS are on the rise as well.

The Baldrige Criteria include seven categories that are integrated to create an environment of continuous improvement in the constant pursuit of excellence. The categories are leadership; strategic planning; student, stakeholder, and market focus; measurement, analysis, and knowledge management; faculty and staff focus; process management; and organizational performance results.

“How Baldrige Works

The Baldrige Criteria for Performance Excellence have brought a focus to improving the many processes in the school system. There is more cooperation among departments and greater efforts are being made to form cross-functional teams to ensure that all aspects of a particular issue are addressed. Many areas of the central administration and 86 schools have adopted the Baldrige Criteria, and the remaining schools and offices will incorporate Baldrige in 2006.

A Diverse and Growing School System

With 140,000 students and 20,000 employees, MCPS is the 17th largest school district in the nation. It has also become one of the most diverse, with students coming from 163 nations and speaking more than 100 different languages. MCPS enrolls 12,000 students with limited English proficiency and 17,000 special education students. More than 5 of every 10 students are children of color and in the past four years alone, nearly 12,000 Hispanic, African American, and Asian American students have enrolled. More than 32,000 students qualify for federally subsidized lunches. MCPS had to strike a delicate balance to meet the needs of its high achievers, as well as those whose academic performance was lagging their peers.

“Baldrige helps everybody understand that you can get better over time. It helps you understand that you don’t need to make excuses, you need to start questioning what you’re doing, how you’re aligning it, and what results you are analyzing.”

—Jerry D. Weast, Ed.D. Superintendent of Schools
Leadership

MCPS has a districtwide leadership team to guide the Baldrige process that includes a member of the Board of Education, deputy superintendents, some members of the executive leadership team, presidents of the employee organizations, school-based representatives including a student, teachers, and parents, and a business representative.

In order to create an environment of continuous improvement, collaboration has been embraced as a key component of the work of senior leadership. Senior leaders partner with stakeholders to resolve problems, address common issues, and identify opportunities for improvement. Divergent thinking is encouraged to ensure that issues are thoroughly explored and all possible solutions are examined.

The executive leadership team uses data to drive its decisions and determine where it needs to make improvements.

Strategic Planning

MCPS has developed a results-centered strategic planning process that is aligned to student and stakeholder needs represented in the school system’s strategic plan.

MCPS began a formal strategic planning process 12 years ago. The process has been enhanced through contributions of corporate partners who, in the 1990’s, introduced the concepts of quality management and continuous improvement to the system. Corporate experience was first applied to the business side of MCPS, and more recently to the instructional side. Overall, a much more performance-based and management-by-fact approach has evolved. This has enabled MCPS to be a leader in responding to local, state, and federal accountability requirements.

Goals, milestones, and data points express a long-term planning horizon, while objectives and performance measures express shorter-term achievements on the path to goal attainment.

Fundamentally, MCPS strategic planning is directed at achieving organizational focus on student results through consistency of action. The central strategy of the school system is building capacity of staff—both at the employee level and the organizational level.

Student, Stakeholder, and Market Focus

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The Seven Keys to Baldrige Success at MCPS

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Academic Priorities

- Organize and optimize resources for improved academic results
- Align rigorous curriculum, delivery of instruction, and assessment for continuous improvement of student achievement
- Develop, expand, and deliver a literacy-based pre-kindergarten through Grade 2 initiative
- Use student, staff, school, and system performance data to monitor and improve student achievement
- Foster and sustain systems that support and improve employee effectiveness, in partnership with MCPS employee organizations
- Strengthen family–school relationships and continue to expand civic, business, and community partnerships that support improved student achievement

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Process Management

To satisfy the goals of the MCPS strategic plan and meet local, state, and national requirements, three key learning-centered processes guide the work of the system: curriculum, instruction, and assessment. These processes provide teachers, students, and parents with clear expectations of what students should know and be able to do.

Board policy and state law guide the implementation of these processes. MCPS uses rigorous data analysis, extensive research, and input from stakeholder communities to refine and align the processes to reach maximum effectiveness. Processes throughout the organization are constantly evaluated as a basis for making improvements.

The district’s Early Success Performance Plan is an example of how key processes work for students, the organization, and key stakeholders. After gathering data from numerous sources, including key stakeholder input, MCPS developed and implemented the early success initiative. An ongoing longitudinal study continues to provide MCPS leaders with the necessary results and information.

Organizational Performance Results

Systematic academic reforms over the last five years coupled with a comprehensive commitment to continuous improvement have yielded results that have solidified MCPS as one of the preeminent school systems in the nation.

The Academic Record of Success

- Highest average SAT score (1102) in the history of MCPS and the state of Maryland with the greatest number of seniors ever to take the test
- Record numbers of students from all groups taking Honors and Advanced Placement (AP) courses
- Record numbers of students—10,000—taking AP tests
- AP mastery rate of scoring a 3 or more on at least one test is 39 percent—three times the national average
  - African American students’ mastery rate increased 111 percent since 2000
  - Hispanic students’ mastery rate increased 116 percent since 2000
- 23 high schools among the top five percent in the U.S. that encourage AP and International Baccalaureate (IB) testing
- 51 National Merit Scholars
- Highest-ever results on the High School Assessments
- More students completing Algebra by 8th grade

- 29 National Blue Ribbon Schools
- 3rd grade students posting highest results ever on the Maryland School Assessments
- 2nd grade students among the highest-achieving students in the nation on the Comprehensive Tests of Basic Skills (CTBS)
- Record numbers of students reading in kindergarten
- Highest number of semifinalists in the nation (15) in the 64th Intel Science Talent Search; 4 finalists

Academic accomplishments have fueled a strong public commitment to the school system’s budget. Over the past five years, the MCPS operating budget has increased by an average of $100 million each year. The new resources have been invested to improve the capacity of staff, classroom instruction, and system performance. The budget increases are also an indicator of strong community support for the school system.

As the budget has increased, the percentage spent on central administrative services has steadily declined to two percent, evidence of continuing improvement in management efficiency.

The cost efficiencies in central services results in a greater proportion of resources invested in the classroom.
Student, Stakeholder, and Market Focus

The strategic plan recognizes the diversity of the community and addresses the multiple learning styles and needs of students, as well as the requirements and expectations of other stakeholders. Student needs and enrollment forecasts drive the school improvement process and system budget as it relates to staffing, programs, and facilities.

Establishing strong relationships with students and stakeholders has enabled MCPS to increase student and stakeholder participation in the continuous improvement process. These partnerships address parent and student concerns and help MCPS recognize the needs of all children within the school system. PTA involvement is strong, and the number of outreach activities has increased over the years, allowing for inclusion of parents in decision-making processes.

Measurement, Analysis, and Knowledge Management

Four critical questions contained in the strategic plan drive data gathering to help instructional leaders improve student performance—What do students need to know and be able to do? How will we know they have learned it? What will we do when they haven’t? and What will we do when they already know it?

The strategic plan’s milestones, data points, objectives, performance measures, strategies, and initiatives have all been formulated to respond to these four critical questions. This process now includes 41 objectives and 151 performance measures.

Benchmarking is an important part of the analysis framework at MCPS. Where possible, MCPS compares itself to other school systems to gauge success and achievement. Supporting services are benchmarked against entities such as Dell Computer, United States Postal Service, and Blockbuster Video.

Progress on meeting objectives within each goal area is monitored through performance measures regularly reviewed by the executive leadership team. For example, MCPS determines the effectiveness of curriculum, instructional programs, and assessment components and makes appropriate adjustments based on results from external and internal curriculum audits, reviews, and evaluations.

Faculty and Staff Focus

One of the district’s goals is to create a positive work environment in a self-renewing organization, and it is a priority of the Board of Education to improve employee effectiveness in partnership with employee associations.

MCPS’ relationship with its employee unions is a model for other districts around the nation. They are intimately involved in the decision-making process and are fully supportive of the district’s strategic plan and goals for student achievement.

Instead of the acrimony that may characterize labor relations in other organizations, the relationship is viewed as a true partnership at MCPS.

Detailed improvement programs and workshops are available to staff and are encouraged. When a specific need is identified, it is addressed in a comprehensive and thorough way.

MCPS seeks input by tapping into a variety of stakeholder groups that meet on a regular basis, and these groups are asked for input when there is an education and training initiative.

A system as large as MCPS requires multiple initiatives and options for professional development and training, all operating simultaneously. All staff development and training are aligned with the Board of Education goals in order to keep the main focus of student achievement front and center.

MCPS has adopted a systematic and systemic approach to organizing and managing its work systems according to these guiding tenets:

- Planning with broad stakeholder involvement
- Implementation with quality
- Processes to ensure systemic support
- Follow-up support for deployment
- Analysis of impact on staff behavior that will contribute to student learning

“If there’s a silver bullet in education, it’s the people who work in education. By joining with our employee unions, we are able to work as a team to make sure all of our staff have the knowledge and skills to meet the needs of every student. When we do that, magic happens.”

—Dr. Weast
Baldrige and the Future

MCPS is expanding the Baldrige program to all schools and central administration offices in 2006 to ensure that the cycle of progress continues. The MCPS community—staff, students, and community stakeholders—are proud of the progress on the Baldrige journey so far. In 2003, the Office of the Chief Operating Officer was awarded a Bronze Maryland Quality Award. But there is more to accomplish.

In the coming months and years, the partnerships will continue and be strengthened as MCPS seeks to fulfill its goal of ensuring that every student succeeds.

The Waters Landing Story

“I am on stage 14 in writing and I’m working to be on stage 16 by December.” When you question that third grader from Waters Landing Elementary School further, he’ll even tell you the criteria he needs to meet and the steps he needs to take to get to that stage. These are the kinds of conversations that students in kindergarten through grade 5 are having since the school began implementing Baldrige in 2001.

It all began when staff analyzed school data and determined that improving performance in writing was their priority. Staff, parents, and students received Baldrige training and students began keeping data notebooks to track their own progress.

Walk into any classroom at Waters Landing, or any of the other Baldrige schools, and you will find mission statements, flowcharts, and data display boards. Principal Wanda Carroll says, “It’s moving to see a teacher drop everything to PDSA (plan-do-study-act) a problem that disrupts learning with the help and input of her second graders.”

Parents, staff, and students regularly monitor academic, attendance, and behavioral data and collaborate on ways to make improvements. The greatest paradigm shift in the school has been in thinking about student involvement. Students really are taking greater ownership for their learning. As one student said, “When I wrote my mission statement, I thought about what I could do to be better.”

“When I look at my goals and graphs, it’s cool to see how much I’ve improved.”

—Student
For further information about the continuous improvement process in Montgomery County Public Schools, contact Dr. Michael Perich, Coordinator of Systemwide Continuous Improvement, at 301-279-3626, or at Michael_P_Perich@mcpsmd.org.