

May 2024

Office of Shared Accountability

MONTGOMERY COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS, ROCKVILLE, MARYLAND



## Results from the MCPS Superintendent Search Data Collection Efforts

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## **Executive Summary**

Kecia L. Addison, Ph.D.

As we embarked on the crucial task of identifying a new superintendent to lead Montgomery County Public Schools, it was imperative that we recognize the invaluable role of community input in this process. The collective voice of our stakeholders – including parents, educators, students, and community members – served as a guiding beacon, illuminating the qualities, priorities, and expectations they envision in the next superintendent.

In gathering data through various channels such as focus groups, community forums, and surveys, a comprehensive understanding of the diverse perspectives and aspirations within our community was cultivated. This report serves as a synthesis of the invaluable insights gleaned from these endeavors, providing distinct findings from each data collection effort.

### **Community Forums**

Community forums served as inclusive arenas where individuals from different backgrounds could voice their hopes and concerns for the future of our district. These forums facilitated dynamic exchanges, highlighting priorities related to academic excellence, equity, diversity, and community engagement. Findings from community forums begin on page 4.

### **Focus Groups**

The focus groups provided an intimate platform for stakeholders to engage in candid discussions, sharing their nuanced perspectives on the qualities and characteristics they desire in our next superintendent. Through these sessions, themes emerged regarding leadership style, communication, vision, and the ability to foster collaboration. Themes that emerged from focus group sessions begin on page 8.

### **Survey**

The survey, disseminated widely across our district, offered a quantitative lens through which we could gauge the sentiments of our community members. From responses garnered, we gained insights into overarching priorities, perceived strengths and weaknesses of our district, and specific criteria deemed essential in our superintendent selection process.

In combining the findings from these distinct avenues of data collection, we aim to honor the rich tapestry of perspectives within our community and ensure that our superintendent selection process is reflective of the values and aspirations that define us. This report serves as a testament to our commitment to transparency, inclusivity, and shared governance as we embark on this pivotal journey together. Results and findings from the surveys begin on page 18.

### Overarching Themes

The following overarching themes were elevated related to characteristics of the next Superintendent:

1. **Transparency and Accountability:** An individual who promotes transparency in reporting of data (e.g., academic, budget), but is also held accountable for decisions made regarding changes to the system in order to foster trust, and enhance understanding within the community. The individual not only holds staff accountable and advocates for transparency in decision-making, procedures, processes and outcomes, but is also held accountable for outcomes, measuring and monitoring success, transparency, and leadership.
2. **Honesty, Integrity, and Trustworthy:** An individual who demonstrates through their behavior and actions these characteristics. One who demonstrates a display of forthrightness in addressing issue regardless of their complexity or difficulty. One who has an interest in building solid relationships with all stakeholders and to
3. **Communication & Engagement:** An individual who authentically engages with the community (i.e., students, staff, families, and community) by not viewing these opportunities as check-boxes, and demonstrates value of the engagement. Also, communicates openly and honestly with the community.

**The following overarching themes were elevated related to priorities for the next Superintendent:**

1. Student Academic Achievement and Equity of Access to Programs and Resources
2. Safety and Security
3. Well-Being of Staff and Students
4. Recruitment and Retention

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## **Findings from Community Forums**

Michael Samuels, Ed.D.

## Summary

Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) comprises 211 schools serving over 160,000 students who collectively speak 162 languages. As the largest school district in the state of Maryland, MCPS boasts a workforce of approximately 25,000. The student body's demographics are diverse, with 34.6 % Hispanic/Latino, 24.4% White, 21.8% Black or African American, 13.9% Asian, and 5.1% Two or More Races.

MCPS seeks a leader capable of inspiring its staff and educators, fostering trust, and ensuring equitable educational outcomes for all students. This report encapsulates the insights gathered by MCPS during four community forums – three held in person and one conducted virtually – in April 2024. These forums were structured to elicit feedback on the school system's strengths, areas of growth and improvement, desired leadership qualities, and priorities of the next superintendent.

### Strengths of Montgomery County Public Schools

During the community forums, participants frequently identified the diversity and inclusivity of MCPS as key strengths. These qualities are evident not only in the student body but also among the staff and teachers. While acknowledged as strengths, they were also recognized as areas ripe for improvement and among the priorities for the next superintendent. Despite MCPS being a diverse school system and significant efforts made towards improvement, participants noted the necessity for further endeavors to ensure that the staff better mirrors the student population they serve.

Participants also emphasized the high quality of teachers within the system. There is consensus on the importance of investing in teachers, providing them with support, and retaining their talent. The abundance of high-caliber and committed teachers contribute significantly to the exceptional education provided to students.

Another asset highlighted is the array of rigorous academic programs offered to students, providing them with opportunities to pursue various academic and career pathways. The significance of partnerships with various institutions allows students to explore areas that enrich their educational experience and journey through MCPS.

### **Growth and Improvement**

MCPS is a vast, dynamic and diverse school system, presenting both opportunities and challenges for growth and improvement. One area highlighted for growth in the community forums was the need for equity in resource allocation. Concerns were raised about how inadequate resources may impact the academic outcomes of certain students, particularly in accessing diverse and rigorous academic programs.

Ensuring a safe environment is paramount for effective teaching and learning. Participants stressed the importance of school safety, including addressing bullying and hate speech, and maintaining consistent consequences for inappropriate and disruptive behavior. Improved communication with parents and transparency during safety incidents were deemed necessary. Additionally, there was a call for increased administrative accountability and enforcement of school rules.

A recurring sentiment expressed in the community forums was the significance of community engagement, identified as an area for both growth and improvement. Community engagement is viewed as a collaborative process where parents and other stakeholders play a vital role in the partnership between the school district and the community. Therefore, MCPS is expected to be responsive and transparent, integrating feedback into decision-making processes.

### **Characteristics of the New Superintendent**

The new superintendent of MCPS is expected to collaborate with a broad spectrum of stakeholders within the district, each with diverse interests. The socioeconomic and racial diversity with the school system necessitates that this superintendent possesses the ability to navigate these complexities effectively in order to achieve success and enhance academic outcomes for all students.

Some of the characteristics highlighted during the community forums include:

- Providing transparent communication
- Demonstrating an understanding of the prevailing educational and political landscapes
- Engaging with the community to build trust
- Being adaptable and flexible
- Focusing on equity, diversity and inclusion

### **Priorities and Goals of the New Superintendent**

The challenges, priorities, and goals awaiting the new superintendent have been clearly outlined in the community forums, marking a pivotal moment as the school district embarks on a transformative journey into the future.

Community engagement stands out as both an area of improvement and a top priority for the incoming superintendent. Stakeholders view this engagement as essential for the district's success and the superintendent's effectiveness. It must be genuine and substantive rather than merely a procedural activity. Authentic community engagement fosters active involvement of relevant stakeholders in district-wide and school-specific affairs.

MCPS is economically and racially diverse. Inequities are observed in the educational outcomes and experiences of its students. Addressing and closing these achievement gaps to ensure equitable educational experiences for all students emerged as a key focus in the community forums.

Emphasis must also be placed on ensuring and promoting the social and emotional well-being of both staff and students. Effective teaching and learning thrive in environments where individuals feel secure and supported.

### **Summary**

The community forums provided an opportunity for stakeholders to weigh in on the strengths, areas of growth and improvement, ideal qualities, characteristics and priorities of the next superintendent. The diversity, high quality of the teaching force and the rigorous academic programs were seen as great assets of the school system. Safety and security and the allocation of resources were highlighted as areas in need of improvement. The success and effectiveness of the next superintendent hinge on transparent communication, community engagement and a focus on equity.

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## **Focus Group Themes**

Tiffany George, Ph.D.



## Summary

The superintendent search for Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) generated insightful feedback across many public forums. The purpose of this report was to summarize the responses from the focus groups held with community leaders, and stakeholder groups affiliated with MCPS. As of April 2024, there were seven different focus groups conducted in which MCPS stakeholders answered two specific questions: Question 1: What qualities and characteristics do you believe are most important for our new superintendent to possess? Question 2: What specific goals and priorities should our new superintendent focus on to best serve our students, teachers, families, and community? The seven different focus groups were conducted with members from the Montgomery County Education Association (MCEA), Montgomery County Association of Administrators and Principals (MCAAP), Montgomery County Council of Parent-Teacher Associations (MCCPTA), Montgomery County Council, Maryland House of Delegates, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Parents' Council, and Chinese American Parent Association-Montgomery County (CAPA-MC). Themes emerged for each question, and are summarized below using the responses recorded from the focus groups.

## Qualities and Characteristics of New Superintendent

### Themes for Qualities and Characteristics of New Superintendent

*Show, not tell: The need for illustrated success with comparable past leadership experience in large organizations.*

A theme that emerged across focus groups was the need for the new superintendent to have exhibited past leadership success with large organizations, given that MCPS is a large district. Participants expressed the importance for candidates to have a track record of successful leadership experiences and achievements, rather than relying on on-the-job learning. Additionally, responses within this theme indicated that managing large systems require both high-level managerial skills and educational qualifications due to the complexities that exist within large systems, and this demands proven success. Therefore, the desire for the new superintendent to have illustrated success with large organizations was perceived as beneficial when working within a comparable, large district such as MCPS.

“Needs prior experience in a large district.” (MCAAP/MCBOA Member).

“Demonstrated successes of leadership. This is not on-the-job training. Need to have longevity of success.” (NAACP Parents' Council Member)

“Need to know how to run a big system – just because someone is an expert in education, they also need management experience building and developing teams.” (MCCPTA Member)

“Possess CEO qualities – system is large; the size of mid-size city, can’t get into the weeds on topics.” (County Council Member)

“Experience with change management across a large system – can be in any area, curricular reform, hate-bias, and experience doing that in a large system.” (MCCPTA Member)

“Active illustrations of examples of success. We must promote those who are successful (not just spotlighted).” (MCEA Member)

“Experience in a large, diverse school district.” (MCEA Member)

*High quality interpersonal skills with an emphasis on collaboration.*

Another theme that emerged across focus groups was that the new superintendent possesses interpersonal skills and use these skills to promote collaboration and engagement with all stakeholders. Responses for this theme emphasized that collaboration involves actively engaging all members of the community (parents, elected officials, students), by listening to them, and taking the time to reach out as a way to foster true partnerships and promote inclusivity. It was emphasized that building a collaborative culture would elicit positive outcomes for MCPS.

“Collaboration with parents, both at the district level and school level. Parents should be part of the conversation/decision-making because their children are impacted.” (Maryland House of Delegates Member)

“Willingness to work with stakeholders within the unit. More than lip service. Actual partnership.” (MCEA Member)

“Need to be able to build relationships with elected officials. Reach out and call on the phone when there is an issue or item to discuss; letter or email won’t work. Need to work together on blueprint implementation.” (Maryland House of Delegates Member)

“We want someone who is a collaborative culture builder.” (MCEA Member)

“Need to value partnerships. Superintendent can’t do it alone and don’t be defensive when there is help needed/offered.” (County Council Member)

“We want someone who, if not diverse, works collaboratively for the betterment of a diverse system and is attuned to black and brown communities.” (NAACP Parents’ Council Member)

“Needs to have an ear to listen to everyone and that you care and listen to the different needs.” (CAPA-MC Member)

“Ready to connect and engage with parents and students in the community.” (CAPA-MC Member)

“Relation building with all of MCPS.” (MCAAP/MCBOA Member)

“Can look at multiple perspectives and bring those perspectives together to solve the issues.” (NAACP Parents’ Council Member)

*The promotion of transparency and being held accountable.*

A third theme that emerged was the hope that the new superintendent would promote a culture of transparency and accountability with effective communication. Responses from these focus groups detailed that clear, effective communication was needed regarding decision making, and failures. By articulating the rationale for changes, this would enhance clarity and understanding for stakeholders. In addition to leaders being transparent about changes, this would also facilitate accountability because it would restore trust, and foster a culture of responsibility. Overall, participants felt that these characteristics would positively improve the functionality of MCPS.

“Transparent about decisions and how it was made.” (MCAAP/MCBOA Member)

“Clearly articulate the rationale for any changes. Someone who is experienced with it – need to understand “the why” – if people know the why, it is easier.” (MCCPTA Member)

“Be transparent about failings of the system – tell us what we do not know instead of just a mild weak version of what we do know.” (MCCPTA Member)

“Transparency and accountability. Bring MCPS back to a high-quality education system – benefits all of MoCo and beyond.” (County Council Member)

“Trustworthy, first and foremost – honesty, transparency, allowing others to speak honestly and say what they are going to do without repercussions.” (MCCPTA Member)

“Accountability – not only having standards and providing supports to ensure that local schools and staff can be accountable but also to be personally accountable for implementing change that is equitable, with fidelity across the system.” (MCEA Member)

“Commitment to accountability for everyone – for themselves and all the way down to staff and students.” (MCEA Member)

“Willing to be very transparent with everything (the good things and the bad things).” (CAPA-MC Member)

*Authenticity in Leadership: De-emphasis of check-boxes.*

A fourth overarching theme was that focus group participants highlighted the importance for the new superintendent to go beyond the fulfillment of basic job expectations. In particular, participants stressed that the new superintendent should not perceive opportunities as check boxes, but as valuable, investment opportunities to seek input from various stakeholders. The responses shared echoed the sentiment that some participants felt that they were not being heard, and that the new superintendent should de-emphasize the check-box expectations. It was noted that successful, authentic leadership is not contingent on just checking boxes.

“Practice “retail politics” i.e. need a personal touch. MCPS is basically a large business, but personal relationships are important. In the past, a large meeting/forum was held where parents and staff were given the opportunity to speak, but didn’t feel personal or like the thoughts shared were valued. Just checking the box.” (Maryland House of Delegates Member)

“We are not a check box to meet with.” (MCAAP/MCBOA Member)

“With prior administration, felt like parent conversations were to check a box, but input was not valued.” (Maryland House of Delegates Member)

“An ability to see students “as human beings not puzzle pieces” – we are not widgets to move through a system; we are not check boxes.” (MCCPTA Member)

“Meeting together isn’t collaborating. Shouldn’t be a check-the-box situation but actually helpful.” (MCEA Member)

*Humility and earnest in approach.*

A fifth theme that emerged was the desire for the new superintendent to lead with humility and to be earnest in taking into consideration the knowledge and expertise of those around them. It was shared that humility in leadership is expressed in a variety of forms such as the willingness to receive feedback, and admit mistakes. It was also shared that a single person is not expected to know all of the answers, but rather, there should be earnest attempts in problem solving, and resolving challenges for the betterment of MCPS as a whole.

“Someone who believes the smartest person in the room is the room.” (MCEA Member)

“Humble about not being in the classroom recently. Take the advice of those who have. Ability to lead with humility and be able to “pivot” – for example, during the pandemic, it appeared that there were no backup plans.” (MCCPTA Member)

“Recognizes that they don’t always have all the answers.” (MCEA Member)

“Admit when they are wrong or own decisions.” (MCAAP/MCBOA Member)

“Brave enough to say they don’t know the answer if they don’t, and is willing to go find out.” (NAACP Parents’ Council Member)

## Goals and Priorities of New Superintendent

### Themes for Goals and Priorities of New Superintendent

#### *Effective recruitment and retention strategies.*

A theme that emerged for the second question was the need for more effective recruitment and retention strategies for MCPS staff and leaders given the high turnover rates. In particular, the quotes highlighted that effective recruitment and retention strategies ensure quality education and support for students. It was suggested that making efforts to benchmark with other districts may assist in these efforts, and could offer valuable insight into making these positions more desirable for prospective candidates. With regards to recruitment, it was emphasized that there needed to be transparency in hiring as a way to promote fairness and accountability, and aligning the right staff to appropriate roles. By increasing staff alignment, this would have positive implications for retention. Moreover, there was the acknowledgment of recruiting diverse staff as a reflection of the diversity that exists within MCPS. Recruiting diverse staff not only increases representation, but also encourages the diversity in ideas and perspectives from those within and outside the system. Overall, it was important to focus group participants that the new superintendent addresses and navigates these staffing challenges.

“Recruitment/retention of high-quality staff and make these desirable positions.”  
(MCEA Member)

“Level-set where we are with comparator districts to identify issues we need to address.”  
(CAPA-MC Member)

“Transparency in hiring process for Board-appointed positions.” (NAACP Parents’ Council Member)

“Recruiting professional staff that mirrors the diversity of the student population (teaching

staff vs. support staff).” (MCEA Member)

“Build an effective team; recruit and retain the best out there. Should be a balance of local, internal hires who know the system, and external candidates who can challenge the status quo.” (County Council Member)

“We need low turnover in leaders.” (MCAAP/MCBOA Member)

“Make sure staffing is on point-need the right people in the right roles.” (County Council Member)

“Address staffing issues-some schools can keep employees, others are revolving doors. Figure out how to retain good staff.” (County Council Member)

### *The prioritization of student welfare.*

A second theme was the desire for the new superintendent to prioritize student welfare at MCPS. The majority of these quotes reflected the need to address challenges related to school safety, and mental health, but there was a mention of drug use. The responses demonstrated that a safe learning environment was important for students. Some examples given of ways that the superintendent could address improving student welfare was the need to improve building security, and to review the student code of conduct. The quotes also highlighted the crucial need to address mental health challenges by offering more resources and support services to students. Perhaps then, by offering more comprehensive support systems, this would address the needs of students more effectively.

“Need to address school safety, mental health issues, and drug use/vaping.” (County Council Member)

“Safety: building security issues that haven’t been addressed.” (Maryland House of Delegates Member)

“Mental Health: social media impacts on mental health – need to address/assist. Need a multi-faceted approach. Can’t rely on just teachers to provide help to students. Need to get help from community partners too.” (Maryland House of Delegates Member)

“Need the appropriate resources for student mental health escalating behaviors.” (MCAAP/MCBOA Member)

“In relation to safety and security, it might be important to review the student code of conduct. There have been changes to the community and student realities on the ground. Effectiveness of safety and security-need to determine what needs to be changed.” (MCCPTA Member)

“Attracts and maintains good principles to create safe schools in all areas of the district.”  
(NAACP Parents Council)

“Often, there is not enough support in the schools.” (MCCPTA Member)

*Reexamination of the budget and achieving budget equity.*

A third theme that was reflected by the quotes from the focus groups was the suggestion of reexamining the budget, and the insistence that the new superintendent be transparent in articulating budget decisions with the public to promote fairness and equity. It was emphasized that transparency regarding budget decisions would foster trust and understanding amongst various stakeholders. The quotes also suggested that the reexamination of the budget would be an opportunity to achieve budget equity by ensuring that resources were properly allocated. Focus group participants provided some examples of how the resources should be equitable and this included enough FTEs, program expansions, transportation, and access to technological devices for low-income students.

“The budget needs to be opened up. Open budgets so that we can drill down to the open data so that there are enough Full-Time Equivalents (FTEs) so that we can look at the equity.” (MCCPTA Member)

“Transparent process and budget.” (MCAAP/MCBOA Member)

“Making sure resources are evenly spread. Need to make sure there is equity in access to resources and programs, and that transportation is available.” (Maryland House of Delegates Member)

“Address the digital divide-low income students need access to devices.” (Maryland House of Delegates Member)

“Need to figure out pre-k expansion-need a plan to get it done, in both public school and with private providers.” (County Council Member)

*The elevation of community engagement strategies.*

The quotes from this fourth theme emphasized elevating community engagement strategies such as partnership building, improving communication, and increasing check-in opportunities. Some specific examples were that the new superintendent needed to be upfront with communication regarding any changes as a way to promote transparency. Similar to the superintendent search public forums, a focus group participant expressed the need for more routine check-in opportunities. The formation of strong community partnerships was also perceived to be a valuable collaborative opportunity. In general, these responses indicated the need to foster genuine community buy-in through transparency, avoiding over-tokenization of viewpoints, addressing the

diverse needs of various community members, and accepting input from various stakeholders. Overall, focus group participants conveyed that elevating community engagement would have positive impacts for MCPS.

“Make sure that different viewpoints do not become over-tokenized as a community and that we are communicating in a manner that fosters community buy in.” (MCCPTA Member)

“When they change criteria for programs or do research-based things, we lack the upfront communication and explanation.” (MCCPTA Member)

“Needs to form strong business partnerships.” (MCAAP/MCBOA Member)

“Get to know all the different groups of people.” (CAPA-MC Member)

“Needs to do more check in opportunities such as more types of community forums.” (MCAAP/MCBOA Member)

“Be open to accepting help from parents, they want to help but don’t know how.” (Maryland House of Delegates Member)

“MCPS superintendent cannot do this alone. There are mechanisms in place with partnerships. Superintendent should prioritize wrap around services and partnerships and come under one department.” (MCCPTA Member)

“Engaging in collaborative discussions that are adaptable to the specific needs and encourages partnership possibilities.” (MCEA Member)

#### *Positive culture and climate development.*

Responses for the fifth theme emphasized the significance of developing a positive work culture and climate for MCPS. Quotes revealed that improving culture and climate involved holding leaders accountable for creating positive climates, addressing toxic work environments promptly, fostering collaboration opportunities, paying attention to the feedback received from MCPS climate surveys, and to encourage participation in these feedback opportunities to foster change. Overall, focus group participants asserted that focusing on building a positive work culture and climate is critical for long-term organizational success.

“Focus on achievement, culture, and climate. Hold other leaders accountable to be the best that they can be so they create climates of change for students, parents, and staff.” (NAACP Parents’ Council Member)

“Need to build a collaborative culture.” (MCEA Member)



“Improve culture and climate, and staff morale.” (MCAAP/MCBOA Member)

“Stop ignoring the climate survey. People don’t participate because they don’t see a change.” (MCEA Member)

“Culture. Negative culture, could be toxic-that needs to be addressed.” (MCCPTA Member).

### Conclusions

In summary, across the seven different focus groups with MCPS stakeholders, the feedback received for the two questions related to the superintendent search was highly informative and thoughtful. Five themes emerged for each question. For the first question, in addition to meeting educational qualifications, focus group participants wanted the new superintendent to have a demonstrated track record of successful leadership experience in large organizations similar to MCPS. They also wanted the new superintendent to possess a high-level interpersonal skillset by collaborating with various MCPS stakeholder groups, and to be authentic while engaging with stakeholders in order to avoid check-box leadership behavior. Given recent challenges, responses highlighted the significance for transparency and accountability while maintaining humility in leadership approaches.

For the second question, focus group participants wanted the new superintendent to prioritize decreasing turnover by implementing more effective recruitment and retention strategies for staff. This also translated to the desire to build a more positive work culture and climate for staff, which would have positive implications for retention. Other goals and priorities included prioritizing student welfare by providing specific examples such as addressing school safety, and mental health challenges. Additionally, focus group participants revealed that it would be helpful to reexamine budget decisions such as ensuring equitable resource allocation to address existing challenges. Lastly, focus group participants wanted to elevate community engagement strategies, such as increased check-in opportunities similar to the public superintendent search forums, and valuing stakeholder input.

It is important to note that despite gaining feedback from participants across seven different focus groups, the summary of responses for this report only reflect the input gained from these select participants, and not all members of MCPS. Nevertheless, responses in this summary are meaningful, and should be taken into consideration in the superintendent search because input from those invested in MCPS is powerful and valuable.

**Summary of Survey Results**

Kendra D. Price, Ph.D.

### Superintendent Search Survey: Summary of Results

The purpose of this descriptive analysis was to analyze the results of the Superintendent Search Survey. A total of 4,880 Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) stakeholders completed an online survey between March and April 2024. The survey was available in Amharic, Spanish, French, Korean, Portuguese, Vietnamese, Chinese, and English. The majority of respondents completed the survey in English (98%;  $n = 4,801$ ). The survey elicited insights and information from district stakeholders on their perceptions of what constituted an ideal superintendent candidate, and the areas of emphasis for the new superintendent to prioritize once appointed by the Board of Education. Respondents also expressed their reactions and sentiments toward the current state of the district. The following sections provide the descriptive results of the 12-item survey, along with the demographic profile of the respondents.

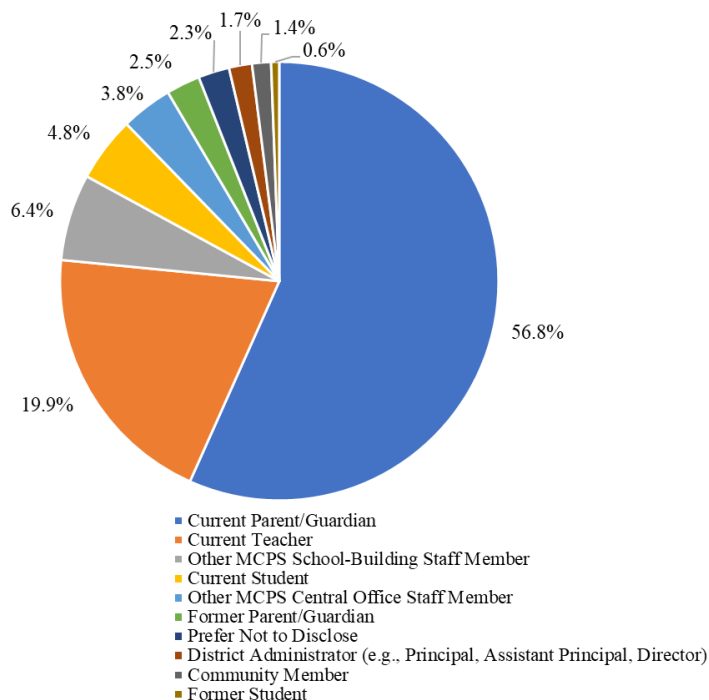
### Results

#### Respondent Characteristics

Of the 4,880 survey participants, 57% of respondents identified as a current parent/guardian. The second largest percentage of respondents identified as current teachers (20%) (see Figure 1). Of the 3,729 respondents who disclosed their race/ethnicity, 61% identified as White, followed by 18% Black or African American and 12% Asian (see Figure 2).

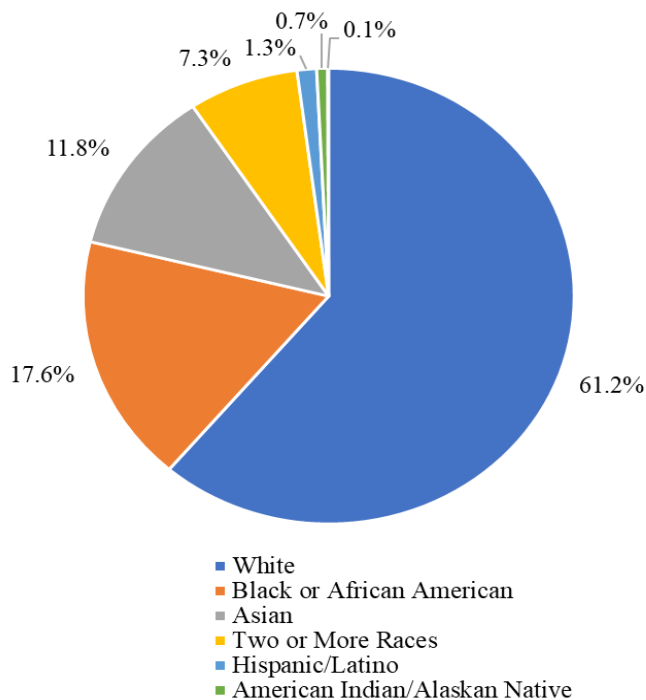
**Figure 1**

*Percentage of Respondents by Stakeholder Group*



**Figure 2**

*Percentage of Respondents by Racial/Ethnic Group*



**Profile of Montgomery County Public Schools**

To assess respondents' perspectives on MCPS, they were prompted to identify the district's top three strengths and challenges, as well as share a single word encapsulating their feelings about MCPS (see Figure 3 for the word cloud). Presented below are the most commonly cited strengths and challenges of the district, along with the words chosen by respondents to convey their sentiments toward MCPS.

***District Strengths***

1. Student Diversity (58%; *n* = 2,836)
2. Teacher Quality (41%; *n* = 2,021)
3. School Choice Options (e.g., access to magnet schools) (20%; *n* = 963)

***District Challenges***

1. Teacher Shortages (41%; *n* = 1,982)
2. Student Discipline (43%; *n* = 2,110)
3. School Safety and Security (28%; *n* = 1,352)

***Respondents’ Sentiments Toward MCPS***

1. Disappointed
2. Frustrated
3. Hopeful

**Figure 3**

*Word Cloud: Respondents’ Sentiments Toward MCPS*



**Note.** In the word cloud, the larger words represent sentiments expressed by respondents with greater frequency, while the smaller words indicate lower frequency.

**Qualities/Areas of Emphasis of Superintendent**

***Critical Skills and Qualities of Superintendent***

Respondents rated the level of importance the Board of Education should place on specific skills and qualities of superintendent candidates as *not very important, somewhat important, important, very important, and critically important*. Below are the top three skills, qualities, or traits most frequently rated as critically or very important for a superintendent to possess and the percentage and number of respondents who rated the area as such.

1. Effective communication skills including honesty, integrity, and transparency (94%;  $n = 4,469$ )
2. Commitment to a positive, professional climate of trust and respect among staff (88%;  $n = 4,205$ )
3. Demonstrated leadership improving educational outcomes for all students (83%;  $n = 3,946$ )

### ***Areas of Emphasis for Superintendent***

In addition to qualities and traits, respondents recommended roles and responsibilities for the new superintendent to prioritize. The survey provided a list of 15 areas of emphasis that included: *Uses data to make informed decisions; Promotes innovation in curriculum; Honors and communicates the vision and values of the district.* The three areas of emphasis selected most often in the responses were:

1. Promotes safety and security in the schools and across the district (58%;  $n = 2,818$ )
2. Puts the needs of students first (48%;  $n = 2,352$ )
3. Sets high expectations for all students (30%;  $n = 1,462$ )

The survey provided an “Other” response option for respondents to write in responsibilities of critical value for the new superintendent. Most of the written responses can be categorized into the top three areas of emphasis. Regarding putting the needs of students first, respondents encouraged a focus on not only academics but also students’ mental health needs. For safety and security, the respondents acknowledged the importance of promoting physical safety but also elevated the need to promote emotional and psychological safety within the district.

Responses that did not align with the top three areas of emphasis highlighted the needs of teachers, and more specifically, a focus on teacher retention and recruitment, valuing and respecting teachers’ input and experiences, as well as issues of compensation and support. As one respondent stated, *“Take care of the troops (educators) first....so that the students' needs are met.”* There was also widespread agreement on the necessity of promoting quality teaching and learning with an emphasis on improving academic achievement and fostering academic excellence.

### ***The Ideal Superintendent***

Respondents also shared one word they would use to describe the ideal superintendent (see Figure 4 for word cloud). The three most frequently used words to characterize the model candidate were:

1. Honest
2. Integrity
3. Transparent

**Figure 4**

*Word Cloud: Characteristics of the Ideal Superintendent*



**Note.** In the word cloud, the larger words represent sentiments expressed by respondents with greater frequency, while the smaller words indicate lower frequency.

**Superintendent’s Priorities**

***Principal Priorities***

Respondents were tasked with selecting the three most critical district-level priorities for the new superintendent from a list of 11 focal points, which included items such as *community relations*, *facilities and maintenance*, *fiscal responsibilities*, and *antiracism and equity*. The majority of respondents emphasized the importance of prioritizing:

1. Safety and Security (59%; *n* = 2,876)
2. Student Achievement (49%; *n* = 2,407)
3. Behavioral and Mental Health (41%; *n* = 1,995)

Most of the written responses for “Other” can be categorized as one of the top three priority areas. Many respondents expressed disciplinary concerns including behavior management and accountability. There were also priorities listed for school and district culture reform, and the improvements of school climate and staff morale. Responses that did not coincide with the selected categories centered on education or teaching and learning, and emphasized providing a quality or “world-class” education. For these respondents, ensuring an education characterized, for example, by enhanced rigor, enrichment opportunities, a balanced curriculum, and improved special education services must take precedence above all else. Respondents also desired to see

the new superintendent prioritize teachers, with attention to supporting and empowering them, and enhancing recruitment and retention efforts.

“[Education] should be the top priority of the school system and its leader. Ensuring a system in which all students are safely and appropriately educated (1) to enter the workforce or continue their education and (2) to become knowledgeable citizens who can make positive contributions to society, should be the only top priority of the system. Everything else should be done in service to that goal”.

“Understanding that corny email and video messages do not make teachers believe you care about what is happening in schools. Visiting and talking with teachers, not core teams and principals, trying to teach for a day, getting in the trenches—that's what might just turn the tide”.

### ***Priorities Warranting Immediate Attention***

Once respondents selected the top three priorities for the new superintendent, they specified which priorities should be addressed immediately. These open-ended responses echoed the priorities and areas of emphasis identified earlier in the survey. This section provides more descriptive information for how respondents felt about the priority areas and is intended to be additive. Therefore, only a few noteworthy findings from this survey item will be highlighted. The following key themes emerged from the data: *Safety and Security*; *Equitable Access and Practices*; *Budgetary Considerations*; and *Student Discipline and Behavior*. Below are exemplary statements for each theme:

***Safety and Security.*** Respondents expressed great concern for the frequency and severity of school fights and for students’ sense of insecurity when accessing communal areas of the school building, such as the bathroom or recreational areas. There are also concerns about unsafe bus routes for students.

“Safety and security of students. Too many fights, threats, and drugs in schools that were once safe.”

“Safety in schools (and I am not asking for cops, safety for everyone and not at the point of conflict mitigation or worse).”

“Safety of staff and students (fights in our schools are out of control). My student does not feel safe to use the bathroom during the school day.”

“Safety in the recreation area, girls' and boys' bathrooms monitoring and updating security cameras where they exist and where they do not exist inside and outside the school.”  
(response translated from Spanish)



“Safe routes to school/buses—why are children expected to walk across major unsafe state highways?”

***Equitable Access and Practices.*** In addition to addressing school safety, respondents highlighted the need for the new superintendent to tackle districtwide disparities in resource distribution, access to enrichment programs, and the allocation of school facilities and funding. They also emphasized the urgency of ensuring equitable access to teacher and staff training and professional development opportunities.

“Equity across the county—the impression is that the 'W' school areas get more and better.”

“Equity—we have 2 counties under one roof with totally different needs and issues- we need to find unity and level things out.”

“Equitable access to quality programs, regardless of the surrounding community's wealth.”

“Equity in access to challenging instruction and magnet programs should be larger and/or home schools should have more rigorous opportunities.”

“Equitable access to antiracism and equity trainings, resources, and shared messages.”

“Equitable funding for special education services.”

“Fiscal responsibility so that schools have the staffing they need and we are too overloaded in central office.”

“Equitable school buildings and infrastructure across schools.”

***Budgetary Considerations.*** Respondents emphasized the need for immediate action on funding and budgetary matters, including adequately financing schools and the special education program, exercising greater intentionality and fiscal responsibility in spending, and devising approaches to enhance teacher and staff compensation, potentially by reducing executive leadership salaries.

“Budgeting/systems—there is a lot of money wasted throughout MCPS (redundant systems/tools, competing materials/curricula, etc.) Be focused and intentional and end the wasteful practices so money can go where it is most needed/beneficial.”

“Budget pay increases for teachers and staff and decreases for upper-level administration bloat.”

“Fully and accurately funding schools.”

“Budget shortages that impact staff and student wellbeing and access to resources.”

“Budget, especially relating to retaining and hiring teachers, in order to reduce class sizes.”

“Special education is not funded properly or staffed properly—20 students to one case manager at elementary level is not sustainable for anyone and students aren't getting their services. It will come back at the county through massive lawsuits and compensatory services in a few years.”

***Student Discipline and Behavior.*** While student discipline and behavior are intertwined with safety and security concerns, respondents expressed a distinct desire for more stringent disciplinary measures and a reevaluation of policies such as those regarding cell phone usage and the implementation of restorative justice initiatives.

“Behavior and discipline including banning cell phones.”

“Cell phone policy that is more enforceable and doesn't put all the responsibility on the teacher with no end actionable consequence. Presently, the policy is at least 4–5-time intensive steps for teachers to take per student and then in the end, there is no consequence for refusing to put phone away/take earbuds out.”

“Behavior management and incorporating consequences—courageous conversations are not working.”

“Behaviors at all levels. There is absolutely no discipline in this county and it is becoming unsafe.”

“The pendulum has swung so far in the opposite direction that students know there are no consequences for their actions. Restorative Justice was supposed to be this [great plan], but we've had one training on it for 30 minutes during preservice and then nothing since. For it to truly work there needs to be constant training and implementation schoolwide. We're not even close to that. Instead we just don't do anything.”

### ***Proposed Questions to Superintendent Candidates***

Respondents submitted a total of 8,560 questions for the new superintendent. Most of the questions were reflective of respondents' views on priorities or urgent matters to be addressed. The questions were categorized based on the top three identified priorities, and below are exemplary questions for each priority area:

***Priority 1: Safety and Security.*** Respondents posed questions to assess the new superintendent's vision and objectives concerning student and school safety. Within this category, they emphasized that safety encompasses not only physical well-being but also mental and psychological welfare of students and staff, and inquired about candidates' strategies to address

these aspects. Specific questions were raised regarding proposed safety initiatives and approaches to tackling issues such as drug-related incidents, firearms, and violence. Additionally, respondents sought insights into the superintendent's stance on restorative justice programs and the presence of resource officers in schools.

“Safety in the schools has become an increasing concern. How would you ensure staff and students feel safe in the school environment?”

“How do you promote and help create an environment of physical and psychological safety in schools for all students?”

“How will you ensure safety procedures for staff and students are met with fidelity and urgency?”

“How would you ensure that gun safety is a high priority in our classrooms?”

“How do you plan to close the disproportionality in discipline while managing safety and security in all buildings?”

“What do you think makes an effective restorative justice program, and how do you protect the rights and safety of all students, but especially victims and bystanders, when implementing restorative justice?”

**Priority 2: Student Achievement.** Many of the respondents’ questions addressed concerns about student achievement. Respondents inquired about the new superintendent’s past experiences and successes with improving student achievement and addressing achievement disparities within a school district. Questions were tailored to specific student populations, such as Emergent Multilingual (EML) students and academically gifted students, and also included inquiries regarding perspectives on standardized assessments. Furthermore, respondents sought insights into addressing common factors impacting achievement, such as class size, teacher retention, and combating COVID-related underachievement.

“Please share evidence of the impact of your leadership on increasing student achievement in a school district.”

“What immediate steps will you take to improve student achievement in key areas, particularly ELA, math and science?”

“How do you intend to enhance student achievement and bridge any existing achievement disparities in our district through your strategic approach?”

“How are you going to promote the academic achievement of our emergent multilingual students?”

“High achieving students sometimes feel overlooked while the focus is constantly on closing achievement gaps. How do you make sure these students are not ignored?”

“How will you ensure student achievement continues to improve/heal from the educational disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic?”

“Do you think standardized test scores (such as MAP, or MCAP) are a reliable indicators of student achievement?”

“How specifically will you allocate funds to address the achievement gap?”

“MCPS class sizes are very large in some schools (over 30 students), affecting student achievement and teacher retention. How will you address this critical issue as MCPS Superintendent?”

***Priority 3: Behavioral and Mental Health.*** Respondents often inquired about the new superintendent’s approach to tackling the perceived behavioral and mental health challenges within the district. Their inquiries ranged from plans to support teachers' mental well-being and prevent burnout to initiatives aimed at improving behavioral and mental health resources and supports within schools. Respondents also sought to understand the new superintendent’s perspective on the impact of mental health issues on academic achievement.

“How will you address the growing mental health crisis in elementary, middle, and high school students?”

“How do you plan to address the mental health/behavioral challenges impacting individuals and classrooms across the county?”

“How do you plan to address burnout and mental health crises for teachers?”

“How do you plan to address the shortage of mental health/behavioral support in the county?”

“How do you see the role of mental health in the classroom setting?”

### Conclusions

In a comprehensive survey conducted among 4,880 MCPS stakeholders, largely represented by parents/guardians and teachers, several key insights emerged regarding the desired attributes and priorities for the new superintendent. A significant majority of respondents emphasized the critical importance of effective communication skills, honesty, integrity, and transparency in the superintendent role. Additionally, a commitment to a positive and professional climate of trust and respect among staff, coupled with a demonstrated ability to enhance educational outcomes for all students, were highlighted as paramount. Safety and security within schools and across the district, prioritizing student needs, and maintaining high academic expectations were identified as the primary areas of focus for the new superintendent. Notably, respondents also underscored the importance of ensuring students receive a quality education, tackling behavioral and mental health challenges within schools, and addressing teacher-related concerns, including teacher retention and compensation.

While respondents noted that the district's strengths lie in its student diversity, teacher quality, and school choice options, challenges such as teacher shortages, student discipline issues, and school safety concerns persist. Despite these challenges, sentiments toward MCPS among respondents ranged from disappointment and frustration to hopefulness, reflecting a complex array of perspectives within the community. These findings provide valuable guidance for the selection and future direction of leadership within the MCPS system, emphasizing the need for a superintendent who prioritizes effective communication, safety, student well-being, and academic excellence.

The insights gleaned from the superintendent search survey can serve as valuable guidelines for identifying candidates who possess the necessary skills and qualities desired by the community. However, it's essential to approach these findings with caution and recognize that they represent the perspectives of a subset of district stakeholders. Attempting to generalize these findings to the entire community may overlook the diversity of opinions and needs within the district. Therefore, these survey data are to be supplemented with additional sources of input, such as the superintendent search focus groups and community forums. The district aimed to engage in comprehensive outreach efforts to ensure that the superintendent selection process is inclusive and representative of the broader community's views and priorities.