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Montgomery County Public Schools: Improving Student Achievement Through Effective Human Capital Management

March 2012

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The Center for Educator Compensation Reform (CECR) would like to thank the following people for their time in reviewing drafts of this resource: Carrie Tucker, Westat; Carolyn Lampila, U.S. Department of Education.

The work described in this paper was supported by the U.S. Department of Education through the Center for Educator Compensation Reform. The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the view of the U.S. Department of Education, the Center for Educator Compensation Reform, or the institutional partners of the Center. Comments and suggestions are welcome.

The Center for Educator Compensation and Reform (CECR) was awarded to Westat — in partnership with Learning Point Associates, an affiliate of American Institutes for Research; Synergy Enterprises, Inc.; J. Koppich and Associates; and the University of Wisconsin — by the U.S. Department of Education in October 2006.

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This work was originally produced in whole or in part by the CECR with funds from the U.S. Department of Education under contract number ED-06-CO-0110. The content does not necessarily reflect the position or policy of CECR or the Department of Education, nor does mention or visual representation of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by CECR or the federal government.

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Montgomery County Public Schools: Improving Student Achievement Through Effective Human Capital Management

States and school districts across the country continue their efforts to increase student achievement. Arguments abound about how to measure that achievement credibly and reliably. Yet, the centrality of effective teaching to improved student learning seems to be a settled issue. Teaching matters. As research confirms, without effective teachers, attempts to improve student achievement have little chance of success.

Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) is the largest school district in Maryland and the 16th largest in the United States. Spanning nearly 500 square miles, the district has a reputation as a wealthy, white Washington, DC, bedroom community. However, district demographics have changed in recent years and continue to evolve as the county becomes home to larger numbers of low-paid service workers and their families.

MCPS employs more than 11,600 teachers to serve a population of 144,000 students. Slightly more than one-third of the district's students (37 percent) are white, about a quarter each is African-American (23 percent) and Hispanic (24 percent), and 16 percent are Asian. Montgomery County students speak more than 180 home languages. Nearly a third (31 percent) qualify for free or reduced-price meals.

MCPS has spent more than a decade developing and implementing system and organization changes, including new student achievement targets, refined means of calibrating and measuring student learning, and a totally revamped curriculum.

The teacher Professional Growth System (PGS)—a set of interlocking strategies targeted to improving teacher effectiveness—is central to Montgomery County's reform efforts.[1]

This case study describes the core elements of Montgomery County's teacher PGS. It is a story about how one school district has developed a coherent teacher effectiveness strategy that incorporates multiple components of a human capital management system.

The Professional Growth System

The PGS is the centerpiece of Montgomery County's efforts to improve teacher effectiveness. The system's core elements are: (1) induction and mentoring for new teachers; (2) ongoing, job-embedded professional development for all teachers; (3) a comprehensive performance appraisal system, including Peer Assistance and Review (PAR) for first-year teachers and for struggling experienced teachers; and (4) a career lattice to retain highly skilled teachers and reward teacher leadership. A considerable strength of Montgomery County's approach is that it aligns several human resource programs—induction, professional development, evaluation, and compensation—around a coherent human capital strategy for developing and supporting effective educators.

1 MCPS also has implemented a parallel PGS for administrative and supervisory personnel and one for support staff. Experiences with the teacher PGS informed the development of these tools.

Foundational Standards

Developers of the PGS structured each of its components around MCPS' teaching standards. Derived from the five core propositions of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, Montgomery County's standards hold that:

(1) Teachers are committed to students and their learning.

(2) Teachers know the subjects they teach and how to teach these to students.

(3) Teachers are responsible for establishing and managing student learning in a positive learning environment.

(4) Teachers continually assess student progress, analyze the results, and adapt instruction to improve student achievement.

(5) Teachers are committed to continuous improvement and professional development.

(6) Teachers exhibit a high degree of professionalism.

Each of the standards has indicators and exemplars attached to it. These function as rubrics, shaping expectations for teaching and providing the foundation for ongoing appraisals of the effectiveness or challenges of each element of the PGS and of the system as a whole.

Multi-Stakeholder Investment and Involvement

A multi-stakeholder Implementation Team oversees the PGS. This committee, composed of representatives of the district's human resources and staff development offices and representatives of the local teachers union, the Montgomery County Education Association; and the local administrators' association, the Montgomery County Association of Administrative and Supervisory Personnel, has been in place since the PGS' inception.

The Implementation Team meets monthly and works collaboratively to develop, implement, and continuously refine the PGS.

The partnership between the district and the Montgomery County Education Association (MCEA) has been particularly critical to the success of the teacher PGS. Representatives of MCPS and MCEA co-chair the Implementation Team and strive to ensure that this complicated system remains on track. This paper will return to the district-union partnership later in this case study. Now, the paper will turn to the core elements of the PGS.

I. New Teacher Induction

The district informs teachers of the PGS as soon it hires them.[2] Whether they have previous teaching experience or not, all teachers new to MCPS participate in a comprehensive induction program. This includes a five-day preservice orientation designed to acquaint new teachers with MCPS policies and programs, including the PGS. Thus, teachers learn from the very beginning of their employment what the district expects of them as professionals, what kinds of support they will receive to help them meet these expectations, and how appraisers will evaluate their performance.

For their first year, the district assigns a mentor to teachers who have taught but not in Montgomery County. The mentor, an experienced teacher who teaches at the same school as the new hire, carries a full teaching load and provides support before and after the school day and during professional development time.

2 Montgomery County has a reputation as a good place to work and historically has had little trouble attracting well-qualified teaching candidates. Nevertheless, coincident with the development of the PGS, MCPS has burnished its teacher recruitment and selection processes. The district engages with a set of pre-employment university partners and widely uses technology to recruit, screen, and hire applicants. In 2010, the district launched the Applicant Tracking System to enable principals to post job openings, view candidates' profiles, and track and manage the hiring process.

MCPS prides itself on hiring high-quality teachers. The district selects teachers who come from other teaching assignments because they have the requisite professional skills Montgomery County is seeking. Mentoring provides socialization to the district and some periodic coaching around MCPS-specific ways of operating. Thus, mentors can provide information on MCPS curriculum, help the new hire understand specific school-based programs, or help the teacher hone teaching strategies that fit the school's culture and student population. Mentors volunteer for this work. The district trains them and pays them a small stipend.

For teachers who have never taught, the district assigns a consulting teacher rather than a mentor. The consulting teacher is an experienced, highly skilled MCPS classroom practitioner who is part of the PGS's Peer Assistance and Review (PAR) program. (The subsection on Evaluation explores PAR more fully.) Consulting teachers provide MCPS novices with targeted, intensive, one-on-one support for their first year of teaching. At the end of that year, the consulting teacher evaluates the novice's practice.

This paper now takes up professional development and evaluation in Montgomery County. Though this paper treats them here as separate case study subsections, in fact, professional development and performance appraisal link symbiotically in a multi-year professional growth cycle in which all MCPS teachers participate.

II. Career-Long Professional Development

"Continuous, job-embedded, career-long": These are the watchwords of professional development in Montgomery County. A key component of the PGS, staff development is integral to teachers' jobs and extends throughout their MCPS careers.

Professional development encompasses three linked components: (1) district-led staff development to build a common language and common understanding of effective teaching, (2) school-based professional development to improve instruction by building and supporting a professional learning community, and (3) individualized professional development to enhance teachers' instructional skills.

District-Led Professional Development

Montgomery County organizes its district-level professional development around the belief that teachers need a common language to talk about and act on effective teaching. This common language creates shared understanding, enables teachers collaboratively to describe and analyze their work and its impact on their students, and paves the way for a school culture and climate in which teachers and administrators work together toward identified student achievement goals.

Since most of Montgomery County's professional development is school-based, the district is judicious and focused about district-level offerings. Two primary district-offered courses—Studying Skillful Teaching (SST) 1 and 2—specifically align with the PGS.

Developed by the district in collaboration with Research for Better Teaching,[3] the SST courses focus on increasing teachers' capacities to meet students' different learning needs. The courses incorporate both a basic framework and MCPS-specific content about standards, instructional strategies, assessment, and data analysis.

SST1 and SST2 support teachers to improve student achievement by fostering professional community, helping them examine their beliefs about teaching and learning, expanding their instructional repertoires, and developing skills in using student performance data in instructional decision-making. The district encourages all teachers to take both courses, SST 1 within the first five years in MCPS and SST 2 upon completion of SST1.

In addition to the SST courses, the district supports a variety of in-district and out-of-district credit-bearing courses geared toward salary advancement and certification renewal. The district offers many of these courses online.

School-Based Professional Development

The vast majority of Montgomery County's professional development is school-based. As part of the PGS, the principal designates one teacher in each school as the full-time Staff Development Teacher (SDT).[4] SDTs focus their work on improving instruction by building and supporting the professional learning community at the school.

SDTs create school-based professional development opportunities for teachers to hone their instructional skills through coaching, walk-throughs, peer observations, and help with individualized professional development plans. They also facilitate school-based small group collaboratives to help teachers analyze student achievement data and other indicators of student learning, critique each other's work, and revise their practice.

SDTs' work is nonevaluative. Nevertheless, two factors guide their choice of professional development for the school: the school improvement plan, which includes student performance targets and data regarding where the school ranks on each of those targets, and teachers' individual improvement plans, which are derived, at least in part, from teachers' performance reviews.

SDTs have access to a pool of substitutes so that teachers can pursue professional development activities during the regular school day.

Staff development teachers receive approximately 20 days of training before school begins, including SST1 and SST2. This requirement forges a direct link between professional learning the district has tagged as essential to promoting key elements of the PGS and the individual principally responsible for ensuring fidelity with the PGS at the school level. Training is ongoing through twice-a-month sessions throughout the school year.

Individual Professional Development Plans

The Professional Development Plan (PDP) is the third prong of PGS professional development. Post-tenure Montgomery County teachers work on extended professional growth cycles that culminate in comprehensive summative performance evaluations. (See the section on evaluation for details on the evaluation cycle.) During nonevaluation years, teachers design and implement multi-year PDPs.

3 Research for Better Teaching is a Massachusetts-based school improvement organization that works with districts to develop leadership skills and build in-house district capacity to ensure effective teaching.

4 The district often assigns several part-time teachers often in high schools to ensure subject area coverage.

Aligned with the school's school improvement plan and approved by the principal and staff development teacher, PDPs guide teachers' professional growth as it relates to improving student learning. Each plan contains a clear statement of what the teacher intends to do and why and what the anticipated outcomes are. The PDP becomes part of the data for the teacher's summative evaluation. This helps to ensure that individual professional development efforts align with areas in which teachers need or want to improve their performance.

III. Comprehensive Performance Evaluation

The PGS embraces the research-based finding that effective evaluation has two principal components: improvement and accountability. Thus, teacher performance appraisal in Montgomery County is part of a continuous loop: professional growth—performance evaluation—more professional growth. Most experienced teachers are on a standard evaluation cycle. The district places first-year teachers with no teaching experience and underperforming tenured teachers in the PAR program.

Standard Evaluation Cycle

MCPS evaluates teachers annually during their first two years in the district. Once a teacher passes the two-year probationary period, formal teacher evaluations become cyclical. This cyclical approach to evaluation serves two purposes: (1) It conserves evaluation resources for those teachers most in need of help, and (2) it focuses teachers' efforts on targeted professional growth, giving them the time and space to improve their practice in between summative reviews.

A newly tenured teacher enters a three-year professional growth cycle. In the third year of the cycle, the principal formally evaluates the teacher.[5] Teachers who successfully complete the three-year professional growth cycle enter a four-year cycle and receive formal evaluations in the fourth year. After successfully completing this cycle, teachers enter a five-year professional growth cycle. The principal evaluates at the end of this cycle and every five years thereafter.[6]

Principals receive 72 hours of training through two required Research for Better Teaching-developed courses, Observing and Analyzing Teaching (OAT) 1 and 2. The courses prepare principals to collect and analyze evidence about a teacher's work across MCPS' standards using multiple sources of data and to provide effective feedback for teachers at all skill levels.

In evaluation years, the principal prepares a summative evaluation report that includes an appraisal of a teacher's cumulative performance on each of MCPS' standards. Data for the performance rating include results of formal and informal classroom observations, student work samples, student achievement results, lesson plans, professional development plans, and evidence of communication with parents.

Montgomery County uses a binary teacher rating system. Teachers either "meet standard" or are "below standard." Principals automatically refer any teacher who receives a "below standard" rating to the PAR program.

5 During the years, they do not receive formal evaluations; teachers refine and implement their professional development plans.

6 A principal who is concerned about the performance of a teacher not up for formal review can request an off-cycle evaluation.

Peer Assistance and Review

The district requires all first-year teachers who have never taught and all experienced teachers who receive a "below standard" evaluation rating to participate, typically for one year, in MCPS' PAR program. PAR, patterned after the program pioneered in Toledo in 1981, combines intensive, targeted professional development and performance evaluation guided by consulting teachers.

Consulting teachers are highly qualified, experienced teachers who apply for the competitive position. The PAR Panel, the joint labor-management committee that oversees the program, rigorously screens the consulting teachers' qualifications. MCPS trains consulting teachers, who carry a caseload of 12 to 20 PAR teachers, in classroom observation, analysis of evidence of teaching quality, and strategies for having difficult professional conversations. Required training includes OAT 1 and 2. Released from their classrooms full time, consulting teachers work in this role for three years, returning to the classroom once their consulting teacher rotation is up.

Consulting teachers provide intensive support to the PAR participants with whom they work. They offer PAR teachers instructional coaching; lesson modeling; opportunities to watch exemplary teachers teach; help with lesson planning, presentation, and classroom management; and assistance in developing and implementing professional growth plans. Consulting teachers also complete a minimum four formal observations of each teacher.

The PAR year culminates with a consulting teacher-prepared final report on each participating teacher. Using MCPS standards as their guide, consulting teachers assess the quality of teaching of each of the teachers for whom they were responsible and present their reports to the PAR Panel.

The Panel reviews the consulting teacher's data and report (and, in the case of a new teacher, an evaluation by the principal). The Panel then makes a recommendation to the superintendent that the teacher (1) take a place in the regular professional growth cycle, (2) have a second year of PAR support, or (3) not be renewed or be dismissed from the district.

IV. Compensation for Teacher Leadership

The fourth component of the PGS, the career lattice,[7] rewards excellence in teaching by providing opportunities for additional compensation for teachers who assume designated leadership responsibilities. The district intends these responsibilities to result in improved student learning and keep excellent teachers close to the classroom. In addition, the lattice, Montgomery County's version of a career pathway, is a way to attract and retain teachers for a long career in MCPS.[8]

The career lattice recognizes three stages of a teacher's career. The first is induction, the two years prior to tenure. The second stage is skillful teaching. Teachers can choose to remain at this stage for the rest of their MCPS careers. To do so, they must successfully complete successive growth and evaluation cycles.

7 Montgomery County's career lattice looks much like a teacher career ladder in other districts. MCPS and MCEA specifically chose the word "lattice" to indicate that the pay and responsibility attached to it apply to teachers and teaching and are not intended as a stepping-stone to administration.

8 Montgomery County maintains a traditional teacher salary schedule except for the career lattice.

Stage three is teacher leadership. To reach this stage, which is optional, teachers compete for lead teacher positions. Lead teachers earn additional pay in exchange for assuming designated leadership responsibilities. Among the roles that lead teachers take on are school-based staff development teacher, PAR consulting teacher, instructional specialist, resource teacher, project leader in schools not meeting Adequate Yearly Progress, and mentors to teachers new to MCPS. Lead teachers earn an additional $2,000 plus any supplement attached to a specialist position. (Consulting teachers in PAR, for example earn $4,425 for that role.)

The Career Lattice Panel, another joint MCPS-MCEA committee, oversees the career lattice program, including selecting lead teachers. The Panel reports to the PGS Implementation Team.

A True Labor-Management Partnership

MCPS and MCEA have formed a true partnership around the district's key education improvement efforts, including, of course the teacher PGS. Partnership is the operative word.

The MCPS-MCEA relationship extends well beyond the conventional collaborative labor-management relations where the parties deal civilly with one another but stick to the classic labor-management triumvirate of wages, hours, and working conditions. The district and union in Montgomery County use the collective bargaining contract to institutionalize a labor-management pact focused on high-stakes collaborative decision-making designed to improve student achievement.

The preamble to the bilateral agreement states, "MCPS is committed to creating organizational structures and processes that solidify the collaborative relationship between [the district] . . . and MCEA so that all parties will work together to do what is best for students." Article 6 of the contract, Collaboration, spells out some of the particulars of these structures and processes.

MCEA has a seat on the district's Executive Leadership Team, which is responsible for reviewing the district's strategic plan and setting annual student performance targets. The district and union also work in tandem to allocate MCPS's fiscal resources. The joint labor-management Operating Budget Review Committee considers requests from all district offices and departments and makes budget recommendations to the superintendent.

Collaborative work around the PGS captures the primacy of this labor-management partnership well. The union was integral to developing the system and continues to be an active participant with the district on all aspects of the PGS as it continues its path forward.

As previously mentioned, the union co-chairs, with the district, the Implementation Team that is responsible for ensuring the district is implementing the PGS effectively and with fidelity. The union and district work as a team on the PAR Panel, to which the union appoints half the members. That entity makes high-stakes determinations that directly affect teachers' employment status. The joint district-union Career Lattice Panel makes decisions about teacher responsibility and pay.

Montgomery County provides a timely illustration of the interaction between a human capital management system and labor-management relations. The district and the union negotiate many of the elements of the PGS, including evaluation and pay. These are part of the contract. MCPS thus serves as a reminder that districts cannot build coherent human capital management systems around the union or association; they must build the systems with them.

A Coherent and Cohesive System

MCPS can boast significant accomplishments:

- Every student subgroup—all races and ethnicities, income levels, and students at the top and bottom of the performance curve—has made significant gains since Montgomery County began its reform efforts.
- Ninety percent (90 percent) of MCPS students graduate from high school, the highest rate of any large school district in the United States.
- Three-quarters of MCPS students take one or more Advanced Placement exams. Half of the 2010 graduates earned a score of 3 or higher on at least one of the exams.
- The percentage of 2010 African-American and Hispanic graduates who earned a 3 on at least one AP exam ranks above the national average for all graduates.
- The number of students scoring proficient or advanced on the Maryland State Assessment in elementary and middle school reading and math has steadily climbed.
- The achievement gap between white and African-American and Hispanic students continues to narrow.
- Eighty percent (80 percent) of the MCPS class of 2009 took the SAT. Scores continue to rise as the population taking the test becomes more diverse.
- The district posted a 95 percent teacher retention rate in 2010.
- MCPS was a finalist for the 2010 Broad Prize for Urban Education and won the 2010 Malcolm Baldridge National Quality Award.[9]

To be sure, the teacher PGS, the subject of this case study, is one among a number of Montgomery County reforms, including new curriculum, a new grading and reporting system, and professional growth systems for administrators and support personnel. As the first of Montgomery County's reforms, however, the teacher PGS is in many ways the touchstone of the district's work. Other system changes are built on the foundation laid by the teacher PGS.

Montgomery County has created an impressive teacher human capital system that is at once integrated and sequential. The system takes the full teaching career as its point of departure and embeds a kind of backward mapping that anticipates teachers' professional needs at various stages of their work life.

Professional standards provide the foundation of the PGS. The system uses those standards to shape continuous professional growth, development, and performance. The PGS' common language about teaching effectiveness enables teachers and administrators to operate from a consensual understanding of teaching effectiveness, recognizing, supporting, and rewarding it as well as attaching appropriate consequences for those who fail to live up to professional expectations. The PGS is

9 The Broad foundation awards the Broad Prize for Urban Education annually to the school district that demonstrates the greatest improvement in overall performance and student achievement while reducing achievement gaps between among groups of students.

The Baldridge National Quality Award recognizes organizations in business, health care, education, and nonprofit sectors for performance excellence.

collaborative. At the district level, MCPS and MCEA together developed and continue to refine the system. At the school level, collaborative data-based decision-making among teachers and between teachers and principals drives a continuous momentum for increasing student achievement. At its heart, Montgomery County's PGS drives ever-increasing levels of teaching effectiveness while reinforcing an ethic of teacher professionalism.

Source

Montgomery County Public Schools. Mar. 2, 2012.
http://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/

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