

## **Evaluation of the Implementation of the Montgomery County Board of Education Grading and Reporting Policy: Findings from the October 2005 Elementary School Interviews**

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### **Background**

Montgomery County Board of Education Policy IKA, *Grading and Reporting*, was piloted in Grades 1 and 2 during the 2005–2006 school year. The intent of the policy is to ensure uniform and consistent grading. The three major components of the policy include academic meaning of a grade, homework, and learning skills.

During the 2005–2006 school year, all elementary schools implemented the policy and 17 volunteered to pilot the electronic report card. As part of the evaluation process, the Department of Shared Accountability (DSA) conducted interviews, core team surveys, parent focus groups, and a Web survey that have been used to examine the level and quality of implementation and to inform later practices. The intent of this brief is to provide a summary of the interviews that were conducted in October 2005.

### **Methodology**

Schools were selected to be part of the evaluation systematically, based on student demographic and academic characteristics using the cluster analysis statistical technique. Three schools using the electronic report card were randomly selected for in-depth implementation analyses, and three schools that did not use the electronic report card were matched using student demographics. In-depth evaluation activities such as face-to-face interviews and parent focus groups were held in these six schools. This brief presents findings from the conducted interviews.

The three schools using the electronic report card are Ashburton, Forest Knolls, and Fox Chapel elementary schools. Bel Pre, Farmland, and Viers Mill elementary schools are the schools

not using the electronic report card. Interviewees included the principal, staff development teacher, and grading and reporting contact person. At some schools the contact person was the staff development teacher. Interviews were also conducted with administrators located in Carver Educational Services Center (CESC) to gain an understanding of implementation in the schools and to inform future surveys.

Interviews were scheduled by DSA evaluation specialists according to availability of the interviewee. The majority of the interviews were conducted in October 2005, with some in early November 2005. Interviewees were interviewed either by one evaluation specialist or a team of two evaluation specialists. Interviews consisted of several sections, including background information, policy implementation, communication, and reporting of grades. The comparison schools were not asked questions specific to the electronic report card.

### **Findings**

When asked how well MCPS has been doing thus far in managing the implementation of the grading and reporting policy, approximately 60 percent of respondents at the schools implementing the electronic report card said good, very good, or an excellent job.

One third of the respondents at the comparison schools said that MCPS was doing a good job in managing the implementation. Another third said that MCPS was doing a fair job, and the remaining respondents indicated not knowing how MCPS was doing.

In interviewing the respondents across all six schools, results show that many of the issues and concerns raised are similar, regardless of whether or not the schools were using the electronic report card. For all schools, the concern was with

the policy itself and ensuring that there was a consistent approach to informing schools on how to implement the procedures, providing training and support, and ensuring that teachers' time is valued.

When asked about their perceptions of the major components of the grading and reporting policy being implemented in Grades 1 and 2, the majority of the respondents indicated consistency of grading across classrooms and schools. Other responses included using the essential learnings, standardized practices, and common monitoring tools.

Interviewees also were asked about Academic Meaning of a Grade, Homework, and Learning Skills, as well as the current implementation status (Fully Implemented, Partially Implemented, Not Implemented, and Not Sure). The following sections detail a summary of responses related to the major components of the grading and reporting policy.

#### *Academic Meaning of a Grade*

The majority of respondents at the schools using the electronic report card felt it was difficult to implement the following procedure: *Grades reflect what students know and are able to do in relation to grade-level expectations.* The challenge was the number of assessments that had to be collected, as well as the assessment tools. In contrast, the majority of respondents in the schools not using the electronic report card did not find it difficult to implement the aforementioned procedure.

To address this difficulty, schools using the electronic report card stated that they created assessments as teams. As one respondent stated, "Teachers are creating assessments as teams, which is time consuming, but they are subdividing the work." Another respondent explained that their second grade teachers have "taken each assessment along with its rubrics and checklist criteria and copied them into one piece of paper" to make recording easier.

For the remaining three procedures (*teachers assess student learning in a variety of ways; grades are based on multiple measures over time; and, learning is evaluated using varied tasks/assignments, such as tests, projects, reports, and discussions*), the majority of

respondents at all schools did not find them difficult to implement.

Across all six schools, respondents indicated they had fully implemented each of the four procedures related to Academic Meaning of a Grade.

#### *Homework Component*

Three statements about the major procedures related to the homework component of the grading and reporting policy were read to interviewees. These statements were: 1) *Homework evaluated for learning may count toward the academic grade;* 2) *Teachers provide feedback on homework that is assigned to practice new skills. Homework for practice is not part of the academic grade;* and, 3) *Teachers can give feedback in writing, or by talking with students individually, or in a group.* Similar to the statements read for the Academic Meaning of a Grade component, respondents were asked whether each statement was difficult to implement or not. For schools implementing the electronic report card and comparison schools, the majority of respondents did not believe the procedures were difficult to implement. Furthermore, all respondents indicated fully implementing the procedures related to the homework component.

#### *Learning Skills Component*

The majority of the respondents indicated that the two procedures related to the Learning Skills component were not difficult to implement. The two statements were: *Learning skills are reported separately from academic grades* and *learning skills include behavior and effort.* As with the other two components, all respondents indicated fully implementing the procedures related to the Learning Skills component.

#### *Barriers to Successful Implementation*

In an effort to gain an understanding of any challenges to implementation, interviewees were asked to identify three barriers that they perceived as adversely impacting the successful implementation of the grading and reporting policy at their schools.

### *Schools not Implementing the Electronic Report Card*

The most frequently cited barrier at comparison schools was time. Similar to responses at the pilot schools, time referred to the amount of time it takes teachers to conduct the assessments.

The next most cited barrier was that the policy is not fully developed. Many respondents understood that this was the initial year for implementation, but the fact that things are not fully developed and changes occur in the midst of implementation makes it difficult for them.

Other barriers mentioned include not having enough training before things have to be done, lack of a full awareness of current practices, new curriculum changes in Grade 2, and an absence of clear models for aspects of the policy.

To deal with these barriers, many respondents mentioned using time during team meetings to discuss problems or concerns. Additionally, in-house trainings are conducted for teachers to try to maintain consistency in implementing the components of the policy.

### *Schools Implementing the Electronic Report Card*

At the pilot schools, the barrier most frequently cited was the number of benchmarks that teachers had to complete. Many respondents felt that the amount of essential learnings that teachers had to complete for each student was overwhelming. It should be noted that respondents were not classroom teachers, but had received feedback from teachers in their school at various meetings.

Other barriers to successful implementation included respondents' dissatisfaction with the need to use a draft version of the electronic report card that cannot be shared with parents and the amount of time required to conduct assessments.

Teachers not being able to enter data at home, constant changes, and competing MCPS initiatives were the next most cited responses. One respondent indicated that if she had known that teachers would not be able to enter data into the electronic collection tool from home, she would not have been as supportive of implementing the pilot this year. It was the

understanding of some that teachers would be able to enter data from home; but since they cannot, this was seen as a challenge as it forced teachers to stay longer at their schools to complete data entry.

Some respondents mentioned that changes occurring in the middle of the process have made it difficult for teachers and have caused confusion. Some respondents explained that teachers were confronted with competing initiatives. One indicated having to prioritize initiatives for teachers so that teachers would not feel overwhelmed with the number of initiatives they had to implement.

Other barriers that were mentioned included lack of flexibility of the assessments, lack of parent and teacher education to affect the paradigm shift, lack of support, lack of resources, vagueness of some of the rubrics, and a lack of understanding the big picture.

To address these barriers, many respondents stated that they provide support for teachers to help alleviate any stressors they might be experiencing. Others mentioned that they try to keep the lines of communication open and allow teachers to provide them with feedback regarding concerns about implementation.

### *Communication Methods*

Communication with parents and community members about the implementation procedures of the grading and reporting policy is an important component of the policy implementation. To understand the communication methods used by the pilot and control schools, respondents were asked to identify the methods they utilized from a list of choices. They also were allowed to list any other methods that may not have been listed in the evaluation instrument. The choices included the following statements:

- Community forums or public information sessions on the topic
- Back-to-school night
- Parent meetings
- Mailing of documents or written information sent to home
- School newsletters
- School system Web site
- Other

The most frequently cited methods of communication at the schools not implementing the electronic report card were back-to-school night, school newsletters, and the school system Web site. Respondents at the control schools mentioned having a link to the MCPS grading and reporting Web site on their school's Web site. The second most frequently cited method of communication for respondents at the control schools was parent-teacher conferences. Equally cited were parent meetings and the mailing of documents, or written information sent home. The least cited response was community forums or public information sessions on the grading and reporting topic. One respondent indicated that in the future the school plans to use ConnectEd as a method to communicate grading and reporting information to parents.

At the schools implementing the electronic report card, the most frequently cited method of communication was back-to-school night, where all respondents indicated that the grading and reporting policy was discussed. The next most frequently cited methods of communication were the mailing of documents or written information sent home and school newsletters. Community forums or public information sessions on the topic of grading and reporting was the next most frequently cited method of communication to parents and community members. Parent meetings, parent-teacher conferences, and use of the school system Web site were equally cited methods. Some respondents mentioned that although they may not have the information directly on their school's Web site, they did have a link to the MCPS grading and reporting Web page.

#### *Consistency of Implementation Methods*

In addition to understanding the status of implementation at the schools and issues related to implementation, interviewees were asked to provide three things that MCPS should be doing to ensure consistency of implementation within and across schools. Based on responses received from the interviewees, categories were created to group them.

#### *Schools not Implementing the Electronic Report Card*

The most frequent recommendations by respondents at the control schools were related to

preparation. In addition to ensuring that clear expectations are provided for every individual role, it was suggested that MCPS ensure that teachers have the curriculum, assessments, technology, and training ready before implementation.

Time was the second most cited recommendation. Not only did respondents suggest reducing the extra demand on teachers' time, but also requested that MCPS give teachers enough time to implement the policy.

The next group of recommendations mentioned was about training and support. Similar to the pilot schools, respondents wanted ongoing and consistent training for teachers and administrators. A respondent said that MCPS should "provide teacher supervision to make sure that the curriculum is followed in all MCPS schools."

#### *Schools Implementing the Electronic Report Card*

The most frequent recommendation mentioned at schools was preparation on the part of MCPS. Many respondents believed that if many procedures were in place prior to implementation, things would be moving more smoothly. One respondent recommended the creation of a system for immediate and consistent feedback from central office, specifically assigning one person to each school. Another respondent suggested having teachers be a part of the planning process.

The next group of recommendations mentioned was related to training and support. Respondents felt that more support should be provided to teachers, specifically at the school level. Local school level support was thought to be beneficial. As one respondent stated, "it's difficult to get in touch with the go-to people." Respondents also felt that regular trainings on the rubrics and assessments would help teachers understand how to use them better and facilitate easier implementation.

Related to training on assessments, having assessment tools and having them in a timely fashion was the third most frequent recommendation.

Time and materials were recommended the least by respondents. It was suggested that teachers not only be provided with more planning time, but also more time beyond what they currently receive for entering data. One respondent clarified, “three hours additional time is insulting to teachers because there is so much extra time that teachers are putting into this.”

### **Recommendations**

The following recommendations are based on the findings from the interviews:

- Maintain consistent and ongoing communication with the schools regarding policy implementation and changes. Provide information in a timely manner to not only schools, but also to parents.
- Provide more training for teachers in the use of the assessment tools and methods to assess students.
- Provide teachers the opportunity to come together across schools to discuss methods that work best for consistent policy implementation.
- Provide each school with an MCPS central office contact person so that questions can be answered quickly.