

## Implementation of the Montgomery County Board of Education Grading and Reporting Policy: Findings from the November 2005 Survey of Elementary School Staff

Shahpar Modarresi, Ph.D., and Marjorie A. Innocent, Ph.D.<sup>1</sup>

### Background

This brief is part of a comprehensive evaluation being conducted by the Department of Shared Accountability (DSA) of the Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) to assess the implementation of the Montgomery County Board of Education's grading and reporting policy in Grades 1–2 during the 2005–2006 school year. The brief summarizes findings from data collected through a survey administered during feedback sessions with staff from 17 selected elementary schools in November 2005. These schools are implementing all components of the policy, including the use of an electronic report card. The main purpose of the survey was to gather information pertaining to the degree and quality of the implementation of the policy at the school level. This brief serves to provide formative information to school decision makers to make any necessary changes and/or improvements to the grading and reporting policy procedures.

### Methodology

Stakeholder groups in the 17 elementary schools implementing the electronic report card in Grades 1 and 2 were gathered into feedback sessions on November 15 and 21, 2005. They shared their experiences pertaining to the implementation of grading and reporting policy procedures and the electronic report card. Evaluation specialists from DSA distributed a survey to session attendees. The survey solicited information on the following: a) implementation status of the major policy procedures, b) consistency of implementation, c) use of the electronic report card, d) communication of policy components to staff and parents, e) major challenges to implementation, f) training/support, g) quality of implementation of the policy procedures, h) areas of need/support, and i) perceived benefits and hindrances of the policy components. Before administering the survey, a draft of the instrument was provided to the Grading and Reporting Advisory Group, as well as Curriculum and Instruction staff,

for revision and feedback on its content and logical construct validity. A total of 97 participants completed the survey.

The analysis of survey data was performed at the aggregate level (all participants). This sample of participants was further categorized into four groups: 1) classroom teachers ( $n=54$ ); 2) administrators (including principals, assistant principals, and administrators,  $n=11$ ); 3) core team members (including staff development teachers, reading specialists, and math content coaches,  $n=15$ ); and 4) specialty teachers (including physical education, art, music, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), special education, and deaf/hard-of-hearing teachers,  $n=16$ ). One of the respondents did not record her or his position in the survey and therefore is not included in the disaggregated data. Where applicable, the analysis focused on exploring homogeneity as well as heterogeneity in responses among different respondent groups.

A summary of major findings is provided below, followed by a discussion of findings for each area addressed in the survey.

### Summary of Major Findings

Overall, survey findings suggest that staff in the 17 elementary schools implementing the electronic report card is highly engaged in policy-related activities to implement the standards-based grading and reporting components in their schools. The areas with least-reported activities are the ones associated with the policy procedures for students in special populations. Moreover, respondents widely reported using formal meetings and informal collaborations to ensure consistent grading among teachers. Almost all of the survey respondents indicated that there is extensive discussion within teams and departments about the implementation of the standards-based grading and reporting policy procedures.

While survey respondents generally praised the support provided by individual schools and the MCPS central office staff for implementation of the grading and reporting policy components, many indicated that receiving additional guidance from these sources would increase the effectiveness of policy implementation.

Survey respondents believed that the standards-based grading and reporting policy is beneficial to students because it provides increased clarity and specificity, particularly for instruction and feedback to parents and students. At the same time, respondents believed that students may not benefit from the policy as it involves too much assessing, which results in the loss of instructional time.

There were marked differences between the perceptions of administrators and those of teachers in a number of policy-related areas. In particular, more administrators than teachers agreed that teachers receive guided support on implementing the policy procedures, and more administrators than specialty teachers agreed that policy procedures are being implemented for students receiving special services. More administrators than teachers had a favorable view of existing policy-related communication to staff and parents, and administrators had a much more positive view of the quality of the policy's implementation than do classroom teachers.

Respondents in general, and teachers in particular, expressed concern that implementing some of the policy procedures has been time consuming and challenging. The most cited areas of challenge included a) time needed to plan, create, and assess students; b) number of assessments required; c) consistency in developing grades; and d) clarity of benchmarks or rubrics. In addition, more than two thirds of respondents reported that time needed to enter student data and the task of entering the data have created some or major problems when using the new electronic report card.

The simultaneous implementation of the standards-based grading and reporting policy with new assessment and testing requirements such as mCLASS may have given school-based staff the impression that the standards-based policy involves a great deal of additional assessments. Based on qualitative data gathered, teachers, principals, and specialists were overwhelmed by the overlap of the two initiatives and repeatedly reported a connection between them.

## Discussion of Findings

### *Implementation Status*

Analysis of survey data suggests that the majority of respondents are often engaged in policy-related activities in their schools. Table 1 in the appendix presents the frequency of policy-related activities in schools disaggregated by the participant's position. A very high percentage of survey respondents reported that grades frequently or always<sup>1</sup> reflect what students know and are able to do in relation to grade-level expectations (98.9%); teachers assess student learning in a variety of ways (96.9%); grades are based on multiple measures over time (97.9%); learning is evaluated using varied tasks/assignments like observation, checklist, and exit card (96.9%); learning skills are reported separately from academic grades (92.7%); teachers do provide written or oral feedback to students individually (93.8%); teachers can give oral or written feedback to students in a group (86.6%); and homework for practice is not part of the academic grade (79.4%). The least-cited area was that teachers provide feedback on homework assigned to practice new skills (62.5%).

When these results were disaggregated by position, teachers' responses were similar to all respondents', except in two areas. A higher percentage of teachers (about 7.0 percentage points higher) reported that homework for practice is not part of the academic grade and that teachers provide oral or written feedback to students in a group. Administrators' responses differ sharply from teachers' responses in two areas. Compared with classroom teachers, a lower percentage of administrators (by 12.6 percentage points) reported that teachers give written or oral feedback to students in a group and a higher percentage of administrators (by 8.6 percentage points) said that teachers provide feedback on homework assigned to practice new skills.

About half or less of all survey respondents were in strong agreement or agreement<sup>2</sup> with statements asking about the implementation of policy procedures for groups of students receiving special services in their schools (see Table 2 in the appendix). Slightly

---

<sup>1</sup> The response format was *never, infrequently, occasionally, frequently, always, and don't know*.

<sup>2</sup> The response format was *strongly disagree, disagree, not sure, agree, strongly agree, and don't know*. The *agree* and *strongly agree* response categories are combined here.

more than half of all respondents (51.1%) reported that ESOL teachers collaborate with classroom teachers in English Language Learner (ELL) committee format to determine when ESOL students require adjustments to essential learnings. Likewise, more than half of all respondents (55.3%) indicated that special education teachers collaborate with classroom teachers in a special education committee format to determine when special education students require adjustments to essential learnings. Moreover, more than one third of all respondents (35.5%) said that there were clear procedures for implementing the standards-based grading and reporting policy for students in special populations. When participants' responses in the stated areas were compared by position, a pattern was observed of more positive responses from administrators than specialty teachers. A higher percentage of administrators than specialty teachers reported that ESOL teachers collaborate with classroom teachers in ELL committee (81.8% vs. 56.3%), that special education teachers collaborate with classroom teachers in a special education committee (90.0% vs. 53.3%), and that there are clear procedures for implementing the standards-based grading and reporting policy for students in special populations (81.8% vs. 25.1%).

#### *Consistency of Implementation*

Respondents widely reported using formal meetings and informal collaborations to ensure consistent grading among teachers. Seventy of the 73 respondents to open-ended questions on consistency of implementation reported taking part in regular or frequent team meetings and/or staff development meetings. Some team meetings were described as grade-specific, while others were both grade- and subject-specific. Team and staff development meetings were held to create student tasks and quizzes, share evaluation points for essential learning, and conduct group scoring efforts. Informal collaborations were described as daily meetings, phone discussions at home, and continual conversations among teachers to ensure grading consistency. According to some classroom and specialty teachers, the success of the policy to date would not have been possible without the willingness of teachers to donate time for planning and implementation: "It's working because we are willing to put in hours above and beyond the duty day."

#### *Use of the Electronic Report Card*

Slightly more than two thirds of survey respondents (67.0%) reported some or major problems entering student data (see Table 3 in the appendix). Similarly, more than two thirds of survey respondents (69.8%)

indicated that time needed to enter student data created some or major problems for teachers (e.g., it took a long time to enter one piece of the data before going to the next). When results are disaggregated by position, teachers' responses to the stated survey items show a somewhat similar pattern. In an open-ended format, survey respondents were asked to list any other report-card-related issues. The problems cited most often included the lack of access from home and difficulty in viewing the entire essential learning on the screen.

#### *Communication to Staff and Parents*

Almost all of the survey respondents reported that there were extensive discussions within teams and departments about implementation of the standards-based grading and reporting policy procedures. Responses to this question ranged from a high of 100% for core team members, closely followed by 98.1% for classroom teachers, to a low of 81.8% for administrators. As shown in Table 4 of the appendix, about 73% of all respondents (ranging from 100% of administrators to 63.5% of classroom teachers) agreed or strongly agreed that there was a grading and reporting staff contact person in their school to answer parents' and students' questions. Nearly 58% of respondents said parents provide feedback about the grading and reporting policy. Agreement with this statement was highest among administrators (72.8%), followed by classroom teachers (65.4%), and lowest for specialty teachers (31.3%).

#### *Major Challenges to Implementation*

All the respondents (100%) reported that the time needed to assess and collect data created problems (ranging from some to major) for teachers. Participants were also given an opportunity to list major challenges to the implementation of Academic Meaning of a Grade, Homework, Learning Skills, and Assessment and Data Collection at the school level. Survey respondents identified a variety of challenges in practicing the procedures for the stated policy components, as summarized below.

*Academic meaning of a grade.* The majority of respondents (38 of 61) who listed a challenge to the implementation of Academic Meaning of a Grade cited consistency, clarity, and meaning of a grade as the major areas of difficulty. The following were some of the common responses: "Consistency," "Consistency with developing grades," "Clarity of benchmarks," "Rubrics are not always clear—Essential learning not always clear," "Different meaning of grades-interpretation," "Not enough

guidance with knowing what meeting standard really looks like.”

*Assessment and data collection.* Thirty-one of 58 participants who responded to this question cited the time factor and the number of assessments as the major challenges to implementation of Assessment and Data Collection aspects of the grading and reporting policy. The following were repeated in the survey responses for this question: “Too many assessments,” “Assessments prevent effective instruction,” “Time to assess; time to create assessments,” “Too much data all at once. More time is spent planning assessments than planning teaching,” and “Coming up with specific T1 & T2.” In addition, several of those who listed a challenge (16 of 58 respondents) reported a lack of consistency and clarity as major challenges. The following common comments reflect respondents’ concerns: “Consistency of assessment at all levels,” “A better understanding so I can explain to parents/students or simplify it,” “Clear directions.”

*Learning skills.* The most frequently-cited challenges to the implementation of Learning Skills included specific report card design and data entry concerns (18 of 40 who responded to this question). The following includes examples of responses that reflect these concerns: “On the report card, ‘I’s’ look like ‘1’s’,” “The layout on the Web [is a challenge]. We need to be able to enter all of the learning skills for each child then move to the next,” “Teachers can’t enter all skills for one student at a time.”

*Homework.* Respondents recorded very few challenges in implementing the Homework component of the policy. Lack of parent support/contribution was cited most as problematic for implementing the Homework component by the survey respondents ( $n=7$ ). For example, one respondent reported, “Parents complain it is too much,” and another commented, “[We have an] increasingly diverse student body who receive very different levels of home support. Consequently, homework is difficult to assess.”

*Other factors.* Besides the grading and reporting policy, the most significant factors identified as impacting grading assignment were updated MCPS curricula, as well as assessment and testing requirements. Across all subjects, classroom teachers in particular (12 of 36 who answered open-ended questions on other factors) cited curriculum updates as having an effect on grades. Concerning changes in assessment and testing requirements, 9 of 69 respondents highlighted reading assessments—

notably mCLASS Reading 3D—as having an important impact on grading and as being time-consuming to implement; challenges around implementing these assessments may also affect implementation of the standards-based grading and reporting policy. The Reading First initiative was noted by 5 of 69 respondents as a factor influencing grade assignment. According to one respondent, the initiative “has made evaluating students’ skills in literacy extremely complicated.” Respondents also identified updated curricula and reading interventions as difficult to correlate with rubrics/areas in the new report cards; this is likely because of the broader rubrics used in grading and reporting for Reading First versus other reading initiatives.

#### *Training/Support*

More than one fourth of all survey respondents (27%) and slightly more than one tenth of teacher respondents (13%) reported that they were adequately trained in how to effectively implement the standards-based grading and reporting policy procedures. More than half of all respondents (62%) reported that teachers in Grades 1 and 2 receive guided support to enable them to implement the standards-based grading and reporting policy procedures. The disaggregation of results by position reveals that more administrators than teachers (29 percentage points more) agreed that teachers in Grades 1 and 2 receive guided support.

Fifty of 69 participants who provided open-ended responses on training and support indicated that support provided by individual schools and MCPS central office staff was critical to achieving effective implementation of the policy. Of the 26 classroom and specialty teachers who identified school-based support as critical to the policy’s implementation, 16 were particularly grateful for the guidance received from staff development teachers (SDTs). Respondents commented that SDTs provided “an amazing wealth of information” and were “so helpful answering questions in a timely manner.” Moreover, SDTs provided assistance with organizing materials, including grade books, combined rubrics/grade sheets, and reading binders. Teachers and core team members also spoke a great deal about the benefits of team planning and collaboration within schools for effective implementation, including group task development and scoring.

Furthermore, 18 of 69 respondents highlighted the support provided by MCPS central office staff, particularly the feedback sessions offered in November 2005; they also commented on the overall

responsiveness of staff in the Office of Curriculum and Instructional Programs (OCIP), which they perceived as a sign that “people are listening and making themselves available.”

#### *Quality of the Implementation of Policy Procedures*

As shown in Table 5 of the appendix, analyses reveal that quality of the Learning Skills implementation was the highest-rated area (cited as good or very good by 78.4% of all respondents) and quality of the Assessment and Data Collection implementation was the lowest-rated area (cited as good or very good by 49.5% of all respondents). About 63% of respondents rated the implementation quality of Academic Meaning of a Grade as good or very good and 77% provided the same rating (good or very good) for the quality of implementation of the Homework component at their schools.

When responses to the quality of implementation were compared between groups of respondents, it was found that higher percentages of administrators than classroom teachers rated implementation of policy components as good or very good in all areas: Academic Meaning of a Grade (81.8% vs. 53.1%), Homework (81.8% vs. 78.6%), Learning Skills (81.8% vs. 78.0%), and Assessment and Data Collection (72.8% vs. 42.0%). Across the components, administrator responses are comparable with those of core team members, except in one area. A much higher percentage of administrators (72.8%) than core team members (53.9%) rated the implementation of Assessment and Data Collection as good or very good.

#### *Areas of Need/Support*

While survey respondents generally praised the support provided by individual schools and MCPS central office staff around implementation of the grading and reporting policy components, many indicated that receiving additional guidance from these sources would increase the effectiveness of policy implementation. In particular, 9 of 60 classroom and specialty teachers who provided open-ended comments on need and support requested countywide standardized assessments for T1, T2, and T3 evaluation points, as well as sample papers for all final grading options (1, 2, 3, and 4). Five of 46 classroom teachers also suggested that premade grade books should be provided to them, with rubrics indicated on grade sheets. Supplying teachers with standardized assessment tools was identified not only as a viable option for providing needed guidance on grading, but also as a way to address another important concern generated by the new policy:

minimizing time spent on assessment-related efforts. As noted by one classroom teacher, “all of the formative assessments need to be handed to us. We spend way too much time creating this on our own.” More support staff assistance with data entry was also identified as a way to protect teachers’ time.

#### *Benefits and Hindrances of Policy for Students*

Seventy-four respondents provided open-ended comments about benefits of the grading and reporting policy for students. Across all respondent groups, the most commonly cited benefit (60 of 74 respondents) was that it provides increased clarity and specificity for instruction. Teachers indicated that they were able to provide more focused and appropriate instruction to students, as “[teachers] know exactly what students can and cannot do,” and “...teachers [are] more aware of essential learning skills.” As one specialty teacher commented, “I feel clearer in my expectations, thus the students are clearer in their purpose.”

The policy was also perceived as being beneficial to students by providing clearer information to parents on students’ standing and progress: “Everything is broken down so it is very apparent to parents/students what their strengths/weaknesses are” and “[the policy] provides clarity for students and parents as it relates to what students know and are able to do.” Along with greater clarity, a smaller number of open-ended-question respondents (10 of 74) also emphasized that the policy increases consistency in grading and “movement toward more uniform expectations.” As noted by one classroom teacher, “[the policy] more accurately reflects what the child can do compared to other first graders.”

Sixty-four respondents shared their views in open-ended format on negative aspects for students of the standards-based policy. Among those, 44 thought the policy did not benefit students, in that, it involves too much time spent assessing and takes away from instruction. Teachers, administrators, and core team members all commented on the shift in time spent with students from centering on teaching to focusing on assessment. They noted that the “time required to assess takes away from the time available to teach” and that students were “losing out [on] in-depth instruction due to excessive assessing.” Respondents also remarked that teachers’ “lack of planning time greatly impacts delivery of instruction.” They believe the policy requires “too many indicators” and “too many essential learnings in a marking period,” leading to “not enough time teaching, learning, and absorbing.” While respondents acknowledged

improvements in the quality of teaching that have resulted from the new grading and reporting policy, they recognized that the policy has come to limit actual teaching time.

### **Recommendations**

- Provide more detailed procedures for implementing the standards-based grading and reporting policy for students in special populations.
- Provide classroom, specialty, and staff development teachers with more training on developing assessment tools and defining subject-specific guidelines for grading.
- Develop a “train-the-trainer” system with core team members to allow those who are more proficient to provide support within and across implementation cohorts.
- Continue to provide semiannual feedback sessions led by MCPS central office staff during the first years of implementation of the policy across all grade levels. Yearly sessions should be provided thereafter to maintain active engagement between teachers, school-based administrators, and central office staff.

- Develop a mechanism for teachers and administrators within each school to improve their internal communication regarding implementation of the policy procedures.
- Provide classroom and specialty teachers with more protected time for assessment-related activities and more support with data entry.
- Provide classroom and specialty teachers with additional training around other assessment and testing requirements, such as mCLASS. This training should include a component on how best to integrate assessment and testing requirements with the grading and reporting policy to increase teachers’ clarity around this issue.
- Provide teachers with the capability to access the electronic report card at home so that they can enter student data at their convenience.

---

<sup>i</sup> The authors would like to thank Mrs. Donna Shipley of the Department of Shared Accountability who coded open-ended comments; and the teachers, administrators and core team members who completed the survey.

**Implementation of the Montgomery County Board of Education  
Grading and Reporting Policy: Findings from the November 2005  
Survey of Elementary School Staff**

**Appendix**

Table 1  
Percentage of Respondents Selecting Frequently or Always for Survey Items on Policy-Related Activities,  
Disaggregated by Position

Survey Items	All Respondents N=97	Classroom Teachers N=54	Administrators <sup>1</sup> N=11	Core Team Members <sup>2</sup> N=15	Specialty Teachers <sup>3</sup> N=16
	Frequently or Always (%)	Frequently or Always (%)	Frequently or Always (%)	Frequently or Always (%)	Frequently or Always (%)
Learning skills are reported separately from academic grades	92.7	94.5	90.9	100.0	87.5
Grades reflect what students know and are able to do in relation to grade-level expectations	98.9	100.0	100.0	100.0	93.8
Teachers provide feedback on homework assigned to practice new skills	62.5	64.1	72.7	60.0	56.3
Homework for practice is not part of academic grade	79.4	87.0	90.9	80.0	50.1
Teachers assess student learning in a variety of ways	96.9	96.3	100.0	100.0	93.4
Teachers do give feedback in writing or by talking with students individually	93.8	94.4	91.0	92.9	93.8
Teachers can give feedback in writing or by talking with students in a group	86.6	94.5	81.9	80.0	68.8
Grades are based on multiple measures over time	97.9	96.3	100.0	100.0	100.0
Learning is evaluated using varied tasks/assignments like observation, checklist, and exit card	96.9	94.4	100.0	100.0	100.0

<sup>1</sup> Administrators include principals, assistant principals, and administrators.

<sup>2</sup> Core team members include staff development teachers, math content coaches, and reading specialists.

<sup>3</sup> Specialty teachers include physical education, art, music, special education, English for Speakers of Other Languages, and deaf/hard-of-hearing teachers.



Table 2  
Percentage of Respondents Selecting Agree or Strongly Agree for Survey Items on Policy Procedures,  
Disaggregated by Position

Survey Items	All Respondents N=97	Classroom Teachers N=54	Administrators N=11	Core Team Members N=15	Specialty Teachers N=16
	Agree or Strongly Agree (%)	Agree or Strongly Agree (%)	Agree or Strongly Agree (%)	Agree or Strongly Agree (%)	Agree or Strongly Agree (%)
ESOL teachers collaborate with classroom teachers in ELL committee format to determine when ESOL students require adjustments to essential learnings	51.1	45.3	81.8	46.7	56.3
There are clear procedures for implementing standards-based grading and reporting policy for students in special populations	35.5	28.0	81.8	33.3	25.1
Special education teachers collaborate with classroom teachers in a special education committee format to determine when special education students require adjustments to essential learnings	55.3	45.3	90.0	66.7	53.3
Grades 1 and 2 teachers receive guided support to enable them to implement standards-based grading and reporting	61.5	52.8	81.8	66.6	68.8
I was adequately trained regarding how to effectively implement the standards-based grading and reporting policy procedures	27.1	13.0	40.0	46.7	43.8

Table 3  
Percentage of Respondents Selecting Some or Major Problem for Survey Items on Use of Electronic Report Card  
All Respondents vs. Classroom Teachers

Tasks	All Respondents N=97	Classroom Teachers N=54
	Some or Major Problem (%)	Some or Major Problem (%)
Difficulty entering student data	67.0	61.1
Time needed to enter student data	69.8	72.2
Access to a computer when needed to record the data	32.2	33.9

Table 4  
 Percentage of Respondents Selecting Agree or Strongly Agree for Survey Items on Communication,  
 Disaggregated by Position

Survey Items	All Respondents N=97	Classroom Teachers N=54	Administrators N=11	Core Team Members N=15	Specialty Teachers N=16
	Agree or Strongly Agree (%)	Agree or Strongly Agree (%)	Agree or Strongly Agree (%)	Agree or Strongly Agree (%)	Agree or Strongly Agree (%)
Parents give feedback about the grading and reporting policy	58.1	65.4	72.8	53.9	31.3
There is a grading and reporting staff contact person to answer parents' and students' questions	72.7	63.5	100.0	86.7	68.8

Table 5  
 Percentage of Respondents Rating the Implementation of Policy Procedures as Good or Very Good,  
 Disaggregated by Position

Survey Items	All Respondents N=97	Classroom Teachers N=54	Administrators N=11	Core Team Members N=15	Specialty Teachers N=16
	Good or Very Good (%)	Good or Very Good (%)	Good or Very Good (%)	Good or Very Good (%)	Good or Very Good (%)
Overall rating of quality of Academic Meaning of a Grade implementation at teacher's school	62.5	53.1	81.8	76.9	64.3
Overall rating of quality of Homework implementation at teacher's school	77.0	78.6	81.8	81.8	55.5
Overall rating of quality of Learning Skills implementation at teacher's school	78.4	78.0	81.8	84.7	69.3
Overall rating of quality of Assessment and Data Collection implementation at teacher's school	49.5	42.0	72.8	53.9	50.0