Evaluation Brief

Implementation of the Montgomery County Board of Education Grading and Reporting Policy: Findings from the Winter 2006 Elementary School Parent Focus Groups

Marjorie A. Innocent, Ph.D.[i]

Background

Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) is implementing a revised, standards-based grading and reporting policy and electronic report card at the elementary school level. All elementary schools implemented the policy during the 2005–2006 school year and 17 of the schools volunteered to pilot the new report card.

The Department of Shared Accountability (DSA) is conducting a comprehensive, multiyear evaluation of the implementation of the grading and reporting policy. As part of this evaluation, focus groups were conducted with parents of students in Grades 1 and 2. This brief provides a summary of key findings across all of the focus group discussions.

Methodology

Focus group participants represented eight elementary schools; four were implementing the revised grading and reporting policy as well as the electronic report card, while the other four were implementing only the policy. The original sample included six schools selected through cluster analysis, based on student characteristics and academic performance. At the request of administrators in the Office of Curriculum and Instructional Programs (OCIP), three additional schools were added to the sample. The addition of these schools offset low or no participation in three schools and resulted in a final sample of eight schools: Beall, Bel Pre, Farmland, Forest Knolls, Fox Chapel, Lakewood, Rock Creek Valley, and Viers Mill elementary schools.

DSA staff worked with each school's principal or a designee to schedule sessions and recruit a diverse group of participants for the focus groups. Several principals suggested their schools' Parent Teacher Association (PTA) president as an appropriate contact to help organize the groups. A flyer was sent to parents via student backpacks and/or e-mail; in some cases, the information also was shared with parents through the school's newsletter. Parents were asked to notify either DSA staff or the school contact if they wanted to participate in their schools' focus group. Every effort was made to accommodate the schedules of interested parents.

Nine focus groups were conducted between November 2005 and March 2006 using a structured questionnaire addressing the major components of the policy. In all, 47 parents took part in the focus groups; 27 represented schools implementing the policy and the electronic report card and 20 were from schools implementing the policy only. The average group size was 6, with a range of 1 to 12 participants. Supplemental information on focus group participants is provided in the Appendix Tables 1–3.

Summary of Major Findings

Participants were generally familiar with the main components of the grading and reporting policy. However, they did not have a clear understanding of several of the policy-related procedures and the relationship between the academic grade, homework, and learning skill components of the policy.

Participants reported that they received information this school year about the major components and procedures of the policy through multiple sources: back-to-school night, parent-teacher conferences, and school newsletters and mailings. At the same time, they indicated that policy-related documents they received did not provide them with an

understanding of how the policy applies to their child's overall performance and progress.

Across all participants, suggestions for improving implementation of the policy procedures centered on making the report card more readable and understandable. Specifically, they included improving parents' understanding of the procedures and the school system's efforts to solicit parental feedback; providing consistent training to teachers and improving the consistency of implementation within and across schools; and considering the potential negative impact of the policy and procedures on instructional time. Some of the suggestions related to consistency focused on implementation of the policy beyond Grades 1 and 2 and the need for MCPS to encourage more open dialogue and a more collaborative partnership between teachers and central office staff.

Participants from schools implementing the standards-based electronic report card cited the lack of contextual and overall information provided by the report card and its lack of user-friendliness as obstacles to understanding the revised tool. Their specific recommendations for improving the report card centered on the inclusion of teacher comments to add context to reported grades, as well as format and content changes to make the report card more user-friendly.

When asked how well they thought MCPS was managing the implementation of the policy procedures, nearly 28% of participants said MCPS was doing a good or very good job, nearly 45% rated MCPS as doing a fair or poor job, and about 21% were unsure or had no opinion. Parents from schools using the electronic report card rated the implementation of the policy higher than parents from schools implementing the policy only.

Participants also shared their recommendations for improving parents' opportunities to ask questions and provide feedback on the policy procedures at their child's school. Suggestions to school staff were to obtain input from parents systematically; identify and announce a point-person at the school; provide parents with translations of all information pertaining to the policy; and establish more open communication between parents, the local school, and the broader school system.

Discussion of Findings

Knowledge and Understanding of the Policy

During the focus groups, participants were asked to describe their understanding of the major components of the policy, based on what they have read or heard. In seven of the eight groups, parents identified assessments as the method used to collect grading information. Participants in six of the eight groups said that student behavior is separated from academic achievement under the revised policy, and that learning skills and academic grades are reported separately. Consistency was cited as a central component of the policy in four groups, with parents noting that the policy seeks to achieve consistency in grading and reporting across all schools based on academic achievement, and that grading under the policy is standards-based.

When shown a handout summarizing the three main components of the policy—academic grades, homework, and learning skills—participants reported being familiar with all three components. Yet in two groups, parents said they were unclear about the relationship between homework and the revised grading system. As one parent noted, "I have heard things outside the school about homework counting or not counting, but at our school I don't know how it relates to the grade for the student other than the teacher using it to see if the kid understands the material or not."

In half of the sessions, participants expressed some confusion about other aspects of the policy, as well as disagreement with the policy's intent. "I don't understand the behavior component," said one parent, while another commented, "I don't know what standards are necessary for my child to achieve." Concerning the intent of the policy, one parent shared this thought: "Leveling the playing field makes more sense in the upper grades. I'm not that concerned about students learning the same standards in 1st and 2nd grades." Another parent said the following about the separation of behavior and grading: "If [a child] has behavior issues, they are being put out of the classroom or someplace else, so they aren't in the classroom to get what they need in order for them to do the assignment. So it's going to catch up [to grading] one way or the other."

Communication about the Policy

Policy components and procedures. When asked how information about the major components and procedures of the policy were shared with them, parents indicated receiving information through multiple sources. In six groups, they said they received information during back-to-school night, as well as through school newsletters and mailings to home. Parent-teacher conferences, parent meetings, and the MCPS Web site were each identified as information sources by four groups.

Nearly all of the participants indicated that the key components and procedures of the policy were communicated to them in the language they preferred, including participants who were nonnative English speakers. There were differences of opinion among Hispanic parents regarding language of preference for receiving information on the policy. One was not provided with a Spanish-speaking interpreter at the school, another received materials in English instead of Spanish, and a third was dissatisfied with the quality of the Spanish translation of the materials he received and would have preferred getting them in English.

Participants indicated that policy-related documents distributed this school year did not provide them with an understanding of how the policy applies to their child's overall performance and progress. In six of the groups, parents reported understanding the standards "for the most part" while not being clear on how they are "put into action." When asked which of the policy components or procedures need to be clearer, participants identified teachers' interpretation and application of standardized measures of behavior and effort; the multiple measures that are used to determine academic grades and the weight of each measure; the purpose of homework and its relationship to grades; and the intent behind the separation of academic grades and learning skills. One parent also asked for clarification on how the revised policy "can show what students know versus what they can demonstrate they know."

Parents also were asked if their child's teacher provided them with specific information about the grading policy in his or her classroom; overall, parents reported receiving general or no information from their child's teacher. However, some parents did report receiving specific information. In one group, a parent said that "At back-to-school night, the teacher spent at least half an hour explaining the curriculum and expectations to a group while visiting the classroom." In another group, a parent mentioned that "One class got an extensive e-mail when the teacher was working on report cards—how the policy was applied and what it meant."

Interestingly, the posing of the question itself raised some concerns for parents in one group, as the phrasing suggested to them that the policy may not be applied uniformly. As one parent stated, "My son was satisfactory in many subjects last year with a tough teacher. Suddenly he has moved up this year in Grade 2. Depending on the teacher, we all don't quite know where they stand."

Student performance and progress. Parents were asked if, at the beginning of the marking period, they were informed of curriculum-specific expectations for each subject their child would be taking, as well as the basis that would be used to evaluate their child's performance. Depending on the timing of the focus group, parents were able to answer the question for the first marking period only or for the first two marking periods of the school year.

In three groups, parents reported being informed of expectations and the basis of student evaluation during back-to-school night, and participants in two groups said they received the information during their child's parent-teacher conference and through class newsletters. One parent whose child receives special education services reported meeting with her child's teacher for 90 minutes at the end of the first marking period and receiving detailed information on the contents of the report card.

Other parents also reported receiving some information, which at times they found insufficient or confusing. "At the start of each unit, we get a summary of what they are studying but not how they will be graded," said one parent. Concerns also were raised about the clarity of materials for parents with limited English proficiency: "They need to rewrite the brochures with parent-friendly language, especially for parents who are learning English."

Updates on progress and performance. During the focus group discussions, parents also had an

opportunity to talk about updates from their child's school on progress and performance, based on grade level expectations. In five of the eight groups, parents reported receiving updates via three or more methods. The most frequently cited means were the Friday folder, which includes weekly notes from the teacher; parent-initiated contact with the teacher, whether by phone or e-mail; the annual parent-teacher conference; and notes written on the child's homework.

Parents in three groups reported fewer means of communication and noted an overall lack of information received from their child's school on progress and performance. One parent shared that "My daughter had a hand-changed grade on her [electronic] report card and there was no explanation as to why it was changed." Another parent talked about the communication challenges she faced with her child's school, where she believes there is greater emphasis on less successful students: "There's a real sense of pride in this school that they've been able to achieve a level of performance among students who have barriers against that. With our particular situation we get somewhat frustrated, because in some areas our daughter is performing well above her grade level, [and] we just haven't gotten a lot of feedback as to how the school is challenging her."

Parents of children receiving special services also reported getting updates on their child's progress and performance through various means. For students with individualized education programs (IEPs), parents indicated having multiple "very informative, very helpful" meetings with their child's school and getting quarterly reports on the child's mastery of skills. A parent whose child receives English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) services indicated that she communicated with her child's teacher on a daily basis. The parent of a student receiving special education services said her child had a communication book through which parents and teachers could correspond. On the other hand, parents of students with accelerated reading services noted that the only update they received was a letter informing them of their child's group placement.

Perceived Benefits and Hindrances of the Policy

Participants were asked which component of the policy is most valuable for supporting student

achievement and which is least supportive of student achievement. Parents expressed diverse thoughts on these questions, but most thought that the academic meaning of grades is a critical component to student achievement: "Whether a child knows the information is most important." In four of the groups, parents indicated more than one key component as critical to supporting student achievement.

On the other hand, parents in three of the groups expressed concern about the new policy on homework, which they believe impedes student achievement. As one parent explained, "The academic grading system promotes achievement, and homework improves academic achievement if it's done. But if there are no consequences [for not doing homework], many students and parents don't do it." Another aspect of the grading and reporting policy that parents considered a major hindrance to student achievement was the level of data collection they associated with the policy and its negative impact on instruction: "Standards-based [grading] has increased the emphasis on testing. The amount of testing gets in the way of teaching"; "Data collection is not allowing teachers time to teach. If the school district needs to pay for an extra person in the room to track data, then let them pay for it."

When asked for additional comments about the grading and reporting policy, parents in several groups expressed their apprehensions about the potential negative impact and intent of the policy. Many spoke about the use of consistency as "its own goal, at the expense of teachers and students." They expressed their belief that the policy minimizes students' "individual strengths and weaknesses" and has "pigeon-holed" information about students. They also shared the thought that teacher creativity is being stifled by the policy because "there is so much emphasis on tests and standards," and that the policy is "turning teachers into data collectors [with] very little time for teaching." Others were concerned that the policy was intended primarily to redress the distribution of grades across schools: "Why is the policy coming down? Is it because students at different schools get different grades?"

Electronic Report Card

Ease of understanding. Participants from the four schools implementing the standards-based electronic report card were asked to share their thoughts on the report card. In three of the

groups, parents thought that the new report card was not easy to understand; those in the fourth group indicated that they generally found the report card easy to understand but that it needed some modifications. Many of the impediments to understanding focused on the lack of contextual and overall information provided by the report card, as well as its lack of user-friendliness. Regarding context and overall information, parents indicated that the report card is "too technical, more of a statistical measure," and that it "does not tell you if your child is on track from one term to the next." They also suggested that a conversation with teachers is useful for understanding grades, as reported grades may be at a certain level "because something wasn't covered" or "the learning skill is the same but the [teacher's] expectation has changed."

Concerns with the report card's user-friendliness were mostly centered on parents' ability to understand reported grades or to interpret them correctly, including the reading level graphs. As noted by one parent, "On the front [of the report card] the stuff was spelled out, but on the back, all this stuff for reading, I don't understand at all." Participants also reported difficulty with understanding mathematics-related grades: "I don't know why there is a mathematics overall academic performance and a whole column of mathematics and then there is mathematics accelerated, and I don't know how that relates to the other category." In addition, a number of parents indicated not understanding the meaning of the grade *M*: "My daughter had an M in overall academic performance for science and nowhere in the literature could I find an M, so I don't know what that means."

Participants also were worried that parents' ability to understand the information provided in the report card may be limited, depending on their proficiency in English or their educational level. As one parent indicated, "I find it a little overwhelming and I have a master's in public health [and] I also have an evaluation and education background. I can only imagine what it's like for someone who might be less educated or less familiar with standardized reporting. Thinking of people of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds and language barriers, it really concerns me."

Information provided. Participants also were asked if the report card provides them with the information they want to know about their child.

The groups were fairly divided on this issue. In one group, parents thought the report card gives them the information they want to know about their child. As noted by one parent, "It's a marvelous tool to communicate where a child is in their grade level." In another group, participants found the report card informative but said it does not provide the full range of information they'd like to know. While they understood the need for standardization in the reporting of grades, they also indicated that they "miss the personal touch of teachers' comments," which tell them about "the human relationship between the teacher and child" as well as their child's "learning styles." The lack of contextual information also makes it challenging for parents to determine "where the child is or needs to be at this point, or this quarter."

In the other two groups, most parents said the report card does not provide them with the information they wanted to know about their child. They too spoke about the importance of reintroducing teachers' comments to inform them of "how [their] child relates to the teacher, peers and the learning experience." Many also talked about their lack of understanding of the new rubrics and grading codes: "They need to equate to A-B-C-D," said one parent, while another said, "I can look at my 4th grade child's report card and know what he knows. I am not as clear about my 2nd grader."

Questions and Feedback on the Policy

Questions about implementation. Focus group participants were asked if they had submitted any questions about the implementation of the grading and reporting policy to their child's school for clarification, and, if so, whether they had obtained a response in a timely manner. Only four parents reported asking questions to staff at their child's school about the policy implementation. Among the two parents who posed questions during their child's parent-teacher conference, one indicated that her child's teacher answered questions about learning skills "as best she could," while the other reported getting answers to some questions but no follow-up to unanswered ones. A third parent said that her school's PTA had addressed several questions to the principal about standardized testing. On the other hand, a fourth parent was able to obtain satisfactory answers

from her child's teacher, along with "a better understanding" of her child's performance.

A possible reason that more parents did not pose any questions to their child's school about implementation of the policy is suggested by the following comment: "I would go to [Central Office] instead of the school. The school says they don't have any influence over policy implementation."

School-based and PTA contacts for questions on the policy. The majority of parents reported not being aware of a staff contact person at their child's school to whom they could address questions about the grading and reporting policy. Respondents in six groups indicated not knowing of a designated staff contact; yet in four of these groups, parents thought there was someone they could turn to if they had questions (two groups said they would ask their child's teacher, and two groups said they would consult the principal). Parents in another group were under the false impression that their principal was the designated school-based contact for questions on the policy. Only one group knew that the staff development teacher at their school was the staff person identified to address parents' questions about the policy.

Likewise, most parents did not know if their school's PTA had a designated point-of-referral person for parents to address their policy-related questions. In five of the groups, parents said they were not aware of a designated person, and parents in another group indicated that their PTA did not have a point person. For the two focus groups in which participants were aware of their PTA's point-of-referral person, parents either said they had not posed any questions to their contact or had opted for addressing questions to their child's teacher: "If you've got something the first-line of defense is the teacher."

Opportunities to ask questions and provide feedback. Parents were asked about their level of satisfaction with the mechanisms in place at their child's school to ask questions and provide feedback on the policy. They were fairly divided on this issue. Twenty parents said they were satisfied or very satisfied, 16 said they were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied; and 11 had no opinion or were unsure. More parents from schools implementing the electronic report card expressed their satisfaction with mechanisms at their school than parents from schools implementing the policy only.

Parents expressed a range of perceptions on what they identified as a question and feedback mechanism at their child's school, from individual teachers' willingness to maintain communication about the policy to efforts at the school level to address inquiries. At the same time, a number of parents suggested that what they considered a "mechanism" depended on the ability of their school's staff to answer questions and address concerns to their satisfaction.

Feedback on implementation. Participants were also asked to rate how well they thought MCPS was managing the implementation of the new grading and reporting policy procedures. Thirteen of the participants said MCPS was doing a good or very good job; 21 said a fair or poor job; 10 said they were unsure or had no opinion; and 3 did not answer the question. None of the parents thought MCPS was doing an excellent job. Interestingly, more participants from schools implementing the electronic report card rated MCPS' job as good or very good, while more parents from schools implementing only the policy said MCPS was doing a fair or poor job.

Suggestions for Improvement

Consistency of implementation. Participants proposed a number of measures to ensure consistency of implementation of the grading and reporting policy within and across schools, particularly across teachers. Some parents suggested that all teachers be required to use "the same rubrics, materials, assessments, and standards for evaluating homework," including the use of 1-2-3-4 to grade all assignments and assessments. Others advised MCPS to train teachers on the process of grading on standards: "How they [teachers] grade should be identical." Also, some thought that teachers should receive "consistent training to improve teachers' understanding and skill to use the policy."

A number of parents talked about consistent implementation of the policy beyond Grades 1 and 2. Their recommendations included using the electronic report card in Grade 3 "so we don't have to go back to A-B-C-D," as well as in other grades "to truly test it for a longer time"; and implementing the full policy schoolwide to minimize confusion among parents, especially those with "multiple children on multiple grading policies." They also emphasized that preparation for the next grade level should be

uniform within and across schools. As one parent noted, "I can see my granddaughter is not getting what others are getting. I'm getting some of the work from another parent in another class. It shouldn't be that way."

Some parents spoke of the importance of providing parents with print copies of "grade-level standards," as well as weekly progress sheets for each student, based on grade-level expectations—just as "special needs parents get a progress sheet each week." They also talked about the need for MCPS to encourage more open dialogue and a more collaborative partnership with teachers: "Teachers are afraid to speak out to MCPS, but parents are hearing about it," said one parent, and another stated, "Teachers are providing feedback but are being ignored."

A few parents thought there wasn't anything MCPS should do to ensure greater consistency of implementation, as they questioned the relevance of using grading and reporting standards at the elementary level. One parent noted, "It's not so important that they grade on standards at the primary level. That's more critical by middle school and high school"; and another parent said, "Grade 1 and 2 really is just ongoing assessment."

Electronic report card. Participants had two main types of suggestions for improving the way grades are reported: adding contextual information to the report card and making it more user-friendly. The inclusion of student-specific teacher comments was mentioned in three of the groups as invaluable contextual information for improving parents' overall understanding of their child's performance. Progress with socialization skills also was identified as important information to include, particularly for children receiving special education services: "Socialization, social skills, that is such a huge part of being in a school. So something in the social area (playing with others, is he kind?) would be a huge help."

Concerning user-friendliness, parents thought the report card could be improved by increasing the overall font size and bolding the font type for headers and overall performance grades. They also thought the report card could be streamlined if extraneous information was removed each reporting period, most notably shaded boxes for essential learnings. Although parents expressed some dissatisfaction with the number and wording of essential learnings reported for reading and mathematics, they recognized that essential learnings were not provided for science and social studies—suggesting an emphasis in MCPS on reading and mathematics: "Are there no objectives [for science and social studies]? Aren't they doing more in science and social studies?" In addition, just as the current report card includes a graph for reading level, a number of parents agreed there should be a similar graph depicting each student's mathematics level.

Opportunities for questions and feedback. Participants were asked to share their suggestions on ways to improve the process of asking questions and providing feedback on the grading and reporting policy procedures at their child's school. Overall, participants' recommendations centered on four areas: obtaining input from parents systematically; identifying and announcing a point-person at the school; providing parents with translations of all information pertaining to the policy; and establishing more open communication among parents, the local school, and the broader school system. Regarding parental input, participants suggested that schools survey parents—preferably early in the implementation process and/or school year—regarding their understanding of the policy and questions on the procedures. Participants also suggested that each school identify a school-based contact for parents, and that the contact's name be disseminated widely, especially through the PTA. Providing and distributing translations of grading and reporting documents and the electronic report card were identified as a critical step for improving the question and feedback process at each school.

Participants placed a great deal of emphasis on the need to improve school-parent communication at the local and district level, offering a number of suggestions in this area: providing parents with more face-to-face time with teachers and more parent-teacher conferences; designating a page on each school's Web site where parents can ask questions and obtain answers; sending an MCPS representative to PTA meetings "to listen to the issues"; organizing a series of districtwide forums where parents can pose their questions to a "system person"; and giving parents a clear indication that MCPS will respond to questions that the school cannot answer—"We feel it is a dead-end

to complain to the teacher… We need to get the feeling they [MCPS administrators] are listening."

Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on findings from the focus groups:

- Provide consistent training and support to school staff on implementing the policy and develop a mechanism to track consistency of implementation of the procedures within and across schools.

- Make appropriate changes to the electronic report card to make it more understandable and user-friendly. One critical change that should be considered is the addition of teacher comments.

- Use less technical language in developing materials for parents on the policy and provide translations of all policy-related materials that are distributed to parents.

- Encourage teachers to communicate with parents about the specific ways that they apply the policy procedures in their classrooms.

- Develop a process for improving school and school system responsiveness to parents' questions and concerns about the policy. This process should include systematically collecting feedback from parents and establishing more open communication among parents, schools, and the broader school system.

- Build a more collaborative relationship between school staff and district administrators to achieve a stronger school-district partnership in implementing the policy. For example, central office administrators could expand existing efforts to identify and address teachers' challenges with implementing the policy.

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Appendix

Table 1
Number and Percentage of Participants with Children in Grades 1 and 2 in Study Schools
Electronic Report Card Schools vs. Comparison Schools

Grade	All Schools (N=45)	Electronic Report Card Schools (N=26)	Comparison Schools* (N=19)
Grade 1	18 (40.0%)	9 (34.6%)	9 (47.4%)
Grade 2	24 (53.3%)	17 (65.4%)	7 (36.8%)
Both	3 (6.7%)	0 (0.0%)	3 (15.8%)

*One respondent in the comparison group did not respond to the question.

Table 2
Number and Percentage of Participants with Children Receiving Special Services in Study Schools*
Electronic Report Card Schools vs. Comparison Schools

Service	All Schools (N=46)	Electronic Report Card Schools (N=26)	Comparison Schools (N=20)
Special Education Services	8 (17.4%)	5 (19.2%)	3 (15.0%)
ESOL Services	6 (13.0%)	3 (11.5%)	3 (15.0%)
Accelerated Services	14 (30.4%)	6 (23.1%)	8 (40.0%)

*Figures include multiple selections per respondent.

Table 3
Number and Percentage of Participants Who Are Members of Various Education-Related Groups*
Electronic Report Card Schools vs. Comparison Schools

Group	All Schools (N=46)	Electronic Report Card Schools (N=26)	Comparison Schools (N=20)
Parent/Teacher/Student Association at this school	34 (73.9%)	19 (73.1%)	15 (75.0%)
Parent/Teacher/Student Association at another school	6 (13.0%)	5 (19.2%)	1 (5.0%)
A committee formed by MCPS or the Board of Education	3 (6.5%)	2 (7.7%)	1 (5.0%)
A listserv concerned with MCPS issues	20 (43.5%)	16 (61.5%)	4 (20.0%)
Another community or neighborhood group involved with school issues	8 (17.4%)	6 (23.1%)	2 (10.0%)

*Figures include multiple selections per respondent.