



# Evaluation Brief

September 2006

Department of Shared Accountability

## Implementation of the Montgomery County Board of Education Grading and Reporting Policy: Findings from the Winter 2006 Secondary Schools Parent Focus Groups

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### Background

Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) is implementing a standards-based grading and reporting policy at the secondary school level. The intent of this policy is for students to be evaluated on the same standards consistently within and across all schools.

As part of the evaluation of the implementation of the policy, the Department of Shared Accountability (DSA) conducted focus groups with parents of secondary school students. The focus groups were designed to gauge parents' knowledge and understanding of the policy, as well as their experience with the implementation of the policy in their respective schools. This brief provides a summary of the major findings from the focus group sessions conducted with parents of secondary students.

### Methodology

Nine focus groups were held in five middle schools and four high schools between December 2005 and April 2006. The original sample included six middle schools and four high schools selected through cluster analysis, based on student characteristics and academic performance. Parents at one middle school opted not to participate, resulting in the following final sample: John T. Baker, Benjamin Banneker, Kingsview, John Poole, and Redland middle schools; and Paint Branch, Sherwood, Watkins Mill, and Thomas S. Wootton high schools.

DSA staff worked with each school's principal or a designee, usually the Parent Teacher Student Association (PTSA) president, to schedule focus group sessions and recruit a diverse group of participants. A flyer was sent to parents via e-mail and/or the school's newsletter. Parents were

asked to notify 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.

Focus groups were conducted using a structured questionnaire addressing the major components of the policy. In all, 49 parents took part in the focus groups, with 27 representing middle schools and 22 from high schools. The average group size was five, with a range of three to ten participants. The majority of the parent participants were members of the PTSA at their child's school. Supplemental information on focus group participants is provided in Appendix Tables 1 and 2.

### Summary of Major Findings

Overall, findings suggest that parents learned about the grading and reporting policy primarily at back-to-school night. Some also indicated that they attended PTSA meetings or forums and received written documentation on the policy. In fact, very few respondents reported not receiving any information about grading and reporting activities.

The majority of respondents had a grasp of the intent of the policy and the tasks associated with it. However, parents in the middle school focus group sessions were less familiar than parents in the high school sessions about the various guidelines related to each component of the policy.

Across all focus group sessions, parents indicated the reteach/reassess component as most valuable to supporting student achievement. At the same time, they raised concerns about all of the components, citing them all, in some way, as most problematic to supporting student

achievement. Parents reported that frequent policy changes posed a challenge to understanding the various components and guidelines of the policy. Other concerns included: a) consistency of implementation, b) clarity of policy guidelines, and c) teacher training on implementing the policy.

The majority of the parents (78%) believe that MCPS has done a fair or poor job<sup>1</sup> in its management of the implementation of the policy.

## Discussion of Findings

### *Knowledge and Understanding of the Policy*

When asked to describe the major components of the policy implemented in 2005–2006, parents from one middle school mentioned the policy addresses consistency and inconsistency in grading, while parents from three of the four high schools discussed this topic. Parents from four of the five middle schools discussed the homework policy, while parents from three high schools discussed this topic. Parents (three middle schools and two high schools) also discussed reteach/reassess. Other topics discussed included the 50% rule and due dates/deadlines.

*Reteach/Reassess.* Parents in all nine focus group sessions were shown the guidelines related to the reteach/reassess component and asked which they had seen or heard (Appendix Table 3). For all but one guideline, high school parents were more familiar than middle school parents with this component. Fifty-six percent of middle school parents and 77% of high school parents reported familiarity with the guideline, *Reassessment opportunities will be offered in every course*. Few parents (33% at middle schools and 41% at high schools) were familiar with the guideline, *The teacher will identify reassessment opportunities before the original task or assignment*. In reference to *All students are eligible for reassessment, regardless of the original grade* guideline, 44% of middle school and 64% of high school parents reported having heard or seen this information.

*Assigning and Grading Homework.* Parents were also shown the guidelines on assigning and grading homework and asked to indicate whether

they had seen or heard about each. Parents at middle schools were less aware of the guidelines than parents at high schools (Appendix Table 4). Forty-eight percent of middle school and 77% of high school parents reported familiarity with the guideline, *Teachers will only assign homework that is related to the curriculum*. Sixty-seven percent of middle school and 77% of high school parents indicated familiarity with the guideline, *Homework checked for completion may account for up to 10% of the marking period grade*. Only 30% of parents at middle schools, compared with 77% at high schools, were familiar with the guideline, *Homework evaluated for learning may count toward the remaining portion of marking period grade*.

*Grading and Academic Meaning of Grades.* Parents were shown the guidelines for grading students and the academic meaning of grades and asked to identify those they had heard some information about. Parents participating in the high school sessions were overwhelmingly more familiar with the guidelines compared with parents in the middle school sessions (Appendix Table 5). Fifty-two percent of parents in middle school sessions reported familiarity with the guideline, *Teachers will assess student learning in a variety of ways*, compared with 91% at high school sessions. A little more than half (56%) of parents in middle school sessions and 77% in high school sessions were familiar with *Grades will reflect what a student knows and is able to do in relation to the MCPS curriculum*. The majority of participants in high school sessions (77%) indicated familiarity with the guideline, *Teachers will not use scales such as 4-3-2-1 or A-B-C-D-E to record grades for individual tasks*, compared with only 19% of parents from middle school sessions.

### *Communication about the Policy*

The majority of middle school parents indicated learning about the components of the policy at back-to-school night. Other sources reported by both middle school and high school parents included PTSA meetings, forums and discussions, and written publications.

*Reteach/Reassess.* Parents in seven out of nine focus group sessions (three middle and four high) reported hearing about the reteach/reassess component at back-to-school night. Some parents in the middle school sessions reported

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<sup>1</sup> Response options were *excellent job, very good job, fair job, poor job, very poor job, and don't know*.

hearing from teachers and some said their child informed them about the component.

When asked which guidelines related to the reteach/reassess component that parents need to better understand, responses centered around consistency in the application of the reteach/reassess component and clarity for when teachers reassess. As one parent stated, “[The] guidelines are very clear, but I am not sure it is applied in practice.” Another parent said, “Departments need to decide on how to implement, give out one handout, and be consistent.” Related to clarity of procedures, one parent stated, “The concept of reteach and reassess has been communicated to me, but I still have questions about when you can get it and when you can’t.”

*Assigning and Grading Homework.* Parents in three of the middle school focus group sessions and one of the high school focus group sessions reported hearing about the guidelines at back-to-school night. Other sources of information mentioned in individual sessions included summer mailings, teacher syllabi, progress reports, conversations with the staff or principal, and PTSA meetings.

Parents in five focus group sessions (two middle school and three high school) believed that the guideline, *Homework evaluated for learning may count toward the remaining portion of marking period grade* is confusing and requires more information and less technical language to help them understand it better. One parent explained, “I don’t know what that means in reference to 10%” [referring to the guideline, *Homework checked for completion may account for up to 10% of the marking period grade*]. Another parent asked, “What does ‘homework evaluated for learning’ mean? Some of these terms are [only understandable by teachers] and need to be clarified [for parents].”

*Grading and Academic Meaning of Grades.* Participants at three middle school sessions and three high school sessions indicated hearing about the grading component at back-to-school night. Parents at one middle school session and one high school session reported reading about it in a newsletter from the principal and flyers that were sent home. Parents at two middle school sessions reported not hearing about this component during the 2005–2006 school year, but discussing it the previous school year.

*Assignments turned in after the established due date and prior to the established deadline are dropped not more than one letter grade* is the guideline that parents in three focus group sessions (two middle and one high) are most confused about and believed they need more information. A need for clarity about the following guidelines also was raised by parents participating in middle school focus group sessions: *Teachers will not use scales such as 4-3-2-1 or A-B-C-D-E to record grades for individual tasks* and *When using percentages, teachers assign a grade no lower than 50% to a task or assignment that meets minimum standards*. Parents at two of the high school sessions mentioned a need for more information on the following guideline: *Teachers are expected to separate the due date from the deadline to increase opportunities for students to complete assignments. However, there may be exceptions when the due date and the deadline are the same (e.g., daily homework assignments)*.

#### *Perceived Benefits and Hindrances of the Policy*

Parents were asked which component of the policy they believed to be most valuable to supporting student achievement. Parents in all middle school and high school sessions mentioned activities related to reteach/reassess. Parents from two middle school sessions and two high school sessions mentioned grading and academic meaning of grades as most valuable. Only parents at three focus groups sessions (one middle school and two high schools) mentioned homework as most valuable to supporting student achievement.

When asked which policy component they believed to be the most problematic to student achievement, parents raised concerns for each of the components. Parents at all of the high school focus group sessions and one middle school session mentioned reteach/reassess as problematic. One parent said, “[The] whole point of reassessment should not be the grade, but what they have learned. This can be a crutch for students.” Parents at the high school sessions mainly discussed the inconsistency with which reteach/reassess is applied. Grading and academic meaning of grades was considered problematic by parents at two middle schools and three high schools. Similarly, parents at two middle school sessions and three high school sessions believed the homework component is problematic to supporting student achievement.

As one parent stated, “[The homework policy] de-motivates the teachers from assigning too much homework and the student may not do the homework if they think it’s not going to be checked.”

### *Suggestions for Improvement*

Parents across all focus group sessions believed that teacher training is essential to ensuring consistency within and across schools in the implementation of the policy components. Specifically, providing teachers with clear criteria for implementing the components was crucial for parents. Parents also believe that the burden on teachers and the interruption of instructional time needs to be examined.

Parents appreciate the opportunity to provide feedback on the policy, however many feel that there are still a number of parents who are unaware of the policy implications and components. They also believe there should be follow-up meetings for parents to attend. Some also mentioned a need to simplify the wording in handouts provided to them about the policy.

### **Recommendations**

The following recommendations are based on findings from the focus group sessions:

- Continue to solicit feedback from parents about the grading and reporting policy.
- Provide parents with follow-up sessions about the components of the grading and reporting policy.
- Continue to provide training to teachers on the implementation of the policy and the importance of consistency in applying components.
- Encourage teachers to communicate with parents the specific ways that they apply the policy’s procedures in their classroom.
- Use less technical wording in written documentation sent to parents about policy procedures and components.
- Increase the knowledge and awareness of policy components and procedures at the middle school level by providing parents

with additional opportunities to attend sessions on the grading and reporting policy.

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<sup>1</sup> The authors wish to thank the following individuals for their contribution to this work: Mrs. Trisha McGaughey and Mrs. Natalie Wolanin of DSA, who took notes during the focus groups and summarized key findings; Ms. Suzanne Merchlinsky of DSA, who lead some focus group discussions and summarized key findings; Mrs. Donna Shipley of DSA, who coded the findings; the contacts at participating schools who helped organize and recruit for the focus groups; and the parents who graciously shared their thoughts and insights.

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**Appendix**

Table 1  
Number and Percentage of Participants  
with Children in Grades 6 through 12 in Study Schools

Grade	Middle School Parents (N=27)	High School Parents (N=22)
Grade 6	7 (25.9%)	---
Grade 7	10 (37.0%)	---
Grade 8	5 (18.5%)	---
Multiple MS grades	5 (18.5%)	---
Grade 9	---	4 (18.2%)
Grade 10	---	7 (31.8%)
Grade 11	---	4 (18.2%)
Grade 12	---	3 (13.6%)
Multiple HS grades	---	4 (18.2%)

Table 2  
Number and Percentage of Participants Who Are Members of Various Education-Related Groups\*

Group	All Parents (N=49)	Middle School Parents (N=27)	High School Parents (N=22)
Parent/Teacher/Student Association at this school	46 (93.9%)	26 (96.3%)	20 (90.9%)
Parent/Teacher/Student Association at another MCPS school	22 (44.9%)	13 (48.1%)	9 (40.9%)
A committee formed by MCPS or the Board of Education	2 (4.1%)	1 (3.7%)	1 (4.5%)
A listserv concerned with MCPS issues	16 (32.7%)	8 (29.6%)	8 (36.4%)
Another community or neighborhood group involved with school issues	10 (20.4%)	8 (29.6%)	2 (9.1%)

\*Figures include multiple selections per respondent.

Table 3  
Percent of Participants Reporting Having Seen or Heard about the Guidelines for Reteach/Reassess

Guidelines for Reteach/Reassess	Middle School Parents	High School Parents
	(N = 27)	(N = 22)
Reassessment opportunities will be offered in every course.	55.5	77.2
Reassessments may be done partially, entirely, or in a different format.	33.3	45.5
End-of-course or end-of semester exams may not be reassessed.	48.1	68.2
End of unit assessments may not be assessed (except Math A, B, and C in MS).	18.5	45.5
Final research papers, reports, essays, and culminating projects or performances may not be reassessed.	22.2	68.2
All students are eligible for reassessment, regardless of the original grade.	44.4	63.6
Reassessment grade replaces the original grade.	55.5	68.2
The teacher will identify reassessment opportunities before the original task or assignment.	33.3	40.9
Reassessment opportunities will occur within an instructional unit.	48.1	36.4
One opportunity for reassessment is offered per task or assignment (for those tasks that are reassessable).	48.1	72.7

Table 4  
Percent of Participants Reporting Having Seen or Heard about Guidelines for Assigning and Grading Homework

Guidelines for Assigning and Grading Homework	Middle School Parents	High School Parents
	(N = 27)	(N = 22)
Teachers will only assign homework that is related to the curriculum.	48.1	77.3
Homework checked for completion may account for up to 10% of the marking period grade.	66.6	77.3
Homework evaluated for learning may count toward the remaining portion of marking period grade.	29.6	77.3
Feedback may take a variety of forms, as determined by the teacher.	37.0	54.5

Table 5  
Percent of Participants Reporting Having Seen or Heard about Guidelines for  
Grading Students and Academic Meaning of Grades

Guidelines for Grading students and Academic Meaning of Grades	Middle Schools ( <i>N</i> = 27)	High Schools ( <i>N</i> = 22)
Teachers will assess student learning in a variety of ways.	51.8	90.9
Grades will reflect what a student knows and is able to do in relation to the MCPS curriculum.	55.5	77.3
Teachers will not use scales such as 4-3-2-1 or A-B-C-D-E to record grades for individual tasks.	18.5	77.3
The report card will remain a letter grade.	48.1	90.9
Learning skills are reported separately from the academic grade.	48.1	n/a
When using percentages, teachers assign a grade no lower than 50% to a task or assessment that meets minimum standards.	37.0	86.4
Assignments turned in after the established due date and prior to the established deadline are dropped not more than one letter grade.	51.8	77.3
Teachers are expected to separate the due date from the deadline to increase opportunities for students to complete assignments. However, there may be exceptions when the due date and the deadline are the same (e.g., daily homework assignments).	29.6	95.5
Assignments not attempted and submitted by the deadline will be recorded as a zero.	29.6	90.9
Extra credit may not be used.	40.7	68.2