

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

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### Background

The Department of Shared Accountability (DSA) conducted an evaluation of the implementation of the grading and reporting policy during the 2005–2006 school year. At the secondary level, the evaluation activities included interviews with school-based staff and Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) central office staff, a teacher survey, a student survey, and parent focus groups.

This brief describes the findings of the interviews with secondary school staff and MCPS central office personnel. The purpose of these interviews was to determine the extent to which the major policy components were implemented consistently; the challenges that teachers and administrators faced in implementing each component; and the level of communication between schools, parents, and students about the implementation of new grading and reporting procedures.

### Methodology

Analysis focused on six middle schools (John T. Baker, Benjamin Banneker, Kingsview, John Poole, Redland, and White Oak) and four high schools (Paint Branch, Sherwood, Watkins Mill, and Thomas Wootton). The schools were selected using a cluster analysis technique, based on student characteristics and academic performance. Schools were then randomly selected from the clusters of academically and demographically similar schools. In each of the 10 schools, DSA staff interviewed the principal, two resource teachers (RTs), the resource counselor, and the staff contact person for grading and reporting—typically the staff development teacher (SDT). A total of 50 interviews were conducted (29 in the middle schools and 21 in the high schools). The interviews took place during October 2005 (prior to the end of the first grading period). During the interviews, respondents commented on each of the three major components of the grading and reporting policy being implemented in secondary schools during the 2005–2006 school year: reteach/reassess,

homework, and grading/academic meaning of the grade. (According to the interview data, each of the selected schools implemented some of the components during the 2004–2005 school year. However, during the interviews, respondents were asked to comment on their experiences implementing the policy during the 2005–2006 school year.)

### Findings

The overall implementation of the grading and reporting policy this year received relatively high marks from interview respondents. In the high schools, 7 of the 21 respondents (33%) rated this year's implementation as very good or excellent, and nine others (42%) rated it good. In the middle schools, 17 of the 29 interviewees (59%) rated implementation as very good or excellent, and another 7 (24%) rated it good. Nearly half (9) of the high school respondents qualified their remarks by stating that their rating would have been lower if they included consideration of last year's implementation. In the middle schools, only four of the respondents (14%) made such qualifications. According to one principal, "It was bold to step back when there was inconsistency. I have to give credit for addressing the inconsistency."

Respondents appreciated that MCPS used teachers' and administrators' feedback from last year to adjust the timelines for implementation, rather than rushing forward with a process that needed revision. A middle school RT commented, "MCPS was flexible to change the policy as they responded to teacher and principal complaints." They also appreciated the publication of the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) as an effort to disseminate information consistently.

### *Perceived Benefits to Students*

Although respondents recognized logistical and motivational difficulties, nearly every respondent overwhelmingly expressed that the reteach/reassess is the component most supportive of student achievement. They felt this component encouraged students to master concepts and gave them additional opportunities to have the material or assessment presented in a way that better enabled them to show what they know and are able to do.

At the same time, the majority of respondents felt that the reteach/reassess component was detrimental to students. (While this finding seems contradictory to the one above, respondents frequently cited that the reteach/reassess component was *both* the most supportive and the most problematic to supporting student achievement.) Those who shared this view discussed the time constraints associated with the reteaching activities and the limited availability of time for taking the reassessment. Additionally, some felt that the option to reassess could undermine students' motivation to do well the first time on an assessment, especially when preparing for multiple assessments on the same day. According to a high school RT, "Reteach and reassess hurts upper-level students who play games to take advantage of reassessment."

Several respondents also felt that the 50 percent rule could be detrimental to student motivation and provide an inaccurate picture of students' academic needs.

### *Consistency of Implementation*

Teachers may base decisions about implementation procedures on the workload associated with implementation of a particular component, their philosophical beliefs regarding its pedagogical soundness, or their perception of the benefit to students. Of the three major components, reteach/reassess was implemented with the most variation across schools in the interview sample.

Reteach/reassess is an area where teachers felt some students try to "play the system," for example, by not studying for a test because they know they can take it again with the added benefit of knowing what will be tested. To deal with this issue, schools are implementing procedures to ensure that students take seriously the reteaching and reassessment component of the policy. Some of these procedures appear to be in alignment with the grading and reporting policy, while others are not. For example, in some schools students must complete a reteaching packet to show

they have attempted to relearn the content, have their parents sign an intent to reassess, correct their mistakes from the original task or assessment, or attend reteaching sessions with the teacher prior to taking a reassessment. These procedures appear consistent with the intent of the grading and reporting policy.

An inconsistent procedure implemented in some schools was to allow only students who received a C or lower on the original task or assessment to be reassessed. This was done to avoid a situation where a student may try to move from a B to an A on an assessment. Another inconsistency occurred when teachers did not determine ahead of time which tasks were eligible for reassessment. This was done to motivate students to do their best on the original assessment and to more accurately determine which content students did not master.

Another barrier to consistent implementation of the reassessment procedures was teachers' belief that some policy components do not reflect good teaching practices. Several respondents stated that teachers felt it was not pedagogically sound to determine prior to an assessment or task whether it would be eligible for reassessment. Teachers were more comfortable using the results of an assessment to determine what concepts required reteaching and reassessment.

Additionally, one RT mentioned an inconsistency in the reassessment for Advanced Placement (AP) courses. That school is not offering reassessment in AP courses, because the RT is concerned that component is not aligned with the College Board requirements for assessing AP students.

Within the grading/academic meaning of the grade component, there was inconsistent interpretation of "minimum standards" and the resulting procedures. The majority of respondents indicated that although they do not agree, their teachers award 50 percent to an assignment for which students have made some effort. For example, a student would receive 50 percent for an assignment when only 20 percent of the task was completed correctly. A few, however, have chosen to interpret "minimum standards" as 50 percent. For example, if a student receives 30 percent on a quiz for which the minimum standard is 50 percent, the student receives a grade of 30 percent because he/she did not meet the minimum standard to be awarded 50 percent.

The homework component was the most consistently implemented of the three. The few respondents who commented on homework stated that teachers were supportive of the policy, especially last year's

changes. According to nearly all respondents, teachers had the least trouble implementing the changes to the homework component of the policy. They applauded the ability to count homework checked for completion in up to 10 percent of a student's grade. They noted the increase this year in the number of students completing homework. They also remarked that teachers are assigning homework that is directly relevant to the content. However, they have had to find alternative ways to encourage students to complete tasks that can no longer be credited as homework, (such as covering their books or participating in canned food drives.)

#### *Challenges: Time for Reteaching and Reassessment*

Both philosophical and logistical difficulties present challenges to implementing components of the grading and reporting policy. (The challenges discussed below are in the order of frequency cited by the interview respondents.)

Nearly all respondents discussed the challenge of finding time for reteaching and reassessing students. Curricula are full, and there is insufficient time to go back over material that students do not understand, while trying to cover all of the content that will be included on final exams. According to a middle school math RT, "The units are very tight as far as what to cover in the amount of time. Also, the fact that you're supposed to do this (reteach and reassess) within the instructional unit makes it more challenging."

When all students are eligible for reassessment, regardless of the original grade, the number of students requesting reassessment can be overwhelming. The teacher must find time in a full curriculum to reteach the content to those students requesting reassessment. Additional time is also needed for teachers to develop new formats for reassessment.

Time for reassessment also is burdensome for students. Reassessment is only offered at limited times, such as during lunch and after school. Several respondents discussed problems for students who do not get lunch several times in a week, due to multiple reassessments offered only during lunchtime. According to a high school SDT, "Students are taking multiple reassessments during lunch. They have to take them all in a short period of time. Students are not eating, and not getting downtime. It's highly stressful."

#### *Challenges: Defining Minimum Standards*

After discussing the challenges associated with the reteach/reassess component, respondents most frequently discussed difficulties teachers encounter in interpreting "minimum standards" in relation to the grading procedure that states, "Teachers will assign a grade no lower than 50 percent to a task/assessment that meets minimum standards (50 percent rule)." Teachers had difficulty awarding 50 percent to students who completed less than 50 percent of an assignment for several reasons. Some students intentionally complete a minimal portion of a task, because they know they will be awarded 50 percent. Others genuinely try to complete the whole assignment and get 50 percent or less correct. Teachers were uncomfortable awarding 50 percent to both types of students (i.e., those who "play the system" versus those who give effort but are not successful).

Additionally, many respondents reported that teachers question the accuracy of awarding 50 percent to a student who did not complete or did not understand at least 50 percent of an assignment.

#### *Challenges: Understanding Extra Credit*

Another challenge cited by several respondents was the understanding of what constitutes extra credit. Teachers understood that they cannot give additional assignments to students who are trying to improve their grades. However, they are uncertain whether the definition of "extra credit" includes bonus questions on tests that are offered to all students and that are aligned with the curriculum. Respondents reported that most teachers are not including bonus questions in an effort to comply with the policy. However, they would like clarification of whether extra credit includes a prohibition against bonus questions on a test.

#### *Communication to Parents, Students, and Staff*

Interviewees from each of the target schools indicated that they had provided various formats for communicating information to parents and students about the grading and reporting policy. Thirty-six respondents (72%) stated that their schools held public information sessions on the topic of grading and reporting for parents. Twenty-nine respondents (58%) stated that their schools held informational sessions or meetings on the topic of grading and reporting for students.

Information was most commonly disseminated at back-to-school night by group presentations and individual teachers discussing grading policies during

classroom visits. Schools also frequently make information about grading and reporting practices available on their Web site or on EdLine. The school newsletter in many schools carries stories about grading and reporting issues, and some principals hold monthly informal meetings with parents (such as breakfast or coffee hours) where they address issues, including grading and reporting.

## Conclusions

Overall, respondents had positive comments about this year's implementation of the grading and reporting policy. Many commented that the changes from last year improved implementation, and they appreciated that MCPS included feedback from teachers and administrators when making decisions about this year's implementation. Additionally, they appreciated the consistent and timely dissemination of information via the FAQs.

Still, some respondents noted the need for continued communication and revisions. According to respondents, teachers would appreciate additional guidance and clarification on what is meant by minimum standards and extra credit. They are trying to align their practices with the intent of the policy, but feel these terms leave too much room for interpretation. Additionally, several asked for strategies for managing the workload of the reteach/reassess procedures.

Several respondents said they were anxiously awaiting guidance on implementing a standardized electronic grading program. They appreciate that the electronic report card is being piloted this year.

However, many feel that they are struggling to make their current electronic grading program work within the structure of the policy. They are also concerned that once they determine a way to make their current program work effectively, they will be given something new to implement.

## Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on findings from the interviews:

- Continue communication between MCPS central offices and the schools as policy components are refined. Provide information in multiple formats for teachers, administrators, and parents. Provide mechanisms such as surveys and interviews for teachers to provide feedback about implementation challenges.
- Provide a forum for teachers to discuss "what works" in areas cited as challenges, such as managing the workload of the reteach/reassess component.
- Provide specific information and forums for discussion of the definitions of minimum standards and extra credit.
- Provide information about the process for pilot testing and planned implementation of an electronic grading program. Keep all schools informed of the ongoing challenges and solutions attained by the pilot schools.

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