



## Montgomery County Public Schools, Md.

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### District Profile\*:

Rank among U.S. school districts (by size):	16
Number of schools:	200
Number of students:	141,777
Number of teachers:	11,503
Per pupil expenditures:	\$13,938

Superintendent: Jerry Weast was appointed superintendent of Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) in 1999 and reappointed in 2003 and 2007. Weast has worked in public education since 1969 and has served as superintendent for 30 years, overseeing eight school districts in five states.

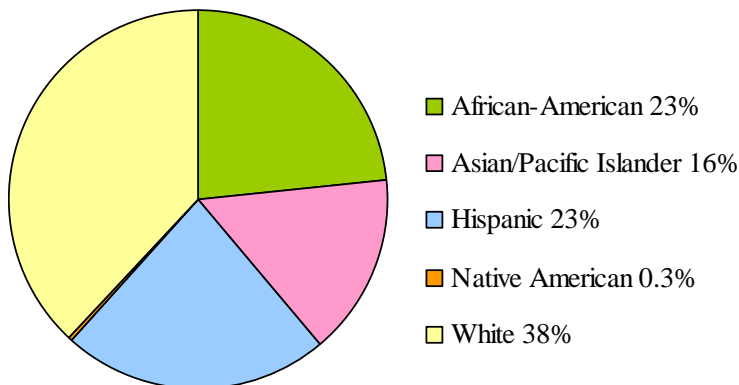
Governance: The seven-member board of education is comprised of two at-large members, five district representatives, all of whom serve staggered four-year terms, and one student representative, who serves a one-year term. Board members are elected countywide but run at large, or from the board district in which they reside.

Teachers Unions: Montgomery County Education Association

### Student Characteristics

Percent of students eligible for free and reduced-price school lunch:	30%
Percent of students designated as English language learners:	13%

### Student Demographics:



\*2009/10 data, unless noted otherwise

\*\*Total expenditures per pupil in 2006-07. Source: Common Core of Data

## Student Achievement

- Montgomery County, which serves nearly 36,000 low-income students, *outperformed* other Maryland districts that serve students with similar family incomes in reading and math at all school levels (elementary, middle and high school) in 2009, according to The Broad Prize methodology.
- In 2009, Montgomery County's African-American students achieved *higher average proficiency rates* than their counterparts statewide in reading and math at all school levels. Additionally, in 2009, Montgomery County's low-income students achieved *higher average proficiency rates* than their counterparts statewide in elementary and middle school reading and in middle and high school math.
- In recent years, Montgomery County *narrowed achievement gaps* between its African-American and Hispanic students and white students statewide in elementary and middle school reading and math. For example, between 2006 and 2009, Montgomery County narrowed the gap between its African-American students and the state's white students in middle school reading by 12 percentage points.
- Between 2006 and 2009, *participation rates on Advanced Placement exams increased* for Montgomery County's African-American and Hispanic students. For example, participation rates for Hispanic students increased by 6 percentage points during this period.

## High-Impact Factors Behind Improved Student Achievement

- **MCPS sets clear and rigorous expectations for achievement, setting college and career readiness as the ultimate academic goal.**

The goal of MCPS is not only that students graduate from high school, but that they also succeed in college or a career. That focus on post-secondary student performance among district leaders led to a concern that the requirements for earning a high school diploma in the state of Maryland were not rigorous enough to adequately prepare students for college or a rewarding career. Even with a diploma, some students might still need to take remedial classes or they might not have the essential skills that employers are seeking.

So the district began a process of clearly defining for students and the public what it means to be ready for college by using the target scores for 12<sup>th</sup>-graders of a 1650 on the SAT or a 24 on the ACT. Then they “backmapped” a series of milestones that students would need to achieve throughout their K-12 years in order to meet that expectation in 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Each step is considered critical in order reach the next.

Now called the “Seven Keys to College Readiness,” the standards are:

- A score of 1650 on the SAT or 24 on the ACT;
- A 3 on the AP exam or 4 on the IB exam;
- Algebra II completion by grade 11 with a “C” or higher;
- Algebra I completion by grade 8 with a “C” or higher;
- Advanced Math in grade 5;
- Advanced Reading on the Maryland State Assessment in grades 3-8; and
- Advanced Reading in grades K-2 as measured by achieving the 70<sup>th</sup> percentile or higher on the TerraNova 2.

These straightforward academic targets all extend higher than Maryland’s state standards, but they are viewed as necessary for students to make a smooth transition to post-secondary education.

“We have laid down the steps of what you need to do to climb to the top,” Superintendent Jerry D. Weast says.

The district has also expanded opportunities for students to reach these goals by consistently offering advanced classes and encouraging students to take advantage of them. The emphasis on rigor has led to achievement gains across the district and a narrowing of achievement gaps.

- **The district directly addresses the issues of race and equity by reallocating resources to schools serving a large proportion of children from high poverty and immigrant families.**

MCPS has long had high-achieving schools in affluent neighborhoods. But in their effort to raise academic standards for MCPS students, district leaders have taken bold steps to ensure that all students—regardless of where they live in the county—have the opportunity to attain a higher level of performance.

To realize this goal, however, leaders determined that it was necessary to give the district’s low-performing, high-poverty and high-minority schools additional resources. As they examined the data, it became clear that schools in a section stretching from the Prince George’s County border up into the center of the county were in the greatest need of attention. This area was labeled the “red zone” and was targeted to receive special treatment, such as

smaller class sizes and extra training for teachers on how to improve learning among at-risk students. Coupled with the reallocation of funds came what leaders call “courageous conversations” about the issues of racial discrimination and equity.

Parents and community members in the rest of the county—the area known as the “green zone”—were asked to support this approach on moral grounds, even if it meant that class sizes in their local schools would not be shrinking. Weast also made the connection between improving schools and increasing property values, appealing to the public with an economic message.

In the schools, the initiative meant that teachers and administrators were held accountable for making sure Hispanic, African-American and other minority students were taking the PSAT and encouraged to enroll in advanced classes as much as white students.

While some people in the district found Weast’s approach too direct, the experience has still raised awareness about educational opportunities and changed classroom and district practices.

- **MCPS teachers rely on a shared framework for instruction.**

“Skillful Teacher,” a book on effective classroom strategies from the Massachusetts-based professional development organization Research for Better Teaching, is the inspiration behind the Montgomery County Public Schools framework for lesson planning. While teachers are not required to plan using this approach, most lessons do have an “activator”—an activity or a question at the beginning of a lesson to get students focused on the topic and engaged in the lesson. Lessons also include a presentation of the learning objectives, activities that involve exploration, explanation, and extension, and then finally, a summary.

While teachers are allowed flexibility in choosing instructional activities for their classroom, most report that they follow the framework’s general guidelines, such as asking what the framework considers to be “essential questions” and making sure students are acquiring specific knowledge and skills. Instructional guides also reinforce the framework, and administrators monitor its use when they conduct classroom “walk-throughs.”

- **MCPS provides multiple types of ongoing professional development that is differentiated to meet individual teacher needs.**

Not only is professional development in the district delivered through a variety of vehicles—coaching, mentoring, workshops, study circles and professional learning communities—but it is also tailored to where educators are in their careers.

New teachers, for example, engage in week-long summer sessions and individualized mentoring, while more experienced teachers can participate in teacher exchange programs and “action research” in which teachers conduct small research projects into a question they have about the performance of students in their own classroom. It might be focused on whether a new teaching strategy, a certain instructional material, or even something like whether having math before or after lunch makes a difference in student achievement. After receiving professional development, participants are expected to share what they have learned with their colleagues. The vast majority of MCPS teachers have personal professional development plans designed to guide their continuous improvement over a period of four years.

Demonstrating a new level of employer-employee collaboration, district officials and union representatives have also implemented a “peer assistance and review” program to assist struggling educators and other staff. Teachers

who are performing “below standard” are referred to the program and assigned a “consulting teacher” who can help them improve. A peer assistance and review panel, comprised of eight teachers and eight principals, makes recommendations to the superintendent indicating whether the employee has made sufficient progress or whether they should be “invited to seek employment elsewhere.”

From 2005 to 2009, the program—widely considered by teachers and district staff to be fair and effective—served about 6,000 teachers, of which about 400 ultimately left the district.

- **The MCPS school board and district leaders work effectively with schools, unions, parents and other interested groups.**

With “peer assistance and review” as an example, district leaders have forged a strong and productive relationship with officials from the three unions that represent district employees, working together to improve teacher quality and retention. Twice a month, district and union leaders meet to discuss issues, solve problems and discuss implementation challenges of major new initiatives, including decisions regarding the district’s annual budget. This relationship has led to significant improvements in achievement at some of the district’s lowest-performing schools—those in the “red zone.”

“The union leadership has been such an integral part of our work,” says Larry Bowers, the district’s chief operating officer.

School officials also reached out to parents and other community groups as part of the district’s efforts to raise achievement levels, asking them to support the district’s strategy toward raising achievement in the low-performing “red zone.” In addition, the business community was actively involved in developing the “Seven Keys” so they could be easily communicated to the public.

- **The superintendent provides skillful leadership, providing an effective link between the district and the schools and between the district and the community.**

As superintendent of MCPS since 1999, Weast has earned a national reputation among educators as an ambitious, yet highly effective educational leader. He is considered especially skilled at applying sound business practices to the central office and to the management of schools in order to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the delivery of education.

To increase accountability, Weast requires managers throughout the district to use “process maps,” which are like flow charts that visibly illustrate how a task gets done, who is in charge, and who is involved. When e-mails and other forms of correspondence from parents and community members as well as administrators went unanswered, he required the staff to begin tracking how long it took to respond. “Weast has no patience for inefficiency,” says one district official.

The district embraces the “Baldrige Education Criteria for Performance Excellence,” a successful business model that keeps staff focused on how to continuously improve all aspects of their work in order to make ever-rising progress toward goals. Weast also asks schools to use the “Plan-Do-Study-Act” process that helps staff set and work toward specific goals when developing school improvement plans.