



**NBPTS**<sup>®</sup>

National Board for  
Professional Teaching Standards

# PROFILES IN EXCELLENCE: Montgomery County, Maryland

A Districtwide Coalition to Improve Teaching  
through National Board Certification

# A Snapshot of Montgomery County Public Schools

## **ENROLLMENT:**

With 141,777 students, Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) is the largest school system in Maryland and the 16th largest school system in the United States.

## **SCHOOLS:**

200

(131 elementary, 38 middle, 25 high,  
1 career and technology center and  
5 special schools )

## **TEACHERS:**

11,503

## **NATIONAL BOARD CERTIFIED TEACHERS (NBCTs):**

561

## **STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS:**

29% low-income

13% limited English proficiency

23% African American

23% Hispanic

38% White

16% Asian/Pacific Islander

[www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org](http://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org)



**PROFILES IN EXCELLENCE:  
Montgomery County, Maryland**

**Using a Districtwide Coalition to Improve Teaching  
through National Board Certification**

# MCPS Performance Standards

*(Based on NBPTS Core Propositions)*

- Teachers are committed to students and their learning.
- Teachers know the subjects they teach and how to teach those subjects to students.
- Teachers are responsible for establishing and managing student learning in a positive learning environment.
- Teachers continually assess student progress, analyze the results, and adapt instruction to improve student achievement.
- Teachers are committed to continuous improvement and professional development.
- Teachers exhibit a high degree of professionalism.

# Executive Summary

*While considerable attention has been paid to the “multiplier effect” of individual National Board Certified Teachers (NBCTs) or small groups of NBCTs transforming the culture of individual schools, Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) offers an example of how school leaders can purposefully leverage the program across an entire district.*

Over the past decade, Montgomery County Public Schools in Maryland has focused on improving teacher capacity as a strategy to address achievement gaps and promote “college-ready” standards in what has become an “urban suburb” with significant pockets of high-need students. As part of this focus on quality teaching, the district has encouraged growth in the number of National Board Certified Teachers through an array of financial incentives and support. However, that reflects only a small portion of the impact the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) and the National Board’s standards and assessment process has had on teaching and learning in the district. As part of an innovative union-district partnership with the Montgomery County Education Association (MCEA), a local affiliate of the National Education Association, the district has also embedded the NBPTS Five Core Propositions—the framework for what teachers should know and be able to do—into the professional development, hiring, and evaluation of all teachers to create a powerful “multiplier effect” that leverages the program throughout the district.

“We learned how to make National Board Certification high leverage and change a culture,” explains MCPS Superintendent Jerry Weast. “Instead of changing one classroom at a time, you can change one district at a time.”

Critical to improving teacher capacity is the collaboration between the district and MCEA around shared goals focused on strong principles of student learning that go beyond traditional district-union relationships.

“We want our focus to be as a union that cares about teaching and learning,” says MCEA President Doug Prouty. “The district and union recognize that by empowering teachers to be in front of change and thinking about how they work with students, we’re all better off.”

Many of the lessons learned in Montgomery County are applicable to other school districts as well.

## Leveraging National Board Certification

The ways in which the district has leveraged National Board Certification include:

- Adopting the NBPTS Core Propositions as the basis for its teacher performance standards in its Professional Growth System (PGS), the framework that guides the district’s professional development and teacher evaluation (see opposite page).
- Using the core propositions to develop a common language around teaching practice.

- Endorsing National Board Certification as one component of the professional growth plan all teachers are expected to develop.
- Using the core propositions, through Montgomery County’s teacher performance standards, to frame the district’s Peer Assistance and Review (PAR) process, which evaluates and supports novice and underperforming teachers. The program, which is a key component of the district-union partnership, relies heavily on consulting teachers—many of whom are NBCTs—to mentor and evaluate participants.
- Placing NBCTs in a variety of teacher leadership roles, including staff development and peer counseling, with the idea that those teachers will return to the classroom with an increased capacity to teach and collaborate.
- Developing a career lattice program which, when implemented, will identify and select school-based teacher leaders using a system that mirrors key steps in the National Board Certification process. Further, NBCTs will be exempt from portions of the career lattice application process, which reflects the value that the district places on the National Board Certification process.

## A District-Union Partnership Focused on Student Learning

The NBPTS Core Propositions were the common ground between the district and MCEA as they entered a partnership focused on student learning a decade ago. Specific elements of the partnership and support include:

- An often-examined—and successful—turnaround at Broad Acres Elementary, a failing

school serving the district’s poorest students, in which the union and the district agreed to provide extra time for teachers to plan and collaborate.

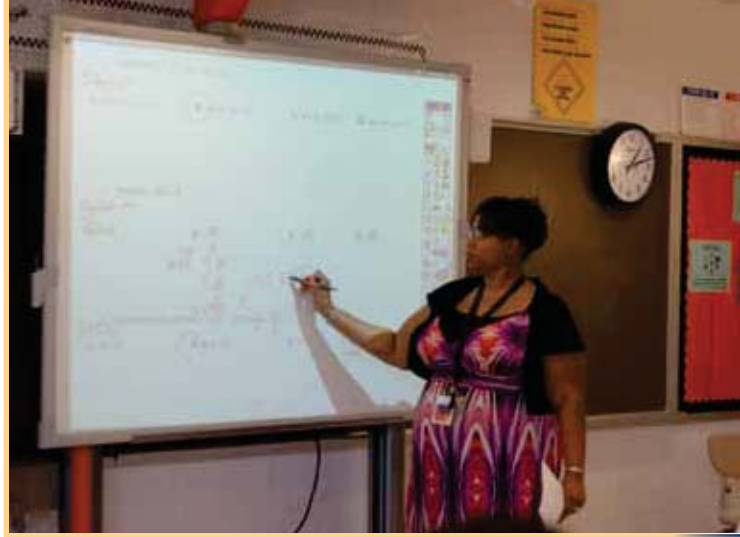
- Training and support for National Board Certification—including state and district contributions to cover the cost of certifying, shared resources, and personnel provided by both MCPS and MCEA to oversee the program in the county and compensation for NBCTs from both the district and state.
- Union participation in—and support for—the Peer Assistance and Review program, which uses the core propositions, counseling, and evaluation by teachers and administrators to support—and, as needed, remove—underperforming teachers.

## Success Indicators

Montgomery County serves as an example of how districts can extend the benefits of National Board Certification beyond the individual teachers who choose to seek certification. As a result of its focus on improving teacher capacity, the district has seen student achievement improve and achievement gaps narrow, even as demographic shifts have led to increases in the number of students who live in poverty and are English-language learners. According to education officials:

- MCPS has the highest graduation rate in the nation among large school districts as identified in the *Education Week* national report, “Diplomas Count 2010.”
- In 2009, MCPS outperformed all other Maryland districts that serve students with similar family incomes at all grade levels.

- Achievement gaps consistently narrowed in elementary and middle school reading and math.
- Participation rates in Advanced Placement exams steadily increased—e.g., nearly 65 percent of the graduating class took at least one AP exam in 2009, far above the 40 percent state and 27 percent national averages.
- Nearly half (47 percent) of all 2001-04 MCPS graduates earned college degrees compared to 31 percent nationally—and college-readiness indicators continue to grow.
- Because the NBPTS Core Propositions support both student learning and reflect the value of teachers as professionals, they became a key point of consensus between district and union officials.
- Focusing on teacher quality has led to retention rates above the national average—and nearly 95 percent of the district’s NBCTs have remained in the district during the past five years.
- As the foundation of the district’s Professional Growth System and teacher evaluation, the NBPTS Core Propositions represent professional teaching standards that have been validated by outside experts and that support quality teaching and student learning.
- The beliefs embedded in the NBPTS Core Propositions have helped create high expectations for students from all backgrounds, as evidenced by narrowing achievement gaps and the district’s selection as a 2010 Broad Prize for Urban Education finalist. District officials noted that some 40 percent of the NBCTs also teach in the district’s 30 Title I schools.
- Basing individual and schoolwide professional development on the same standards has strong



*District and union leaders quickly identified National Board Certification as a key to building teacher capacity, and the numbers of NBCTs in MCPS steadily grew from just two in 1998 to more than 500 in 2009.*

benefits. High-need schools that participated in the district-sponsored Professional Learning Community (PLC) Institute—led by an NBCT—had higher levels of collaboration and narrower achievement gaps than those that did not participate.

- Centering the district-union partnership on student learning has led to a stable, long-term relationship between the two organizations that have supported shared leadership.

The district’s success in improving student performance and narrowing achievement gaps demonstrates to other districts how NBPTS programs can help transform teaching and teaching practice to positively impact student learning.

# Key Achievement Gains

*Montgomery County's focus on improving teacher capacity through NBPTS programs and other district initiatives contributed to significant education improvements in the district:*

- **MCPS had the highest graduation rate in the nation among large school districts**, according to the *Education Week* national report, "Diplomas Count 2010." The county had an 83.1 percent graduation rate compared to the nation's graduation rate of 68.8 percent.
- **MCPS outperformed all other Maryland districts** that serve students with similar family incomes in reading and math at all grade levels in 2009, according to the Broad Prize for Urban Education analysis.
- **Achievement gaps consistently narrowed** in elementary and middle school reading and math. For example, the gap between Hispanic students and their white counterparts in 3rd grade reading scores fell from 43 percent in 2003 to 12 percent in 2009. The gap between African American students and their white counterparts narrowed from 35 percent to 15 percent during the same period.
- **Participation rates in Advanced Placement exams steadily increased.** Nearly 65 percent of the graduating class took at least one AP exam in 2009, far above state (40 percent) and national (27 percent) averages. According to Weast, no district other than New York City has more African American students who have scored a 3 or higher on AP exams.
- **The number of MCPS graduates who receive a four-year college degree in six years surpassed national averages.** Nearly half—47 percent—of all 2001-04 MCPS graduates earned college degrees compared to 31 percent nationally. African American and Hispanic students also outperformed their peers nationally.
- **College-readiness indicators continue to grow.** For example, the number of students scoring 1650 or higher on the SAT in 2009 was 48.3 percent. Nearly half—49.5 percent—scored a 3 or higher on AP or a 4 or higher on International Baccalaureate exams. Sixty-two percent of students completed Algebra I by 8th grade, and 41.2 percent of elementary school students scored "advanced" in reading on Maryland's standardized assessments.



## Setting the Stage to “Change One District at a Time”

Located just outside of Washington, D.C., Maryland’s Montgomery County is one of the nation’s most affluent areas. Yet when Superintendent Jerry Weast mapped out where the district’s 141,000 students lived, he discovered a district within a district—an “urban suburb” serving roughly half of the county’s student population, with 75 percent of all of the district’s minority students located in the area and with 80 percent of all students there qualifying for free or reduced lunch.

“We realized our results were very variable,” Weast said in an interview looking back at his decade in the district. “In fact, our results could be predicted by race and socioeconomic.”

So began a decade-long push to address the district’s achievement gaps, predicated by a simple belief that all Montgomery County Public Schools students could graduate ready for college whether or not they chose to attend college. Addressing student gains required “a much higher capacity delivery system,” Weast says. “We weren’t going to get there from a linear, lockstep, teacher-proof approach. The key to unlock this is the teacher.”

From the central office to struggling schools, a concerted effort began to improve teacher quality. That top-down approach mirrored a grassroots ef-

fort to grow the number of National Board Certified Teachers in the district, which quickly attracted the attention of the teachers union. MCPS and the Montgomery County Education Association entered a decade-long partnership centered on student learning—a partnership that has transcended typical district-union relationships as they worked together on sweeping changes to the district’s professional development and evaluation systems. “We want our focus to be as a union that cares about teaching and learning,” says MCEA President Doug Prouty. “The district and union recognize that by empowering teachers to be in front of change and thinking about how they work with students, we’re all better off.”

A key part of the capacity building revolved around National Board Certification, with the district and union providing a variety of financial incentives and support for teachers seeking certification. But they also went much further. By embedding the NBPTS Core Propositions, the framework for what teachers should know and be able to do, into virtually everything MCPS does to bolster teacher capacity, the district-union partnership leveraged National Board Certification far beyond the 500-plus NBCTs currently teaching in the district.



*District officials consider the National Board Certification process “a breeding ground for teacher leaders,” and they are often placed into full- and part-time leadership roles.*

Over the past decade, Montgomery County saw student performance steadily increase and achievement gaps narrow (see page 4), even as the percentage of minority students rose from 48 to 62

percent, poverty rates increased by 44 percent, and the number of students who are English-language learners increased by 103 percent. In 2010, the district was named a finalist for the Broad Prize for Urban Education, which honors districts that have demonstrated improvement in student achievement while reducing achievement gaps among low-income and minority students. MCPS was also recognized in *Education Week’s* report, “Diplomas Count 2010,” as having the highest graduation rate in the nation among large school districts—83.1 percent as compared to the national average of 68.8 percent.

This profile explores how MCPS leveraged National Board Standards and processes to build teacher capacity; how student learning became the focus of the partnership between the district and the union; and the role NBCTs have played as the district cultivates new roles for teacher leaders.

“We learned how to make National Board Certification high-leverage and change a culture,” Weast says. “Instead of changing one classroom at a time, you can change one district at a time.”

***“The partnership gives both the union  
and district credibility in our work with students.  
We want to make sure there is a systematic way of thinking  
about teachers’ work and getting support for their work.  
That is where National Board Certification comes in.”***

***— Doug Prouty, MCEA President***

# Building Teacher Capacity to Narrow Achievement Gaps

**M**CPS calls the indicators for its systemwide goal of making 80 percent of all students college-ready by 2014—and a 100 percent graduation rate—“the seven keys to college readiness.” Those keys, which begin with each student reaching advanced reading levels in kindergarten and continue through completing Algebra I by 8th grade and then scoring at least 1650 on the SAT in high school, exceed state requirements—and require high-quality teachers with high expectations for all students, according to Weast.

“Our whole trajectory is not to meet No Child Left Behind or get highly-qualified teachers in poor schools—we do that, and we have them,” he says. “Our issue is building capacity to hit the trajectory that results in every child being college and career capable.”

District and union leaders quickly identified National Board Certification as a key to building teacher capacity, and the number of NBCTs in MCPS steadily grew from just two in 1998 to more than 500 in 2009—more than any other

Maryland district and among the top 20 districts nationwide. But in a district with nearly 11,000 teachers, having just 5 percent of all faculty members National Board certified was not enough to change the culture, according to Weast. “You can’t change systems and structures in a district this large without leveraging it,” he says.

***Of all the factors that are important to student achievement in productive schools—and there are many—the most important are what individual teachers believe, know, and can do.***

***— Introduction to MCPS Professional Growth System Handbook***

Along with providing financial incentives and support to teachers seeking National Board Certification (which are described on page 12), the district and union cooperated to incorporate the beliefs and expectations embedded in the NBPTS Core Propositions into the ways in which the district hires, trains, and evaluates all teachers. At the core of this effort is the Professional Growth System, which serves as the framework for all teacher standards, evaluation, and professional development. “Leveraging NBPTS

principles that reflect accomplished teaching is at the heart of the PGS,” said Bonnie Cullison, who led MCEA from 2003 to 2009. “If you’re going to make real change, you need something that is about supporting the quality of teaching, not simply monitoring it,” she says.



*Implementing the NBPTS Core Propositions introduced a set of expectations and standards for evaluating teachers that promote quality teaching practice.*

The PGS framework includes:

**Standards for teacher performance**, including criteria for how those standards are to be met and examples of teaching behaviors. Five of the six standards are directly based on NBPTS Core Propositions; the sixth is connected to behaviors such as attendance and professionalism. Embedding the NBPTS Core Propositions into the system reflects the complexity of teaching, according to James Virga, who currently serves as a consulting principal for MCPS. “It really is rocket science,” he says.

***Courses and other training focused on a common language around teaching practice.***

The district’s common language was derived from the NBPTS Core Propositions, which were used to frame discussions about high-quality teaching and to help staff develop the ability to discuss teaching practice and student data.

**Professional growth cycles** that include standards-based, multi-year professional growth plans, training, and ongoing reflection on progress toward goals set by teachers during the evaluation process. Seeking National Board Certification is endorsed as one way of meeting the professional growth plan required by the district.

**Formal evaluations based on narrative assessments** that provide qualitative feedback to teachers.

**The Peer Assistance and Review program**, in which the union and district collaborate to evaluate, assist, and counsel novice and underperforming teachers.

**Integrating individual and school-level professional development** with a focus on collaborative learning and student data.

Since its inception, the PGS has directed all activities around teacher quality, including professional development and hiring. “When you talk about the culture of the district, the PGS is not seen as a teacher evaluation system,” says NBCT Jolynn Tarwater, a Montgomery County teacher currently serving as the NBPTS teacher-in-residence. “The idea is to help teachers grow and learn.”

Weast and other district officials note that the NBPTS framework has been instrumental in driving change in the district for the following reasons:

- Teachers bought in, because “they’re the right standards,” Weast says.
- The use of the NBPTS Core Propositions provided validation from “an outside group of experts,” says Jody Leleck, the district’s chief academic officer and former principal of Broad Acres Elementary, the school serving the highest-poverty student population in the district.

- The core propositions led to clarity in expectations for teaching staff by creating a common professional language around teaching.
- The core propositions reinforce the belief in high expectations for all students, which is key to the differentiated style of instruction district officials say is needed to have an impact on students from differing backgrounds.
- The core propositions have translated into measurable student growth since the program's inception.
- The core propositions are not designed to limit teachers' professional growth around prescribed standards. Instead, they "release the potential of employees and harness it to drive the engine of change," Weast says.

"Embedding the NBPTS Core Propositions into the PGS also allowed the district to leverage districtwide the key beliefs and expectations that

were once only in the realm of teachers who actively sought National Board Certification. "Whether you're an NBCT or not, you know those core propositions because you're evaluated on them," says NBCT Kimberly Oliver Burnim, a teacher at Broad Acres Elementary and the 2006 National Teacher of the Year.

Consensus around the core propositions did something more. As the district and union entered their partnership to improve student achievement, they provided shared beliefs that "were so strong they overcame barriers

you see elsewhere," Virga says.

***"Many have been through the National Board Certification process, and as a result, components of the process, such as videotaping classroom instruction and reflecting on teaching practice, often find their way into training for all teachers...."***

***— Jolynn Tarwater, NBCT***

# At Broad Acres, Leading a Turnaround

Kim Oliver Burnim's class at Broad Acres Elementary is looking at the writing on the wall. "We're working on words to make us better readers," Burnim says, turning from an interactive whiteboard display to the small group of students she's working with. "When we see those big words, do we have to be scared of them?" "No!" the group replies in unison.

The 2006 National Teacher of the Year, Burnim arrived at Broad Acres when the school was in the midst of a turnaround process sparked by a unique collaboration between the district and the teachers union. That collaboration mirrored the broader partnership between MCPS and the Montgomery County Education Association to improve teacher quality and student achievement.

Serving the poorest, most mobile students in the district—90 percent in poverty, and two-thirds English-language learners—Broad Acres was labeled a failing school at the beginning of the decade. Principal Jody Leleck and Superintendent Jerry Weast negotiated with MCEA to add extra time to teachers' workweeks in exchange for extra pay. Teachers, who were required to stay at the school for three years, spent the extra time on professional development, onsite training, and creating professional learning communities that examined teaching practice and student data—the same reflective processes exemplified by National Board Certification.

Test scores began improving, and large numbers of Broad Acres teachers went through the National Board Certification process—as many as 13 in one year. "It coincided with the programs we were doing," Burnim says. The critical mass of NBCTs "changed the whole tenor of the building," says Leleck, now the district's chief academic officer. Along with leading study groups, developing walkthrough protocols, and analyzing data, NBCTs brought "the belief that all kids could achieve and that we had the ability to get them there," Leleck adds.

Many of the NBCTs who were part of the turnaround have since left for other schools, but their legacy continues. One veteran NBCT is Broad Acres' staff development teacher and "teachers have gotten used to the idea that they're always learning and looking at themselves under the microscope," says Michael Bayewitz, the school's current principal.

"Schools like Broad Acres show that good teaching can overcome any obstacle," says Jamie Virga, a consulting principal with the district.

# Creating a Critical Partnership with the Teachers Union

To understand how the union and district entered a stable, long-term partnership focused on student achievement, consider how National Board Certification first grew in Montgomery County. In 1998, when there were just two NBCTs in the entire district, the push to expand the program did not start in the central office. It began in Jolynn Tarwater's dining room.

Among the first cohort of teachers in Maryland to become National Board certified, Tarwater began holding informal sessions where teachers would "sit at my table and talk about the process" as a way of supplementing a regional support group that met outside of the county. "I started to help one teacher through the process," she says. "Then it became five. It grew organically."

The grassroots growth of National Board Certification soon got the attention of union leaders at a critical time. Just a few years earlier, MCEA had begun interest-based bargaining with the district, which had opened the door for discussions between the union and district around shared goals—and more specifically, student achievement.

Under the leadership of then-president Mark Simon, MCEA began advocating for ways to

embed strong principles of student learning into a range of proposals—including those relating to National Board Certification—that transcended traditional district-union relationships. "The whole motivation was for teachers to take ownership in the profession and the

craft," says Bonnie Cullison, who was MCEA president from 2003 to 2009.

Weast's arrival as superintendent in 1999 established achievement gaps and teacher quality as key district priorities, resulting in "a recognition on the district's part that our work together is a lot more

meaningful than working separately," says Doug Prouty, MCEA's current president.

The union and district entered partnerships around specific projects, such as an often-cited agreement to provide additional staff time and support at Broad Acres Elementary as part of a successful attempt to turn around student achievement at the district's neediest school (see sidebar, on opposite page). Under Simon's leadership, the two groups also reached agreement about embedding the NBPTS Core Propositions into the PGS, providing a highly specific foundation on which to build their work together. "If the union and the district agree that teacher quality matters in

***"You need a level of collaboration to turn loose the creative energy in our professionals."***

***— Dr. Jerry Weast,  
MCPS Superintendent***

order to improve student learning, you have to be explicit about what you are going to do to support it,” Cullison says. The district and union quickly agreed that the NBCT process reflected “powerful professional development which contributes to improved practice and student learning outcomes,” she says. The district-union partnership had several key components.

### **Support for National Board Certification**

**candidates.** On average, between 120 and 140 teachers elect to pursue National Board Certification each year, and the union and district have collaborated to provide a range of support, including:

- **Financial support.**

Maryland supports two-thirds of the cost of National Board Certification, while MCPS picks up the remaining third, meaning that teachers can go through the process at no cost. Related graduate certificate programs offered by local universities also qualify for tuition reimbursement. From the beginning, MCPS never placed an upper limit on the number of candidates it would financially support, which allowed the growing ranks of NBCTs “to recruit as many teachers as possible,” Tarwater says.

- **Shared staffing and oversight of the National Board Certification process.**

MCEA and MCPS collaborate on monthly candidate support sessions held at the union’s office building. Each year, the district has deployed one or two full-time National Board

Instructional Specialists to oversee the program and link candidates with coaching and other support. MCEA also allocates one staff person of its own to help with logistics and programmatic needs.

- **Logistical support.** Candidates receive two days of release time to work on their portfolios, along with coaching and other support. At some schools, staff development teachers include National Board Certification coaching as one component of professional development

opportunities, making teachers familiar with key processes before they attempt to become certified—and often, even if they do not.

- **Salary incentives.** Full-time teachers who become National Board certified receive an additional \$2,000 a year from the district, an amount matched by the state.

The support has encouraged teachers to seek National Board Certification. The 85

Montgomery County teachers who became NBCTs in 2009 represented the seventh largest cohort to achieve certification in the nation that year. The number of candidates in the district who achieve National Board Certification in their first year also exceeds 50 percent, above the national average. This institutionalization speaks to “the passion and persistence of candidate support,” Tarwater says. “Candidates call it the best class they have ever taken because it’s for teachers by teachers.”

**Peer Assistance and Review.** A high-stakes proposition for a union-district partnership, this component of Montgomery County’s Professional

***“If the union and the district agree that teacher quality matters in order to improve student learning, you have to be explicit about what you are going to do to support it.”***

***— Bonnie Cullison,  
MCEA President (2003-09)***



Growth System outlines the process by which novice and underperforming teachers are evaluated, assisted and, if necessary, removed. Both union and district officials play key roles, and NBCTs have been involved as consulting teachers since the program's inception. In the process, consulting teacher peers conduct classroom observations and give feedback.

"Because of the collaboration, it's not seen as personal," says Dr. Susan Marks, who was the district's associate superintendent for human resources until summer 2010. "It's based on the standards and evidence—and the idea that you get one to two years of support to improve."

About 70 experienced teachers are referred to the Peer Assistance and Review process each year, as are the 600 to 1,200 new teachers the district hires. The consulting teachers—now nearly 30 district-wide—provide mentoring, help their peers reflect on aligning their teaching practice with the core propositions, and model classroom instruction. "Being an NBCT gave me a lot of those skills," says Tarwater, who became one of the first consulting teachers in the program when it began in 2000.

To evaluate progress, consulting teachers and principals submit narrative evaluations based on the standards, which are ultimately reviewed by a panel featuring union members and administrators before a final decision is made. "You can't just have a checklist," says Virga who found that the Peer Assistance and Review process helped "teachers who came to the school with baggage and blossomed—and struggling first-year teachers who improved."

Since the program's inception, about 325 teachers have left MCPS as a result of not meeting the standards, according to Raymond Frappolli, director of performance evaluation and compliance.



*Montgomery County serves as an example of how districts can extend the benefits of National Board Certification beyond the individual teachers who choose to seek certification.*

However, about half of the underperforming veteran teachers referred to Peer Assistance and Review successfully complete the program, as do 90 percent of the district's new teachers. "We brought professionalism to the system and removed the 'gotcha' mentality, which is why we exit, enter, and retain so well," Weast says.

Because of the union's willingness to show its commitment to student learning by participating in challenging programs such as PAR, district officials credit MCEA for its "vision of good teaching and supporting teachers," says Virga. MCEA's Prouty agrees, saying that the district and union agree on the value of "empowering teachers to be in front of changing systems."

The partnership, Virga says, "was messy and hard and took a lot of commitment. But 10 years later, the benefits are clear."

# Rockville High School: Leveraging National Board Certification

Rockville High School staff development teacher Anne Taylor knows exactly what it takes to become a National Board Certified Teacher. She is one.

In Taylor's four years as the school's staff development teacher, she has helped 32 candidates go through the National Board Certification process. Fifteen of the school's 90 teachers are now NBCTs. But while she supports candidates through weekly training sessions geared specifically to the National Board Certification process, Taylor's larger role is to introduce the same reflective practices to the entire staff.

"Our main goal is to improve the performance of everyone in the school," says Dr. Debra Munk, who has been principal for five years. "If they get that through National Board, that's great." For those who do not pursue certification, the core propositions and reflective exercises still "gave us a framework and a common language in the school, and made it possible for teachers to work together in collaborative ways they didn't before," she adds.

To that end, the school purchased video cameras for candidates and non-candidates to tape their teaching for later reflection and discussion. Taylor asks all teachers, whether they are going through the process or not, to videotape one lesson "bell to bell and reflect on what they see," she says. She also conducts "peer bingo," where teachers observe five peers for different instructional strategies. "A lot of that I got from my own experience as a National Board candidate," she says.

Munk says every academic measure has improved at Rockville in the past five years—average SAT scores, for example, went up 62 points in 2009—and among every subgroup of the diverse student body. "What the National Board did at the school was open the doors—to each other, to peers, to everyone," she says. "If what you're doing is of value, everyone else can see it."

# National Board Certification: A Pipeline for Teacher Leaders

Rockville High School Principal Debra Munk acknowledges that teaching is often considered “a flat profession.” “What you do the first day is the same as the last day,” she says. But in Montgomery County, district officials have created a variety of structures to foster teacher leadership—without permanently removing highly-qualified teachers from the classroom. “In the old days, you gave the best teachers the best classrooms and the easiest kids,” Weast says. “What really works is giving them more authority over their workplace.”

## **Leveraging teacher leadership.**

District officials consider the National Board Certification process “a breeding ground for teacher leaders,” and they are often placed into full- and part-time leadership roles, including:

- **Staff development.** District officials have assigned a staff development teacher to every school at all levels—elementary, intermediate, and secondary. These school-based teacher leaders lead professional development targeted around the standards embedded in the Professional Growth System. “Many have

been through the National Board Certification process,” Tarwater says. As a result, components of the process, such as videotaping classroom instruction and reflecting on teaching practice, often find their way into training for all teachers, as they did at Rockville High

School, where the staff development teacher is an NBCT (see sidebar on opposite page). “Having a staff development teacher who is an NBCT sets a great example,” says Munk. “Someone promoting the program from within the building, helping and coaching and working with teachers, has made a real difference.”

- **Middle school reform.**

New positions created as part of restructuring in the district’s middle schools have led to NBCTs

serving as team leaders and content specialists in math and reading.

- **National Board instructional specialists.**

The district taps NBCTs to help support candidates as they go through the National Board Certification process (see page 12).

- **Union representatives.** Like the district, the teachers union sees NBCTs as leaders. As part of the district-union partnership, MCEA representatives sit on committees overseeing

*“Supporting National Board initiatives goes hand in hand with empowering educators to provide rigorous educational opportunities for every child.”*

*— Clara Floyd, President,  
Maryland State Education  
Association*

virtually every aspect of the district's operations. "NBCTs have become the core of people I went to when I needed people for these kinds of committees, because I knew they had skills I could put in front of a bunch of district leaders," Cullison says. "No one can question their teaching credentials."

- **Consulting teachers.** As part of the Peer Assistance and Review process, each consulting teacher mentors new and underperforming teachers in more than a dozen schools. As with many of the district's teacher-leader positions, consulting teachers are appointed to three-year terms, and then they return to the classroom. "We know there is great richness in taking that experience back to a classroom position," Marks says, adding that while some NBCTs have moved from teacher-leader roles into administrative positions, "the vast majority stay in the classroom."

### ***Institutionalizing teacher leadership.***

After developing an array of teacher-leader roles, the district plans to formalize the process through what it calls the MCPS Career Lattice. Developed in partnership with MCEA, the program will consolidate all teacher-leader positions into a common pool, from which lead teachers will be selected to serve as school-based instructional leaders for several years before returning to the classroom. Creating a formal system to reward and challenge the best teachers, Tarwater says, "gives teachers a way to advance without leaving the kids."

Union and district officials expressly designed the selection process to mirror National Board Certification—teachers initially submit videotapes and written reflection on their classroom instruction. As further testament to the value of the National Board Certification process, NBCTs will be exempt from those initial steps when the program is fully implemented.

"We're prioritizing that and saying that if you've taken that vigorous look at your performance, you've met the initial criteria," says Rebecca Newman, president of the Montgomery County Association of Administrators and Principals, which worked with the district and MCEA to develop the Career Lattice. "That means we've got hundreds of people already qualified for teacher-leader positions."

Lead teachers assigned to high-need schools would also be given stipends and grants to develop innovative programs, such as after-school tutoring or parent outreach. "Once implemented, the system has the potential for real changes in how schools are operationalized in terms of how

they share in responsibilities," says MCEA's Cullison.

The Career Lattice is currently on hold due to budget constraints; district officials are looking to federal grants to move it forward. But embedding teacher leaders in schools is already an idea that has taken root in the district and one in which NBCTs play a key role. "If you've got a school where everyone looks to the principal for every answer, you're not going to take that school to the next level," says Leleck.

***"What's great about the National Board is that it has gotten teachers involved as leaders and given us a whole new level of involvement where teachers are experts involved in school change."***  
***— Dr. Debra Munk, Principal, Rockville High School***

# Scaling Up and Sustaining Systemwide Change

While Montgomery County's cohort of National Board Certified Teachers has grown from two to more than 500 over the past decade, the steps the district and union have taken to leverage the program and the NBPTS Core Propositions have led to far more exponential growth.

"How do you take anything to scale when you have 140,000 students?" Leleck asks. "What you get from National Board Certification is a network that keeps building. You have people who achieve and aren't afraid

to leave the comfort zone of their school and go to another and grow it there." In fact, approximately 40 percent of the district's 500-plus NBCTs now teach in MCEA's 30 Title I schools, according to district officials. "Part of their effectiveness is being pervasive throughout the system," agrees MCEA's Cullison, who hopes to see larger concentrations of NBCTs in all of the district's schools.

Among the keys to the program's success in Montgomery County, according to officials:

- **Teacher retention.** In part because of the support provided through the Professional Growth System, the number of district teachers who quit in the first five years is about 30 percent, well below the national average of 50 percent. Nearly 95 percent of the district's

teachers who became NBCTs still work in the system.

- **Focus on equity.** The common language and core propositions leveraged from the National Board have helped create high expectations for students from all backgrounds, as documented

by narrowing achievement gaps (see sidebar on page 4) and the district's selection as a 2010 Broad Prize for Urban Education finalist. "We've come a long way as a system, but the teacher still has tremendous power over equitable classrooms—from

assessment to relationships and expectations," says Virga. "As a teacher, you have to see kids as individuals and make good decisions."

- **Evaluating teachers on professional standards.** Implementing the NBPTS Core Propositions introduced a set of expectations and standards for evaluating teachers that promote quality teaching practice. "Why build teacher evaluation on wobbly test scores?" Weast asks flatly. "It's better to build on professional standards that support student learning."
- **Applying standards to all professional development,** including schoolwide projects. Led by an NBCT, the district's PLC Institute helps schools learn how to develop professional

*"If you don't hit scale, you don't meet the trajectory."*

*— Dr. Jerry Weast,  
MCPS Superintendent*

learning communities in which teachers work collaboratively to improve student learning. After conducting an efficacy study of high-need schools, the district found achievement gaps narrowing more rapidly at the schools involved in the PLC Institute than those that were not. The common threads? “At those schools, you find high expectations, collaboration, and more feedback,” Marks says. “People believe they can make a difference for kids, and they have structures that support it.”

- **Consistent long-term goals.** As superintendent, Weast has written extensively about how to transition districts from reactive policy changes to more stable and shared leadership—including shared leadership with the union and other stakeholders, which was facilitated by focusing on student achievement. “That can’t be done overnight,” MCEA’s Cullison says. “You have to build foundations for this kind of work.” Leveraging the National Board Certification process was a critical component of that foundation, Cullison adds, “because of the program’s belief in the professionals to do the job required of them.”

## National Implications and Keys to Replication

Montgomery County serves as an example of how districts can extend the benefits of National Board Certification beyond the individual teachers who choose to seek certification, particularly when districts and unions partner around concrete goals such as student learning. Doing so, says MCEA’s Prouty, “gives both entities credibility in our work with students.”

Having announced plans to step down as superintendent at the end of the 2010-11 school year, Weast is looking for ways to ensure that the changes now in place will be sustainable. “Most

school systems are very reactive to trends and look to quick fixes” by enacting sweeping reforms with “shallow roots,” he says. Instead, MCPS focused on long-term systemic change, leveraging the following components:

- **Grassroots acceptance.** Because the National Board Certification process was first embraced by individual teachers, the ensuing work of both the district and union to support and embed the program reflected both “top-down” and “bottom-up” approaches to change.
- **Collaborative partnerships.** By focusing on collaboration and shared decision-making around student learning, the district-union partnership has been strong enough to tackle such thorny subjects as teacher evaluation. “It makes it much easier to work out situations where we do disagree,” says MCEA’s Prouty, “because we know we’re working for the same thing—the best possible circumstances for the kids we teach.”
- **Incorporation of accepted standards.** Embedding NBPTS Core Propositions into teaching provided an external frame of reference for the work of the district-union partnership. “We want to make sure there’s a systematic way of thinking about teachers’ work and getting support for their work,” Prouty says. “That’s where National Board Certification comes in.”
- **Institutionalization.** Even with the support of the union and broad acceptance of the core propositions as the common language to examine teaching, the process of creating the PGS and its related support was still a multiyear process. But when “you change systems and structures, you change the culture” in ways that go beyond the tenure of any superintendent, according to Weast. “And when you do that,” he says, “people can innovate solutions.”



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