



Reclaiming the Potential for Equity and Diversity in Montgomery County's Schools of Choice

With Latino, black, and low-income students having been largely excluded from the district's magnet and special academic programs, district leaders work to increase equity and access.

Jennifer B. Ayscue

"We have wonderful programs in the county but not all students have been able to access them," states Patricia O'Neill, 17-year member of Montgomery County Public Schools' (MCPS) Board of Education. O'Neill is referring to the 43 magnet and special academic programs, such as language immersion and gifted and talented programs, that are part of the nationally recognized school district located in the southern part of Maryland, just outside of Washington, DC.¹ Compared to the district's current population, the shares of Latino and black students enrolled in MCPS's magnet and special academic programs are disproportionately small, while the shares of white and Asian students are disproportionately large.

The National Coalition
on
School Diversity

FIELD REPORT *February 2017*

¹ In 2013-14, choice programs in MCPS included language immersion programs in seven elementary and four middle schools, seven elementary centers for highly gifted in eight schools, 14 magnet and application programs at three middle schools and six high schools, two high school consortia, and one middle school magnet consortium.

MCPS has experienced substantial demographic change since magnet and special academic programs began in the 1970s. MCPS is experiencing tremendous growth of approximately 2,500 students per year, with the fastest growing segment of students being Latino. Students of color now outnumber white students in the district. In 2013-2014, MCPS enrollment was 32% white, 27% Latino, 21% black, 14% Asian, and 5% two or more races. Although Montgomery County is still a comparatively wealthy district, it has also become increasingly diverse economically; in 2013-14, 34% of MCPS students qualified for free and reduced price meals. Even though Latino, black, and low-income students account for substantial shares of the district's enrollment, few of them have been admitted to MCPS's magnet and special academic programs. In 2013-2014, in elementary centers for highly gifted students, only 4% of students were Latino and 8% were black while nearly half (47%) were white and over one-third (34%) were Asian. Only 8% of students in these centers were low income. Similar disparities exist at the high school level.

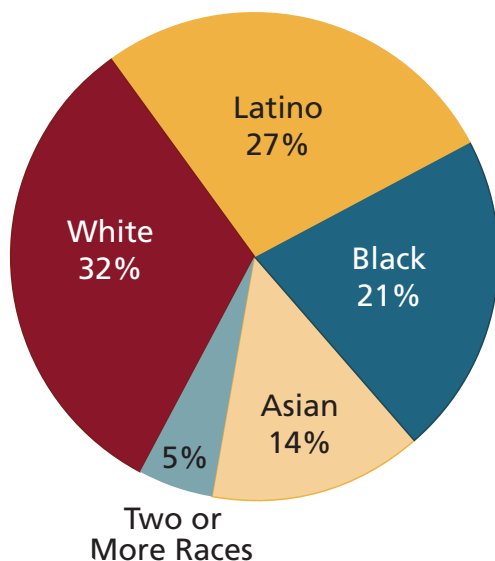
Recognizing the substantial underrepresentation of students of color and low-income students in the district's magnet and special academic programs, O'Neill asserts, "We have a moral obligation to meet the needs of all students and to make changes. Our school system has changed over the many years that these programs have been in existence and they should be reflective of our community, our diverse community."

District Efforts to Increase Equity, Access, and Diversity

Similar to many other districts that created magnet programs in the 1970s and 1980s, MCPS designed many of its magnets and special academic programs as a voluntary approach to achieve desegregation. Magnet schools are public "schools of choice"—schools that offer alternatives to students other than their neighborhood public schools. Magnets often have a unique theme accompanied by an innovative curriculum and instructional approach that can attract students from different geographic areas and diverse backgrounds. In most cases, magnet programs are not bound by geographic attendance zones. As such, magnet schools are often effective tools for creating racially and socioeconomically diverse schools that also achieve high levels of academic success.

As time has passed, newly-created choice programs in the district have not always adhered to the original purpose of facilitating desegregation and diversity. MCPS leaders are now working to reinvest in the original purpose of its magnet schools and special academic programs by reviewing and revising the district's choice system. In January 2015, the MCPS Board of Education contracted with Metis Associates to analyze the current disparities and to provide recommendations for making choice programs more accessible and equitable.

**MCPS Enrollment by Race
2013-2014**





Since receiving Metis's report in March 2016, MCPS gathered community input about the report and its recommendations through a series of three public meetings in April and May 2016. These meetings drew almost 800 attendees, numerous focus group meetings with community organizations, and almost 600 online comments.

Adding to the momentum for change, in June 2016, an MCPS parent and former staff member at the U.S. Government Accountability Office, Will Jawando, filed a complaint against MCPS with the U.S. Office for Civil Rights (OCR). The complaint claims that MCPS's policies and practices in its elementary language immersion programs are discriminatory against students of color. As OCR investigates the claim, MCPS continues to move forward with its voluntary efforts to remedy the situation.

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—Patricia O’Neill

In late September, district staff presented a comprehensive blueprint for how the district plans to create greater accessibility and equity in choice programs. Among the changes, MCPS will focus on expanding access to immersion programs by altering the sibling link; instead of automatic admission, siblings would receive a preference in the lottery. The Board of Education also proposed providing a preference to low-income students who enter the lottery for immersion programs. MCPS is considering how to revise the student transfer policy so that students can transfer into career and technical education programs based on interest, rather than the current policy that restricts transfers only for reasons of hardship. Additionally,



MCPS is exploring ways to create greater access and expand capacity in centers for highly gifted students. MCPS also plans to invest in talent development for all students in the early years.

In addition, MCPS will address issues of limited capacity. Half of the applicants for elementary language immersion programs² are placed on a waiting list, and many programs at the high school level have extremely long waiting lists as well. Metis also recommended that MCPS develop a plan for revising its “merit-based” admission practices, which include tests and writing samples, and shifting instead to “interest-based” practices and the use of multiple measures. However, the current list of MCPS reforms does not include such

a proposal. Currently, nine schools with secondary magnet or other application programs as well as seven elementary centers for highly gifted students use some form of admissions test. These tests are generally considered to be discriminatory against students from more disadvantaged backgrounds and are discouraged by the federal government’s Magnet Schools Assistance Program guidelines. Many magnet schools in the U.S. are open to all children by lottery, and these schools maintain high academic standards. Reforming admissions practices to place less weight on tests and more weight on multiple criteria is an important component that needs to be included in MCPS’s equity efforts.

2 Among the many academic and other benefits of language immersion programs, dual language immersion programs in particular offer great potential to promote desegregation by attracting and enrolling students of different racial, socioeconomic, and linguistic backgrounds who are learning alongside one another.

MCPS plans to take an incremental approach to implementing changes, spreading the new initiatives over a three-year period. This approach will allow the district to conduct research, engage in ongoing community outreach and communication, and conduct field testing throughout the process.

Community Response

While many view these changes as important steps to providing equitable access to educational opportunities for all students, some have expressed concern. Some parents have expressed concern that MCPS will adopt a “quota” system in

MCPS Equity Reforms Under Consideration

CURRENT PRACTICE

POTENTIAL EQUITY REFORM

Language Immersion Programs

- | | |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Sibling link provides automatic admission for applicants with a sibling who is enrolled in a language immersion program | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Give preference to siblings in lottery for immersion programs ■ Provide lottery preference to low-income students |
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Dual Language Programs

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|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Kemp Mill Elementary School is only dual language program | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Provide professional development for dual language ■ Partner with Center for Applied Linguistics to strengthen infrastructure ■ Expand options by establishing additional programs |
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Career and Technology Education

- | | |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Transfers allowed only for reasons of hardship | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Revise student transfer policy to allow for interest-based transfers |
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Gifted and Talented Education

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Students are identified for local programming through Student Instructional Program Planning and Implementation, a universal screening in second grade and rescreening later as needed ■ Separate competitive selection process occurs in third grade for elementary centers for highly gifted students* | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Facilitate talent development by ensuring students have opportunities for enrichment and acceleration and expand opportunities beyond regular school day ■ Provide Title I schools with part-time primary talent coach position ■ Administer universal screening to support local programming for students in third and fifth grades ■ Conduct targeted outreach ■ Create greater access and expand centers for highly gifted students |
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* Selection is based on application form, cognitive reasoning assessment, teacher recommendation, report card and other test scores, student factors including FARMS eligibility and ESOL or special education needs, unique circumstances, current school attended. Highly gifted students are defined as students who are performing two years above grade level.

order to ensure greater diversity in these programs. This concern is unfounded and is not under consideration by MCPS.

There is also concern that the rigorous education offered in magnet and special academic programs will be “watered down,” that there is a tradeoff between equity and excellence and the two cannot coexist. Professor Gary Orfield, co-director of the Civil Rights Project at the University of California, Los Angeles, explains that this is a common concern when admissions procedures are changed. “In schools that have tests and other kinds of criteria, parents whose kids are in those schools tend to see moves to make them more diverse as some way of diluting the experience, but there is no research base for that.”

Other parents are concerned about admissions criteria. According to *The Washington Post*, Henry Fan, an MCPS parent whose child attends a center for highly gifted students, expresses, “This should be a merit-based program, and it should be colorblind and universal standard.” Concern that standards will drop if admissions criteria are changed is based on a widespread belief that tests are an objective measure of merit and ability. However, educational research finds that tests are not a measure of a child’s ability. Rather, tests often measure a child’s knowledge, which is influenced by the child’s environment. All students do not have equitable access to the knowledge that is assessed on tests.

Orfield underscores the importance of listening to input from parents and community members while also remaining committed to pursuing equity, even in the face of opposition. “Any time you change any school arrangement that gives privileges to some groups and not to others, it’s controversial,” he says. “It’s a testing time for leadership in school districts. This is a time when courageous vision is very important.”

Lori-Christina Webb, executive director to the chief academic officer for MCPS, acknowledges the various perspectives: “Any time you make change, you have competing interests. In the end, we all want the same thing.” Committed to facilitating a positive outcome, she adds, “Change is hard. Change takes time. Change is a collective effort. How we get there with each other matters.”

The school district is balancing a range of different goals in assigning students to schools. “Education is a public good. It’s easy to think about wanting what you perceive to be the best for your child,” notes Professor Erica Frankenberg, co-director of the Penn State Center for Education and Civil Rights and co-author of *Educational Delusions: Why Choice Can Deepen Inequality*. But she urges parents to recognize that “diversity in our public schools is critically important for families from all backgrounds and ultimately will help sustain our communities.”

Benefits of Diversity

MCPS students currently enrolled in magnet and special academic programs have achieved impressive academic outcomes. Across the district, 89% of fifth graders met the milestone for reading and 80% met the milestone for math in 2013-2014. In elementary language immersion programs, 100% of fifth graders met the reading milestone and 99% met the math milestone. In elementary centers for highly gifted students, *all* fifth graders met the milestone for both reading and math.

Some parents have expressed their concern that the proposed changes will lead to declining academic success. However, the more likely result of expanding equity and access is improved educational outcomes for more students. Decades of social science research find that students who attend desegregated schools have higher levels of academic achievement and are more likely to graduate from high school and attend college.



Diverse K-12 schooling is also related to reduction in prejudice, stereotypes, and negative attitudes while at the same time increasing friendships and trust across racial groups. Experiencing desegregated learning environments enhances students' capacity for navigating multicultural situations. Students who have attended desegregated schools are more likely to live and work in desegregated environments later in life. School diversity is also related to democratic values and attitudes as well as higher levels of social cohesion.

Part of a Larger System

MCPS's current focus on the choice system is important and could ultimately benefit the entire school system and community, not just the segment of students who are enrolled in choice programs. Frankenberg encourages the district to

“Any time you make change, you have competing interests. In the end, we all want the same thing.”

—Lori-Christina Webb

continue to build upon these efforts. “Hopefully this is just part of continuing to reassess all parts of the district.” She urges the district “to think about how to use the finite resources the district has to maximize the benefit for all students and to meet the district’s goal of ensuring diversity and equity.”

District leaders are determined to apply the lessons they learn to all the other schools in the district. Webb emphasizes that the choice system “addresses 20% of our population. Our charge is really about 100% of our students. The work that we do around choice has to be linked to and inform the work that we do for the entire district.”

MCPS is not alone in this struggle to develop successful, diverse, equitable programs that serve all students. Many districts across the nation have experienced demographic shifts and must reexamine the ways in which educational opportunities are distributed to students along the lines of race and class, particularly in schools of choice. Taking the initiative to address these issues means that MCPS could serve as a model for other districts that strive to create more diverse and equitable schools. As Orfield explains, “This is a time when there hasn’t been much vision on this issue. It’s a time when an example from a district that is widely respected and well-known could be important in putting it on the agenda in many other places.”

MCPS has often been viewed as a leader in efforts to create diverse communities. “Montgomery County has done an impressive job with its inclusionary housing policy. It’s a real national leader in that respect and deserves a lot of credit,” Orfield notes. “In terms of school desegregation, its record has been mixed. Sometimes there’s been

leadership and sometimes there’s been regression. It’s a very important district with lots of resources and a great history. It has gone through a lot of racial change. I’d like to see them do something that would be as strong a piece of leadership in school integration as they provided in their housing policy.”

Therefore, it is fitting that MCPS is working to reclaim the potential of its magnets and choice programs to be racially and socioeconomically diverse schools that offer students a high-quality, rigorous education. As O’Neill states, “We hope that programs will become more diverse and be more reflective of our student population and continue the success that our students have had in the programs.” Reflecting MCPS’s commitment to promoting excellence across the board, she adds, “Montgomery County has a motto, ‘Expect the best.’ We truly expect the best for all of our students. We are a top-ranked school system. Some of our children achieve at extraordinary levels. We want *all* students to have opportunities to achieve at the highest levels.”

About the Author

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About NCSDE

The **National Coalition on School Diversity (NCSDE)** is a network of national civil rights organizations, university-based research centers, and state and local coalitions working to expand support for government policies that promote school diversity and reduce racial and economic isolation in elementary and secondary schools. We also support the work of state and local school diversity practitioners. Our work is informed by an advisory panel of scholars and academic researchers whose work relates to issues of equity, diversity, and desegregation/integration.