

DOES MONTGOMERY COUNTY TRACK ITS STUDENTS?

Over the past decade and a half, the achievement gap has been the major impetus for a number of MCPS sponsored investigations and evaluations of its educational policies and programs. Six of these efforts clearly substantiate that MCPS does indeed track its students, that tracking has a major causal effect on the achievement gap, and that it must stop. Furthermore, the amount of tracking seems to have increased over the years. This section briefly discusses the key tracking-related findings of each study. However, the reader is encouraged to review the reports of these investigations for a full presentation and discussion of the findings.

1988-89: The Gordon Report: “A Study of Minority Achievement in MCPS – If Not Now, When; If Not Here, Where?”

Impetus: A sharp fall in African American and Latino SAT scores; community urging.

Lead Investigator: Dr. Edmund W. Gordon of Yale University

Findings: Documented notable differences in participation in educational enrichment opportunities (gifted and talented program, pre-algebra and algebra, honors/AP courses) by race and ethnicity. Institutionalized lower expectations for students of color cited as the cause of the achievement gap.

Recommendations: Change the institutionalized attitudes and behaviors of teachers who expected less of some students while providing higher academic opportunities to others.

1990-91: Success for Every Student Annual Outcome Measures Reports.

Impetus: Responding to Gordon Report, MCPS established a new vision and strategic plan.

Recommendations: Every child has a right to a quality education, all children can learn, and all children have a right to be successful. Twelve outcome measures were delineated and were to be reported on annually. These included:

- Increase completion by African American and Hispanic students of PreK-8 pre-algebra mathematics programs that prepares students for successful completion of algebra in grade 9 (Outcome E)
- Increase participation of African American and Hispanic students in Honors and Advanced courses, including successful completion of algebra 1 in Grade 8 (Outcome F)
- Increase participation and improve performance of African American and Hispanic students on PSATs and SATs (Outcome G)
- Eliminate disproportionate suspension rates of African American and Hispanic students in the system (Outcome H) and in each school (Outcome I)
- Eliminate disproportionate representation of African American students within special education programs (Outcome J)

“ I went to Back-to-School night when my daughter was in fourth grade, and was quite pleased with the teacher and rich mix of parents in the room. Then the bell rang to send us to our children’s math and science class. All of the white parents got up and went in one direction and all the parents of color went in the other. My mouth dropped. I thought, ‘This can’t be happening in Montgomery County.’ I later discovered that all the white parents had been on their way to the GT science classroom.”

— Parent, MCPS

- Increase the percentage of students each year who meet the MCPS criterion-reference test proficiency levels so within 5 years all racial groups in the system meet the standard (Outcome K) and in each school meet the standard (Outcome L)

Result: Goals not met; elimination of publication of SES Outcome Measures Annual Reports.

1994: Committee Report on Student Grouping Practices

Impetus: Responding to the Gordon Report, MCPS commissioned this study.

Investigators: Teachers, principals, administrators, academics and other community education professionals.

Recommendations: See below.

Committee’s Vision Statement – “All grouping decisions in Montgomery County Public Schools should promote student learning, enhance self-esteem, facilitate positive social interactions, and build a strong school community.”

Topic	Student Grouping Practices Committee Recommendations
1. EQUITY	School’s grouping practices should ensure equitable educational opportunities, resource, and access for all students
2. VARIETY OF GROUPING PRACTICES	Students should experience a variety of types of groupings during the course of the school day, throughout the year, and from year to year. They should have the opportunity to be with, work with, and learn from a variety of students.
3. FLEXIBILITY	All grouping arrangements should be flexible with frequent, regular evaluation allowing students to move from one group to another as their needs change.
4. TRACKING	Schools should eliminate grouping decisions and practices that lead to and result in long-term, unintentional tracking.
5. LOCAL DECISION MAKING	Each school should develop a plan for grouping its students. This plan should be consistent with the recommendations of this report.
6. STUDENT AWARENESS	Students, with the support of school personnel and parents, should develop an awareness of how their effort, behaviors, attitudes, and learning characteristics influence the groups in which they will learn and work.
7. STAFF DEVELOPMENT	MCPS should support system-wide, ongoing staff development that addresses grouping issues and practices.

Result: Recommendations never implemented.

1997: Honors/Advanced Placement Policies, Practices, and Enrollment Work Group Report.

Impetus: Continued lack of proportional representation in enriched education among ethnic and racial groups in the County.

Findings: Numbers of students in honors and advanced placement courses has increased steadily. However, the findings suggest that “these changes are not system-wide nor uniformly evident within each school, to the point that inequity has increased in the selection of honors and advanced placement courses, particularly among African American and Hispanic students, and that some regular class offerings of high schools are lacking in academic rigor... The growth in

enrollment of African American and Hispanic students has not been met with sufficient preparation and training among personnel of the system in a manner sufficient to address the change.”

Other notable report findings are highlighted below:

“Racial and ethnic differences in pre-high school academic preparation among African American, white, and Hispanic students largely, but not completely, account for racial/ethnic group differences in honors course taking in high school.”

“Students described the regular classes as ‘slow,’ filled with ‘behavior problems,’ having ‘low academic and behavioral expectations”

”Students in honors classes ‘worked harder and were well behaved.’ ‘The environment is quieter, and you don’t miss what the teachers say.’ ‘Teachers have more time to explain things instead of disciplining.’ Likewise, some teachers in some honors classes are perceived to have a ‘more supportive attitude towards students’ than in regular classes.”

Result: No clear action taken.

2000:A Curriculum Management Audit of Mathematics Education in MCPS.

Impetus: Continued racial/ethnic disparity in math scores.

Lead Auditor: Dr. William Poston

Findings: *“Tracking [in MCPS] that begins in early years and an exaggerated emphasis on acceleration (see Finding 5) rather than enrichment” places African American and Hispanic students at extreme disadvantage. Moreover, tracking [in MCPS] ultimately results in the separation of students along socio-economic and racial lines (see Finding 1). Thus a dual system in curriculum design and delivery permeates the district (see Finding 1). Solutions to the problems of low achieving minority and poor children – slowing down the pace – further limits the possibility that these students will ever achieve at a high level (see Finding 1 and Finding 2).... Moreover, the use of ability grouping ... which results in ... racial and economical segregation in effect, is a practice that must be terminated if the system is serious about comprehensive and complete success for its entire student clientele.”*

Result: No action on tracking-related findings taken.

2001: MCPS-Sponsored Study Circles.

Impetus: Continuation and growth of achievement gap.

Investigators: Facilitated groups of parents, teachers, students, administrators and community members

Action Team: “To Provide Equal Opportunity for All Students to Succeed”

Top Recommendation: Stop long-term persistent ability grouping and labeling (tracking).

Within the span of approximately 15 years, MCPS has issued the above reports revealing the continuous negative impact of its educational programs and ability grouping practices on African American and Latino students. Therefore, we believe that there is ample and undeniable evidence of the relationship between tracking practices and disparate student outcomes: the Board of Education and MCPS leadership have been made fully aware of this correlation and have been given research-based solutions.

Whether intentional or not, MCPS does track its students. Many of its programs and policies rely on inflexible sorting mechanisms to “address” the needs of students. In actuality, these very programs and policies do not “address” the needs of all students, but set up conditions for potential failure of many students – especially the educational failure of poor and minority students.

ⁱ Superintendent Paul Vance, Memo to Board of Education on Final Report of Honors/Advanced Placement Work Group, July 13, 1999.

ⁱⁱ *acceleration* is the speeding up of the pace of learning a sequential set of information or knowledge; *enrichment* is the deepening of understanding within a set of information or knowledge.