

MONTGOMERY COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS
Rockville, Maryland

The Kennedy Cluster Project Overview

July 12, 2007

The John F. Kennedy Cluster Project (also referred to as the Kennedy Project) is a joint effort between Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) and the Montgomery County Government (County) aimed at creating a services model for African American students that will improve school performance by breaking down institutional barriers, reducing educational and social disparities, and addressing issues associated with the impact of poverty. The project will be aimed at identifying and addressing factors both inside and outside of school that affect children's ability to excel academically.

Studies have shown that the achievement gap between African American and white students is generally in the vicinity of one standard deviation. The best school reforms have succeeded in closing that gap by only one-eighth to one-fifth of a standard deviation. While MCPS has made significant strides in addressing achievement disparities and the achievement gap has narrowed in many areas, African American students continue to under-perform across all grade levels when compared to their white peers. The reality is that between kindergarten and high school graduation, children spend only about ten percent of their waking hours in school. That is why it is critical to look at a comprehensive, coordinated community approach to dealing with the variety of issues that affect academic performance.

The project will involve stakeholders from MCPS, the County, and local non-profit organizations. Stakeholders will work collaboratively to identify and provide the necessary services to address the root causes and barriers that inhibit or discourage African American students from achieving their full academic potential. The project will strive to provide coordinated County services to complement educational services and to eliminate communication barriers between and among MCPS and County departments and agencies.

John F. Kennedy High School (Kennedy) and four of its feeder schools for which Kennedy is the base high school, (Argyle Middle School, Bel Pre Elementary School, Georgian Forest Elementary School, and Strathmore Elementary School), have been selected as the sites of this project. There are approximately 3,500 students in these five schools, with a large percentage of African American students and a growing population of Hispanic students. The cluster is heavily impacted by poverty and about fifty percent of its students qualify for free and reduced meals. The cluster is characterized by high student mobility and low graduation rates. Argyle Middle School is part of the three-school Middle School Magnet Consortium. While it is the base school for the three elementary schools in the Kennedy Project, it receives students from throughout the county. At the completion of Grade 8, its students can select from among the five high schools in the Down County Consortium, but the majority of its students articulate to Kennedy.

MCPS is currently under-taking the following efforts in regard to the Kennedy Project:

- The Diversity Team of the MCPS Office of Organizational Development will lead the development of an internal culture of high expectations within the project schools through focused professional development. Much of this professional development will be based upon the work of Dr. Glen Singleton, and may include seminars conducted by Dr. Singleton himself.
- All three elementary schools will participate in the MCPS Professional Learning Communities Institute (PLCI). MCPS created the PLCI in 2005 to help school leadership teams increase student achievement and eliminate the achievement gap by developing and strengthening a climate at each school devoted to continuous learning and professional growth. The PLCI provides intensive support and training for participating school teams throughout the school year. The PLCI experience helps teams to examine their own belief systems and empowers them to establish and communicate high expectations for all students. PLCI also builds the capacity of school leaders, including teacher leaders, to make instructional decisions that lead to increased student achievement.
- Full-day pre-K classes will be provided at Georgian Forest Elementary School, and half-day pre-K classes at Bel Pre Elementary School. (Georgian Forest is a pre-K through Grade 5 Title One school; Bel Pre is a pre-K through Grade 2 school; and Strathmore is a Grade 3-5 school.)
- The Office of School Performance has ensured that each of these five schools has a highly competent principal.
- Through increased supervision by school administrators, supported by members of the Offices of School Performance and Curriculum and Instructional Programs, there will be assurance that all content-area curriculum is being taught and that appropriate formative and summative assessments are being administered with fidelity.
- Individual student achievement data will be strategically monitored and will be used to provide targeted interventions, including the development of individual student academic intervention plans.
- An emphasis will be placed on the alignment of programs among the elementary schools in order to provide continuation of service to students who move within the Kennedy Cluster.
- County and non-profit agencies will be enlisted to help develop and expand quality after-school programs for students. Currently the following non-profit agencies have agreed to participate in these efforts: the Commonweal Foundation; the George B. Thomas Learning Academy; the Montgomery County Mental Health Association; and, Passion for Learning.
- Schools and appropriate MCPS offices will be increasing efforts to strengthen home-school partnerships and develop quality parent outreach and resources. It is hoped that some County agencies will be significant contributors in these efforts.

- Increased use will be made of student and parent surveys in determining which existing programs are most effective and what additional programs are needed.
- The MCPS Department of Shared Accountability is in the process of developing a research design. Performance measures and benchmarks will be developed, and data will be collected and analyzed to identify the best practices required to address the root causes of the achievement gap for African American students. The project will be documented so that the project's outcomes can be replicated in other MCPS clusters and potentially in other jurisdictions facing similar issues.

With oversight from Ms. Valerie Ervin, County Council member, and Ms. Nancy Navarro, president of the Montgomery County Board of Education, project managers from MCPS (Mr. Donald Kress) and the County (to be determined) will collaborate with MCPS, the County, non-profit organizations, and other stakeholders to ensure that the project is moving forward as planned.

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