

**MEMORANDUM**

March 22, 2012

TO: Education Committee

FROM: Elaine Bonner-Tompkins, Senior Legislative Analyst *EBT*  
 Sue Richards, Senior Legislative Analyst *SR*  
 Office of Legislative Oversight

SUBJECT: **Worksession on OLO Report 2012-4: Alternative Education in Montgomery County**

On March 26<sup>th</sup> the Education Committee will hold a worksession on OLO Report 2012-4 which was released by the Council on March 13<sup>th</sup>. Council Education Committee Chair Valerie Ervin requested this study to improve the Council's understanding and oversight of County appropriations aimed at supporting alternative education programs and youth transitions into the workforce.

OLO Report 2012-4 summarizes research on best practices for connecting youth to education and employment opportunities, County-funded dropout prevention and recovery programs, and promising practices in other jurisdictions. **(NOTE: Committee members are asked to bring their copy of the report to the meeting.** The report is available on-line at [www.montgomertcountymd.gov/olo](http://www.montgomertcountymd.gov/olo).)

The agency representatives listed below plan to attend the worksession. Additionally, Kathleen Guinan, President of the Wheaton and Kensington Chamber of Commerce, and Roland Ikheloa, Chief of Staff to the Board of Education, will be in the audience and available to address questions.

Agency	Representative(s)
Montgomery County Public Schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shirley Brandman, President, Board of Education</li> <li>• Joshua Starr, Superintendent</li> <li>• Frieda Lacey, Deputy Superintendent</li> <li>• Erick Lang, Associate Superintendent, Office of Curriculum and Instruction</li> <li>• Christopher Garran, Community Superintendent (B-CC, Walter Johnson, Wheaton, and Whitman)</li> </ul>
Montgomery College	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• DeRionne Pollard, President</li> </ul>
Montgomery County Government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Steve Silverman, Director, Department of Economic Development</li> <li>• Kate Garvey, Chief, Youth and Family Services, Department of Health and Human Services</li> </ul>

## A. REPORT HIGHLIGHTS AND AGENCY COMMENTS

In FY11, the County funded 14 alternative education programs (mostly focused on dropout prevention) that served 14,000 youth at a cost of \$28 million.<sup>1</sup> Montgomery County Public Schools, Montgomery College, and the Department of Health and Human Services administered these programs. Most programs aligned with best practices; yet some gaps exist, such as limited access to occupational training for students at highest risk of dropping out. (The executive summary from the report is attached beginning at ©1.)

The report's 13 findings are listed below. (The findings chapter is attached beginning at ©5.)

1. From FY06 to FY10, an average of 1,200 MCPS high school students dropped out annually, representing 2.5% of high school enrollment.
2. MCPS' overall graduation rates range from 86-90% depending on the measure, with significant disparities among subgroups by gender, ethnicity, and service group status.
3. Alternative education programs are intended to provide "alternative pathways" to success for at-risk, vulnerable, or disconnected youth.
4. No comprehensive alternative education framework exists at the national or state level. In some communities, alternative education is part of broader strategy to reconnect youth to education and employment.
5. In Montgomery County, primary responsibility for delivering alternative education programs resides in MCPS.
6. MCPS refers students to alternative education programs for reasons including academic, disciplinary, social/emotional, or attendance challenges.
7. MCPS offers a wide range of career and technology education programs. Students behind in credits typically cannot access these programs.
8. Enrollment in County-funded dropout recovery programs does not match the demand for services suggested by MCPS' dropout data.
9. Best practices for alternative education programs engage students by promoting rigor, relevance, and relationships.
10. MCPS' alternative and career and technical education programs mostly align with best practices for promoting rigor, relevance, and relationships. MCPS' other dropout prevention efforts, however, do not fully align with best practices.
11. Three of six of the County-funded alternative education programs administered by Montgomery College and DHHS in FY11 align with best practices.
12. In some jurisdictions, alternative education programs are part of a comprehensive service delivery framework known as "multiple pathways to graduation".
13. Successful multiple pathway programs rely on data-driven strategies, focus on increasing educational options, and develop collaborative partnerships.

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<sup>1</sup> Excluding Summer School, 8,000 youth were served in these programs in FY11 at cost of \$26 million. For FY13, the County Executive has proposed to eliminate funding for one of these programs, the Conservation Corps.

Each agency offered OLO technical comments on the report, but MCPS was the only agency to also offer formal comments. As noted in Superintendent Starr’s letter on © 19, MCPS offers four main comments regarding the report’s findings:

1. Use of the term alternative education as a “catch-all” phrase for dropout prevention and recovery programs obscures the specific needs of at-risk students across programs;
2. Cross-agency collaboration and partnerships are critical to improving outcomes for at-risk youth;
3. State graduation and career and technical education requirements impede MCPS from offering more occupational training opportunities for struggling students; and
4. Not every MCPS program should be expected to align with the rigor, relevance, and relationship framework, particularly if they are strategies embedded within a larger framework.

**B. RECOMMENDED DISCUSSION ISSUES**

OLO identified four issues for discussion that link alternative education programs in the County to the Council’s parallel interest in workforce development and youth workforce development in particular. These OLO recommended discussion issues begin on © 15 and are summarized below.

**Discussion Issue #1: What is known about the local demand for alternative education and the extent to which County programs meet that demand?**

To improve understanding of the demand for alternative education in Montgomery County, OLO recommends the Council ask agency representatives to address the following questions:

- How many youth in Montgomery County (ages 16-24) are not on track to earn a high school diploma or equivalent, and what percent of all County youth does this represent? How many of these youth are served by Montgomery College or Department of Health and Human Services’ programs that offer dropout prevention or recovery services?
- How does MCPS discern the need for alternative education programs to improve its graduation rate? For example, what measures does MCPS use to identify secondary students as off-track to graduate high school in four years? What percent of MCPS students fit this description and how many are served in MCPS programs targeting such students?
- How does MCPS discern the need for alternative education programs to improve student engagement among on-track students? For example, how is demand for MCPS’ career and technology education programs measured and how many students are enrolled in career development programs?

**Discussion Issue #2: What role should occupational training play in current County efforts to engage youth?**

To consider what role occupational training should play in the process of engaging youth in the County, OLO recommends the Council ask agency representatives to address the following questions:

- What should be the occupational component of each agency's alternative education programs? What are the challenges associated with providing more occupational services?
- What opportunities exist to strengthen the career and technical education (CTE) component of existing alternative education programs? What partnerships can be fostered to link existing dropout prevention and recovery programs to related occupational training and workforce development initiatives?

**Discussion Issue #3: What role can the private sector play to bolster youth workforce development?**

To consider what roles the private sector can take in supporting additional youth workforce development opportunities, OLO recommends the Council ask representatives of County agencies and business organizations to address the following questions:

- Beyond the County's Collaboration and Workforce Investment Boards, are there any public/private partnerships that provide workforce development for at-risk youth? Are there lessons from these efforts that could inform future efforts?
- What opportunities exist to enhance private sector involvement in County agency CTE and youth workforce development efforts?
- From the perspective of the County agencies and the private sector, what are the benefits and potential challenges of partnering to advance youth workforce development opportunities?

**Discussion Issue #4: What should be the role of the Thomas Edison High School of Technology in expanding occupational training opportunities for youth?**

To consider the role that Edison could play in providing additional occupational opportunities for youth, OLO recommends the Council ask MCPS representatives to address the following questions:

- What opportunities exist to make Edison's programs available to more youth in the County? What are the potential benefits or drawbacks to expanding Edison's programs?
- What opportunities exist to make Edison's programs available to interested students who are performing below grade level (e.g., behind in academic credits)? What are the potential benefits or drawbacks to this approach?
- Among Edison's current pathways (programs of study), which programs hold the most promise for re-engaging at-risk and out-of-school youth? What academic or non-academic supports might these youth need to be successful?
- Has MCPS leadership considered converting Edison into a comprehensive high school to serve high school students earlier in their careers (i.e., 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade)? What are the potential benefits and drawbacks to this approach?

**LIST OF ATTACHMENTS**

<b>Item</b>	<b>Begins at:</b>
OLO Report 2012-4 Executive Summary	© 1
Chapter VII: Findings	© 5
Chapter VIII: Recommended Discussion Issues	© 15
MCPS Superintendent Starr's Response to OLO Report 2012-4	© 19

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## ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION IN MONTGOMERY COUNTY

### OFFICE OF LEGISLATIVE OVERSIGHT REPORT 2012-4

#### THE ASSIGNMENT

The Council requested this study to understand how County-funded alternative education programs support youths' successful transitions to adulthood, particularly among at-risk youth. OLO found that the County offers a number of alternative education programs aimed at dropout prevention and recovery. For the most part, these programs align with best practices that stress the importance of rigorous and relevant curricula and fostering relationships to keep students motivated to succeed in high school. However, some program gaps exist, particularly related to access to career and occupational training and program supports for students at highest risk for dropping out.

#### WHAT IS ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION?

The term 'alternative education' refers to programs serving at-risk youth who are no longer in traditional schools. These programs can include dropout prevention and recovery programs and schools with specialized curriculums in career and technical education. The National Dropout Prevention Center identifies six sets of approaches.

- Summer and evening schools that enable students to earn academic credits;
- Separate alternative schools with a special curriculum (e.g., parenting or job skills);
- Alternative classrooms within a traditional school;
- Continuation schools for students no longer attending traditional schools;
- Second chance schools for students at highest risk of being expelled or incarcerated; and
- Residential schools for special case students.

Common elements of alternative education programs include small class sizes, individualized learning experiences, flexible scheduling, mentoring, and case management.

#### THE DEMAND FOR ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION IN MONTGOMERY COUNTY

No comprehensive data currently exist that quantify the demand for alternative education programs in the County. Nor have any of the County-funded agencies evaluated the effectiveness of their alternative education programs to increase high school completion rates or to prepare youth for colleges and careers. About 1,200 high school students drop out of MCPS each year, representing 2.5% of total high school enrollment. This district-wide average masks differences by student group. Students who are male, Latino, black, learning English as a second language, low income, or have a disability drop out at rates that are 50% to 500% higher than their counterparts.

Students leave school due to complex interactions of individual, school, and family factors that lead to disengagement and eventual dropout. In 2009, four of every five students who dropped out of MCPS reported they left school because they were failing or bored. The personal costs of dropping out can include lower earnings and employment; the societal costs include a reduced tax base and higher social service costs. Yet, no federal, state, or local agency has sole responsibility for reconnecting youth to educational options that lead to a high school diploma or equivalent.

#### BEST PRACTICES IN ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION

The research literature on student engagement identifies three best practices for motivating students in high school:

- Enhance the **rigor** of the curriculum by coupling high standards and expectations for student success with high levels of support to enable all students to succeed;
- Enhance the **relevance** of school by ensuring that curriculum and instruction respond to and reflect students' current interests and long-term goals; and
- Foster **relationships** to motivate students to succeed by connecting students to their schools and communities.

OLO's review of the research literature indicates that best practices in alternative education, dropout prevention, and career and technical education align with the rigor, relevance, and relationships framework for engaging high school students. The table below summarizes these practices.

### Rigor, Relevance, and Relationships Framework to Engage Students

Best Practices to Engage Students	Practice Features	Examples of Practices
Enhance <b>rigor</b> of curriculum and instruction	High standards and expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High quality instruction</li> <li>• High expectations for students</li> </ul>
	Extensive supports that enable students to meet high expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Effective classroom management</li> <li>• Social skills instruction</li> <li>• Summer school and tutoring</li> </ul>
Enhance <b>relevance</b> of curriculum and instruction	Reflects students' interests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Choice for students</li> <li>• Active, hands on learning</li> <li>• Flexibility</li> </ul>
	Reflects students' long-term goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus on career and college readiness</li> <li>• Career and technical education</li> <li>• Service learning/internships</li> <li>• AP/IB/early college experiences</li> </ul>
Foster <b>relationships</b>	Connections to schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personalized instruction</li> <li>• Small schools and class sizes</li> <li>• Mentors</li> </ul>
	Connections to community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parental involvement</li> <li>• Collaboration with other agencies</li> </ul>
Source: OLO analysis of best practices identified by National Research Council, 2003		

### LESSONS FROM OTHER COMMUNITIES – MULTIPLE PATHWAYS TO GRADUATION

In some communities, alternative education programs are part of a comprehensive service delivery framework known as “multiple pathways to graduation” aimed at reducing dropout rates, improving graduation rates, and structuring services for at-risk youth. This approach consists of a continuum of programs for re-connecting youth to education and employment. Towards these ends this approach typically includes two key components:

- An **education component** that expands educational program offerings to reach at-risk youth through: (1) the use of adequate “on ramps” or re-entry points for youth who detour from the traditional path; (2) customized services to address the challenges that can detour students; and (3) a mix of schools and programs that responds to the educational needs of disconnected youth.
- An **occupational component** to ensure gainful employment or access to career training for at-risk youth. Examples of this component include career academies, intensive career exploration programs, and high school reform models that emphasize career and technical education.

### LOCAL ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION PROGRAMS

In FY11, three County agencies provided fourteen alternative education dropout prevention and recovery programs. Together, they served more than 14,000 youth at a cost of about \$28 million. (See page iii.)

The County current allocates more than 90% of its alternative education resources for dropout prevention. In FY11:

- Eight **dropout prevention programs**, administered by MCPS, served 13,000 youth at a cost of nearly \$26 million.
- Six **dropout recovery programs**, administered by Montgomery College and the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), served 861 youth at a cost of about \$2.5 million. Enrollment in dropout recovery programs equaled about 70% of the number of youths that drop out from MCPS annually.

**MCPS Alternative Education Programs Focused on Dropout Prevention**

<b>MCPS Programs</b>	<b>Program Descriptions</b>	<b>Enrollment</b>	<b>FY11 Budget</b>
Alternative I Programs	Services for students with academic, attendance, or behavioral challenges	1,664	\$3,257,000
Alternative II and III Programs	Schools for students requiring additional alternative services or in lieu of suspension	450	\$5,042,000
Regional Institute for Children & Adolescents*	Special education school primarily serving students with emotional disabilities	152	\$3,326,000
High School Plus**	Credit recovery classes during school day	4,390	\$502,000
Summer School**	New and recovery credit classes in summer	5,911	\$1,829,000
Online Pathway to Graduation**	Opportunity for current and former students to earn up to 3 credits online for graduation	129	\$75,000
Vocational Education in Special Education	Pre-vocational training for certificate-bound students with disabilities	583	\$11,427,000
Students Engaged in Pathways to Achievement	Vocational and academic program for ESOL Spanish-speaking high school students	30	\$267,000
<b>Total</b>		<b>13,309</b>	<b>\$25,725,000</b>

\* MCPS share of funding; \*\* FY12 Data

**DHHS and Montgomery College Alternative Education Programs Focused on Dropout Recovery**

<b>County-Funded Programs</b>	<b>Program Descriptions</b>	<b>Enrollment</b>	<b>FY11 Budget</b>
Gateway to College (Montgomery College)	Dropouts and current students can earn high school and college credit simultaneously toward diploma and associate's degree	141	\$925,000
GED Program at Montgomery College	Placement testing, GED preparation classes, GED testing and post secondary support	127	\$49,000
Conservation Corps (DHHS)	Job training, stipend, and GED preparation	19	\$400,000
Crossroads and Upcounty Opportunity Centers (DHHS)	Variety of services for at-risk youth including dropout prevention and recovery	409	\$952,000
Maryland Multicultural Youth Center (DHHS)	GED preparation and job readiness programming for at-risk Latino youth	165	\$133,000
<b>Total</b>		<b>861</b>	<b>\$2,460,000</b>

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## RECOMMENDED DISCUSSION ISSUES

To facilitate a discussion on the best use of County resources to support successful youth transitions into adulthood, OLO recommends the Council convene an Education Committee worksession with representatives of MCPS, Montgomery College, DHHS, and the Department of Economic Development to discuss the following issues.

### **1. What is known about the demand for alternative education programs in the County and the extent to which County programs meet that demand?**

No comprehensive data currently exist that quantify the demand for alternative education programs in the County. To address this data gap and compare the demand for local alternative education programs with the County's supply, OLO recommends the Council ask agency representatives to describe:

- How many youth in Montgomery County (ages 16-24) are not on track to earn a high school diploma or equivalent, and how many of these youth are served in local programs?
- How does MCPS discern the need for alternative education programs to improve its graduation rate(s)? What measures does MCPS use to identify secondary students as off-track to graduate?

### **2. What role should occupational training play in current County efforts to engage youth?**

Best practices in alternative education recognize the vital role that occupational training can play to engage youth and prepare them for college and careers. To discern the role of occupational training among the County's alternative education programs, OLO recommends the Council ask agency representatives to describe:

- What should be the occupational component of each agency's alternative education programs?
- What opportunities exist to strengthen the career and technical education component of existing alternative education programs?

### **3. What role can the private sector play to bolster local youth workforce development?**

Active private sector participation in advising and supporting local career and technical education programs are also recognized as best practices for engaging youth. To explore opportunities to booster private sector support for youth occupational training, OLO recommends the Council ask representatives of County agencies and business organizations to address the following questions:

- What opportunities exist to enhance private sector involvement in County agency career and technical education and youth workforce development efforts?
- From the perspectives of the County agencies and the private sector, what are the benefits and potential challenges of partnering together to advance youth workforce development opportunities?

### **4. What should be the role of Thomas Edison High School of Technology in expanding occupational training opportunities for youth?**

Edison offers a number of programs not available on other MCPS campuses, yet suffers from under enrollment. To address Edison's under enrollment and explore options for expanding its outreach to at-risk youth, OLO recommends the Council ask MCPS representatives to address the following questions:

- What opportunities exist to make Edison's programs available to more youth in the County, including students who are performing below grade level (e.g., behind in academic credits)?
- Which Edison programs hold the most promise for re-engaging at-risk youth and dropouts?
- Has MCPS leadership considered converting Edison into a comprehensive high school to serve high school students earlier in their careers (i.e., 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade)?

For a complete copy of OLO-Report 2012-4, go to: [www.montgomerycountymd.gov/olo](http://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/olo)

## Chapter VII: Findings

Most youth (ages 14-24) need support well into their twenties before they achieve self-sufficiency. Successful youth transitions into adulthood are supported by schools, families, and higher education.<sup>1</sup> Youth who drop out of school rarely have enough support to effectively transition into adulthood.

No single government agency is responsible for helping young adults make a successful transition to adulthood. Moreover, many services designed to help children, including free education, terminate when youth reach adulthood.<sup>2</sup> Finally, while some programs (such as job training) are available to those who seek them, funding and program slots are limited.

This OLO report responds to the Council's interest in understanding how County-funded alternative education programs offered by Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS), Montgomery College, and the County Government's Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) support at-risk youths' successful transitions to adulthood. This chapter presents OLO's findings on five topics:

- Local Dropout and Graduation Rates;
- Alternative Education Programs – General Characteristics;
- Local Alternative Education Programs;
- Best Practices for Alternative Education Programs; and
- Lessons Learned from Other Communities.

In sum, OLO finds that Montgomery County may need a more coordinated approach to prevent and recover high school dropouts, particularly among student subgroups most at-risk. MCPS, Montgomery College, and DHHS offer multiple programs aimed at preventing and recovering high school dropouts. Several of these programs promote workforce development as part of their services, which aligns with the best practices identified in the research. Yet, in the absence of strategic plans and formative evaluations of existing programs, it remains unclear whether the County's alternative education programs are effective or meet the demand for such services.

### LOCAL DROPOUT AND GRADUATION RATES

**Finding 1. From FY06 to FY10, an average of 1,200 MCPS high school students dropped out annually. Dropout rates varied by student subgroup, school, and program.**

Between FY06 and FY10, MCPS' overall annual dropout rates ranged from a low of 2% to a high of 2.9%, averaging 1,200 students annually over this five-year period. Among student subgroups, dropout rates varied, with higher than average dropout rates for Latino (4.9%) and Black (3.4%) students as well as ESOL (4.9%), FARMS (3.5%) and Special Education (2.9%) students.

Dropout rates also varied by school and program. Among MCPS comprehensive high schools, average annual dropout rates varied by a factor of 10, from 0.4% at Winston Churchill High School to 4.6% at Wheaton High School. Dropout data by MCPS program showed significantly higher rates among programs serving at-risk students, e.g., Regional Institute for Adolescents and Children (RICA) (5%), alternative programs (18%), and the Gateway to College program (31%).

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<sup>1</sup> Wald and Martinez, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Students who have not earned a high school diploma/equivalent by age 21 in Maryland are eligible for a public education until age 21 under COMAR (13A.02.060.2).

**Finding 2 MCPS’ overall graduation rates range from 86-90% depending on how the measures are calculated. Significant disparities exist among student groups.**

There are different ways to measure and report graduation rates. In 2010, using the “leaver rate,” MCPS reported an overall graduation rate of 90%.<sup>3</sup> Beginning in 2011, MCPS must use a different measure, the “cohort rate,” to estimate the percentage of students who graduate “on time.”<sup>4</sup> As the table below shows, use of the more precise cohort rate yields lower graduation rates for all students and increases graduation rate disparities among student subgroups.

	Class of 2010		
	Leaver Rate (L)	Cohort Rate (C)	Difference (C-L)
All Students	90.0	86.0	-4.0
<b>Race and Ethnicity Subgroups</b>			
Asian	96.4	94.7	-1.7
Black	85.8	78.0	-7.8
Latino	79.3	74.0	-5.3
White	95.3	93.7	-1.6
<b>Service Subgroups</b>			
Special Education	81.0	59.5	-21.5
ESOL	70.7	52.3	-18.4
FARMS	84.0	73.4	-10.6
<b>Gender Subgroups</b>			
Male	87.9	83.6	-4.3
Female	92.3	89.0	-3.3

Source: 2010 Maryland Report Card

More specifically, use of the cohort methodology to calculate graduation rates lowers MCPS’ reported rates across every subgroup, reducing the 2010 rate for all students by four percentage points (from 90% to 86%), and the rate for students who receive special education services by 21.5 points (from 81% to 59.5%). Some of this decline occurs because, under the new cohort measure, MCPS must count students with disabilities who take more than four years to graduate high school as “dropouts.”

The cohort rate methodology also produces greater reductions for black and Latino subgroups (7.8 and 5.3 percentage points respectively) compared to the Asian and white subgroups. This, in turn, widens the disparity among the graduation rates for these groups.

<sup>3</sup> The formula for the leaver rate divides the number of students who graduate in a given year by the number of those students who started ninth grade four years earlier plus an estimate of the number of students who dropped out over the last four years. It excludes students who transfer in or out and does not account for students who take more than four years to graduate.

<sup>4</sup> To calculate the cohort rate, schools must track each cohort of ninth graders and account for all students who enter or exit that class over the next four years. Newly issued state regulations mandate MCPS’ use of this approach.

## ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION PROGRAMS – GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS

### **Finding 3. Alternative education programs are intended to provide “alternative pathways” to success for at-risk, vulnerable, or disconnected youth.**

The term ‘alternative education’ typically refers to programs serving at-risk, vulnerable, or disconnected youth who are no longer in traditional schools. Alternative education programs can include dropout prevention and recovery programs, and schools with specialized curriculums such as technical education programs.<sup>5</sup>

Common elements of alternative education approaches include:

- Small class sizes;
- Individualized learning experiences;
- Positive rather than punitive emphasis in behavior management;
- Flexible scheduling, including part-time and evening program offerings;
- Mentoring and case management; and
- Collaboration with other human service agencies.

### **Finding 4. No comprehensive alternative education policy framework exists at the national or state level. In some communities, alternative education is part of a broader strategy to reconnect youth to education and employment.**

No federal agency’s mission focuses on all youth in alternative education or the comprehensive set of supportive services needed. The Department of Labor (DOL) historically offered few comprehensive youth employment and training programs for at-risk youth. Since the 1970’s, DOL has relied heavily on state and local governments to carry out its programs. At the state level, alternative education policies vary widely in scope and intensity across the country.

Some local jurisdictions are using alternative education as part of a comprehensive framework to reduce dropout rates, improve graduation rates, and structure services for at-risk youth. Known by various names (e.g., multiple pathways to graduation, the alternative pathway project, and Connected by 25), these frameworks aim to coordinate programs that address:

- Reductions in federal and state funding for public youth employment programs;
- A growing gap in the availability of skilled workers to fill technical jobs; and
- The lack of improvement in high school graduation rates despite education reforms focused on academic achievement and college readiness.

The principles that underlie a community’s policies and programs designed to reconnect at-risk youth to education and employment include:

- The use of data driven assessments and early warning systems;
- Multiple program options that combine high school completion, post-secondary education, training, and employment;
- Publicly funded transitional services that enable seamless service delivery across systems; and
- Reinforcing youth’s connections to families, children, and community based organizations.

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<sup>5</sup> This definition is from the National Center for Education Statistics and the National Dropout Prevention Center. As used in this report, MCPS’ Alternative Programs are a subset of County-funded alternative education programs.

**LOCAL ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION PROGRAMS**

**Finding 5. In Montgomery County, primary responsibility for delivering alternative education programs resides in MCPS.**

Fourteen alternative education programs in Montgomery County serve more than 14,000 youth. MCPS administers eight of these programs, including the three largest - Summer School, High School Plus, and Alternative I programs - that collectively serve about 12,000 students as described below.<sup>6</sup> Exhibit 21 on the next page describes enrollment for all County-funded programs.

<b>MCPS Alternative Education Programs</b>	<b>Enrollment</b>	<b>FY11 Budget</b>
Alternative I Programs	1,664	\$3,257,000
Alternative II and III Programs	450	\$5,042,000
RICA*	152	\$3,326,000
High School Plus **	4,390	\$502,000
Summer School**	5,911	\$1,829,000
Online Pathway to Graduation**	129	\$75,000
Vocational Education in Special Education	583	\$11,427,000
Students Engaged in Pathways to Achievement	30	\$267,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>13,309</b>	<b>\$25,725,000</b>

\*MCPS share of funding; \*\*FY12 data

**Finding 6. MCPS refers students to alternative education programs for reasons including academic, disciplinary, social/emotional, and/or attendance challenges.**

MCPS' provides an array of alternative program whose referral practices vary by type of program.

- **Alternative I program** referrals are made by school-level teams for students experiencing academic, attendance, and/or behavioral challenges.
- **Alternative II and III program** referrals to separate campuses are made by school-level teams for students who have not been successful in the Alternative I program and/or have been recommended for expulsion due to disciplinary infractions.
- **RICA referrals** are made by MCPS central office staff primarily for students with emotional disabilities who have not been successful in other special education placements.
- **Credit Recovery Program** referrals (e.g., High School Plus) are generally made by counselors at a comprehensive school if a student has failed one or more core courses.
- **Gateway to College Program** referrals are made by counselors for students who must apply to this dual credit program where they can earn high school and college credits.

Of note, MCPS does not refer students to career and technology education (CTE) programs, which include programs at the Thomas Edison High School for Technology.

<sup>6</sup> Of note, not all MCPS' Summer School students are enrolled in credit-recovery courses; many are not at-risk. Data on the number of Summer School students earning recovery credits are not available from MCPS.

**Exhibit 21: Alternative Education Programs in Montgomery County, FY11**

<b>Program</b>	<b>Key Program Features</b>	<b>Enrollment</b>
<b>MCPS Alternative and Special Education Programs</b>		
Alternative I	Advisory classes, supports, and consultations in comprehensive middle and high schools.	1,664
Alternative II and III	Second-chance schools for students (a) needing more supports than Alternative I or (b) instead of being expelled.	450
Regional Institute for Children and Adolescents	Day and residential school for students with emotional disabilities or placed by courts. MCPS and DHMH operate this school.	152
<b>MCPS Dropout Prevention and Recovery Programs (FY12)</b>		
High School Plus	Free credit recovery courses offered at comprehensive high schools (replaced Evening High School).	4,390
Summer School	Fee based new and recovery credit core/non core courses.	5,911
Online Pathway to Graduation	Online recovery credit and High School Assessments for current & former students who are three credits or less short of graduation.	129
<b>MCPS Career and Technology Education Programs for Special Populations</b>		
Vocational Education	Classroom and community based pre-vocational and vocational education for certificate-bound students with disabilities.	583
Students Engaged in Pathways to Achievement	Career and technical education program focused on building entry-level job skills for Spanish speaking English language learners ages 18-21 who have experienced interrupted educations.	30
<b>Montgomery College Programs</b>		
Gateway to College	Two year dual enrollment program in MCPS and Montgomery College for students ages 16-20 who have dropped out.	141
GED Programs	GED placement testing, preparation classes, testing, and transition support for anyone age 16 or older who needs to complete a GED.	127
<b>Montgomery Department of Health and Human Services Programs</b>		
Conservation Corps	Job training, stipend, and weekly GED and computer literacy instruction to out-of-school and unemployed youth ages 17 to 25.	19
Youth Opportunity Centers	Services include case management, GED preparation, and workforce services. Identity, Inc. operates this program.	409
St. Luke's Transition Center	Assistance to 11 <sup>th</sup> and 12 <sup>th</sup> grade students with emotional disabilities to support the transition into adulthood.	89
Maryland Multicultural Youth Center/LAYC	GED preparation and job readiness programs for at-risk Latino youth. The Latin American Youth Center operates this program.	165
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>14,259</b>



**Finding 7. MCPS offers a wide variety of career and technology education programs. Students behind in credits typically cannot access these programs.**

Career and technical education (CTE) programs are routinely identified in the dropout prevention literature as effective practices to meet the needs of at-risk youth. Empirical evidence has demonstrated that Career Academies and Talent Development High Schools that emphasize CTE are effective in reducing dropout rates and enabling students to progress in high school, particularly at-risk students.

MCPS offers CTE courses in all 25 comprehensive high schools, the Thomas Edison High School of Technology, the Needwood Academy, and RICA. The eligibility requirements for CTE programs, however, generally limit their enrollment to students performing at or above grade level.

As a result, CTE programs generally exclude the enrollment of MCPS students who are at the highest risk of dropping out. There are, however, two exceptions to this practice – vocational education for certificate-bound students with disabilities and the Students Engaged in Pathways to Achievement (SEPA) program for Spanish speaking high school students with interrupted educations. Both of these programs provide experiential/job-based learning opportunities for students performing below grade level to support their transition into adulthood.

**Finding 8. Enrollment in County-funded dropout recovery programs does not match the demand for services suggested by MCPS’ dropout data.**

In Montgomery County, most of the alternative education programs serving at-risk youth focus on dropout prevention rather than recovery. The enrollment and budget data for the six County-funded dropout recovery programs in Table 10 show these programs served fewer than 900 youth in FY11. This number is notably lower than the 1,200 MCPS students who drop out of high school each year.

**Table 10: County-Funded Dropout Recovery Programs**

Program	FY11 Number Served	FY11 Budget	FY12 Approved Budget
Gateway to College	141	\$925,000	\$948,000
GED Program at Montgomery College	127	\$49,000	\$59,000
Conservation Corps	19	\$400,000	\$200,000
Crossroads Youth Opportunity Center	308	\$502,000	\$502,000
Upcounty Youth Opportunity Center	101	\$450,000	\$450,000
Maryland Multicultural Youth Center	165	\$133,000	\$133,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>861</b>	<b>\$2,460,000</b>	<b>\$2,292,000</b>

**BEST PRACTICES FOR ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION PROGRAMS**

**Finding 9. Best practices for alternative education programs engage students by promoting rigor, relevance, and relationships.**

The research literature on student engagement (National Research Council, 2003) identifies three best practices for motivating students to succeed in high school:

- Enhance the **rigor** of the curriculum by coupling high standards and expectations for student success with high levels of support to enable all students to succeed;
- Enhance the **relevance** of school by ensuring that curriculum and instruction respond to and reflect students’ current interests and long-term goals; and
- Foster **relationships** to motivate students to succeed by connecting students to their schools and communities.

Together, these practices are known as the “rigor, relevance, and relationship framework” for promoting student engagement. The exhibit below describes the key features of this framework based on best practices for promoting student engagement. A review of the research literature indicates that best practices in alternative education, dropout prevention, and career and technical education align with the rigor, relevance, and relationships framework for engaging students.

<b>Best Practices to Engage Students</b>	<b>Practice Features</b>	<b>Examples of Practices</b>
Enhance <b>rigor</b> of curriculum and instruction	High standards and expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High quality instruction</li> <li>• High expectations for students</li> </ul>
	Extensive supports that enable students to meet high expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Effective classroom management</li> <li>• Social skills instruction</li> <li>• Summer school and tutoring</li> </ul>
Enhance <b>relevance</b> of curriculum and instruction	Reflects students’ interests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Choice for students</li> <li>• Active, hands on learning</li> <li>• Flexibility</li> </ul>
	Reflects students’ long-term goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus on career and college readiness</li> <li>• Career and technical education</li> <li>• Service learning/internships</li> <li>• AP/IB/early college experiences</li> </ul>
Foster <b>relationships</b>	Connections to schools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personalized instruction</li> <li>• Small schools and class sizes</li> <li>• Mentors</li> </ul>
	Connections to community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parental involvement</li> <li>• Collaboration with other agencies</li> </ul>
Source: OLO analysis of best practices identified by National Research Council, 2003		



**Finding 10. MCPS' alternative education and career and technology education programs mostly align with best practices for promoting rigor, relevance, and relationships. MCPS' other dropout prevention efforts, however, do not fully align with best practices.**

MCPS administers its alternative education programs to comply with Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) requirements. MCPS has not evaluated its programs to determine their effectiveness at improving graduation rates; it was beyond the scope of this project to discern whether MSDE requirements align with research-based best practices.

To consider whether MCPS' alternative education programs align with best practices, OLO developed a rubric to compare the "rigor, relevance, and relationship" framework to the key features of each MCPS alternative education program. Applying this rubric, OLO found that:

- MCPS' Alternative I, II, and III programs and Regional Institute for Children and Adolescents generally align with best practices for promoting student engagement. The only gap evident is whether MCPS' Alternative II and III programs reflect students' interests in short- and/or long-term goals beyond earning a high diploma and preparing for college.
- MCPS' career and technology education programs also squarely align with best practices for enhancing student engagement. One exception to this pattern is the absence of extensive supports to assist MCPS students pursuing career pathways to reach high expectations for student performance. Conversely, MCPS' vocational programs in special education and Students Engaged in Pathways to Achievement Program each employ extensive supports aimed at ensuring students reach high standards and expectations for performance.
- MCPS' dropout prevention and recovery programs (e.g., High School Plus, Online Pathway to Graduation) focus exclusively on the rigor construct by providing students additional opportunities to master course content and earn their high school diploma. They do not address the relevance and relationship constructs to motivate students to succeed.

**Finding 11. Three of six County-funded alternative education programs administered by Montgomery College and DHHS align with best practices.**

The County funds six programs that provide dropout prevention or recovery services beyond MCPS:

- Gateway to College and GED Programs administered by Montgomery College; and
- Youth Opportunities Centers (Crossroads and Upcounty), Conservation Corps, Maryland Multicultural Youth Center, and St. Luke's Career Transition Programs funded by DHHS.

All but the St. Luke's program focus on re-engaging MCPS dropouts to earn their GED or to prepare for the workforce as part of their service delivery. To consider whether these County-funded alternative education programs align with best practices, OLO developed a rubric to compare the "rigor, relevance, and relationship" framework to the key features of each these programs. Applying this rubric, OLO found that the Gateway to College, Conservation Corps, and Youth Opportunity Centers most closely align with the best practices for supporting student engagement while the alignment for the other, smaller programs is not as strong. Like MCPS' alternative education programs, none of these County-funded programs have been evaluated to determine their effectiveness at improving graduation rates.

## IMPLEMENTATION HIGHLIGHTS FROM “MULTIPLE PATHWAY” COMMUNITIES

**Finding 12. In some communities across the nation, alternative education programs are part of a comprehensive service delivery framework known as “multiple pathways to graduation.”**

Some local jurisdictions have incorporated alternative education into a comprehensive service delivery framework aimed at reducing dropout rates, improving graduation rates, and structuring services for at-risk youth. Often called “multiple pathways to graduation,” this approach consists of a continuum of programs aimed at re-connecting at-risk youth, including dropouts, to education and employment. Typically, multiple pathways programs include both **education** and **occupation components**.

Similar to alternative education, **the education component** of this approach expands the program offerings of traditional comprehensive high schools to reach at-risk youth through the use of adequate “on ramps”, customized services, and a mix of schools:

- **Adequate on-ramps** are re-entry points for young people who detour from a traditional path. Examples of these “on ramps” include the increased availability of alternative schools, expanded youth employment services, or transitional services in GED programs.
- **Customized services** require educational and employment systems, including higher education, to recognize the types of challenges that some young people face and customize the types of supports and opportunities they provide to enable these young people to succeed.
- **A Mix of Schools and Programs** recognizes the need to provide engaging educational opportunities for youth across the academic continuum (e.g., pre-GED, GED, and diploma).

The **occupational component** of the multiple pathway approach aims to ensure gainful employment or access to career training for at-risk youth. Some examples of this component include:

- The **Learning to Work Program (LTW)** developed by the New York City Department of Education. The LTW program is an intensive career exploration and college readiness program that uses community based organizations to provide skills workshops, field trips, job skills seminars, internships, college and career counseling, and job placement assistance.
- **Career Academies**, as used in school districts across the country, including Philadelphia. Career Academies provide integrated academic and vocational coursework. Career academies also use partnerships with local employers to build links between school and work and provide students with work-based learning opportunities.
- **Linked Learning** model high schools (located primarily in California) that educate at-risk students in the same environment as other students. This model emphasizes work opportunities (e.g., internships), hands-on projects, the involvement of career professionals, and training for in-demand careers.

**Finding 13. Successful multiple pathway programs rely on data-driven strategies, focus on increasing educational options, and develop collaborative partnerships.**

Successful efforts to establish a multiple pathways framework share the following implementation characteristics:

- **Data driven.** These programs use segmentation analysis to identify students who are off-track or academically at-risk. Following a segmentation analysis, a district may enhance or redesign its data systems to more closely monitor student cohorts and capture longitudinal data for at-risk students. For example, a community may increase its pre-GED program opportunities in response to a high number of dropouts needing these services.
- **Focus on increasing educational capacity and options, particularly for out-of-school youth.** Local districts also use the results of a segmentation analysis to design a portfolio of program options. The array of programs typically consists of:
  - Prevention/intervention programs (such as bridge programs, high school orientation programs, or attendance monitoring) are designed to increase graduation rates by reducing the number of off-track students; and;
  - Recuperation/recovery programs that expand options for students who have fallen behind or dropped out. Examples of these include credit recovery programs and twilight schools.
- **Collaborative partnerships that cross institutions, sectors and organizations.** The collaborative work among community stakeholders and institutions, such as private industry councils and institutions of higher education, is a defining feature of multiple pathway initiatives.

## **Chapter VIII: Recommended Discussion Issues**

The Council requested this study to understand how County-funded alternative education programs support youths' successful transitions to adulthood, particularly among at-risk youth. OLO found that the County offers a number of alternative education programs through MCPS, Montgomery College, and the Department of Health and Human Services aimed at preventing and recovering dropouts. For the most part, these programs align with best practices research that stresses the importance of rigorous and relevant curricula and fostering relationships to keep students feeling connected.

OLO's review found that some program gaps exist, particularly related to access to career and occupational training and program supports for all students. An example of one gap is whether Alternative II and III program curricula adequately address students' short- and long-term career goals, beyond college readiness. Another issue is the uneven access to career and technology education (CTE) programs for all students.

No comprehensive data currently exist that quantify the demand for alternative education programs in the County or that measure to what extent the County's programs meet that demand. However, the data that are available suggest efforts to enhance access to occupational training and expand outreach efforts to improve dropout recovery are warranted. For example, the County's total enrollment of about 860 youth in its dropout recovery programs in FY11 captured only 70% of the average number of students who drop out of MCPS in one year.

Based on the experience of other jurisdictions, one option for the County to consider is working in conjunction with its workforce development efforts and the business community to reconfigure alternative education programs. Specifically, one model to consider is the "multiple pathways to graduation approach," which aims to re-connect students (both dropouts and those at risk of dropping out) to education and employment opportunities.

To facilitate a discussion on the best use of County resources to support successful youth transitions into adulthood, OLO recommends the Council convene an Education Committee worksession with representatives of Montgomery County Public Schools, Montgomery College, the Department of Health and Human Services, and the Department of Economic Development to discuss the following issues outlined below. The issues are intended to improve the Council's understanding and oversight of County appropriations aimed at enabling youth to be successful both in school and at work.

### **Discussion Issue #1: What is known about the demand for alternative education programs in the County and the extent to which County programs meet that demand?**

Alternative education programs provide second chance opportunities for youth who have dropped out or who are at-risk for dropping out to achieve success in education and transition into adulthood. Understanding the demand for alternative education requires understanding the individual, school, and community risk factors for dropping out of school, the scope of the dropout problem, and the typical life paths taken by recent dropouts. Quantifying the demand for alternative education programs locally is the first step toward discerning how well current County programs meet that demand.

Alternative education programs can also be tailored to meet the needs of on-track students performing at grade level and not in need of recovery credits who desire a different educational experience. For example, career and technical education high schools and Career Academies can meet the needs of on-track youth desiring occupational training.

To improve understanding of the demand for alternative education in Montgomery County, OLO recommends the Council ask agency representatives to address the following questions:

- How many youth in Montgomery County (ages 16-24) are not on track to earn a high school diploma or equivalent, and what percent of all County youth does this represent? How many of these youth are served by Montgomery College or Department of Health and Human Services' programs that offer dropout prevention or recovery services?
- How does MCPS discern the need for alternative education programs to improve its graduation rate? For example, what measures does MCPS use to identify secondary students as off-track to graduate high school in four years? What percent of MCPS students fit this description and how many are served in MCPS programs targeting such students?
- How does MCPS discern the need for alternative education programs to improve student engagement among on-track students? For example, how is demand for MCPS' career and technology education programs measured and how many students are enrolled in career development programs?

**Discussion Issue #2: What role should occupational training play in current County efforts to engage youth?**

Successful transitions to adulthood require that young people develop both academic and occupational skills. The "multiple pathways to graduation" approach relies on both an educational and occupational component to re-engage disconnected youth. The research literature on student engagement confirms the essential role that career and technical education can play in motivating youth, including at-risk youth, to stay in school and graduate.

Currently, the County offers a host of alternative education programs that emphasize the educational component of the multiple pathways approach. MCPS administers most of the County's alternative education programs. MCPS' programs focus on getting at-risk students to perform at grade level by earning enough credits to graduate and by passing Maryland's high school assessments.

Most of the County's alternative education programs administered by Montgomery College and the Department of Health and Human Services also emphasize the educational component of the multiple pathways approach with a focus on completing a high school diploma or equivalent. The exception to this pattern is DHHS' Conservation Corps that, in addition to its education component, includes internships and stipends aimed at re-connecting at-risk youth to the workforce. Of note, the Conservation Corps is not currently operating and is seeking a vendor to re-start this program.

Finally, the County's Department of Economic Development (DED) administers the County's youth employment programs that focus on workforce development. Note: A review of the key features and characteristics of DED's youth programs was beyond the scope of this project.

To consider what role occupational training and workforce development should play in the process of engaging youth in the County, OLO recommends the Council ask agency representatives to address the following questions:

- What should be the occupational component of each agency's alternative education programs? What are the challenges associated with providing more occupational services?
- What opportunities exist to strengthen the career and technical education (CTE) component of existing alternative education programs? What partnerships can be fostered to link existing dropout prevention and recovery programs to related occupational training and workforce development initiatives?
- Beyond the agencies represented at the worksession, are there other organizations that should be engaged in providing more occupational training and CTE opportunities for County youth?

**Discussion Issue #3: What role can the private sector play to bolster the County's youth workforce development programs?**

Two current challenges - tight budgets facing local governments and a need to increase the occupational component of existing alternative education programs - suggest that the role of the private sector in supporting youth workforce development opportunities could be strengthened.

Federal policy requires the inclusion of representatives from the private sector to advise local career and technical education and workforce development efforts. Locally, the Montgomery County Collaboration Board, which includes private sector representatives, advises MCPS and the College on its career and technology education offerings. Private sector representatives also comprise the majority of the Workforce Investment Board that advises DED on its programming. Additionally, local business partners support and fund three trade foundations that support MCPS' automotive technology, construction, and information technology programs.

To consider what roles the private sector can take in supporting additional youth workforce development opportunities, OLO recommends the Council ask representatives of County agencies and business organizations to address the following questions:

- Beyond the County's Collaboration and Workforce Investment Boards, are there any public/private partnerships that provide workforce development for at-risk youth? Are there lessons from these efforts that could inform future efforts?
- What opportunities exist to enhance private sector involvement in County agency CTE and youth workforce development efforts?
- From the perspective of the County agencies, what are the benefits and potential challenges of partnering with the private sector to advance youth workforce development opportunities?
- From the perspective of local businesses/private sector, what are the benefits and potential challenges of partnering with County agencies to advance youth workforce development opportunities?

**Discussion Issue #4: What should be the role of Thomas Edison High School of Technology in expanding occupational training opportunities for youth?**

Thomas Edison High School of Technology serves as MCPS' career and technology education school for students interested in pursuing one of 16 career pathways, seven of which are only available at Edison (e.g., HVAC). Students enrolled at Edison spend half of the day at their home school taking core academic subjects and the remainder of their school day at Edison in a three-period CTE course tied to their specific career program of study. Examples of career programs of student include business management and finance, information technology, and early childhood development.

Generally, students at-risk are not enrolled at Edison because admission is limited to students performing at or above grade level in terms of academic credits earned. Edison has also operated under capacity over the past five years; with the capacity to serve 1,000 students, FY11 enrollment was only 555 students.

In FY10, MCPS convened the Edison Career Pathway Program/Facilities Project to offer recommendations for improving enrollment. Their recommendations include expanding opportunities for certificate-bound students with disabilities, updating current pathway programs, creating more career and industry connections to support under-enrolled programs, and downsizing some programs to expand the capacity of over-enrolled programs.<sup>1</sup> According to the Board of Education's and the County Executive's Recommended Capital Improvement Program FY13-FY18, Edison's modernization is scheduled for completion by August 2018.

To consider the role that Edison could play in providing additional career and technical education opportunities for County youth, OLO recommends the Council ask MCPS representatives to address the following questions:

- What opportunities exist to make Edison's programs available to more youth in the County? What are the potential benefits or drawbacks to expanding Edison's programs?
- What opportunities exist to make Edison's programs available to interested students who are performing below grade level (e.g., behind in academic credits)? What are the potential benefits or drawbacks to this approach?
- Among Edison's current pathways, which programs hold the most promise for re-engaging at-risk and out-of-school youth? What academic or non-academic supports might these youth need to be successful?
- Has MCPS leadership considered converting Edison into a comprehensive high school to serve high school students earlier in their careers (i.e., 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade)? What are the potential benefits and drawbacks to this approach?

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<sup>1</sup> See MCPS Report of the Thomas Edison High School of Technology/Wheaton High School Roundtable Advisory Committee was transmitted to members of the Board of Education on January 31, 2011



**MONTGOMERY COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS**  
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March 8, 2012



Dr. Elaine Bonner-Tompkins, Senior Legislative Analyst  
Montgomery County Office of Legislative Oversight  
Stella B. Werner Council Office Building  
100 Maryland Avenue  
Rockville, Maryland 20850

Dear Dr. Bonner-Tompkins:

Thank you for providing Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) staff members with the opportunity to review and comment on the Office of Legislative Oversight (OLO) Report, Alternative Education in Montgomery County. MCPS staff members who participated in the review and the development of this report appreciated the collaborative, constructive nature of the interagency process. Comments and suggestions for technical changes were previously provided, but not all suggestions and changes were evident in the final report. Additionally, we have comments that address your specific findings.

An analysis of the report indicates that feedback from MCPS staff members was carefully considered and incorporated into the draft. The following comments on the completed draft are provided below:

- In chapter I, page 1, under “Background,” the report includes a definition for Alternative Education from the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network at Clemson University. Although MCPS generally accepts much of the definition and description used in the report, we believe that it is too broad and encompasses a disparate range of programs including the Regional Institute for Children and Adolescents (RICA). RICA provides a program for students with identified special education needs and the program is designed to be comprehensive in addressing the identified needs while providing a general education program.
- In chapter IV, page 21, the report reads, “principals are encouraged to design their Alternative I programs to meet the specific needs evident in their schools.” We believe a more complete description would be, “principals are encouraged to design their Alternative I program to provide direct academic, social/emotional, and behavioral management services using the critical components of alternative education programs to meet the specific needs evident in their schools.”
- In chapter IV, page 22, the report states, “that Alternative I programs typically target services to students at-risk who are not eligible for special education services.” Alternative I programs “typically target services to students who experience academic

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failure and are at risk of not completing school.” Students who receive special education services would not automatically be excluded from the pool of students eligible for alternative services as defined by MCPS. The current construction of the sentence implies that a student receiving special education services would be excluded from alternative services or that a school team would need to rule out special education before referring a student for alternative services.

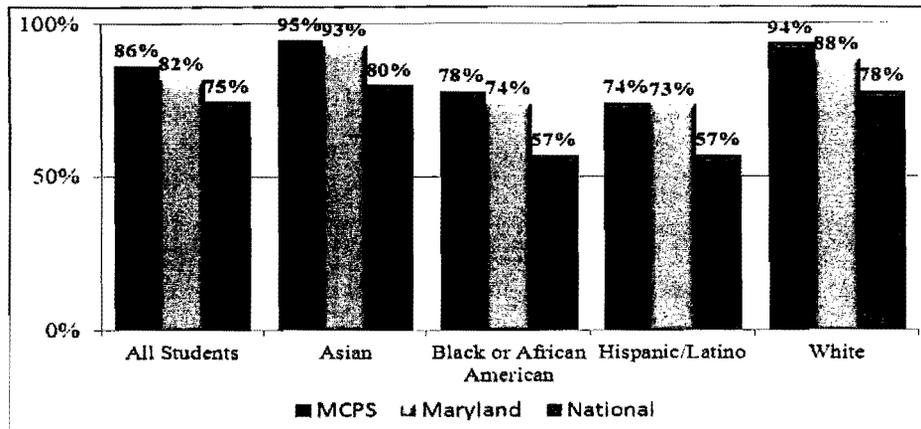
- In chapter IV, page 22, Footnote #9, the report makes reference to the Department of Alternative Programs. There is no Department of Alternative Programs; rather Alternative Programs resides in the Office of School Performance.
- In chapter IV, page 32, the report states that generally, students must be performing at or above grade level to enroll at the Thomas Edison High School of Technology (Edison). As a clarification, out of the 16 programs, there are no Grade Point Average (GPA) requirements for Edison programs other than the Medical Careers Program. The GPA requirement for the Medical Careers Program is due to the technical and background knowledge necessary to pursue that course of study.
- In chapter IV, page 49, Chart 8 RICA, the report makes reference to college preparedness as a feature of the RICA program. We believe that in addition to college preparedness, a feature of the program should include: full transition services, inclusion into general education programs, Thomas Edison High School of Technology, and Montgomery College (when possible).
- In the chart under finding 5, page 67, the report makes reference to “Vocational Education in Special Education.” MCPS is concerned about the term “Vocational Education” used in reference to special education services for students who are served in certificate-bound programs. We would like to suggest that the report reflects the actual names of the programs (e.g. Learning for Independence, School-Community Based, Rock Terrace School).

MCPS offers the following comments on project findings included in the report:

**Finding 3. Alternative education programs are intended to provide “alternative pathways” to success for at-risk, vulnerable, or disconnected youth.**

Engaging and supporting our at-risk, vulnerable or disconnected youth is a mutual concern, and although MCPS’ graduation rate is among the highest in the nation, and the graduation rates for our Black or African American and Hispanic/Latino youth far exceed national norms, there is clearly room for improvement. The importance of multiple strategies, approaches and programs to reach these students is not in dispute.

## Graduation Rate



Source: 2011 MCPS and Maryland 4-year cohort graduation rate, [www.mdreportcard.org](http://www.mdreportcard.org)  
2009 Nation On-Time Graduation Rate, National Center for Education Statistics

However, using the term “alternative education programs” as a catch-all phrase, despite its local meaning, obscures the critical issues facing our community in our efforts to ensure that every student is engaged and successful. This overly broad definition also operates to blur the unique needs of our student population. For example, students who require the therapy integrated and/or residential components at RICA have significantly different needs than students in our comprehensive high schools who may require more hands-on instructional opportunities in order to remain engaged in their education.

**Finding 4. No comprehensive alternative education policy framework exists at the national or state level. In some communities, alternative education is part of a broader strategy to reconnect youth to education and employment.**

There is no comprehensive “alternative education policy framework” in part because it is difficult to define the at-risk population in a manner that would be meaningful for program design. There is much variance that is rooted in the causes of the lack of student engagement. Building a comprehensive framework for addressing the needs of at-risk students is a laudable goal; however, a more compelling goal is effectively addressing those needs. With or without a framework, in order to serve at-risk students with efficacy, it is incumbent upon a school district and a local community to have a wide array of strategies and programs to address individual student’s strengths and needs. The strategies and programs identified in the report focus on only a small segment of MCPS’ efforts to support at-risk or disengaged students.

With the understanding that dropout prevention starts with high quality classroom instruction, MCPS is in the process of sharpening and refining our focus on teaching and learning. Beyond the focus on quality first instruction, MCPS currently is engaged in developing a systemic approach to recognizing and meeting the needs of all students, especially students who require

more intensive or innovative interventions. This emphasis on identifying and implementing appropriate interventions based on individual student needs is intended to address many of the issues raised in the report and is something that I identified as a strategic focus for the system in December and that the Board of Education is discussing

Of course, we know that there will continue to be the need for specialized programs for small numbers of students with unique needs, such as the Phoenix Program, with its emphasis on substance abuse recovery. To strengthen the school system's efforts to meet the needs of these students, the position of coordinator of alternative programs has been upgraded to principal. It is our belief that this provides for a strong instructional leader, who can weave rigor, relevance, and relationships throughout the educational experience of the students.

**Finding 5. In Montgomery County, primary responsibility for delivering alternative education programs resides in MCPS.**

Although MCPS has the responsibility for administering three levels of alternative programs and administers other services to reach our at-risk youth, it is clear that the school system, in isolation, cannot meet the myriad of needs of at-risk children. There are various county governmental agencies that play critical roles in strengthening the social fabric that supports students to stay in school and earn their high school diploma. The report notes that cross-agency collaboration can coordinate local efforts in such a way as to prevent students from falling through cracks in the system. In addition, this collaboration leads to seamless intervention services for students and families. These efforts at cross-agency collaboration and community partnerships must be viewed as an integral component of an overall strategy to meet the needs of at-risk children.

**Finding 7. MCPS offers a wide variety of career and technology education (CTE) programs. Students behind in credits typically cannot access these programs.**

Of the 16 programs, with the exception of the Medical Careers Program, there are no GPA requirements that would limit the participation of at-risk students in CTE courses. Students are not excluded from CTE programs because they are struggling academically; however, the reality for many of our students who fall behind is that they must take specific courses for credit toward graduation. For some of our struggling students, this means that there is no room in their schedules for CTE courses. Once students are in the position of trying to make up credit, it can be difficult to find room in their schedule for a course that does not fulfill a graduation requirement.

The report notes with approval both vocational education for certificate-bound students with disabilities and the Students Engaged in Pathways to Achievement (SEPA); however, the key fact that sets both these programs apart is that the students in the programs are not anticipating earning a high school diploma. Both these programs are predicated on the assumption that the student will not earn a diploma and therefore, school schedules can be based on interests rather than requirements. The plethora of state graduation requirements and narrowly defined pathways

toward graduation leaves local education agencies with little flexibility for creative or innovative schedule building for our most challenged students.

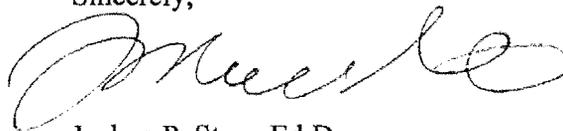
**Finding 10. MCPS’ alternative education and career and technology education programs mostly align with best practices for promoting rigor, relevance, and relationships. MCPS’ other dropout prevention efforts, however, do not fully align with best practices.**

The report uses the rigor, relevance, and relationships rubric to evaluate MCPS’ programs. These are the key elements of any successful approach to supporting at-risk students toward graduation. However, in the report, this rubric is used as the prism to view each program as if it operates in isolation, unconnected to the web of supports that often surround students. For example, the report argues that High School Plus and Online Pathway to Graduation do not address either student interest (relevance) or relationships; however, these programs do not operate in isolation. They are often one component in an overall strategy to help students graduate.

In terms of relationship for example, High School Plus takes place in a student’s home high school, often with teachers the student knows. It is expected that students who take courses through the High School Plus Program remain active in the life of the school community, including accessing supports, participating in extracurricular activities, and all other aspects of school life. Although the three “R’s” are not each a part of every program or strategy, they are what guides MCPS in programming for each individual student. The implicit assumption of the report is that every program or strategy should check off all three boxes of the rubric. This assumption is problematic because it ignores the reality that every component of a path to graduation cannot meet all three “R’s.” A student may have no interest in the State and Local Government course, but the state of Maryland requires that the student pass just such a course.

We share the sense of urgency about meeting the needs of our most at-risk students as articulated in the report and look forward to a constructive dialogue about how to coordinate efforts so as to most effectively reach our children in need. The collaborative nature of this process was appreciated and we look forward to discussing the Alternative Education Program in MCPS.

Sincerely,



Joshua P. Starr, Ed.D.  
Superintendent of Schools

JPS:kjm

Copy to:

- |             |                |
|-------------|----------------|
| Dr. Lacey   | Ms. Richardson |
| Mr. Edwards | Mr. Talley     |
| Dr. Garran  | Ms. Webb       |
| Mr. Lang    |                |