

Opening Doors to Scholastic Success

Put money into kindergarten and elementary grades.

Friday morning in my son's second-grade class is a hectic time. His teacher tries to manage a class of 23—some of whom won't sit still, others who can't complete simple tasks, a few who show the benefits of preschool preparation.

To help these children and all other Montgomery County students, School Superintendent Jerry West recently issued a "call to action" outlining a plan to raise the academic bar for all students and close the minority achievement gap. Not a moment too soon.

Growing enrollment, increasing poverty, high mobility and a growing number of English-language learners have changed the face of county schools. In 1973 Montgomery schools were 90 percent white; now they are 50 percent white. The number of kids on free and reduced-price meals was 5 percent in 1973; now it's 23 percent. The number of children enrolled in English for speakers of other languages has gone up 60 percent in 10 years.

More important, the achievement gap between African American and Hispanic children and students who are white or Asian has become a chasm. About three-fourths of white and Asian students are meeting third-grade reading standards, while fewer than half of African American and Hispanic children are succeeding.

We must develop accountability at all levels; improve and support teachers by providing additional time and resources for professional development; and expand our parental and business involvement in the classrooms.

We also must focus our attention on early childhood. Collaborative efforts between our school system, the Department of Health and Human Services and the non-profit community hold out the best opportunity for success. But within the school system, we must strengthen the kindergarten curriculum, expand all-day kindergarten programs to the schools that face the most challenges and reduce class size at our neediest schools to 17 students per teacher in first and second grades and 15 to 1 in kindergarten.

The most important thing we can do to improve student achievement is to put money in kindergarten and elementary schools. A landmark study in Tennessee showed that gains made in these early years continued into high school, especially for minority and low-income students, with special-education enrollments, grade retentions and disciplinary measures decreasing and graduation rates increasing. Such results have encouraged California, Wisconsin, Nevada and other jurisdictions to begin to reduce class sizes in the early grades.

Class-size reductions and all-day kindergarten may mean relocations or asking principals and staff to use space creatively. But preliminary estimates suggest that the cost would be less than one percent of the annual county operating budget. It would be money well spent, not because it's the latest fad in education reform but because it works.

—*Steven Silverman*

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