



November 17, 2008

Ms. Karen Orlansky, Director  
Dr. Elaine Bonner-Tompkins, Senior Legislative Analyst  
Ms. Kristen Latham, Legislative Analyst  
Office of Legislative Oversight  
Stella B. Werner Council Office Building  
100 Maryland Avenue  
Rockville, Maryland 20850

Dear Ms. Orlansky, Dr. Bonner-Tompkins, and Ms. Latham:

Thank you for providing Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) staff with the opportunity to review and comment on the draft Office of Legislative Oversight (OLO) Report on High School Consortia. Comments and suggestions for technical changes were previously provided. MCPS staff members who participated in this review appreciated the collaborative process used throughout the development and review of this report. The data and findings in this report will help MCPS in our review and oversight of the Northeast Consortium (NEC) and the Downcounty Consortium (DCC).

It is evident that much of the feedback provided by MCPS throughout the development of the report was carefully considered and incorporated. In our final review, the following comments are offered:

- The consortia have been exceptionally successful in providing students high quality program choices. As noted in the report, over 5,000 students are now enrolled in schools outside their base area. Also included in the report are the results of a survey of parents completing choice forms indicating that 53 percent of NEC students and 61 percent of DCC students choose schools based on the available programs. MCPS believes it is important to continue to offer program choices to students in the areas most impacted by poverty.
- MCPS cannot provide students the same level of high quality program options without the current consortia arrangements. Programs such as Project Lead The Way, International Baccalaureate, dance programs, musical technology, or media programs could not be replicated in all schools. As a result, many students would be denied access to these programs that have proven to engage our most needy students. If access to these programs were limited to students living in the base areas, many programs would be under enrolled. The program offerings at the consortia schools have provided recent graduates with postsecondary opportunities that were not available prior to the implementation of consortia programs.

**Office of the Chief Operating Officer**

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- While acknowledging the work MCPS must continue to improve student performance, it is important to consider the impact of poverty in weighing the student performance impact of the consortia. The report concludes that growth in student poverty in the consortia has mirrored the growth of student poverty in all MCPS high schools. While accurate, this analysis does not acknowledge that six of the eight consortium high schools had a significantly higher poverty rate at the outset and continue to account for most of the highest poverty high schools in MCPS. The ability of staff, parents, and students in these schools to perform as well as, or in some cases better than, the MCPS average is a significant achievement. In performance areas where these schools have not kept pace with their more affluent peers, MCPS remains committed to the goal to no longer have poverty or race as a predictive factor of student achievement in MCPS.

MCPS also offers the following comments concerning the budget chapters:

- Regarding Finding 2, the OLO report notes that MCPS has spent a total of \$29.1 million over 11 years for the two consortia, including \$6.3 million in federal grant funds and \$22.7 million in local funds. While the data confirms this conclusion, using multiyear numbers is confusing for readers who normally think of operating budget totals in annual terms. The report does not include an average annual total to put the 11-year figure in terms comparable to most budget documents.
- The report does not discuss fully the annual changes in spending. Had these been included, the data would show that after the grant funding ended, MCPS did not continue grant-funded programs with full local funding, but reduced the size of the program to reflect the end of the start-up period. MCPS requested local funding to replace some of the federal funded positions and resources as budget initiatives. The analysis of the data would be enhanced by the annual funding changes. Such an analysis would inform members of the County Council, particularly those who joined the Council after the expiration of the grants, of the important budgetary changes that have occurred in the two consortia since their inception.
- Regarding Issue 3, MCPS practice with respect to grant-funded positions, MCPS Regulation DDA-RA *Seeking and Securing Federal, State, and Private Grants* (Section IV (C) (2)) provides that grant-funded positions are conditional on future funding. Employees in grant-funded positions are aware of the conditional status of their employment. In nearly all instances, the Council approves supplemental appropriations for grants on the understanding that the expenditures will cease at the expiration of the grant. In some cases, however, grants are awarded for start-up expenditures, assuming that local funding will continue if the program proves successful. This gives the county an opportunity to try out a new program or instructional approach without the requirement of local funding. The county may assume continuing costs, which normally

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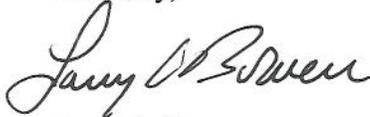
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are less than the original start-up costs, only if the program works. In the case of the NEC and the DCC, the Council was informed that there was an expectation of continued local funding if the programs were successful. Upon expiration of the grant, MCPS included continued funding, as is the normal practice, as budget initiatives to be considered by the Council as discretionary funding. In each case, the Council approved continued funding.

Thank you again for the opportunity to review the draft findings and recommendations. I believe the collaborative work between MCPS and OLO will result in an excellent report that will support the work of the school system and County Council.

Sincerely,



Larry A. Bowers  
Chief Operating Officer

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Copy to:

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