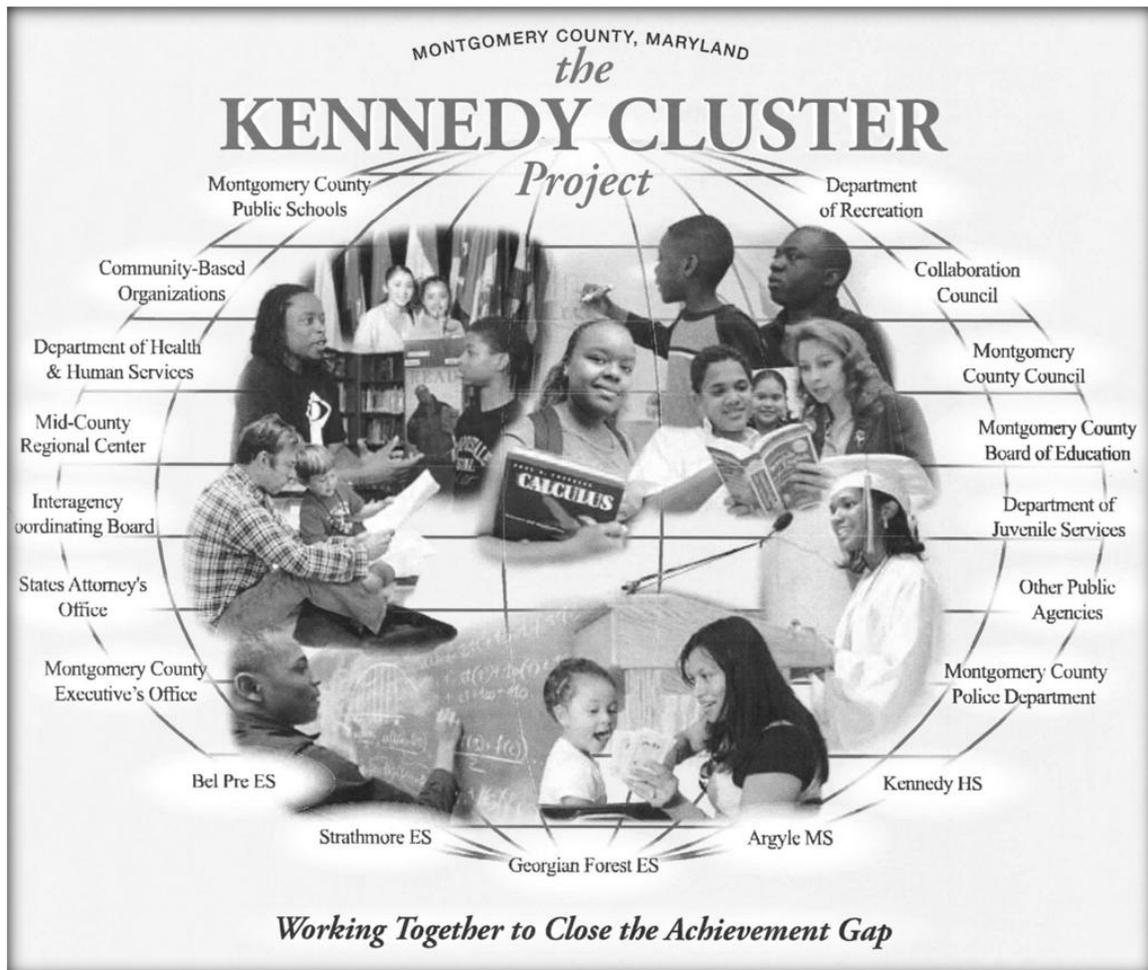


From Multiple Agencies to a Multi-Agency Team: A Case Study of the Kennedy Cluster Project



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Executive Summary

The racial/ethnic gap in academic achievement is a long-standing concern in education. Some of the root causes of the gap are better understood by examining the issues and challenges that confront African American and Hispanic students from low-income families, many of whom also live in households where English is a second language. In these situations, solutions to closing the achievement gap must include access to a broader range of services than are available through a school system. As a result, school systems increasingly are partnering with local agencies to overcome barriers to academic achievement for disadvantaged students. This case study describes the results of a partnership between Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) and Montgomery County agencies—the Kennedy Cluster Project.

MCPS initiated the Kennedy Cluster Project in 2007 to identify and address the root causes of the achievement gap in MCPS. Schools in the Kennedy High School feeder area (cluster) were selected as the focus of the project because the Kennedy cluster schools enrolled large percentages of African American and Hispanic students, many of whom were poor or lived in homes where Spanish was the primary language, or both. The Kennedy Cluster Project multi-agency team representatives provided to students and their families educational resources in and out of school as well as access to health care, housing, financial assistance, legal aid, recreational programs, and many other social services.

Although the achievement gap has not closed for Kennedy cluster students, there is evidence that the Kennedy Cluster Project has contributed to positive academic outcomes for individual at-risk students and for the Kennedy cluster schools overall. Some encouraging academic findings are:

- Graduation rates among African American and Hispanic students at Kennedy High School increased over the past three years.
- The racial/ethnic gap in the high school graduation rate narrowed over the past three years as improvements in the graduation rates of African American and Hispanic students outpaced those of White and Asian students.
- Anecdotal evidence suggested that Kennedy Cluster Project activities contributed to the high school graduation of some at-risk students.
- Over the past two years, the dropout rate of Hispanic students at Kennedy High School was lower than the overall MCPS high school dropout rate for Hispanic students.
- Anecdotal evidence suggested that Kennedy Cluster Project activities helped to prevent some at-risk students from dropping out.
- Over the past two years, the mobility rates of African American and Hispanic students who attended Kennedy High School were lower than the overall rates for MCPS African American and Hispanic students.
- Anecdotal evidence suggested that Kennedy Cluster Project activities reduced residential mobility among elementary and middle school students by making it easier for low-income and homeless families to stay in their neighborhoods.

- School counselors reported that the Kennedy Cluster Project activities improved students' attendance, classroom performance, and course marks.

In addition to fostering achievement among African American and Hispanic students, the multi-agency team addressed root causes of the achievement gap by facilitating access to services that foster at-risk students' likelihood of success despite the odds. Some examples of the multi-agency contributions are:

- Montgomery County Department of Recreation staff reported increases in attendance of Kennedy cluster students at recreational and extra-curricular programs.
- Many students received mental health services that were beyond the scope of what was available at the school level.
- Kennedy Cluster Project interventions increased students' and families feelings of hope, wellbeing, and engagement, three socio-emotional factors that are highly correlated with academic performance.

An unintended positive consequence of the Kennedy Cluster Project was professional development for the partners at no additional cost to MCPS or the county agencies. The multi-agency team has a shared vision, high levels of trust and interdependence among members, and creative problem-solving approaches to service delivery. Better communication resulted in more efficient delivery of educational and community-based resources and services to students and their families during and beyond the school day. Some examples are:

- The Kennedy Cluster Project multi-agency team collaboration reduced communication barriers between and among the school system and county departments and agencies.
- The team members have built a professional network and call on each other to help resolve questions and problems for students and families.
- School counselors increased their awareness of how to access local agency services directly.
- Counselors are better able to link families to specific services so that many students and families can be served without the need for a multi-agency meeting.

In Montgomery County, the achievement gap is no longer merely an educational problem. It is a community problem. Over the past five years, the Kennedy Cluster Project has contributed to success for individual students, their families, and their community, one case at a time. More work needs to be done to close the achievement gap. But results of the case study provide strong evidence that progress in narrowing the gap is possible through multi-agency collaboration.

Background

On average, African American and Hispanic students perform lower on measures of academic achievement than do their White and Asian counterparts. The performance differences, or achievement gaps, are evident as early as Grade 2 and persist through Grade 12. School-based efforts to close the gaps have had some success. But solutions to the root causes of the achievement gaps require a broader range of services than those delivered during the school day.

Research shows that students benefit when their schools, families, and communities work together. One reason for this is that student academic success is influenced simultaneously by the relationships and resources available through their homes, schools, and community environments (Bryan, 2005; Coleman, 1987; Epstein, 1995). In 2007, Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) Superintendent Jerry D. Weast met with stakeholders from MCPS and Montgomery County government to propose formation of a collaborative partnership—the Kennedy Cluster Project—to address jointly root causes of racial/ethnic differences in academic achievement.

Kennedy Cluster Schools

The Kennedy cluster of approximately 4,900 students includes Kennedy High School as well as two middle schools and four elementary schools in the Kennedy High School service area (cluster). Bel Pre Elementary School serves students through Grade 2, after which they articulate to Strathmore Elementary School for Grades 3 to 5. The majority of Grade 5 students at Georgian Forest, Glenallen, and Strathmore Elementary Schools articulate to Argyle and Lee Middle Schools. In turn, a majority of Grade 8 students at Argyle and Lee Middle Schools articulate to Kennedy High School.

At the time the project began in 2007, the Kennedy cluster enrolled the largest percentage of African American students in MCPS and a growing population of Hispanic students. The enrollment pattern has continued through 2013. Compared with MCPS students overall, Kennedy cluster school enrollees are significantly more likely to be African American or Hispanic (Table 1).

Table 1
MCPS 2013 Official Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity

Level	School	% African Am.		% Hispanic	
		2013	School vs. MCPS	2013	School vs. MCPS
Elementary School	MCPS	20.1		27.2	
	Bel Pre	44.7	+24.6	38.5	+11.4
	Georgian Forest	29.3	+9.2	48.5	+21.3
	Glenallen	36.5	+16.4	44.9	+17.8
Middle School	Strathmore	44.7	+24.6	37.6	+10.4
	MCPS	21.6		24.8	
	Argyle	37.7	+16.1	39.4	+14.6
High School	Lee	32.6	+11.0	51.7	+26.9
	MCPS	22.3		24.4	
	Kennedy	37.8	+15.5	45.4	+21.0

Source: Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE).

In 2013, the percentages of Kennedy High School enrollees who were African American or Hispanic were more than twice the MCSP high school averages of 21.6 and 24.8 percent. The patterns were similar in elementary and middle schools. At Lee Middle School, Hispanic enrollment in 2013 was more than twice the MCPS middle school average of 24.8 percent. At Bel Pre and Strathmore Elementary Schools, African American enrollment was more than twice the MCPS elementary school average of 20.1 percent.

The Kennedy cluster is heavily impacted by poverty. Kennedy cluster enrollees are significantly more likely to qualify for Free and Reduced-price Meals System (FARMS) services than MCPS students overall (Table 2). The impact of poverty is particularly evident in elementary and middle schools where more than 60 percent of students received FARMS services in 2013. Even at the high school level, where FARMS participation is typically lower than for other levels, 54.4 percent of the students received FARMS services in 2013, a rate nearly twice the MCPS high school average of 28.2 percent.

Table 2
Percentage of Student Receiving FARMS and LEP Services, 2013

Level	School	FARMS ^a		LEP ^b	
		School vs. 2013	MCPS	School vs. 2013	MCPS
Elementary School	MCPS	39.2		25.3	
	Bel Pre	67.0	+27.8	45.6	+20.3
	Glenallen	76.9	+37.7	34.4	+ 9.1
	Georgian Forest	69.0	+29.8	38.9	+13.6
	Strathmore	62.7	+23.5	25.5	+0.2
Middle School	MCPS	32.6		8.7	
	Argyle	60.8	+28.2	14.5	+5.8
	Lee	66.3	+33.7	22.3	+13.6
High School	MCPS	28.2		5.9	
	Kennedy	54.5	+26.3	9.1	+3.2

^a Free and Reduced-price Meals System (FARMS) services. Source: MSDE

^b Limited English Proficiency (LEP) services. Source: MSDE.

Kennedy cluster school enrollees were significantly more likely than MCPS students overall to receive Limited English Proficiency (LEP) services (Table 2). Nearly one in ten students at Kennedy High school (9.1 percent) qualified for LEP services in 2013, a rate that was nearly twice the MCPS high school average of 5.9 percent. In 2013, LEP participation was close to the MCPS elementary school average of 25.3 percent at Strathmore Elementary School, which serves students in Grades 3 to 5. However, for younger students at Bel Pre Elementary School, the 2013 LEP participation rate of 45.6 percent was almost twice as high as the MCPS elementary school average of 25.3 percent.

Purpose of Case Study

This case study examines how Kennedy Cluster Project multi-agency team members developed stronger partnerships with families and the Kennedy community to overcome barriers to academic success for African American and Hispanic students. Documentation of the project processes and results will inform efforts to replicate the project in other MCPS high school clusters and in schools outside MCPS.

Methodology

The Multi-Agency Team

The Kennedy Cluster Project multi-agency team is a network of agency representatives who work together for the purpose of helping to break down institutional and social barriers that disaffect student learning. In addition to educational resources in and out of school, participating agencies provide access to health care, housing, financial assistance, legal aid, recreational programs, and many other social services. The multi-agency team includes representatives from MCPS, the Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services, the State's Attorney's Office, the Department of Juvenile Services, the Montgomery County Police Department, the Montgomery County Department of Recreation, the Collaboration Council, community-based organizations, and other public agencies. The team meets twice per month to review cases that are referred by Kennedy cluster schools.

Data Collection

Data for this study were collected during a 12-month period from June 2012 to June 2013. The data collection methods included review of historical documents, unstructured observations of the multi-agency team meetings; semi-structured interviews with key informants; and aggregated achievement and survey data.

Unstructured observation data were collected at 13 multi-agency meetings held between October 2012 and June 2013. The observation data included transcriptions of the conversations that occurred between members of the team and the families. Excerpts of the conversations from those meetings are shown in italics in the report. No child or family is identified in the report.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 key informants from February 2013 to April 2013. Key informants responded to six open-ended questions about their background; the impact of the multi-agency team for increasing their awareness of root causes of the achievement gap; their awareness of services that are available for students and their families to address the root causes; and their successes and challenges at closing the achievement gap for individual students. In addition, the key informants discussed the professional relationships they had built as a result of their participation on the multi-agency team. Quotations from the interviewees are shown in italics in the report. No key informant is identified in the report.

Student outcome data was collected in June 2013. Aggregated school-level graduation, dropout, and mobility data were obtained from the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) website, www.mdreportcard.org. Disaggregated student enrollment, demographic, and achievement data were not available from MCPS. Results of the 2012 Gallup student survey measuring hope, engagement, and wellbeing were obtained from the MCPS website, www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org.

Data analysis combined results from a literature review with the quantitative and qualitative results obtained in this study to describe program impact on student achievement outcomes. In addition, multiple measures of social-emotional outcomes describe how greater access to social capital and services can support academic resilience among at-risk students. Analysis of the interview data with key informants describes how participation on the multi-agency team enhanced their professional expertise, capacity and effectiveness. Inferences based on the findings should take into account that the Kennedy Cluster Project is one of many programs used by schools to improve student performance (Appendix A).

Results

The cases addressed in the 2012–2013 school year provided insights about the challenges faced by children and families in the Kennedy cluster schools. In many cases, academic concerns such as poor attendance or course failure were rooted in emotional distress related to housing issues or family dynamics. For example:

- A third grader’s attention-seeking behavior had become more extreme. He lied about drawing with marker in the school bathroom. He soiled his pants in class, then kicked his clothing under a desk and tried to blame other students. His parents were separated and his father did not pay child support. His mother was struggling to pay the rent.
- An eighth grader with spotty attendance and incomplete assignments was suspended for theft. A few months earlier, his father had been deported. Recently, the young man had been admitted to Children’s Hospital for an unexplained head injury.
- A high school student wanted to go to college but was skipping school with her friends. She had a history of domestic violence in her home. Her mother had obtained a restraining order against her father but he had stopped paying child support. She was living with her mother and brother in one of the three bedrooms of an apartment they shared with two other families.

Not all of the cases came to the attention of the multi-agency team because of problems with achievement. Nearly half the time, students had satisfactory academic performance but were at risk because of mental health issues or family crises that were beyond the control of school. For example:

- A third grader was doing well academically but was verbally abusive to his teacher and other students. He drew pictures of guns and said things to his teacher like “I wished you died.” Through tears, his mother told the team that her son said that he wants another mother and that he doesn’t love her.
- An Ethiopian sixth grader was a “good student who worked hard” but she needed school supplies and clothing. Her mother had applied for asylum status for herself and her three children, but until that was approved they were not eligible for social services. The family of four lived in one room at a cousin’s house.
- A school senior was a quiet, good student who wanted to be the third in his family to graduate from Kennedy High School. But in the spring of his junior year, an injury on a Ride-On bus left his mother unable to work. By the fall of his senior year, he and his mother were homeless.

Every case was different. But the process of helping families was consistent across a wide range of case needs. When students or families needed a single service or referral, many of the school counselors

used resources available to them through the Kennedy Cluster Project to answer questions and make referrals without the need for a multi-agency meeting. When family needs were more complex, the multi-agency team was able to evaluate the referral and assign county representatives to provide client-centered customer support.

Academic Indicators

The primary goal of the Kennedy Cluster Project is to close the achievement gap. Measuring progress toward this goal has been complicated, in part because the multi-agency team hears a relatively small number of cases each year, each of which requires a different combination of interventions. Case reviews find that some interventions provide immediate short-term benefits, while others influence outcomes years later. Data from the case hearings and key informants suggests that the program has effects at the school level, as well for as for individuals. Interview data from school counselors suggests this multiplier effect occurs because when one student receives intensive support from the multi-agency team, schools have more time available to deal with other students with less pressing needs.

Graduation Rate

A high school diploma is a first step to financial security and a better overall quality of life in adulthood. On average, the annual income of a high school graduate is more than 45 percent higher than for an individual who dropped out and did not earn a diploma (Figure 1). High school graduates who enroll in some college, even without attainment of a bachelor's degree, have annual incomes that are 73 percent higher than the income of those without a high school diploma.

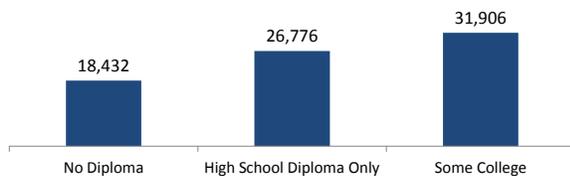


Figure 1. Estimates of average annual earnings by level of educational attainment. Source: U. S. Census Bureau, 2012.

The benefits of greater financial stability are in turn associated with social benefits of less reliance on social services, better health, and more active community engagement. Children of parents who graduated from high school are more likely to graduate themselves.

The MCPS overall graduation rate is among the highest in the nation (Education Week, 2013). More encouraging is that racial/ethnic differences in MCPS graduation rates have narrowed over the past three years.

The graduation rates¹ of African American, Hispanic, and White students in MCPS and at Kennedy High School, already significantly higher than for their public school counterparts nationwide (Stillwell &

¹ MSDE calculates the four-year cohort graduation rate by dividing the total number of diplomas earned divided by the net number of students who enrolled in the graduation class over the four year period. Detailed results are not reported (n/r) for groups with four-year cohort graduation rates of more than 95 percent.

Sable, 2013), have shown further signs of progress since 2010. First, African American and Hispanic students contributed most to increases in MCPS graduation rates over the past three years (Table 3). At Kennedy High School, the graduation rates improved more than four percentage points for African American and Hispanic students, increases more than twice those of Asian and White students. Second, the differences in the annual graduation rates of the relatively more disadvantaged African American and Hispanic students at Kennedy High School were not statistically significantly different than those of African American and Hispanic students in all MCPS high schools. The pattern of results provides evidence of a trend toward higher, and more equitable, high school graduation rates in MCPS overall, and at Kennedy High School in particular.

Table 3
4-Year Cohort Graduation Rates of High School Students, 2010 to 2012

		4-Year Cohort Graduation Rate						
		2010	School vs. MCPS	2011	School vs. MCPS	2012	School vs. MCPS	3-Year Trend
African American	Nation ^a	66.1		n/r		n/r		
	MCPS	78.1		81.3		82.3		+4.2
	Kennedy	77.4	-.7	83.9	2.6	81.5	-.7	+4.2
Hispanic	Nation ^a	71.4		n/r		n/r		
	MCPS	74.2		75.3		76.7		+2.4
	Kennedy	71.9	-2.4	74.7	-.7	76.2	-.5	+4.3
Asian	Nation ^a	93.5		n/r		n/r		
	MCPS	94.7		94.3		> 95%		----
	Kennedy	91.1	-3.7	90.3	-4.0	93.2	n/r	+2.1
White	Nation ^a	83.0		n/r		n/r		
	MCPS	93.7		93.9		94.0		+0.3
	Kennedy	> 95%	n/r	93.3	-.5	89.3	-4.8	----

^a National graduation rates for four-year cohort of 2010. Results were not reported for the classes of 2011 and 2012.
Note. None of the school to MCPS comparisons was statistically significant.

Although the Kennedy Cluster Project has not closed the gap in graduation status for all students, the collaboration has worked one student at a time to help students attain high school diplomas.

One teenage mother was about to drop out of Kennedy High School because she needed medical care, housing, and child care. The multi-agency team helped her complete her graduation requirements and get access to medical and financial assistance. She graduated with her class and went on to receive a \$6,000 grant that allowed her to attend Montgomery College and study criminal justice. After she graduated, she wrote a thank you letter to the team.

"I wouldn't be where I am now if the project would not have helped me."

"I want to thank...[people] who never gave up on me and told me that I was capable of doing many things if I just put effort into it...[school staff] who made sure I had my work done for all my classes...helped me"

get four bridge projects done in five days...and paid for my cap and gown in order for me to walk across the stage at DAR Constitution Hall....[members of the multi-agency team] who helped me with getting my medical insurance...so I was able to have a gallbladder surgery...and helped with getting my medications, housing, child care, food referrals, and gift cards....”

“The Kennedy Project is just amazing. It changes peoples’ lives.”

Dropout Rate

Dropping out of school sets in motion a series of negative social consequences for dropouts and for the communities in which they live (Fall & Roberts, 2012; Dynarski, Gleason, Rangarajan, & Wood, 1998). Students without a high school diploma have greater risks for unemployment and earn less when they are employed. They are more likely to rely on public assistance and have less access to health care. The rates of criminal behavior and incarceration are higher among dropouts than students who obtain at least a high school diploma. When students from low-income families drop out they put themselves on a path that will perpetuate a cycle of poverty.

Table 4
Annual Dropout Rates of MCPS High School Students, 2011 to 2012

		Annual Dropout Rate ^a	
		2011	2012
African American	Nation ^a	5.5	n/a
	MCPS	< 3.0	< 3.0
	Kennedy	< 3.0	3.9
Hispanic	Nation ^a	5.0	n/a
	MCPS	4.1	4.4
	Kennedy	3.9	4.2
Asian	Nation ^a	1.9	n/a
	MCPS	< 3.0	< 3.0
	Kennedy	< 3.0	< 3.0
White	Nation ^a	2.3	n/a
	MCPS	< 3.0	< 3.0
	Kennedy	< 3.0	< 3.0

^a National dropout results are reported for public high school students in Grades 9 to 12 during the 2010 academic year. Results for 2011 and 2012 are not available (n/a).

Nationally, about five percent of Hispanic and African American public high school students in Grades 9 to 12 drop out each year, rates more than twice those of Asian and White students (Stillwell & Sable, 2013). While the annual dropout rates² in MCPS and at Kennedy High School are lower than the national

² MSDE calculates the annual dropout rate by dividing the total number of dropouts by the total enrollment in Grades 9 to 12. Detailed results are not reported for rates of less than three percent.

averages, the racial/ethnic dropout pattern is similar, with African American and Hispanic students dropping out at rates greater than those of Asian and White students (Table 4).

One noteworthy trend over the past two years is the lower dropout rate of Hispanic students at Kennedy High School compared with the MCPS rate. Although not statistically significant, the differences suggest that Kennedy Cluster Project interventions may contribute to a narrowing of the gap in Hispanic dropout rates.

One of the multi-agency team members provided an example of how support from the Kennedy Cluster Project contributed to a long-term positive outcome for a 15-year African American male who was on the verge of dropping out in 2010.

“I first learned of the case at the Kennedy Cluster Project when his father came seeking help in May 2010. The father was from Mali in West Africa. He came to the meeting by himself. At that time the father was worried about his child’s altercations at school, anger issues, and lack of academic progress. There was a juvenile case pending for the young man, which went to court several times.”

“In February 2013, the young man returned to juvenile court and reported that he had earned a high school diploma, is enrolled at Montgomery College, and is looking for a job. The court was so impressed with him, I’ve never heard of this, the judge came off the bench, closed the case out, and shook his hand.”

“I was surprised by what happened in court but it is a testament to what can happen. There is the possibility of success in everyone’s life no matter how the situation may look at any one time. If the right resources and support and encouragement get into the young person’s life and he is willing to accept what folks are trying to help him with, he can be successful. I think the help and the support the Kennedy Cluster Project provided was one of the reasons for his success.”

Mobility

Overall, the research and theoretical literature indicates that residential mobility has detrimental associations with achievement and high school completion, especially among urban youth (Voight, Shinn, & Nation, 2012). Student mobility occurs when students change schools during the school year as a result of change in residence. When families move, the change in neighborhoods may disconnect them from social services and resources that contribute to academic achievement (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). The Kennedy Cluster Project provides families with access to services that make it easier for them to stay in their homes.

In 2011 and 2012, the mobility³ rates of Hispanic students who attended Kennedy High School were statistically significantly lower than their MCPS counterparts (Table 5). The mobility rates of Kennedy African American students were lower than the MCPS rates for the past two year as well, although the results were not statistically significant in 2012.

³ MSDE calculates the mobility rate by dividing the sum of entrants and withdrawals for the school year by the average daily enrollment. Detailed results are not reported (n/r) for groups with less than five percent mobility. Results are not available prior to 2011.

Lack of documentation may contribute to higher mobility rates among Hispanic families in the Kennedy cluster. School counselors and other members of the multi-agency team talked about the limitations that may prevent families from accessing support services for issues related to eviction, utility payments, and other housing crises.

“A lot of my students are not documented so some services are not accessible.”

“We work with undocumented community members but we are limited by state and federal guidelines.”

Table 5
Mobility Rates of MCPS High School Students, 2011 to 2012

		Mobility Rate			
		2011	School vs. MCPS	2012	School vs. MCPS
African American	MCPS	19.4		19.6	
	Kennedy	12.8	-6.6*	17.2	-2.4
Hispanic	MCPS	16.7		16.7	
	Kennedy	13.9	-2.8*	12.7	-4.0*
Asian	MCPS	5.5		< 5.0	
	Kennedy	7.0	1.5	< 5.0	n/r
White	MCPS	6.0		6.1	
	Kennedy	14.1	8.1	15.0	8.9

* Difference is statistically significant.

Addressing mobility prior to high school is essential to stave off long-term negative consequences of school change. Mobility among elementary students has been linked to learning disadvantages that contribute to grade retention in the short term and to lower mathematics and reading achievement on the long-term trajectory from elementary to high school (Fowler-Finn, 2001; Mehana & Reynolds, 2004; Obradovic, Cutuli, Chan, Hinz, Heistad, & Masten, 2009).

While the overall trends in mobility among middle and elementary school students in the Kennedy cluster have not changed significantly in the past two years, the case records provide anecdotal evidence that Kennedy Cluster Project activities reduce residential mobility and make it easier for low income and homeless families to stay in their neighborhoods.

“The Kennedy Cluster Project started to wrap services to keep a family stable and at one middle school. It helped them academically to connect to school. The male student is on the basketball team. His grades have come up, and he was recommended for higher level courses. His sister has started to achieve as well.”

Loss of community resources is a particular hardship for parents who move due to financial issues that result in eviction or homelessness (Kingsley, Smith, & Price, 2009; Voight, Shinn, Nation, 2012). The Kennedy Cluster Project has provided support to reduce mobility among homeless families.

“We had one case of a child who was homeless and was going after school to the Wheaton Library to study because that was the only place the family had to go. They studied, ate, washed up there, then when the library closed the mother took them to a shelter. The team brought a lot of support to the family to help with housing, past bills, utility bills, housing security, and giving the child a home to go to. The child didn’t have a home to go to to study. When we provide help with so many of these issues we provide a foundation on which child can build academic success.”

Classroom Performance

Students at risk of academic failure often face a complexity of problems caused by poverty, health, and other social conditions that make it difficult for them to succeed in school. The Kennedy Cluster Project addresses the problems that are the root causes of the academic achievement gap in ways that complement the direct academic support provided by the school.

Interviews with multi-agency team members provided information about the ways the Kennedy Cluster Project helps students get on a path to academic success.

“Certain needs have to be met before they can focus on academic needs. If they are not eating in the home, their mind is not on school work or homework. Their mind is thinking about that they are hungry.”

“If students’ home lives are unstable it affects their ability to concentrate. We can bring people together and get families access to things they need and resolve family issues.”

“Often times there are outside factors that impact students’ success in school...and [the team can] help to reduce barriers that interfere with ability to concentrate, attendance, be on time, be motivated to come to school....”

“When we provide the family with some level of stability with regard to food, living, housing...it allows the child to have a base to begin to focus on their school.”

“We address family issues that may hinder students from being able to focus on school [such as the] chaos of not knowing where your next meal is coming from or where you will live. [Our help] takes pressure and anxiety off the kid and leads to better achievement in school.”

“...[helping families] has trickled down to academic success. It is tough to know if it has an immediate academic effect. It has an effect socio-emotionally. Who knows what would have happened if we had not done something. It could be worse.”

Counselors provided anecdotal evidence of the impact of the Kennedy Cluster Project on students’ attendance and academic performance.

"I've seen kids coming to school that were staying home before."

"The involvement has helped students' situations, grades, coming to school."

"There is one family in particular that needed help and did not know where to go. The Kennedy Cluster Project provided assistance to the family as a whole. It got the child back on track and gave the parents a sense of wellbeing. They have utilized everything [the Kennedy Cluster Project] shared with them....The child is doing a lot better in school now."

"One student had a problem with acculturation from Africa and got in trouble with a gun. [The team] supported his mother a lot and he is back at high school and doing average work now."

"[He] is doing well. Last quarter there was some concern about one class, but he has all As, and one B. Things have improved [since the multi-agency team provided support six months ago]."

"[He] is doing pretty well. He is reading on grade level which was a concern earlier in the year."

Social and Emotional Indicators

While the initial purpose of the Kennedy Cluster Project was to focus on barriers to achievement among African American and Hispanic students, what has emerged from the project is greater awareness of resources that promote academic resilience. There is strong evidence that social and emotional factors impact academic outcomes (Afterschool Alliance, 2009; Albright, Weissberg, & Dusenbury, 2011; Harper, & Griffin, 2011). The multi-agency team makes an important contribution to closing the achievement gap by facilitating access to services that foster at-risk students' likelihood of success despite the odds.

Participation in Extracurricular Activities

The ways children spend their out-of-school time is an important indicator of their academic risk (Huang, Kim, Cho, Marshall, & Perez, 2011; Murray Nettles, Mucherah, & Jones, 2000). Participation in recreational activities such as team sports and mentoring programs is correlated with more positive academic attainment and higher paying jobs (Lleras, 2008; Scott-Little, Hamann, & Jurs, 2002; Ungar & Liebenberg, 2013; Vandell, Reisner, & Pierce, 2007). Conversely, time spent "hanging out" with friends is a strong predictor of school failure and teenage risk behavior (Beuhring, Blum, & Rinehart, 2000).

The Kennedy Cluster Project promotes engagement in extracurricular activities through Montgomery County Department of Recreation (MCR) services, collaborations and partnerships. MCR offers a wide range of leisure activities and opportunities throughout the year which help students experience interactions and develop skills that contribute to academic resilience. Data suggest that the Kennedy Cluster Project has increased the access of students and families to MCR services.

"I see actually more families in my center now than I did before [from Kennedy Cluster Project referrals]."

"...the children many times need an outlet and [MCR] can offer that by giving them something positive to do."

"I have formed some friendships with some families that have come through [my MCR programs]."

"What has been really helpful is the summer program, the fun center available for youth 5 to 12 years of age that Kennedy Project participants come to."

"We have a summer leadership challenge program which gives teens [ages 13 to 16] the ability to learn skills they need to be a junior counselor and...is also very important to provide that self-esteem piece."

Access to Mental Health Services

Access to mental health services is a significant factor in promoting resilience among disadvantaged students. Between 12 percent and 30 percent of children who are performing well in school also are facing emotional stress that ultimately may cause a downturn in their academic performance (Becker & Luther, 2002). Most vulnerable are children confronted with the added risks associated with disadvantaged environments. Even when mental health needs are evident, school personnel have limited options for addressing the issues.

"The school system is limited in what we can do...the family therapist can say something that a school counselor cannot say."

"Outside therapists see things we don't see in the school. They can do family therapy....The therapist goes to the home...and sees [family] dynamics."

During the 2013 school year, the team provided mental health services for students at all grade levels. Many students were performing well despite considerable personal emotional stress. Mothers shared two poignant stories that highlight the extent of the social-emotional challenges students faced while trying to maintain their academic performance:

"Back home in [Africa] we had everything....Now we are refugees." A year earlier, the mother's husband, a high-ranking government official, had been imprisoned and sentenced to death. Some family members fled the country. For the past eight months, the mother and her son had been living in one room of a friend's apartment in Silver Spring. The fate of her husband and the whereabouts of her oldest child in Africa were unknown.

"When I had her I was in high school. I was raped.... I haven't been with her as a parent since she was 6 months old." The baby was raised by her grandparents in Cameroon. In middle school, she came to the United States to live with her mother and a family she did not know. A few months after she arrived, the young uncle with whom she grew up, and who was like a sibling to her, was shot and killed. "When [my daughter] came, she did not talk for 2 weeks. She did not know me....After the shooting she started saying that she might take her

life...that she does not deserve to live. Most of the time she is depressed and won't say anything."

Beliefs about the Future—Hope

Hope is a trait that is characterized by an individual's optimistic beliefs about his or her ability to plan for and create a positive future (Ciarrochi, Heaven, & Davies, 2007; Hoy, Tarter, & Hoy, 2006). Individuals are hopeful when they feel that there are adults in their lives who care about them and when they feel confident in their abilities to get good grades, find many solutions to their problems and get a good job after they graduate (Gallup, 2013).

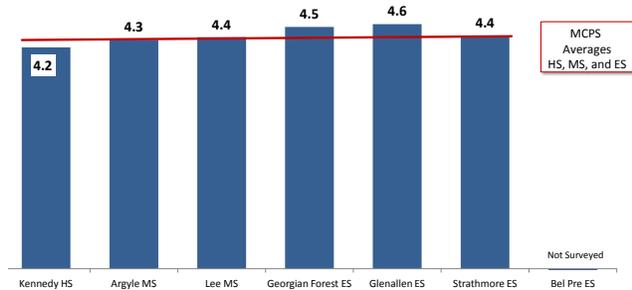


Figure 2. Results of 2012 Gallup survey of student ratings of hope about the future. Source: MCPS.

On average, students who attended schools in the Kennedy cluster in the fall of 2012 rated their feelings of hope at about the same levels as the average MCPS ratings for students at the same grade levels (Figure 2). Results suggest that the Kennedy Cluster Project interventions fostered feelings of hope among children and their families.

One way the multi-agency team works to create hope is by providing more equitable access to social services and opportunities. Multi-agency team meetings give students and families access to experts who can help them address a range of problems and provide referrals to appropriate supports services. Team members report that the interventions support students' and parents' problem-solving skills and promote hope.

"A huge barrier is lack of knowledge about what is out there and what is available. They just need a little bit of help [about] where they could go."

"[We] identify students and families who are facing challenges inside or outside the school system and come together to alleviate those problems."

"So many people are right at the edge of falling through the safety net. A lot of times there is a window where you are eligible and if you don't apply at that time it will fall through. If the family doesn't think about it, the things we take for granted don't work."

"We frequently have those moments when clients [tell us they] are grateful for our assistance"

"Parents feel hopeful after hearing everyone...say what they can do to help."

Wellbeing

Wellbeing involves how individuals think about and experience their lives (Gallup, 2013). Student wellbeing is a strong predictor of academic success (Alva, 1991; Perez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado, &

Cortes, 2009; Waxman, Gray, & Padrón, 2003; Waxman, Padrón, Shin, & Rivera, 2008). Children are more available to learn and do better in school when they are happy, healthy, and confident that they have family and friends they can count on when they need someone (Gallup, 2013).

On average, students who attended schools in the Kennedy cluster in fall 2012 rated their feelings of wellbeing at levels that were about the same or slightly higher than the MCPS averages for students at the same grade levels (Figure 3). The consistency of this finding for all levels of Kennedy cluster schools suggests that the Kennedy Cluster Project contributes to student wellbeing.

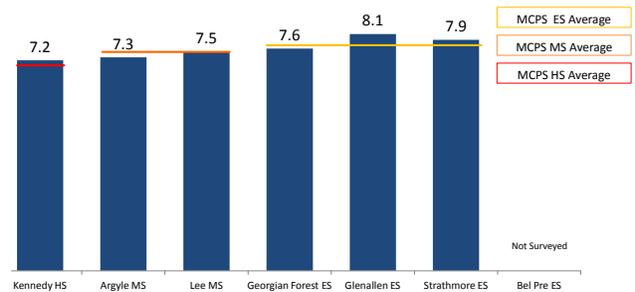


Figure 3. Results of 2012 Gallup survey of student ratings of overall wellbeing. Source: MCPS.

Students' wellbeing is enhanced by efforts to promote wellbeing for the families who care for them. An important step in that process is to foster trusting relationships between families, the school, and the community. Data suggest that the multi-agency team processes and follow-up build trust and enhance wellbeing. The trusting relationships increase the likelihood that families will benefit from a network that is a source of connection, information, and support that parents can access to create more positive home environments for themselves and their children.

“To help the child, you need to help the families. All the multi-agency representatives are there to help the families be more self sufficient, learn parenting skills, and get resources.”

“The program began in 2007 with the goal to provide support to help students achieve their academic potential. But...what I’ve observed is that for so many of the children in the Kennedy cluster and Montgomery County in general, some part of the academic issue, large or small, is based on so many of the other things that surround them like food insecurity, homelessness, domestic violence, foreclosures... When we provide the family with some level of stability with regard to food, living, housing, it allows the child to have a base to begin to focus on their school.”

Student and Family Engagement

Student engagement in learning activities and the broader school environment is a strong predictor of academic resilience regardless of students' prior performance or ability (Finn & Rock, 1997; Fantuzzo, LeBoeuf, Rouse, & Chen, 2012; Gonzalez & Padilla, 1997; Masten, Best, & Garmezy, 1990; Reyes & Jason, 1993; Waxman, Padrón, Shin, & Rivera, 2008). Students are more likely to be engaged at school when they feel safe, encouraged, and welcome (Gallup, 2013). The Kennedy Cluster Project works to enhance student engagement by providing mentoring programs and academic supports that foster school connectedness and involvement. In addition, the multi-agency team offers a safe haven for families to

share fears and problems and to make connections with people in the community who help and encourage them.

Nationally, and in MCPS, student engagement is highest among elementary students and lowest among high school students (Figure 4). On average, students who attended schools in the Kennedy cluster in fall 2012 rated their feelings of engagement at levels that were about the same as the MCPS averages for students at the same grade levels.

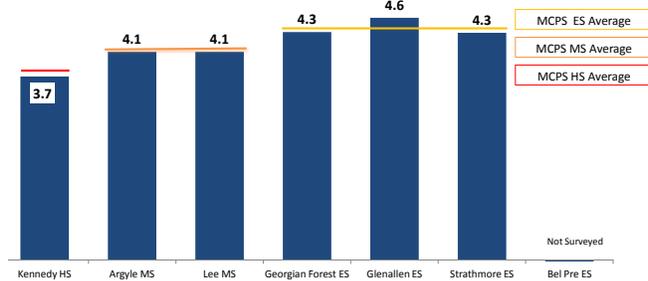


Figure 4. Results of 2012 Gallup survey of student ratings of school engagement. Source: MCPS.

Students with involved parents, no matter what their income or background, are more likely to attend school, earn higher grades, graduate, and enroll in postsecondary programs (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). One of the school counselors remarked, *“Any time we engage a family and get them to come in for a meeting, it is a positive.”*

Efforts to engage parents are especially important for Hispanic students whose families are challenged by language barriers and cultural differences (Emerson, Fear, Fox, & Sanders, 2012).

The Kennedy Cluster Project multi-agency team includes many Spanish speakers who are instrumental in reaching out to Hispanic parents. At multi-agency team meetings, a Spanish-speaking care coordinator and a translator work one-on-one with parents to build trust and help encourage them to use available resources to enhance their well-being. These team members explained some of the barriers that prevent families from seeking help.

“[Many parents] are afraid, undocumented, scared, have a language barrier....or are afraid of how information will be used.”

“Some Hispanic families worry about getting a green card if they accept help from the government.”

“[One Hispanic parent] thought they would take her to jail [if she talked about the reason for her child’s truancy].”

“One mother was homeless with her seven kids and was afraid to tell the school because she thought her kids would be taken away.”

“When families come in they are overwhelmed with emotions and fear of the unknown.”

“One of the biggest things I saw with a family when I first started and walked in [to the multi-agency meeting] with her, I said to her, ‘If at any point you want me to ask them to stop let me know.’ I saw the fear that was in her eyes when she saw that big group of people.”

“Now when I bring them into the room [for the multi-agency team meeting], I say ‘Don’t get overwhelmed, we are here to support you and link to different resources and see what resources you need.’ So I set it up so when they walk in they are prepared.”

The last meeting of the 2013 academic year provided an example of how multi-agency team engagement over the course of the academic year built trust with, and enhanced hope and well-being for, a Hispanic family with a history of domestic violence.

In November, the counselor referred a mother who requested financial support, winter clothing, and furniture. At the six-month follow-up with the multi-agency team in May, the mother broke down and, through tears, told the team that she needed help escaping 26 years of domestic violence. Her middle school son had done well in school in the past but was traumatized by what was happening at home and beginning to show some of his father’s violent behaviors. The multi-agency team helped this mother make the contacts she needed to access legal and social services. In June, the mother asked for another meeting. With the help of her Spanish translator, she thanked the team for their support.

“After the last meeting I gained strength and knew that I was not by myself. I got out of my home. My children have changed a lot and are doing better in school. [The Kennedy Cluster Project care coordinator] is helping me get my children into summer school programs....I feel stronger and more independent. I couldn’t do it by myself. I thank all of you for your support.”

From Multiple Agencies to a Multi-Agency Team

In 2007, the Kennedy Cluster Project began to identify and address the root causes of the achievement gaps in MCPS. Implementing solutions to those root causes required multi-agency team collaboration and sharing of information about students and their families among various service providers. Federal laws and state regulations place restrictions on the ability of agencies to share anything beyond directory information. In 2008, attorneys for MCPS, Montgomery County Government, and Montgomery County Police and Justice, worked with appropriate agency heads to develop a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to address some of those restrictions.

In 2009, plans for many recommended Kennedy Cluster Project interventions were scaled back due to budget constraints. But the multi-agency team remained committed to the project. Since spring 2009, the multi-agency team, headed by Mr. Donald Kress representing MCPS and Ms. Fran Brenneman representing Montgomery County Government, has heard cases twice per month during the school year. Document analysis of team meetings from 2007 to 2012 and observations of the team at work in 2012 and 2013 provided strong evidence of benefits of the collaboration.

An unintended positive consequence of the multi-agency collaboration was embedded professional development for participants, at no additional cost to MCPS or the county agencies. What began with an MOU between multiple agencies has developed into a multi-agency team of professionals with shared vision, high levels of trust and interdependence, and creative problem-solving approaches to

service delivery. Team members spoke with one voice about their greater awareness of the issues and resources and utilization of a professional network to enhance their capacity to access and deliver services to children and families.

Building Awareness and Shared Vision

The Kennedy Cluster Project allows schools to take advantage of a more coordinated strategy for reaching out to children and their families. School counselors who have worked with the program for several years and attended training sessions reported increased awareness of how to access directly resources to deal with specific issues that do not require a multi-agency intervention.

“The multi-agency team has held training sessions so that school staff can learn more about county resources available for their students.”

“The [training] workshop with representatives from different organizations...was very helpful in getting counselors the resources they could use.”

“The counselor does not always have the information and connections to answer questions parents have.... [Now] when we talk to parents and teachers we know what services [are available].”

“It was an eye-opener for the Pupil Personnel Workers....We became more aware of what services we can offer our families.”

“My previous job looked at welfare services. I didn’t know what the achievement gap was about.”

“Being a member of the multi-agency team] opened my eyes up to things I was not aware of before. I knew we had county recreation department, for example, but didn’t know what they offer.”

“I have learned so much about the services [other agencies] provide. “

“Sitting at the meetings and hearing the members talk about what is available has been an education for all of us.”

Building Trusting and Interdependent Professional Relationships

Over the past five years, team members have built professional relationships that typically would not have been possible without the opportunity for collaboration.

“We developed an ongoing relationship ... we did not have before.”

“[Over the years] we began to know who to call and who we can get help from.”

“I keep their phone numbers near and dear.”

“It is a lot easier to coordinate services when you can put a face with a name.”

"Now we are friends and we ... help each other."

"I feel comfortable ... picking up the phone or shooting them an email."

Building Capacity

Although the multi-agency team meets with less than one hundred families per year, the ripple effect of Kennedy Cluster Project efforts have had a broader impact school-wide. In addition to multi-agency team meetings, Kennedy Cluster Project provided several training sessions to inform schools about the range of non-profit services available in the community. Greater awareness of the issues, combined with the personal connections with the experts on those issues, has enhanced the expertise and capacity of all team members. Counselors are better able to link families to services so that many students and families can be served without need for a multi-agency meeting.

"Generally if a family comes to me and they have one specific need then it is easy to go straight to the providers."

"I can use references from meetings to hook [families] with services."

"I can tell people...where to go because of information I [learned] in meetings."

One of the multi-agency team leaders explained why working together is essential to build shared vision and ownership for a solution to the achievement gap.

"One of the biggest paradigm shifts that resulted from this project since 2007 was that the achievement gap was something the school system owned. It was a school system issue. Slowly as we looked at data and began unpeeling the onion, and [looked at] services available to families in this part of the county and where they had to go to get them, slowly the heads of agencies began to say that maybe they owned a piece of the achievement gap as well. There was a shift from student achievement being a school system issue to student achievement being a community issue."

Discussion

Students in Kindergarten through Grade 12 spend about 20 percent of their waking hours in school⁴. Given that small percentage, it is not surprising that schools across the United States are partnering with their students' families and communities to support student success. For students in the Kennedy cluster, the contributions of other agencies and community groups are essential to provide access to social services and extracurricular opportunities that directly and indirectly influence the achievement gap. Yet, access to community resources for students and families who most need them can be complicated and challenging.

The Kennedy Cluster Project multi-agency team collaboration reduced communication barriers between and among the school system and county departments and agencies. Better communication resulted in more efficient delivery of educational and community-based resources and services to students and their families during and beyond the school day. Services included academic support and enrichment programs that could directly improve academic achievement. But perhaps more important was access to social services and programs that addressed basic needs related to housing and food insecurity, health care, counseling, leisure and recreational activities, and legal aid.

Although academic gaps have not closed, there is evidence that the Kennedy Cluster Project is making a difference. Statistical and anecdotal evidence suggest that the Kennedy Cluster Project contributed directly to higher achievement. Trends in graduation rates were higher and more equitable at Kennedy High School in 2012 than in prior years. Dropout rates of Hispanic students were significantly lower than in the past at Kennedy High school. In addition, data showed that the Kennedy Cluster Project contributed to reduced mobility and better classroom attendance and performance among students at all the cluster schools.

The Kennedy Cluster Project's most important contributions may be on the impact on social-emotional indicators that are highly correlated with academic resilience and achievement. Survey data and anecdotal reports provide evidence that program benefits included higher rates of participation in extra-curricular activities among students at risk, better access to mental health services, greater engagement of Hispanic families, and more positive feelings of hope and well-being.

For the multi-agency team, the achievement gap is no longer merely a school problem. It is everyone's problem. Closing the achievement gap requires the commitment of multiple agencies with a shared vision for how to better deliver social and educational services to students and their families. Over the past five years, the Kennedy Cluster Project has contributed to success for individuals and for schools. More needs to be done. But because of the commitment of the stakeholders and the shift in ownership of the problem, the future offers promise of continued progress toward a solution.

⁴ Based on 180 school days of 6.5 hours each and 365 calendar days where students are awake for 16 hours and asleep for 8 hours on average.

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Appendix A

2012–2013 School Programs at Kennedy Cluster Project Schools

	Kennedy	Argyle	Lee	Bel Pre	Georgian Forest	Glenallen	Strathmore
Kennedy Cluster Project School	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Professional Development Programs							
Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS)	*	*	*		*		*
Middle School Reform (Partial)			*				
Secondary School-Based Academy and Magnet Programs							
Academy of Business Studies	*						
Career Pathway Programs	*						
College Institute	*						
International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma Programme	*						
Leadership Training Institute	*						
MediaCom: Multimedia & Telecommunications Academy	*						
Medical Careers	*						
Medical Careers, Sports Medicine and Management Academy	*						
Naval Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (NJROTC)	*						
Naval Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (NJROTC)	*						
Dual Language			*				
Magnet School for Digital Design and Development		*					
Elementary School-Based Academic Programs							
Focused Academic Support—Local Funds				*		*	*
Focused Academic Support—Federal Title I Funds					*		
Head Start					*	*	
Prekindergarten				*	*		
Media/Technology Program						*	
Resource (K–5)					*		
Reading/Language Arts Program				*			
Ruth Rales Reading Program				*			
One Dream Academy - 21st Century Community Grant							*
School-Based Special Education Programs							
Secondary Learning Center	*						
Elementary Learning Center							*
Autism	*						
Learning and Academic Disabilities	*	*	*			*	
Gifted and Talented/Learning Disabled			*				
Emotional Disabilities					*		
Physical Disabilities	*		*				
Learning for Independence	*						
Out-of-School and Community-Based Programs							
After School Theatre Program						*	
Character Counts!						*	
Commonweal Tutoring		*				*	
Destination Graduation	*						
Elementary Home School Model				*	*		*
Excel Beyond the Bell		*					
Extended Day Program		*					
Passion 4 Learning		*					
School/Community-Based	*						

Source: *Schools at a Glance*, Montgomery County Public Schools, www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org