

Leading the Way to College-Career Ready Graduates

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February 2014

Appearances can be deceiving. When I took leadership of the Montgomery County, Maryland public schools in 1999, the county had a well-deserved reputation as an affluent bedroom community just north of Washington, DC where the public schools were considered among the best in the country. Students from Montgomery County went to the nation's finest colleges and universities and succeeded magnificently in their chosen professions. That was how it had always been in Montgomery County, and long-time residents assumed it would always be so.

In truth, student test results in the aggregate bore out the county's self-satisfaction. Collectively, students scored well among their peers from the nation's largest school districts. But the data were telling only part of the story. The county's demographic profile was very fluid, and many of the new residents were not fluent in English or equipped with skills for well-paying jobs. The children of these families were to some degree under the radar until I directed that student performance data be disaggregated by race/ethnicity, by FARMS eligibility, and by ESOL and special education service recipients—two years before that was required by the *No Child Left Behind Act*. It quickly became clear that Montgomery County's schools were excellent for some, but not equitable for all.

We were able to drive home that point for the community and its political leaders by employing technology tools such as GIS mapping to delineate economically impacted areas of the county. A ribbon of contiguous areas running north through the heart the county from the Washington, DC line to the county's northern region was delineated as an area with disproportionate numbers of children in need. We called that the Red Zone. The rest of the county, which was economically well-off, was called the Green Zone. It became my mission to build public support, then, for a new funding formula that would allow us to allocate to schools based upon the level to which each was impacted by students eligible for FARMS, ESOL, and special services, rather than apportioning funds based on enrollment, as had been the practice.

To their everlasting credit, the citizens of Montgomery County understood that improving opportunities for all children was in the county's best interest. In order to "bend the trend" that seemed to predict a downward slide for student outcomes collectively, we incorporated the views of constituents from across the county about what we wanted our public schools to accomplish and the strategies that would get us there. The funding formula was changed, the first step in "Greening the Red Zone," and we moved on to the challenges inherent in preparing every child for future success. In addition to committing that all children in the early grades would meet a standard that ensured literacy by Grade 3, we agreed that success would be defined as graduating students who are well prepared for college and careers. We then faced the conundrum of deciding how to measure that career/college ready outcome. We turned to the data.

Available to any school district is information from the National Student Clearinghouse. Among the available data are education persistence statistics for a district's graduates. In Montgomery County, we used that information to learn which of our graduates had enrolled in and graduated from college in the six years subsequent to graduation. Having identified those successful graduates, we looked retrospectively at their course-taking histories in high school and their performance outcomes on selected standardized tests taken in public school and in select courses to develop benchmark scores or academic grades that are predictive of future success.

This information facilitated the development of the "7 Keys to College Readiness," a colorful communications tool that explained clearly to parents (as well as staff and students) the milestones that are important markers of academic progress. Further, the information provided the foundation to our work to back-map a rigorous curriculum based on a college-ready standard—Advanced Placement—from grade 12 all the way to preschool.

This brief, somewhat facile summary of how we proceeded in Montgomery County over the course of my twelve-year tenure to build a good school system into an excellent one that better addressed the needs of all children omits the grueling hours of work that it took. Much as women describe the huge discomforts of childbirth being forgotten as a beautiful child is welcomed into the world, in telling Montgomery County's story it's easy to make the process sound so simple and linear that the headwinds we faced and the complexities of pulling the school system's dozens of "compartments" into a functioning whole are lost in the telling.

As superintendents, you know the challenges of leadership. For a fuller description of our processes and pitfalls in Montgomery County Public Schools, I would direct you to other sources, including the comprehensive book, *Leading for Equity*, by Stacey Childress and others. But for the purposes of this pre-conference publication, it's my thought to give you a "cheat sheet" of sorts—a quick summary of some of what we learned along that winding journey.

1. At the beginning, review performance data so you, the superintendent, know where you are. Then begin to build consensus by sharing that information widely.
2. Decide collaboratively what you want your students to achieve. Bring everyone to the table: employee association representatives, PTA leadership, executive leadership from within the district. Keep them at the table for the thousands of decisions that must be made going forward.
3. As you've collectively decided what you want your students to achieve, look clear-eyed at the effectiveness of programs, technologies, and resource allocations in place. Have the courage to get rid of what isn't working or is misaligned.

4. Then, as you build your budget, start at the foundation—with the students. Begin the process of preparing your teachers and school leaders to deliver the instruction that will get your graduates to the goals upon which you have agreed. Only then should you address the structure of your central administration. That should be built to support the objectives and goals upon which all have come to consensus. The objectives and goals should not be a reflection of a central administrative structure; it's the other way around. Reallocate resources to support your goals.
5. Align, align, align. Align curriculum from top to bottom, bottom to top. Align training to support instruction. Align support services to reflect desired outcomes. But be strategic. It's easy to come in as the new leader and upend the status quo with wholesale change. Rome, as they say, wasn't built in a day, and neither is a great school system. By keeping your collaborators at the table, you'll get a good sense of when you're about to overrun the capacity of the system, of your people, to assimilate the changes you hope to implement. Keep the big picture in mind, but break it down into manageable bites.
6. Identify the real and artificial impediments to student success: processes, attitudes, values, and beliefs. Change the processes; begin courageous conversations about the attitudes, values, and beliefs to develop a culture of respect and a commitment to high expectations for all students regardless of their race, socioeconomic status, English language proficiency, or special needs.
7. Continually review performance data so you know where you are. Be open about successes and about persisting challenges. It's probable that your community wants good schools. By including members of the community, local interest groups, and political leaders in the ongoing conversations about building a great school system, you're more likely to get the support you'll need, even in hard times.

These are turbulent years to be a school district leader. The press is quick to report on the failings of our nation's public schools as compared to schools in other developed nations. There is often hand-wringing about the number of young men and women exiting high school ill-prepared for the real world that awaits, where jobs are hard-won and the skills to win them are evolving rapidly. These are not small issues, nor is it enough to dismiss the criticisms with a shrug and the certainty that there's more to the story. The fact is, we who work in public education can do better by our students and we must. Providing an equitable education for all the children who enter our classrooms is a moral imperative. That means opening access to high quality curriculum to every child by ensuring that excellent preparation is available from preschool through high school.

The road to this outcome is neither straight nor sure. I've walked it in school districts in several states, and though I'm in a different role now, I understand well the hurdles superintendents face. The lessons I've learned are not so far in the rear view mirror. I look forward to meeting and speaking with you in March to discuss the mission that is central to all of us: preparing the next generation of America's children to excel.