## Closing the Achievement Gap: The Context, Part II—State and Local Data, Reports, and Efforts in Public Schools and Colleges

In my last Focus report, I shared information on some troubling national trends with respect to education and closing the achievement gap. In this edition, I will turn the lens on this issue to the trends that we are seeing in our own communities, our own county, and in our own state and region. As you will see, the issue is not just around the corner in our neighborhoods; it is right at our doorsteps.

The context for Maryland is one of juxtaposition. Maryland is a state highly regarded for its educational system, yet thousands remain unsuccessful in achieving their educational goals. It is a state known for having several counties among the wealthiest in the nation, yet tremendous disparities exist among counties and even the towns and cities within them.

With respect to education, *Education Week* has ranked Maryland's K–12 school system as the top school system in the country for five years in a row.[1] In addition, US Census data reflect that 36.3 percent of Maryland residents hold a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 28.5 percent for the rest of the United States.[2] Maryland, on the face of it, could be considered a state with a highly educated population… in some respects.

In contrast, MarylandCAN, a local organization that is part of 50CAN, a national network of state-level advocacy groups advocating to enact research-based education reforms that will give every child access to a great school, reflected on the disparities existing in the K–12 system in Maryland. In its "The State of Public Education Maryland" report, MarylandCAN articulates three points that reflect the breadth of the disparity:

1) Maryland has the second largest disparity in the country between low-income students and their wealthier classmates on the 8th grade math test according to the results of the 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

2) Eighteen percent of African-American eighth graders scored at least proficient on the math exam, compared to 56 percent of white students—a racial achievement gap that has more than doubled since 1990.

3) Maryland has the fourth largest socio-economic disparity in the country on the corresponding 8th grade English test according to the results of the 2011 NAEP.[3]

Complete College America serves as a national nonprofit with a single mission to work with states to significantly increase the number of Americans with quality career certificates or college degrees and to close achievement gaps for traditionally underrepresented populations. Its 2011 report on Maryland shares a telling statistic on the achievement gap: By 2020, 67 percent of jobs will require a career certificate or college degree, but only 45 percent of Maryland adults hold an associate's degree or higher. This reflects a skills gap of 22 percent that needs to be closed if Maryland is to have a strong economy.[4]

So while it is clear that Maryland has made great progress and has earned its national rankings, there is still much work that needs to be done to ensure no Marylander is left behind. With thousands of children and young adults falling below acceptable standards of achievement, Maryland's top educational rankings mean very little in this context.

The narrative for Montgomery County continues the theme of significant disparity in educational attainment and income inequality. It is a narrative we must share, debate, discuss, and act upon to ensure all of our residents have access to and the resources for success in

postsecondary education—both credit courses and workforce training. Given the recent demographic shifts in our community, the imperative to act has never been greater.

Montgomery County has many assets. Based on the 2012 American Community Survey, Montgomery County ranked the 11th wealthiest county in the United States based on median income at $94,965. Montgomery County is home to a highly educated overall population where 58.6 percent of residents hold a bachelor's degree or higher.[5] The county percentage outpaces the overall Washington, DC, region's 48 percent figure as reported by *Governing Magazine* as the top region in the country.[6] Such a well-educated populace is the key ingredient to the overall success of the county and why Montgomery County is the economic engine of Maryland.

Yet, upon closer inspection of the statistics, educational attainment and income levels across the county reflect startling discrepancies. For example, the discrepancies are very apparent when examining the educational and income levels of the overall county residents compared to those in communities such as Gaithersburg, Wheaton, and in the East County.

As I examine the closing the achievement gap for our county communities, I am drawn to the results of the site selection analysis we used to determine the locations of our two Montgomery College community engagement centers. In the analysis of potential locations for the centers, six emerged with key indicators showing the need for a Montgomery College presence in the communities to help expand access to educational opportunities.

For example, let's take a look at the City of Gaithersburg. Gaithersburg recorded 64,510 residents in 2011, representing just over six percent of the county population. The city has a projected population growth rate of eight percent, one of the highest rates in the county over the next 10 years. Gaithersburg also has one of the youngest populations in the county with a median age of 34.5. Its racial make-up reflects the county's rich diversity: 34 percent white, 30 percent African American, 19 percent Hispanic, 14 percent Asian, and 3 percent other races.[7]

The richness of its diversity and youthfulness is accompanied by several important statistics related to education. One in almost four residents of Gaithersburg is not English proficient. With 30.2 percent of its MCPS students classified as English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) students, the city has roughly double the county rate of ESOL student population. Forty-one percent of Gaithersburg residents hold bachelor's degrees—well above the national rate of 28.5 percent. However, this is 17 percentage points lower than the county rate and 31 percentage points lower than its neighboring town of North Potomac.[8] It is hard to comprehend that two communities, just a few miles apart, could have such an educational attainment difference.

As significant as the educational disparity is, the economic differentiation is even more pronounced: Gaithersburg has a median income of $65,000, which equates to $30,000 less than the overall county median income and $12,000 below the 2012 self-sufficiency standard of $77,933 for a family of three to live in the county without public assistance.[9] Contrast that with the average resident in North Potomac, who brings home a median income of $151,000.[10] The question for us as residents, as leaders, as human beings remains: Is this a disparity that is acceptable to us and what are we going to do about it?

The bottom line for me: communities with such statistics reflect a disconnect. We have a young, diverse, and growing city population whose achievement gap will continue to widen if we do not act and act now.

A variety of statewide efforts have been made to address the statewide discrepancies in educational attainment. Here are a few examples:

- In the summer of 2014, Maryland announced $4.3 million in *Prekindergarten Expansion Grants* to create partnerships with local providers and school systems across the state to expand high-quality full- and half-day pre-K to more than 1,500 children.

- The One Step Away Grant was implemented by the Maryland Higher Education Commission to help students who left their college or university prior to degree completion to re-enroll to finish the degree.

- The College and Career Readiness and College Completion Act of 2013 provided enhanced mandatory advising and student tracking for higher education institutions. The Act has led to students being advised more consistently on degree and discipline/career paths and to innovations such as Montgomery College's use of Starfish software as a way of tracking student progress and providing a new method for advising that fits with today's students.

- According to its 2013–2014 Summary of Institutional Achievement Gap, the University of Maryland College Park's engagement of departments, programs, and clubs, including the Office of Multi-Ethnic Student Education, the Nyumburu Cultural Center and several student organizations, has led to a significant decrease in the gap. The graduation gap between black students and the overall College Park campus was lowered to seven percent, which is six percentage points lower than the 13 percent recorded in 2008. Steady improvements have been recorded across low-income and Hispanic students as well, according to the report.

- StudentStat is one of the state's efforts to use "big data" to improve Maryland's schools from pre-kindergarten through college. StudentStat started in 2007 and, five years later, the governor convened the first StudentStat meeting in Annapolis. Each quarter, the StudentStat team analyzes data submitted by the StudentStat agencies, identifies trends, and convenes meetings to present the information to key stakeholders.

- In 2011, the Maryland State Education Association (MSEA) conducted a statewide forum on closing the achievement gap for teachers and leaders. The forum yielded the *We Make The Difference* booklet of best practices across the state for closing the achievement gap.

- In 2008, Maryland codified the P–20 Leadership Council of Maryland in an effort to drive alignment of education with the skills needed for present and future employment.

- Enacted in 2002, The Bridge to Excellence in Public Schools Act was groundbreaking work in so far that the formula for funding public schools was restructured to be wealth-equalized and provided for additional funds for school systems in areas of high poverty. In return, each school submits an annual update to its master plan with a focus on strategies being followed to improve student achievement.

In short, statewide efforts hold great promise and my hope is that there is a way in which we can create stronger collaborations among institutions and agencies annually to share best practices and find ways to implement them in our localities.

In 2008, Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) presented a report to the county government on its progress on closing the achievement gap. The report produced mixed results: it showed progress by race and ethnicity on standardized measures of grade-level performance. The report further noted mixed progress on narrowing the gap on many above-grade level measures and gifted identification, and lost ground on several non-standardized measures of grade-level performance.

The report cited outcomes on standardized tests that illustrate the gap remains. For example, compared to White students, Black students were 78 percent as likely to pass the Grade 3 Maryland State Assessment (MSA) test in math, 68 percent as likely to pass the Grade 8 MSA test in reading, and 51 percent as likely to pass the Grade 8 MSA test in math. In addition, Whites were more than twice as likely as Latinos and African-Americans to enroll in advanced math in Grades 5 and 6, complete Algebra I by Grade 8, and earn PSAT scores that demonstrate honors/AP potential in 2006 and 2007. Although these reflect just two performance indicators in the report, the measures makes one ponder the following question: How is it that some students can progress through the educational system while others still show a significant lack of progress in a five-year span?

This continues to point to the difficulty of the challenge and that there is no "one size fits all" solution. However, the work continues and there are promising efforts to close the gap

happening in the county through the efforts of the Montgomery County Board of Education, dedicated MCPS teachers, and Montgomery College faculty as well as staff and administrators from both organizations. Here are a few notable examples:

- **ACES Program:** The collaboration among MCPS, MC, and the Universities at Shady Grove (USG) remains one of the most promising local efforts to close the achievement gap. Of the 573 ACES high school seniors last year, 562 remained in the program and graduated (98 percent) this past spring. The loss of 11 students was due to several reasons, including students moving out of the area, students transitioning to non-ACES high schools, or not completing graduation requirements. Of the 562 graduating seniors, 98 percent applied to either two-year or four-year colleges and universities. As of this writing, 286 of the 562 students (roughly 50 percent) have enrolled in MC for the fall 2014 semester. And, among the group, there are approximately 30 Dreamers.

- **Early Success Performance Plan:** As a result of the MCPS Early Success Performance Plan, improvement was seen in important student results. Between 2001 and 2006, the Early Success Performance Plan has helped close the gap for kindergarten students' reading skills at text Level 4. MCPS then raised the bar to text Level 6, and between 2006 and 2012, each racial/ethnic and special service subgroup achieved double-digit performance gains. Performance for White and Asian students increased 36 and 32 percent, respectively; performance for Black or African-American students increased 47 percent; and performance for Hispanic/Latino students increased 56 percent. Gains also were seen by students receiving special education (38 percent), ESOL (51 percent), and Free and Reduced-price Meals System (FARMS) services (50 percent).[11]

- **Community Engagement:** Montgomery College and Montgomery County Public Schools have long recognized the importance of the community in closing the achievement gap. Both institutions have created community engagement offices to take the educational institutions more directly out to the neighborhoods. Our

community engagement center classes in child development, computers, and SafeServe training will be at capacity this academic year, entrenching our efforts more deeply into the Gaithersburg and East County communities. MCPS is doing more direct engagement with families as a holistic approach to trying to move an entire family forward in completing primary and secondary education. In addition, MCPS has created an African American Achievement Action Group and a Latino Student Achievement Action Group (LSAAG) to address gaps in these populations. MCPS and MC have been very inclusive with these groups, exemplified by the College's Director of Community Engagement serving as co-chair of MCPS's LSAAG and MCPS's Community Engagement Director participating as a member of the College's CTAGIT Task Force.

Again, these are just a few examples of our public school and College efforts to address the achievement gaps. On a daily basis, our faculty, staff, and administrators have focused on addressing this gap as a top priority for their areas and as a top priority of the *Montgomery College 2020* strategic plan.

As we conducted research on Closing the Achievement Gap, we uncovered where we need greater resources to close the gap on a statewide and local basis. Some of those resources could be effective yet inexpensive. As I conclude, let me share some innovative thoughts about how the efforts described above could be expanded and enhanced.

- **Networks of Community Social Networks:** Ronnie Galvin, former director of Impact Silver Spring, reflected on the need for connecting community social networks to expand educational and training opportunities at our *Innovation Forum* last month. We need communities to make connections beyond their geographic borders as the college takes itself out to the communities, bringing its corporate partners and nonprofit partners side by side to address the achievement gap. As the college connects individuals and their small groups to the college and partners, community social networks grow, grassroots education, awareness, and communications increase,

and community members gain a better understanding of how to access all levels of education and educational support.

Every county resident can play a role through various paths, including volunteerism, philanthropy, advocacy, adjunct teaching, and most importantly, direct interaction with the students most vulnerable to not completing a college degree or workforce licensure or certification.

- **Closing the Achievement Gap Repository:** The state needs an electronic repository of strategies that have worked locally and statewide in closing the achievement gap in Maryland. The repository could be accessible to anyone—principals, superintendents, faculty, college presidents, researchers, etc. The repository would contain county and statewide achievement gap studies, scholarly works on Maryland's achievement gap, as well as dissertations and presentations used to describe, assess, and propose solutions to closing the achievement gap. The repository would tie into the longitudinal P–20 data and the StudentStat data to track students in improved ways. We could create this as a precursor to a national repository for all educational institutions.

- **Greater Alignment with the Implementation of the Common Core:** We need to identify college readiness by the 11th grade and improve ways of providing transition and college courses in partnership between MCPS and MC. Our Middle College and K-to-College programs are our most recent efforts to provide this improvement and to start children to think about college at earlier ages. We need to examine how we are revising our teacher education programs to better prepare teachers for Common Core as well.

- **Businesses and Closing the Achievement Gap**: Closing the Achievement Gap remains a community issue, not just a school system or college issue. I would like to see our local and state businesses take an active and engaged role in the solutions. Our businesses have strong commitments to community engagement and what better way

to serve the community than to assist it with meeting the educational needs of our students that face a variety of challenges in the pursuit of knowledge and trainings. Businesses benefit from closing the achievement gap through a broader pool of skilled workers, a more diverse workforce, and a workforce more prepared to communicate globally.

## Discussion Questions

1. What information stands out for you in this report?

2. What can Montgomery College and its K–20 partners learn from the cited regional, state and local efforts on closing the achievement gap?

3. How do you see our local businesses, partners, and residents assisting in closing the achievement gap?

## Sources

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