

Closing the Gap: Starting Early, Continuing Support, Lasting Results

From the beginning of its work, the Commission has been focused on addressing the needs of students who are falling behind – and who are being left behind – by the current education system. Every student in Maryland should have access to educational experiences and opportunities that enable them to reach their full potential and be ready for success in college and a rewarding career by the end of high school. This is a fundamental premise of the Commission’s recommendations. Unfortunately, Maryland is a long way from achieving this goal. The Commission learned that student performance gaps based on race, income, and learning disabilities, among other student subpopulations, persist. And once a student falls behind, it is even harder for them to get back on track to success. As in other states, too many Maryland students who fall behind are identified as requiring special education services, which is a label that too often permanently sets lower expectations for these students. In Maryland, about 12.5% of public school students receive special education services compared to less than half that amount in the top performing systems in the world.

Close examination of Maryland student performance on the State’s current assessment of student proficiency, known as the PARCC exams, reveals just how great the challenge is in achieving equitable student outcomes in Maryland. According to data from 2017, just under half (49.3%) of all students taking the English 10 exam received a proficient score (4 or 5), indicating college and career readiness, which is bad enough. However, disaggregated data illustrates how far we are from closing achievement gaps. While 67% of white students and 77% of Asian students scored proficient, only 29% of African American students and 34% of Hispanic students did so. Only 28% of low-income students (eligible for free or reduced-price meal (FRPM)) scored proficient compared to 62% of non-FRPM students. And the results are significantly worse for English Learners and special education students. Distressingly, these performance gaps have widened since the 2016 administration of the PARCC exam. Similar results (although lower with only 36.5% of all test takers scoring proficient) and even larger achievement gaps are seen in the Algebra I PARCC exam.

The Commission also learned that the concentration of students from low-income families in schools affects not just the performance of those students but *all* students in the school. Statewide, 43% of Maryland students are FRPM-eligible and considered low income, which is 185% of the federal poverty level. In Maryland, about 4 out of every 10 public schools has 55% or more of its students from low-income families. Schools with concentrated poverty are located in all but one jurisdiction in the State. In 15% of all schools, 80% or more of students are low income. While most of these schools with highly concentrated poverty (220 in total) are located in Baltimore City and Prince George’s County, there are such schools in 13 other counties in the State.

All of this is occurring in Maryland, which for over a decade has ranked among the highest (top five) household median income states in the US. Though the state is in this sense wealthy, as the data above suggests, there is wide variation in incomes, which results in enormous differences in student experiences, support and opportunities. Many of its children, from Baltimore City and Central Maryland to the Eastern Shore and the Western mountains, live

in the challenging circumstances resulting from concentrations of poverty, which include cross-generational poverty, neighborhoods and communities with chronically underperforming schools, underemployed or unemployed adults, high crime rates, substandard housing and inadequate social and healthcare services. These families are disproportionately minority and a growing number are non-English speaking. In many cases, their children are the very ones over-represented among students identified as having special academic and/or behavioral needs.

The Commission devoted much of its time and energy to developing a deep understanding of the critically important challenge of educational equity. In doing so, it benefitted greatly from presentations by leading local and national experts and submissions from national, state and community organizations on the differential experiences of children resulting from their economic, racial, ethnic, and community circumstances. This greatly heightened the Commissioners' understanding of and empathy for the lives of those segments of our citizens facing the most challenging circumstances.

As a result of its extensive efforts on this topic, the Commission has come to an inescapable conclusion: substantial and sustained improvement in Maryland's educational performance requires targeted attention to its lowest performing schools and an integrated set of reforms that will enable its most challenged students to achieve their true potential. One of the overarching principles of the Commission's recommendations is that the instructional system must be designed to quickly identify students who are falling behind grade level and provide the appropriate, individualized instruction and supports needed to get the student back on track for college and career readiness. Many of the Commission's recommendations, described in detail in Chapter 5, are designed to do just that. For example,

- In the short term, provide substantial additional resources for Transitional Supplemental Instruction (TSI), to address the needs of students in kindergarten through 3rd grade who are not proficient/on track for CCR.
- Phase in high quality full-day prekindergarten at no cost to 3- and 4-year-olds from low-income families (and on a sliding scale for 4-year-olds from higher income families) to enable children from economically challenging circumstances to begin kindergarten ready to learn like their peers from higher-income families.
- Increase teacher preparation requirements so that teachers are adequately prepared to identify students who are falling behind and to design instructional supports to get them back on track.
- Redesign the school day so that teachers have the time to diagnose and deliver individualized supports to students who need them.
- Provide additional resources for "at promise" students, a term which acknowledges that low-income, English learner, and special education students have the potential to be successful if they are given needed supports and opportunities.
- Implement a new concentration of poverty grant to provide a community school coordinator and health practitioner for every school with 55% or more of its students low income and up to an additional \$3,265 per FRPM student to provide support for all students in the school both during the school day and before/after/summer.

This last recommendation acknowledges that many economically disadvantaged students are not receiving the critical social services, health care, behavioral/mental health, nutritional and other needs that students from more affluent families receive as a matter of course. It also acknowledges that these students are also living in neighborhoods where they experience traumas that are going untreated. While it should not be the school's – or the school finance system's – responsibility to provide these services, the Commission recognizes that students cannot learn properly if these needs continue to go unaddressed. For this reason, the Commission is also recommending:

- An addition of 30 new Family Resource Centers, to ensure young mothers living in struggling economic conditions get the pre- and post-natal support they need; and
- An addition of 135 new Judy Centers across the State to provide early childhood education and family support services living in Title I school districts.

Over time, as the Commission's recommendations including the expansion of early childhood education and family support are implemented, more students will enter school ready to learn and fewer students will fall behind, and when they do fall behind, they will be identified more quickly and receive the additional instruction and supports to get back on track sooner.

The Commission firmly believes that, as its recommendations are phased in over time, priority must be given to implementing recommendations and allocating resources first in low-performing schools and schools with high concentrations of students living in poverty. The Commission cannot overstate the importance of prioritizing these schools for the adoption of new policies and the allocation of additional resources, including additional teachers and the assignment of the most effective teachers to low-performing schools, where they are needed most to reduce achievement gaps.

But these recommendations are not enough. The Commission realizes that there are different factors at play for African American and other racial and ethnically diverse students. While there is a high correlation between race and poverty in educational outcomes, race and poverty are not interchangeable. Racial inequities persist among students of different race and ethnicity with similar family income levels, as shown in data presented to the Commission by the Maryland Longitudinal Data System Center, the Education Trust, and other experts. For example, among students from higher incomes (non-FRPM eligible), 36% of African Americans scored at least proficient on the 4th grade reading PARCC compared to 65% of white students; the gap on the Algebra I PARCC is even wider.

Dr. Ivory Toldson, a consultant to the Commission, noted in his report to the Commission that African American and other students are dealing with racism and implicit and explicit biases from school personnel that lead to racial disparities in for example, placement in AP courses and disciplinary actions. Racial disparities can be seen in early childhood educational outcomes, which put students far behind their peers from the first day they enter school, and in access to college preparatory opportunities, as shown in the U.S. Department of Education Civil Rights Data Collection. While the Commission had adopted many recommendations in its working group reports that addressed education equity, the Commission adopted additional recommendations based on Dr. Toldson's suggestions. These recommendations were

incorporated into the appropriate policy areas of the Commission's report in Chapter 5, including requiring existing and prospective teachers to receive cultural competency training that includes understanding and addressing implicit as well as explicit biases, adopting restorative justice practices and recruiting more teachers in the classrooms who look like the students they are teaching.

In addition, the Commission is recommending better and additional data collection so that policymakers and decision makers have the information they need to evaluate the effectiveness of the Commission's recommendations, and making data transparent and readily available to parents and the public. Specifically, data should be collected and made readily available on racial disparities not only in achievement but in school attendance, disciplinary actions, school readiness, enrichment opportunities, assignment to special education classes, student and principal satisfaction, and meaningful family involvement. Data metrics to be collected should be clearly defined and developed by MSDE in partnership with school systems and the Maryland Longitudinal Data System Center should be consulted as appropriate.

While the Commission has diligently worked to put into place a system that provides the extra supports students need before, during, and after school as well as during the summer months, the Commission acknowledges that they are insufficient to fully support families and students grappling with socio-economic realities that exist in the larger communities surrounding our schools. Strong student performance is achieved by strong students. A strong student is not only someone who makes the highest grades or performs best on exams, but someone who is confident, curious, and resilient enough to persist in the face of challenging content and concepts. Someone who is able to attend school regularly and comes to school equipped to learn – arriving in good health, having adequate sleep and nutrition, benefitting from nurturing guidance in a supportive home. Strong students come from strong families that are able to support their children in a way that allows them to fully participate in the education program his or her school offers. And strong families are supported by strong communities that have adequate infrastructure and services and opportunities.

Therefore, in addition to the recommendations put forward by this Commission, Maryland must commit to building strong families and strengthening communities in a way that allows them to grow, nurture and support strong students. This requires resource allocation, policies and practices that ensure access to safe and affordable housing, ready access to nutritious food, reliable and efficient public transportation, high quality and affordable childcare, health and dental care, and meaningful job opportunities that allow families to move beyond functioning on a survival budget and into real and lasting financial stability. Enacting all of the reforms included in the Commission's report will certainly have great impact on the quality of teaching and learning in Maryland, but unless we also commit the same intentional approach to investing in the State's communities and families, we will never completely fulfill the goals we have set forward for providing access, opportunity and achievement for each and every student.

Finally, much to its surprise, the Commission also learned that Maryland's school finance system is more regressive than was thought, meaning that less funding is going to school systems and schools with greater numbers of students who need additional support and resources. At its best, an equitable school finance system provides greater funding to students with greater needs.

As a step toward addressing this issue the Commission is recommending that most funding provided through enrollment-based formulas follow the students to their schools and be required to be spent for students in their schools. In its final report in fall 2019, the Commission will recommend changes to the education funding formulas to ensure that the distribution of Maryland school funding is more progressive.