Expert Review Consensus Report
2010–11 Review of Montgomery County Public Schools: Professional Growth System (PGS)

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Overview and Review Process

Overview of the Professional Growth System

Throughout the past 10 years, Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) has been developing and implementing the Professional Growth System (PGS). PGS comprises three specific components: a set of standards, job-embedded professional development, and the Peer Assistance and Review (PAR) program.

PGS was developed as a collaborative effort between MCPS, the Montgomery County Education Association (MCEA), the Montgomery Association of Administrators and Principals, Montgomery County Business and Operations Administrators, and Service Employees International Union Local 500 (SEIU Local 500). The PAR program within PGS is a rigorous and high-stakes program for both novice teachers and struggling experienced teachers. PGS is a comprehensive system that includes all school personnel in an evaluation. District officials use the PAR program to inform hiring and dismissal decisions. In addition to using the PAR program to inform human capital decisions, PGS data are used to identify professional development opportunities for teachers. Despite the high stakes associated with the system, the district has encountered few legal complications and there appears to be strong teacher support for the program.

The Review Process

In collaboration with national experts in measurement and instruction, the National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality developed a Teacher Evaluation Review Template to help guide an examination of district efforts related to teacher evaluation. The template guided the review through a series of probes that prompt a systematic assessment for critical reflection and appraisal of the district evaluation system. Three expert reviewers used this template to examine district websites, training materials, and other supporting documentation to provide this appraisal of PGS. The three reviews were consolidated into one report, shared with the district for endorsement, and finalized for inclusion on this website.
Component 1: Evaluation System Goals

Description

Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) has developed three major professional growth systems: one for administrators and supervisory personnel, another for teachers, and the third for support services personnel. Montgomery County’s Professional Growth System (PGS) includes an evaluation plan with standards, job-embedded professional development, and the Peer Assistance and Review (PAR) program. The MCPS mission is to provide a high-quality, world-class education that ensures success for every student through excellence in teaching and learning. Further, within the strategic plan, Goal 4 emphasizes building the capacity of the workforce for individual and organizational effectiveness to promote student success (A-12). The purpose, vision, and goals for the evaluation system are articulated for the stakeholders in the three major systems.

Although Montgomery County has a comprehensive evaluation system in place, the district does not have a pay-for-performance program. The state of Maryland is considering an alternative compensation system, and Montgomery’s decision to pursue an alternative compensation system in the future is contingent on how the state proceeds.

Lessons Learned

The following lessons learned emerged from this review of PGS:

Culture of Accountability

MCPS has a strong culture of accountability. PGS’s primary focus is to provide support and professional development for teachers; however, if improvements in instruction have not occurred, MCPS will take the necessary steps to remove ineffective teachers.

Comprehensive System

The comprehensiveness of MCPS’ three systems is also a strength. MCPS recognizes the importance of all school personnel, including those in nonteaching roles, in student success and the efficient operation of the system (A-11). The system’s purpose, vision, and goals are aligned.

Professional Development

Professional development is a strength. Goal 4—create a positive work environment in a self-renewing organization—states that “all employees will be provided with high-quality professional development opportunities to promote individual and organizational effectiveness.”
Compensation Decisions Based on PGS

Compensation decisions are not presently a component of the evaluation system for teachers. If, however, MCPS elects to use teacher evaluation results to implement an alternative compensation program, the district might consider creating a performance level that is higher than the current Meets Standard.
Component 2: Communication and Stakeholder Investment

Description

The PGS system was developed through collaborative efforts by MCPS, the Montgomery County Education Association (MCEA), the Montgomery Association of Administrators and Principals, Montgomery County Business and Operations Administrators and supporting services employees including Service Employees International Union Local 500 (SEIU Local 500). A PGS Implementation Team was created and met on a regular basis to discuss and solve problems dealing with PGS, to ensure the fidelity of implementation, and to maintain continuous improvement. In addition, an Oversight Evaluation Team gathered data from stakeholders through surveys, case studies, interviews, and focus groups. Finally, a steering committee, which is intended to provide consistent support to struggling schools, and a design team were created. These committees comprise teachers, principals, support staff, and community members.

The system was introduced to MCPS staff through a series of meetings led by the vice president of the union and a principal who served as a coordinator of the work. Written documents were discussed during face-to-face meetings with faculty and administration in individual schools over the course of the 2000–03 school years. During these meetings, the district administration provided information regarding the system and its progress and used these meetings as a way to obtain feedback from the teachers on their view of the system.

In addition to the meetings, there are numerous sources to inform stakeholders about the evaluation system, including handbooks, a website, and an annual report. The communication plan provides supports for teachers, administrators, and support providers as they work to meet the standards and requirements of the system. A searchable database of professional development courses, a transcript of completed professional development courses, observation forms, target announcements and content for specific positions, and information about available professional development opportunities are accessible to all personnel within the district. Moreover, trainings through Professional Growth Consultants provide extensive assistance to personnel.

In an effort to gather feedback from participants in the PAR program, two surveys are administered to participants each year. Within the survey, participants are asked about their work with their support person as well as general feedback on the system. Feedback also is collected on a regular basis on the PGS trainings in order to improve them.

Lessons Learned

The following lessons learned emerged from this review of PGS:

Information Dissemination

Throughout the various stages of development, teachers and administrators were informed of the system. Documentation indicates that teachers learned about the various components and timelines of the PGS and had opportunities to provide feedback.
**Strategic Communication Plan**

There are several means of stakeholder inclusion and modes of communication within the evaluation system design and implementation; however, a strategic, comprehensive communication plan identifying specific goals was not apparent. Establishing a detailed communication plan may strengthen the system’s coherence and its capacity to be understood across all components. Although Montgomery County has discussed this need and some initiatives have been started, it has not been implemented to a significant degree.
Component 3: Evaluation Format

Description

The Professional Growth System (PGS) plan for each staffing group has several components, including an evaluation based on set standards, job-embedded professional development, and a Peer Assistance and Review (PAR) program for support and evaluation requirements. The district’s Professional Growth System (PGS) has two levels of proficiency: Meets Standard and Below Standard.

When Are Staff Members Evaluated?

The system differentiates requirements between new and probationary teachers. In addition, the cycle of teacher evaluation differs for those by experience and competence. If the staff members meet expectations in the formal observation year, they are placed in a multiyear professional growth cycle, with the intent of the professional development leading to continuous improvement. During a professional development year, staff members gather artifacts to share with their evaluator during the formal observation year. In nonevaluation years, tenured teachers design a multiyear Professional Development Plan (PDP) with outcomes for improvement, providing opportunities to collaborate with others and refine their skills. In an evaluation year, teachers on PDPs review professional development goals, identify issues, address past concerns, and analyze student outcomes. Probationary teachers must have at least two formal observations by a principal or qualified observer. One observation must be announced, and an observation must take place each semester. Consulting Teachers (CT) will complete a minimum of two additional observations, and, if the teacher is rated Below Standard, an additional observation is required.

Pre- and Post-Conferences

Pre-conferences and post-conferences are required prior to and after a formal observation. Specific feedback within the post-conference meeting is mandatory and is required to occur within three days, unless approved by both parties.

What Types of Evidence Are Collected?

The observation used in formal evaluation years is based on the standards set forth by the implementation teams and is closely tied to the district strategic plan. Items incorporated in the evaluation can include samples of student work, lesson and unit plans, student test data, and surveys. Standardized test scores are not used as an indicator for teacher effectiveness but are used in analysis and problem solving for the student, teacher, and campus. The level of flexibility for which artifacts can be collected was intentional because the district acknowledges that student data and assessments are not uniform across all grades and content areas. This flexibility allows teachers to collect artifacts that are most relevant for their teaching situation.
Using Evaluation Data

When using the evaluation data to make decisions, the district annually monitors the number of teachers dismissed and the frequency with which teachers are dismissed. Two union association leaders, the Deputy Superintendent and the Chief Operating Officer, meet biweekly to review data results. In addition, an annual meeting is held, in which the association leaders, deputy superintendent, president and executive director of MCEA, and chief operating officer compare the data and review documents.

Appealing Decisions

Previously, the district allowed only process appeals, but now teachers can appeal on content at the completion of their review by asking the PAR panel to reconsider the content of the report itself, and the panel can negate that report and change the report if a problem with the content is found. There is a more extensive appeal process now for both content and process.

Lessons Learned

The following lessons learned emerged from this review of PGS:

Commitment to Accountability

MCPS has demonstrated a willingness to implement and support PGS—particularly in using PGS to support hiring and dismissal decisions. The union support in making these decisions also is noteworthy. The strong, supportive culture is a definite strength of the district. Also, the system’s proposal to align hiring, induction, mentoring, professional development, and support systems is to be commended. The system has well-designed and explicit procedures in place to address teachers who are not meeting standards. Evaluation forms provide clear directions and expectations for teachers at different stages and for those in the PAR program.

Flexibility

Another strong component is that the flexibility within PGS allows the system to account for all school personnel. For example, all staff can generate whatever evidence they feel is most appropriate, allowing the system to accommodate various teaching roles, content, and context. Although checks for reliability were not explicitly evident in the supporting documentation, the fact that there have been few legal disagreements implies that personnel view the system as credible.

Inclusion of All Personnel

Another strength of the evaluation design is its consideration of teachers at different stages of development and its differentiated support for teachers at varying levels of performance. The system’s structure ensures that teachers at all levels—even those with tenure—can be compelled to participate in the evaluation process at any time, which demonstrates the level of commitment of MCPS personnel. The manner in which the system differentiates for teachers identified as
effective and those needing additional support allows the district to stretch resources and direct efforts toward teachers in most need.

**Focus on Student Growth**

MCPS has established a strong culture of accountability using data. Using data to inform instruction and measure student growth has been emphasized within the district over a number of years. Although data use is relatively strong within the district, explicit guidance in how to include and measure student growth for teacher evaluation purposes will likely strengthen PGS.

**Expand Proficiency Levels**

The reviewers noted that the example descriptions help teachers understand expectations for each standard and its categorization under each proficiency level. However, the district may want to add another level of proficiency so that the goal is to become a highly effective teacher rather than one who merely meets the required standard.

**Pre-Conference Forms**

As a precursor to teacher observations, MCPS encourages conversations between the teachers and evaluators. MCPS might strengthen the role of the pre-conference by developing a form that the teacher completes ahead of time, including a self-evaluation, class demographics, and any pertinent background knowledge to understand the lesson sequence and relation to content standards. The form will allow the conversation to be more targeted and reduce the narrative feedback developed by the evaluator.
Component 4: Strength of Measures

Description

MCPS, in conjunction with Research for Better Teaching, has developed a set of standards, based in part on the National Board for Professional Teaching (NBPTS) standards, to cover a myriad of issues and aspects of teaching. The district has six keystandards that are operationalized in the handbook (planning, assessment, motivation, communication, instruction, and classroom management), and these standards provide a concise picture of what is expected from all staff. The standards also include detailed performance criteria and examples to provide additional guidance. The research base around the six standards is strong and provides a succinct, yet comprehensive, picture of essential teaching competencies.

Further, the evaluation system tries to account for factors that are beyond a teacher’s control (e.g., class size and administrative responsibilities). For example, teachers going through Peer Assistance and Review may be given a second year in PAR if "there were external circumstances that made it difficult for the client teacher to be successful, if the teacher is not certified or not teaching in area of certification, or if there are limited resources for support in the building” (pg. 21). Another example includes the existence of contextual factors that are recorded in the observation. Because teachers can generate their own evidence for each standard, and because observers write narratives describing the lessons they observe, the system balances between the need for coherent and stable standards on one side and the infinite variety of teaching practices that can appear in the district on the other.

Lessons Learned

The following lessons learned emerged from this review of PGS:

Capitalizing on Content Expertise

With a system such as this, evaluators may have difficulty when evaluating someone outside of their area of expertise—particularly in specific content areas. Trained evaluators with knowledge of specialist roles and subject-matter competence also gain more credibility with teachers. MCPS might consider using mentors or teacher leaders as evaluators with expertise in content areas to ensure observations of appropriate frequency, duration, and with specific feedback related to content/discipline.

Correlations to Student Achievement

PGS, if implemented with concern for fidelity, has the potential to positively influence student outcomes. Collecting student outcome data and comparing those to PGS results increases the system’s credibility and validity.
Component 5: Evaluator Selection and Training

Description

An education consulting group, Research for Better Teaching provided training to evaluators, Consulting Teachers, and all members of the Peer Assistance and Review panel. In-district trainers then took over the responsibility of training the groups.

The training consists of two courses, each six days in duration. The first course prepares evaluators to collect and analyze evidence about teacher’s work across the standards (planning, assessment, motivation, communication, instruction, and classroom management). The second course concentrates on using multiple sources of data in evaluation as well as conferencing with teachers. During the trainings, the district provides clear examples of behavioral performance that are above and below standard. After the trainings, principals are asked to submit observation reports. The Center for Skillful Teaching is doing an assessment of the reports and evidence to make sure that the CIG process is working. There was no mention in the documentation as to special training for specific content areas or refresher training sessions, but information on the district website did note that resource counselors and student support specialists also received the evaluator training.

Evaluator Selection

The selection of evaluators is systematic, and extensive training is required to serve in this role. Expectations for principals and Consulting Teachers are clearly outlined, and they are evaluated on this work.

Lessons Learned

The following lessons learned emerged from this review of PGS:

Use of Consulting Teachers

The use of Consulting Teachers is a strength in this system because these individuals serve at the discretion of the PAR panel after an extensive review process. The system appears to have the human capital and capacity to manage the system effectively.

Training and Implementation Fidelity

MCPS has developed an extensive selection and training process for evaluators. Through such training, MCPS attempts to minimize the subjective nature of the evaluation process. Reviewing past evaluator data for consistency among raters and monitoring for fidelity of implementation likely will strengthen the system and ensure that it is implemented as intended. Although MCPS has not had a problem with this in the past, providing explicit specification among performance levels coupled with decision rules and examples of evidence that would justify one rating versus another likely will strengthen the potential for evaluators to follow the evaluation format as its intended.
Component 6: Alignment With Professional Development and Standards

Description

The professional development strand of the Professional Growth System is an important part of the evaluation plan and is closely aligned to the Goal 4 of the district strategic plan. There is an emphasis placed on the role of professional development for all employees. The professional development is job-embedded and focused on specific components that support effective teaching. There are many opportunities for research-based professional development courses, including the Studying Skillful Teaching course, support in curriculum implementation, and National Board Certification. Consulting Teachers also provide intensive, individualized support to novice and marginal teachers directly related to their area of need. Using data, tenured teachers design their own multiyear professional development plans, which can last up to four years. The staff development teacher and administrator review these plans to ensure rigor.

Strengths

Commitment to Professional Development

The district has a strong professional development plan for teachers, building staff, and leadership. The financial investment by MCPS also is impressive because the district has increased its professional development budget from 1 percent to 3 percent of the district budget in 2004. In addition, each building has a highly trained staff member whose primary mission is to develop staff capacity. The PGS program has strengths in several areas, including the Professional Learning Communities Institute, a two-year program of professional development for building staff and leadership teams. This intensive, two-day workshop builds the capacity of leadership teams. Training provided by the Equity Training and Development Team centers on the leadership teams of schools and offices, with the goal of building their capacity so they can continue the work with their entire staff. MCPS Professional Development Online System (A-6) provides highlighted displays of required and recommended courses tailored to each individual and allows course searching and browsing.

Lessons Learned

The following lessons learned emerged from this review of PGS:

Use of PGS Results

An evaluation system’s capacity to reliably identify highly effective and ineffective teachers is significant—particularly if results are to be used for personnel decisions. However, ensuring that PGS results detect teacher strengths and weaknesses is critically important for teacher development as well. MCPS’ ability to identify individual, school, and district needs—particularly for teachers in nontested grades and subject areas—is imperative if changes in teacher practice and academic improvements are to be realized. As implementation progresses, MCPS’ attention to the system’s ability to increase the use of data to identify needs and
incorporate relevant professional learning activities would ensure that professional growth is a major component of the evaluation cycle.

Evaluating Professional Learning Efforts

As professional development is incorporated into the evaluation cycle, establishing means to evaluate outcomes related to improved teacher capacity is necessary. This goes beyond a simple evaluation of the professional learning activity, moving toward a continual, longitudinal reflection and analysis of teacher participation, support, and outcomes related to student achievement. Building the data collection system to collect and analyze this data over time will determine the overall effectiveness of MCPS’ professional learning efforts.
Component 7: Data Infrastructure and Transparency

Collecting, validating, interpreting, and communicating teacher performance data is necessary to inform stakeholders, guide professional development, and assess the teacher evaluation system. The information provided in the documentation displayed results from surveys on the effectiveness of the professional development. Meeting minutes from the board meeting on June 8, 2004, also provided information on the PGS. The district also collects information on the number of teachers taking courses and the number of teachers being served by Consulting Teachers.

Lessons Learned
The following lessons learned emerged from this review of PGS:

Collect Student Outcomes Data

Teacher and administrator survey information is collected to evaluate PGS efforts; however, student outcomes (e.g., student achievement, graduation rates, etc.) are not consistently or strategically included in the systems evaluation. Likewise, tracking teacher performance over time provides validation of professional development efforts.

Longitudinal Capability

Designing the technological capabilities to track teacher performance data over time provides opportunities to track teacher growth (or lack thereof), identify trends in performance, drive professional learning, and determine the system’s efficacy. Although MCPS currently buys data from the College Warehouse to track students graduating from post-secondary programs and the state is developing a data model for districts, MCPS might investigate ways to integrate PGS data with the overall district data system to ensure strategic use of these data. A strategic design at the forefront can ensure system capacity to capture teacher ratings, identify teacher needs, develop professional learning activities, track teacher professional development participation, document teacher improvement, and evaluate the efficacy of the program.

Reliable Data

Data can be used to inform teacher practice and professional development and to make personnel decisions. Ensuring that the data management system is sound, user friendly, and understandable will be critical as MCPS attempts to scale up efforts. Targeting professional development according to teacher, school, and district data will reap the most benefits. Continuing to train administrators and staff regarding data findings and how data can be used to guide professional learning and impact student performance will require reliable data.
Component 8: System Evaluation

Systematically assessing the evaluation system and its ability to measure teacher performance in a performance in a rigorous, meaningful way is an often over-looked step in the evaluation cycle. The District chose to gradually implement the Professional Growth System plan. The intent of PGS was to build the capacity of teachers so that they had the knowledge and skills needed to meet the needs of all students. The longevity of PGS demonstrates that the system is well established, and the occurrence of successful collaboration illustrates its benefits. After four years of implementation, the PGS Implementation Team and the PGS Evaluation Oversight Committee gave an evaluation report to the Board of Trustees with its findings and recommendations. Adjustments were made and the program has improved from the evidence provided.

Lessons Learned
The following lessons learned emerged from this review of PGS:

Rigorous Evaluation of PGS’ Impact

Although the district has put in place a well-developed system, the level of rigor is not clear. The example observation reports and anecdotal information suggest positive results, but there is no way to tell the extent to which procedures are truly rigorous. Even though PGS identifies and removes underperforming teachers, suggesting a level of rigor, the system does not produce evidence of demonstrated student growth and improvements in teacher practice.

Systematic Process of Evaluation

The dearth of available research on teacher evaluation has led many districts that are implementing teacher evaluation systems with little supporting research. Systematically evaluating the effectiveness of the system, conducting research, and modifying the structure accordingly ensure system efficacy and sustainability. A comprehensive evaluation would entail a thorough assessment of the various components in teacher evaluation including, but not limited to, implementation fidelity, rater reliability, system validity, professional learning effectiveness, improved teacher practice, and improved student performance.