

**United States House of Representatives Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related
Agencies**

**Testimony of Dr. Joshua P. Starr, Superintendent of Schools
Montgomery County Public Schools, Rockville, Maryland
March 27, 2012**

Good morning, Chairman Rehberg, Ranking Member DeLauro and members of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies.

My name is Dr. Joshua P. Starr, and I proudly serve as the superintendent for Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS). With 146,500 students, MCPS is the largest school district in the state of Maryland and the 17th largest district in the nation. I want to thank you for this opportunity to address you today on the topic of federal funding in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA).

If you want a preview of what the American public education system is going to look like in 20 years, I would encourage you to visit our school district, which is just a short Metro ride from where we sit today. The demographic shifts that our nation is experiencing as a whole have already taken root in Montgomery County.

In 1991—just two decades ago—MCPS was a very different district than it is today. For instance, students of color accounted for less than 40 percent of our enrollment and just 17 percent of our students qualified for Free and Reduced-price Meals (FARMS), an indicator of poverty.

This school year, about 66 percent of our students are people of color. Hispanic students alone represent 26 percent of our student body and over the past 20 years, the number of Hispanic students in MCPS has more than tripled. Today, nearly one third of our students qualify for Free and Reduced-price Meals. In fact, the number of students in MCPS who qualify for free and reduced-price meals is greater than the total number of students enrolled in the District of Columbia Public Schools.

Yet, amid all this change, MCPS has maintained—and even increased—its reputation as one of the highest-achieving districts in the nation.

- Half of the students in the class of 2011 received a college-ready score on at least one AP exam, nearly triple the national rate (18.1 percent). In fact, the percentage of African American and Hispanic graduates with at least one college-ready AP score in MCPS surpassed the national average for all graduates.

- More than 90 percent of our kindergartners meet or exceed grade-level reading targets and we have virtually closed the achievement gap by race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status in kindergarten reading.
- Nearly two-thirds of our students have successfully completed Algebra 1 by the time they finish the eighth grade.

How have we maintained such high performance amid such dramatic change? Without a doubt, the main reason is that we have the most outstanding staff in public education, bar none. Our employees embrace the opportunity to educate a more diverse student body and have met the challenges of providing each and every child with a world-class education.

But there is no doubt that money has made a big difference.

Montgomery County and the state of Maryland have a long history of investing in public education. As MCPS was experiencing these dramatic changes in the 1990s and the early 2000s, our taxpayers increased their investment in our schools, allowing us to keep pace with the demand of a growing and changing student population. Combined with increases in Title I and other federal funding programs, this revenue was used to expand English for Speakers of Other Languages programs; to recruit, retain and build the capacity of the best and brightest teachers and school leaders; and to provide specific interventions for students in need, especially at schools that had high poverty rates or were not making Adequate Yearly Progress.

I want to be clear: I am not saying that more money alone equals success. But money invested in the right strategies and the right people gets a big return. And when that funding begins to disappear, it can be difficult to maintain progress.

Last week, I had the privilege of visiting Highland Elementary School, in Silver Spring, one of our most impacted schools. Eighty-two percent of Highland's students qualify for free or reduced-price meals and more than 60 percent receive ESOL services.

In 2003, just 41 percent of Highland's 5th grade students scored proficient or higher on the state reading test—the MSA—and only 13 percent scored at the advanced level. Highland was the first school in our district to face sanctions under No Child Left Behind, and improving the performance in this school became a major focus, at the school, district and community level.

An outstanding principal, Ray Myrtle, was put in place at the school and a comprehensive improvement plan was enacted. That plan used all resources available—including federal school improvement and Reading First grants and Title I funding—to differentiate instruction, train teachers, create smaller classes, provide effective interventions for students who were behind, and much more. By 2008, more than 95 percent of the Highland's fifth-graders were proficient or higher on the reading MSA, with 80 percent scoring in the advanced range.

In 2009, U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan came to Highland Elementary to announce it had been named a National Blue Ribbon School. A Harvard University case study on Highland's

success highlighted the multifaceted approach the school took to improving student performance. I read it when I was superintendent in Stamford, Conn., and it is an amazing story.

Today, Highland remains a high-achieving school. The percentage of fifth-graders scoring proficient or higher on the MSA is still above 95 percent. But the percentage scoring at the **advanced** level has dropped back to 42 percent. Recently, Highland's current principal, Scott Steffan, said he believes that the drop off is directly related to the loss of resources—including local, state and federal dollars. Those resources paid for direct instruction, smaller class sizes and interventions that took students to a higher level.

And, ultimately, isn't that what we want for our students? We want them to be achieving at the highest levels. We must set our sights higher than proficiency or adequacy. We must strive for excellence in all areas of education.

I am not here to simply complain about the lack of resources. We appreciate the money that the federal government provides to our district—this year we have received \$72.5 million in federal funding and every dollar is helping our students. For instance, \$20.4 million in Title I funding allows us to provide targeted instruction to our students who are most impacted by poverty. Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) funding of \$29.3 million is an important part of providing a continuum of services to the 12 percent of students in our district who have a disability. With \$3.4 million in Head Start funding, we are able to offer more than 600 slots low-income students access to prekindergarten, including full-day pre-k Head Start classes. I applaud the Committee's proposal last year to add \$1 billion each to Title 1 and IDEA last year. Our district is living proof that such funds would be well spent. And I would be remiss if I did not ask you to fully fund IDEA. Full funding of IDEA would provide much needed services for students with special needs.

We certainly also appreciate that President Obama's Fiscal Year 2013 budget calls for level funding for Title I. However, for a district like MCPS, where the number of students living in poverty is growing, this will feel like a reduction. And like all school districts, we are very concerned about the real possibility of deep cuts due to sequestration because of the failure of the Super Committee to reach agreement on deficit reduction. . The depth of cuts to education—as much as \$4 billion would be devastating. With local and state budgets still recovering from the economic downturn, these types of reductions could result in the loss of jobs and reduced services to students in need. I urge Congress to protect education funding at all costs.

As Congress contemplates reauthorizing ESEA, I urge you to spend money on what works—and it's not more tests. Federal funds can be the catalyst that sparks innovation, fosters collaboration and improves teaching and learning for all.

As our country undergoes significant changes in its economy, family structure and population, we must make sure our schools are ready to meet new demands. Federal funds can help make that happen.

Sparking Innovation

Over the past three years, the U.S. Department of Education has used the comparatively small amount of money it provides to schools to spark innovation and change.

MCPS was one of 45 recipients of an Investing in Innovation—or I3—grant in 2010. The grant is allowing us to quickly develop and implement our new curriculum in the elementary grades, which integrates all subject areas and helps students develop the critical academic and thinking skills that are so important in the 21st century. The initiative—called Curriculum 2.0—is being done in collaboration with Pearson, and includes a web-based professional learning environment where teachers can share ideas, ask questions and receive just-in-time training. The \$5 million I3 grant is allowing us to complete a project that will improve the education of tens of thousands of students and is an example of how a relatively small investment in people and innovation can have a huge impact.

It should be noted that the Race to the Top grant has also used a relatively small amount of money to try to yield dramatic change in education. I am hopeful that common standards, better assessments and improved data systems will result from the Race to the Top competition. To be clear, MCPS has had some concerns about Maryland’s Race to the Top application, because it could impact our nationally recognized teacher evaluation system, having the effect of actually hampering innovation. And I am still troubled by what I consider to be an over-reliance on standardized tests in how we determine the success of our schools and our staff. But I do support the overall intent of Race to the Top because it has provided fresh focus to the achievement gap issue. I hope that MCPS, as a district, will have an opportunity to compete for such funds in the future. That said, competitive dollars should not take the place of much needed formula funding.

Fostering Collaboration

In his excellent book, *The Global Achievement Gap*, author Tony Wagner lists the skills that our students will need to be competitive in the 21st century global economy.

- Critical thinking and problem solving
- Collaboration across networks and leading by influence
- Agility and adaptability
- Initiative and entrepreneurialism
- Effective oral and written communication
- Accessing and analyzing information
- Curiosity and imagination

Developing these skills will require us to rethink the way we approach education—and how we fund our schools must change with it. Our classrooms can no longer be places where our kids simply learn facts and formulas, but must provide them with a complementary skill set of social and emotional competencies and 21st century skills.

We must have fewer walls in our schools and more spaces and technology that spur innovation and collaboration. We need more labs so our kids can do science, not view science. We need more hands-on learning to give students experience with the machines and processes they will use in the work place.

We must also teach our children to be socially and emotionally competent. We must foster in them the drive to do good in society, to care for those who are less fortunate and to strive for social justice. The technology revolution has connected us all and sparked massive change around the globe. We must prepare our kids to live in that world, not the world we grew up in.

We must also use funds to foster collaboration among agencies and organizations. As poverty has increased in our district, we have worked hand in hand with the county and the state to provide a continuum of services: health screenings, free breakfasts, after-school programs, summer learning and much more.

In Montgomery County, the school district works with our local Department of Health and Human Services, local nonprofits and other community organizations to provide health and mental health services, social services and educational support to at-risk students who live in one of our most impacted school clusters. This collaboration has allowed us to address the needs of the whole child. We have barely scraped the surface of what is possible, yet we do not have the funds to increase these collaborative efforts. I believe the federal government can play a role in incentivizing interagency collaboration that serves at-risk youth and families.

Professional Development and Accountability

Since coming to Montgomery County this year, I've been quoted many times saying we do not have a student learning problem in America today—we have an adult learning problem.

I know that when I hire a new teacher our district must invest thousands of dollars to make sure that teacher has the necessary skills to be successful. And, in order to retain that teacher, we must continue to invest in professional development. I have never met a teacher who does not want to get better at what they do, but our professional development systems need to be improved in a way that keeps our educators growing and motivated. This year, the federal budget is providing us with \$5.2 million for professional development in all areas of the curriculum, including special education, limited English proficiency and career and technical education. I encourage you to maintain and even expand these dollars, as they have a very real impact on the education our children have every day.

Like many superintendents, I am concerned about the tone of the education conversation today. In the name of “accountability” too many people are pointing fingers at our educators and telling them they are to blame for the woes of American public education. Let me be clear: Our educators are responsible for all that is right in our public education system.

I am proud that in Montgomery County we have a teacher's union that is collaborative and innovative—a union that is part of the solution.

As I mentioned before, Montgomery County has a nationally recognized teacher professional growth system. A key component of the system—Peer Assistance and Review—partners new or underperforming teachers with master educators, who engage in a holistic approach to improving pedagogy and classroom management skills. If a teacher is not improving under Peer Assistance and Review it is the union that makes the recommendation whether they should be separated from the system. To date, this program has resulted in about 500 underperforming teachers exiting the system over the past decade. More importantly, it has also resulted in thousands of teachers and leaders improving their skills and better serving our students.

This is 21st century collaboration and the Montgomery County Education Association, SEIU Local 500 and MCAAP are 21st century unions.

Closing

The current version of ESEA—No Child Left Behind—had good intent and created some positive changes. It forced us to deal with the vestiges of our history; 100 years ago, at the turn of the last century, elected officials and educators were dealing with the same dynamics – how to create a public school system that serves a new economy and a changing population. Unfortunately, the wrong choices were made. Students were rigidly tracked according to faulty science and measurements. NCLB attempted to correct the moral and ethical mistake of the past, but has relied on the same flawed assumptions about the utility of standardized measures. Right now, because of NCLB, or perhaps in reaction to it, our school leaders and educators are having honest discussions about achievement gaps. Such discussions might never have happened without the law.

Unfortunately, NCLB narrowed our curricular focus, used shame as a motivator and put too much emphasis on tests that, frankly, we now realize are not reliable indicators of student performance. I just lost two weeks of instructional time because of state testing and, honestly, our teachers could have used that time for meaningful instruction rather than babysitting bubble sheets. NCLB has created an environment where data, not students, are king—an environment that, at best, demotivates staff, and in the worst cases, leads them to take unconscionable actions.

But now is our chance to make it right. Let us use ESEA and the money that is attached to it to spur innovation, to give our students the 21st century skills they need and create an environment where our educators are valued and can continue to grow. Let's have a 21st century law that supports a 21st century education.

Thank you for allowing me to testify today.