

Chapter Seven

Are Suburban Schools Closing the Reading Gap?

The Experiences of Montgomery County in Maryland

In the late 1990s, a new leader, Dr. Jerry D. Weast, arrived at work in the Maryland suburbs outside Washington, D.C. At the hiring ceremonies, he announced that closing the achievement gap between the races was his top priority. In this district, money was not going to be an obstacle. It was not Baltimore, or Jersey City, or Newark, or Camden, jurisdictions that would close in a week without state aid. Instead, in this county, money had never severely limited the quality of the schools. With neighborhood after neighborhood of half-million to million-dollar-plus houses, the tax base was more than adequate. This county can generate much of what it needs through local property taxes; state aid is important here but not the basis of the school economy. With spending per pupil at close to \$9,000, the story of schools in Montgomery County should not be one of shortages. (See figure 7.1 for spending data.)

Even with this funding, Weast faced some challenges. Enrollment was growing rapidly as farmland in the northern sections of the county turned into townhouses, condominiums, and single-family houses. Portables were being added to older schools. Some high schools received large additions, moving their total size well over two thousand. New schools were being built. And enrollment was changing. Once an almost all-white district, now it was less than half white—with large enrollments of Asian, Latino, and Afro-American students (see figure 7.2).

Weast's investments are clear. A recent report outlines where the new superintendent decided to take this suburban school system. Closing the achievement gap was the core goal.

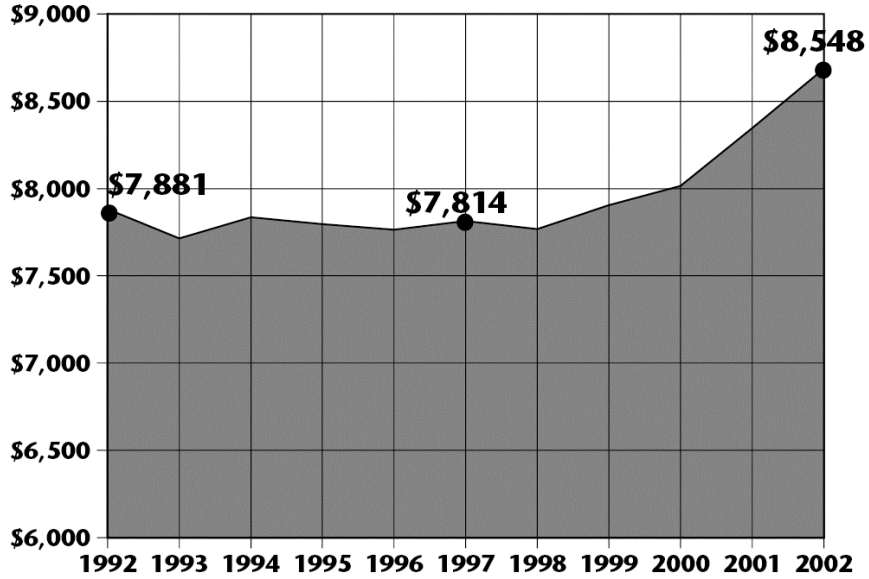


Figure 7.1. Cost-per-pupil amounts in Montgomery County Public Schools (Maryland), fiscal years 1992-2002.

Source: Citizens Budget, 2002, Maryland County Public Schools.

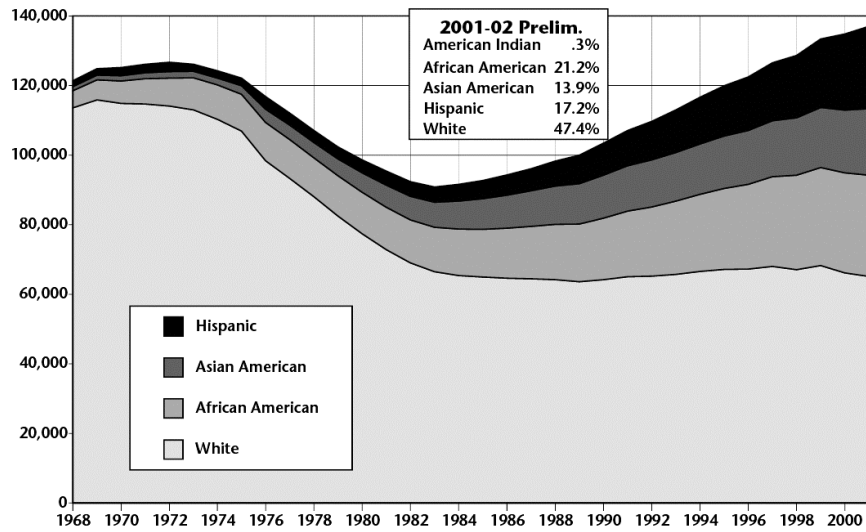


Figure 7.2. Montgomery County Public Schools, enrollment by race/ethnic group, 1968-2000.

Source: Citizens Budget, fiscal year 2002, Maryland County Public Schools

In 1999, the Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) began to make fundamental reforms in the way the school system works. The goal is to raise the bar of expectations for all students and to close the achievement gap between groups. The Board of Education adopted a set of five academic priorities to which it committed itself and the entire school system for at least four years. These priorities are directed at providing a high-quality teacher in every classroom, and giving teachers the tools and support they need to raise the standards of academic performance . . . the goal is to raise the bar of expectations for all students and to close the achievement gap between groups.

This new plan—known as “A Call to Action”—emphasized improving the early literacy experiences of children. Kindergarten teachers received new training. Full-day kindergarten became available in more schools, and during this day a ninety-minute block of time was now devoted to literacy.¹

Just as the new superintendent was investing millions of dollars in K–2 education at the local level, the state was making changes that could also influence literacy. No longer were local standards enough. Now each student has to pass state tests in subject areas.

The state has already created tests on a number of subjects, said Susan Spencer, an instructional specialist with the MCPS. “In the first phase, the state created tests in biology, algebra, government, geometry and English. Additional tests will be added in other subjects in phases 2 and 3. Eventually students will need to pass these tests in order to graduate.”

So a teacher needs to look at the state content indicators, which could be described as the topics to be covered on the test, to know what the kids need to pass the state tests, she explained. “If I look at content indicators for a test in government, I know what the students will need for success on the high school assessment in government. If my students know those standards, that content, then I can enrich the curriculum.”

Spencer said that the time required to cover the topics in the state curriculum does influence the local high schools. “Time is an issue when you have numerous tests and all the obligations to fulfill in the curriculum.” She recommends the use of biographies and social histories if time allows.

Wonderful books are available to supplement textbooks, she added. Two books that she would highly recommend are Tom Brokaw’s book about World War II, *The Great War*, and Doris Kearns Goodwin’s social

history of life in Long Island, *Wait Till Next Year*. “Doris Kearns Goodwin’s social history would be wonderful book for kids to read. She’s is a delight to read,” Spencer said. “Biographies are also highly engaging and a way to turn kids on to history.”

But are these books available? Spencer said she was not close enough to the high schools to know which schools were assigning reading beyond the textbook. Fortunately, homework assignments are now in on line databases available to the public.

As the sample in table 7.1 indicates, textbooks seem to be the major source of reading in high school social studies classes in the system, and the reading assignments seem to be very short—when reading had been assigned, which was not every night or even every weekend.

Imagine if the students doing these reading assignments were African American or Latino? Is this undemanding schedule of reading assignments going to help close the reading gap between the races in Montgomery County?

Ty Healey, the resource teacher (department chair) for social studies, said that this snapshot approach may not accurately capture the amount of reading done in biographies, trade books, and other materials since assignments in the online database only cover two weeks, so a biography assigned in March will not show up in the database in May. His information about the database is only correct at first glance; while the default view of the database only covers two weeks, a user can set the database to retrieve up to six months of homework assignments. An analysis of over forty homework assignments in social studies in county high schools in May 2002 did not show a single reference to a biography, autobiography, or trade book. In addition to short textbook reading assignments, teachers were asking students to complete time lines, to critique online PowerPoint slide shows, to analyze short excerpts from primary sources that they had posted online, and to complete a variety of other assignments.

Fortunately, another indicator may show the level of investment in reading in high school social studies. Healey was willing to provide information about the books he had been able to order for his staff of fourteen other social studies teachers and himself. The business manager of his high school explains there are obstacles to even for a department chair such as Healey in providing teenagers in Montgomery County with more reading experiences.

Table 7.1. A Sample of Reading Assignments in History Classes, Montgomery County, Maryland, Public Schools, Spring 2002

<i>Subject</i>	<i>School</i>	<i>Assignment</i>	<i>Due Date</i>	<i>Total Pages of Reading Assigned</i>
U.S. history	WJ	Timeline activity on civil rights movement	5/30/02	None
U.S. history	BCC	Read pp. 704–710 (1 + 3).	5/7/02	7
U.S. history	WJ	Read pp. 696–703 in textbook.	5/2/02 assigned on Thursday due on Monday	8 over a weekend
U.S. history	WJ	Read pp. 636–642 and do questions 11, 12, 13 on p. 664	4/30/02	7
Modern world history	WJ	Read pp. 807–810 (rise of totalitarian states) and answer questions 1–3 on p. 810.	4/25/02	4
Modern world history	WJ	Read pp. 801–805; bring text.	4/23/02	5
Modern world history	WJ	No homework	4/20/02	No homework for all classes MHW. Please bring your book Monday.
National, state, and local government	AE	Answer the comprehension questions on the political cartoon worksheet with complete sentences.	5/2/02	1
National, state, and local government	AE	Find a newspaper article about foreign relations. Write a summary of the article in your own words. Turn in the article and the summary together.	5/2/02 One week to complete this assignment	1–2
National, state, and local government	AE	On the foreign relations worksheet write the foreign policy options available, possible consequences, and your reason for choosing the best option.	5/2/02 one week to complete	2–3

Source: Online database at <http://coldfusion.mcps.k12.md.us/cfms/webteam/homeworkboard/>.

A teacher in a local high school cannot simply fill out a form, hand it to the business manager, and then have a class set of 150 biographies of *Walking with the Wind*, John Lewis's memoir of the civil rights movement, available for his or her American history course in the fall. Instead, this teacher must compete against the textbook needs of the entire school. This teacher has no direct ability to order supplementary reading materials that might provide more practice in reading and thus develop more fluent readers.

Will these supplementary materials arrive? Will the budget process provide secondary school teachers with a large number of books for students to read during the school year?

Tom Stup, the business manager at Walter Johnson, Healey's high school in Montgomery County, explains the process. "All the resource teachers [chairs of the larger departments] and department chairs who run the smaller departments are informed that an allocation of x dollars has been received from the county for textbooks. They then prepare a justification document for textbooks indicating their textbook requirements for the following year. And in the document they indicate all their reasons such as replacing old dated textbooks or a curriculum change that requires new textbooks.

"Then the document goes to the Budget Committee, an internal committee consisting of the principal, the business manager, two resource teachers, one department chair, and one or two students. The Budget Committee reviews requests and determines the school's budget for the year. All of the allocations are released to the school so that everyone can see what everyone is getting."

At this high school in an affluent section of the county, the budget process provided little but textbooks for students to read in the three required social studies classes. Healey provided the numbers for purchases of textbooks and supplementary reading for the current year (see table 7.2).

As table 7.2 indicates, the records of book purchases by Healey's department show few orders for anything but textbooks. Collectively his staff of fifteen was only able order two books in addition to textbooks among all of them in one year. Healey explained his department began the year with just the new textbooks. He said the new textbooks were available at the beginning of the year, while the money for the two supplementary books, *Thirteen Days* and *Savage Inequalities*, did not appear un-

Table 7.2. Social Studies Department Book Purchases School Year 2001-2002, Walter Johnson High School, Montgomery County Maryland Public Schools

<i>Class</i>	<i>Quantity</i>	<i>Title</i>
American History	70	Textbook: <i>The Americans-Reconstruction though the 20th Century</i> (McDougal Littell)
American History or Government	84	Tradebook: <i>Thirteen Days</i> (W.W. Norton & Company)
American History or Government	60	Tradebook: <i>Savage Inequalities</i> (Harper Perennial)
World History	72	Textbook: <i>World History: Patterns of Interaction</i> (McDougal Littell)
National, State, and Local Government (NSL)	40	Textbook: <i>West's American Government</i> (Glencoe McGraw-Hill)
AP Sociology	35	Textbook: <i>Sociology and You</i> (Glencoe McGraw-Hill)
AP U.S. History	25	Textbook: <i>The Unfinished Nation</i> (Glencoe McGraw-Hill)
AP World History	72	Textbook: <i>The Human Record</i> (Houghton-Mifflin)
AP World History	152	Textbook: <i>The Earth and Its People</i> (Houghton-Mifflin)
AP Psychology	160	Textbook: <i>Psychology: Myers in Modules</i> (Von Holtzbrinck Publishing Service)
Honors American Government (APEX Program)	65	Textbook: <i>American Government</i> (Houghton-Mifflin)

Source: Ty Healey, social studies Department, Walter Johnson High School

til midyear when the business manager announced that there was money available for additional books. Healey also explained that his department had some additional titles to supplement textbooks. "Examples I can think of right now include *Why We Can't Wait*, *Nectar in a Sieve*, *Animal Farm*, *Black Like Me*," he said.

Not surprisingly, the homework assignments available at this high school depend heavily on textbooks. "In this department, most people use the textbook to provide a lot of background and supplement it with newspaper articles," Healey said. A sample of homework assignments supports Healey's conclusion: very short reading assignments in textbooks with occasional assignments of newspaper articles.

This strategy on relying on short textbook assignments, teacher-constructed worksheets, and so on, may not be challenged in Healey's school. After all, students there graduate with SAT scores at the top of the

county—far above the Maryland and national averages. But can this standard curriculum, with its modest reading assignments year after year from sixth through twelfth grade, help close the reading gap between the races in the county's high schools, where achievement is much lower? The gap in SAT verbal scores is over 100 points, and it is not closing.² In fact, in high schools in the eastern part of the county, which are heavily Afro-American and Latino, SAT scores are declining.

VIEWS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

What should Superintendent Jerry D. Weast be doing to close this achievement gap?

One voice argues that Weast may not be running one but three separate school systems. This situation may complicate his planning. According to Brigid Schulte of the *Washington Post*, "In recent years, the 'world-class' Montgomery County school system has evolved into three distinct systems, school officials say: the elite, high-performing school district that rivals any private school, an above-average suburban district, and an 'urban fringe' system with many of the same problems of high poverty and low performance that plague urban schools."³

Schulte goes on to describe the plan for a new network of smaller high schools in the "urban fringe" area. "The consortium plan for Montgomery Blair, Albert Einstein, John F. Kennedy and Wheaton high schools, and for Northwood High when it reopens in 2004, centers on four principles: make these massive schools, which range from 1,300 to 3,000 students, smaller and more personal; get great teachers and principals; offer an engaging curriculum; and raise expectations."

"Research shows it works everywhere else," Superintendent Jerry D. Weast said. "It should work here."

The plan for improvement in the five low-performing high schools are detailed. According to Walter Gibson, the director of the Downcounty Consortium, "To reverse course, the first thing these large schools are doing is attempting to become smaller and more personal, so fewer students fall through the cracks. They have a \$1.95 million grant from the federal government and \$1.4 million from the county to help them get started.

“Each school has created a ninth-grade academy. When classes start next week, freshmen will be divided into teams of one hundred students and taught by a core of teachers whose job it will be to get to know each of them intimately. Already, administrators at each school have combed through data on each student, including test scores going back to fourth grade, to determine what each one needs. High performers are to be pushed. Calls have been made through the summer to students who were not recommended for honors but show promise, to get them into these high-level classes.

“Students who lack basic skills—25 percent of the freshmen entering Wheaton and Einstein read at the sixth-grade level or below—are being assigned double-period algebra and intensive literacy classes,” Gibson continued. “Most freshmen will take a new class called ‘Connections,’ which is designed to teach them study skills and time management, and help them see how school ultimately helps them to the career they want.

“For the upper grades, each school is also creating ‘smaller learning communities,’ or schools within the schools, to appeal to a variety of student interests.

“The idea of the special programs is to draw out students’ passions and set them on fire. Or at least to keep them in school. We want to give kids a reason to stay in school and persist,” said Gibson.

But much is missing in this Downcounty Consortium plan.

1. *Waiting until high school to intervene is not a best practice.* If one believes the research that reading is developmental and that only practice, practice, and practice builds reading skills, then why wait until high school for double periods of literacy, as the Downcounty Consortium Plan intends to do? If the goal is to build the habit of reading in all youngsters, why don’t the superintendent and his leadership team begin demanding monthly reports from elementary and middle school teachers about the reading and writing assignments in their classrooms? There are simply no debates in the research about the need to practice reading in order to build fluency. No one is arguing in the *Reading Teacher*, *Reading Research Quarterly*, or the psychology journals that there are other paths to fluency. If practice is the only path, why wait until ninth grade for an emphasis on literacy? Won’t all the children of the county schools be better served by an emphasis on building the habit of reading much earlier?

2. *Montgomery’s County’s underspending on books is not a best practice.* Of course, for more books to appear in classrooms, the county

cannot continue with the situation at Walter Johnson High School, described earlier in this chapter, where an entire social studies faculty was able to acquire copies of only two trade books for supplementary reading for an entire academic year. Unfortunately, this situation—the same lack of funds that shaped buying books at Walter Johnson—is common practice throughout the system. Both middle schools and high schools are spending less than \$50 per year per teenager on books—an amount not even sufficient to replace textbooks on a six-year cycle much less buy large numbers of biographies and trade books to build the habit of reading. Montgomery County must spend much more on books in the middle school years and make teachers more visible guides to reading, and more accountable for the amount of reading accomplished, in order to prepare teenagers for success in high school. The changes at the middle school level that are being implemented may be too little, too later. (See tables 7.3 and 7.4 for spending on books in Montgomery County’s secondary schools.)

3. *Keeping teachers away from decisions about books is not a best practice.* Teachers have many roles in school systems from checking attendance to planning the daily lecture or class discussion, but their role in developing literacy is often not officially prescribed. Maybe it should be. Maybe the importance of teachers as guides to literacy should receive official recognition, since in the bureaucratic school systems where they work, if a function is not embedded in the school regulations, it isn’t important.

Some researchers feel that unless the poor can find guides and sponsors to literacy, little will change. The well-to-do will continue to become literate without too much difficulty, and the poor will find the path to literacy filled with so many obstacles that success is uncertain.

Deborah Brandt is one of these researchers. She argues that to track literacy, one must move “beyond SES shorthand” and look at how individuals have encouraged each other to read throughout the past.⁴ She suggests that developing literacy may be more complex than just handing out survey textbooks once at the beginning of a semester. A teacher’s enthusiasm for a new book may matter. A teacher’s willingness to recommend what comes next for a student may matter, what are the next books to read, who are the next teachers in the school who can help with writing skills. Brandt writes that

Table 7.3. Spending on High School Textbooks at Montgomery County Public Schools (Maryland), 2000-2002

No	School Name	FY 2000	FY 2001	FY 2002	Number of Students	Per Pupil
406	Bethesda CC	\$ 49,807	\$ 56,088	\$ 62,126	1338	\$46.43
757	Blair	123,181	126,789	142,119	3087	\$46.04
321	Blake	151,290	62,860	73,239	1567	\$46.74
602	Churchill	74,889	76,581	85,981	1875	\$45.86
701	Damascus HS	70,122	73,329	85,454	1937	\$44.12
789	Einstein	66,959	69,899	74,532	1708	\$43.64
551	Gaithersburg HS	81,393	85,536	90,962	2001	\$45.46
424	Johnson, W	67,805	70,211	79,754	1885	\$42.31
815	Kennedy	60,187	58,672	64,378	1476	\$43.62
510	Magruder	75,646	79,344	91,824	2102	\$43.68
201	Montgomery, R.	68,340	69,587	77,838	1711	\$45.49
246	Northwest	137,946	59,697	72,281	1743	\$41.47
315	Paint Branch	65,088	65,177	73,287	1700	\$43.11
152	Poolesville HS	28,690	29,225	33,195	726	\$45.72
125	Quince Orchard	73,819	73,641	82,053	1854	\$44.26
230	Rockville	48,560	48,515	48,235	1145	\$42.13
104	Seneca Valley	62,281	63,395	69,934	1614	\$43.33
503	Sherwood HS	76,492	77,027	84,160	1945	\$43.27
798	Springbrook	86,650	79,834	93,166	2081	\$44.77
545	Watkins Mill HS	81,838	82,106	83,298	1973	\$42.22
782	Wheaton	55,598	55,465	59,013	1402	\$42.09
427	Whitman	74,844	77,161	83,633	1847	\$45.28
234	Wootton	78,586	80,101	92,016	2045	\$45.00
	Total Allocations	\$1,760,010	\$1,620,239	\$1,802,478	40762	\$44.22
	Total Expenditures	\$1,758,501	\$1,767,985	\$1,713,110	40762	\$42.03

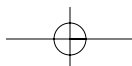
Source: for financial data: Mr. Brian J. Porter, Director of Communications, MCPS for school enrollment data: <http://www.mcps.k12.md.us/departments/dea/saag/>

Table 7.4. Spending on Middle School Textbooks at Montgomery County Public Schools (Maryland), 2000-2002

No	School Name	FY 2000	FY 2001	FY 2002	Enrollment	Per Pupil	Met Local 6th Grade Reading Standard
823	Argyle	\$ 25,054	\$ 25,766	\$ 30,656	687	\$45	No
705	Baker	29,904	31,862	32,668	581	\$56	No
333	Banneker	40,362	42,587	48,619	927	\$52	No
335	Briggs Chaney	36,001	34,043	36,021	914	\$39	No
606	Cabin John	39,027	38,626	44,691	960	\$47	Yes
157	Clemente	31,017	33,286	36,069	826	\$44	No
775	Eastern	38,003	37,647	38,895	977	\$40	No
507	Farquhar	31,284	28,614	31,614	896	\$35	No
248	Forest Oak	37,959	39,116	43,876	977	\$45	No
237	Frost	43,432	45,924	50,822	828	\$61	Yes
554	Gaithersburg MS	34,888	31,862	32,141	1,013	\$32	No
228	Hoover	43,432	45,746	48,619	981	\$50	Yes
311	Key	38,938	40,584	44,687	954	\$47	No
107	King MS	35,511	38,226	43,385	909	\$48	No
708	Kingsview	41,430	51,220	56,762	986	\$58	No
818	Lee	26,700	23,986	27,782	735	\$38	No
557	Mont Village	29,504	30,394	30,608	729	\$42	No
115	Neelsville	33,776	33,998	38,363	918	\$42	No

413	North Bethesda	131,837	92,523	30,551	676	\$45	Yes
812	Parkland	47,882	50,819	55,986	1,049	\$53	No
155	Parks	42,186	37,469	45,710	950	\$48	No
247	Poole MS	17,667	16,821	19,783	500	\$40	No
428	Pyle	54,468	54,023	58,869	1,139	\$52	Yes
562	Redland	30,616	32,085	40,332	792	\$51	No
105	Ridgeview	38,626	38,226	44,595	1,014	\$44	No
707	Rocky Hill	31,061	31,150	33,759	751	\$45	No
521	Shady Grove	157,365	110,610	34,775	800	\$43	No
647	Silver Spring Int	182,007	128,659	43,757	923	\$47	No
778	Sligo Middle	50,997	54,869	55,940	1,216	\$46	No
755	Takoma Park MS	42,587	42,008	44,739	751	\$60	Yes
232	Tilden	36,535	28,035	31,231	723	\$43	Yes
211	West	38,315	38,938	47,517	1,096	\$43	No
412	Westland	40,317	44,678	46,361	1,029	\$45	No
811	White Oak	33,687	35,155	43,158	984	\$44	No
820	Wood	36,357	38,404	45,361	1,000	\$45	No
TOTAL ALLOCATIONS		\$1,648,723	\$1,527,951	\$1,438,702			
TOTAL EXPENDITURES		\$1,541,421	\$1,338,384	\$1,409,179			

Source: Mr. Brian J. Porter, director of communications, MCPS.



intuitively, *sponsors* seemed a fitting term for the figures who turned up most typically in people's memories of literacy learning: older relatives, teachers, priests, supervisors, military officers, editors, influential authors. Sponsors, as we ordinarily think of them, are powerful figures who bankroll events or smooth the way for initiates. Usually richer, more knowledgeable, and more entrenched than the sponsored, sponsors nevertheless enter a reciprocal relationship with those they underwrite. They lend their resources or credibility to the sponsored but also stand to gain benefits from their success, whether by direct repayment or, indirectly, by credit of association. *Sponsors* also proved an appealing term in my analysis because of all the commercial references that appeared in these twentieth-century accounts—the magazines, peddled encyclopedias, essay contests, radio and television programs, toys, fan clubs, writing tools, and so on, from which so much experience with literacy was derived. As the twentieth century turned the abilities to read and write into widely exploitable resources, commercial sponsorship abounded.

Brandt also states that “unequal conditions of literacy sponsorship . . . lie behind differential outcomes in academic performance.”⁵ She argues that what is seen as a failure of values in low-caste racial groups—a failure to care about literacy—may in fact be a failure of access to literacy. (Do school systems such as Montgomery realize that parents of the poor may not be able to hand their teenagers cash for a trip to the local Barnes and Noble or Borders? If they did realize that some households can do far more than others to encourage literacy, would they not be much more conscious of how teachers are handling the responsibilities of developing literacy?) She writes:

A focus on sponsorship can force a more explicit and substantive link between literacy learning and systems of opportunity and access. A statistical correlation between high literacy achievement and high socioeconomic, majority-race status routinely shows up in results of national tests of reading and writing performance. These findings capture yet, in their shorthand way, obscure the unequal conditions of literacy sponsorship that lie behind differential outcomes in academic performance. Throughout their lives, affluent people from high-caste racial groups have multiple and redundant contacts with powerful literacy sponsors as a routine part of their economic and political privileges. Poor people and those from low-caste racial groups have less consistent, less politically secured access to literacy sponsors—especially to

the ones that can grease their way to academic and economic success. Differences in performances are often attributed to family background (namely education and income of parents) or to particular norms and values operating within different ethnic groups or social classes. But in either case, much more is usually at work.

If you believe even part of Brandt's analysis that contact with a teacher or another figure with access to materials or information about literacy matters to teenagers, then a school system needs to move far beyond data such as SAT scores to measure the intellectual lives of teenagers. It needs to look closely at the volume and quality of reading and writing assignments—not just in English classes but also in social studies classes.

4. *Limiting book-length reading assignments to English classes is not a best practice.* Research tells us the reading is a developmental process depending on practice at every age. When I examined the assignments in English classes in the county's homework database (mentioned earlier in this chapter), much more reading was being assigned in English classes than in social studies. Informal interviews with current county high school students confirmed this. Social studies seems to be the area where little reading and writing are being accomplished. Since the content of social studies classes is closely tied to state curriculum objectives that cover content rather than the development of literacy, school leaders face choices.

Parents seeking evidence of the state's neglect of literacy in social studies classes should turn to the state education department's own documents. In almost forty pages of curriculum goals for government, U.S. history, and world history, not a single book or writing assignment is mentioned.⁶ Montgomery County warned its teachers in 2000 that the new state objectives were now to shape local curricula. "In the following pages you will find the first attempt at directly creating Montgomery County Public Schools high school social studies curriculum out of the standards assessed by the state."

As we'll see in the next chapter, one alternative is to connect each era of history with a long list of reading. Should the leadership in the county school system give parents the choice: a long list of readings that will take time and may lead to some complaints from teenagers (e.g., "It's too much work," "It's too hard") or business as usual, very modest assignments from one textbook for the entire year?

6. *Keeping information about books from parents is not a best practice.* Parents may need to ask more questions of the Montgomery County Public Schools if they want to see teachers become effective sponsors of literacy in secondary schools. The county school system needs to prepare parents for encounter with teachers at “Back to School” nights and on informal occasions. Parents need to ask questions that will elicit the necessary information about the development of literacy from the teachers they meet:

- How many books do you plan to assign for my son or daughter to read this year in history and English classes?
- What are the titles? Do they include writers published in the last twenty years? Will the system keep assigning Thornton Wilder and *Our Town* for another fifty years, or will Toni Morrison and *The Bluest Eye* eventually become an acceptable assignment?
- Are these readings to be solitary, individual activities for book reports, or will the whole class read and discuss and then write about *Dead Man Walking* by Sister Helen Prejean and other books on topics that help define a nation?
- When will teachers in county schools have the authority to order books, to build syllabi around biographies and trade books, and to make these syllabi visible to parents before a semester starts rather than using the one book fits all method recommended by the state education department?
- When will parents and their teenagers be able to choose among English and social studies courses based on their publicized reading lists (as is done in the private school described in chapter 12)?

So far, the leadership team in at Board of Education headquarters in Montgomery County has stayed cautious. They have not touched the curriculum in the county’s secondary schools in social studies or English—a curriculum now controlled by state curriculum objectives. They have not considered giving more authority to the teachers in classrooms to select materials. And, not surprisingly, little has changed. Until teachers have the authority to order several books, it is difficult to see how teenagers are going to have a large number of books to read. For the first four years of his administration, the new superintendent has not seen in improvements in the achievement gap in county schools. Can he really believe that improvements in early childhood education and the new plans for a Down-

county Consortium of at-risk schools will be enough to close the achievement gap?

So far, the leadership in Montgomery County—despite the area’s wealth and political clout in the state capital—has operated in exactly the same manner as Schools Chancellor Crew in New York City in the late 1990s: many initiatives in the early childhood education, and neglect of reading after grade 5 when secondary school starts. This approach will not work.

Fortunately, alternatives exist, as we will see in the next chapter.

NOTES

1. Montgomery County, Maryland, Public Schools, *A Call to Action: The Citizens Budget, FY 2002* (Bethesda: Author, 2002).

2. SAT data available from the Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) do distinguish between students who have spend their entire careers in county schools, called “stayers,” and those who arrived in middle school or even later in high school. While the gap in SAT scores between Afro-American stayers and white stayers is considerably lower than the aggregate gap, it is still over 200 points. And the percentage of Afro-American teenagers taking the SAT is only 57 percent in 2001, as compared to 82 percent of white stayers, so the actual size of the gap cannot be accurately determined. See p. 11, table 6, in a memorandum from Jerry D. Weast, superintendent of schools, to members of the Board of Education, “Subject: 2001 Results of the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT),” dated August 28, 2001; available at www.mcps.k12.md.us/info/pdf/satreport2001.pdf.

3. Brigid Schulte, “Downcounty, a Year of Change—and Hope Officials Eye Reforms, Programs at Consortium with Anticipation,” *Washington Post*, August 22, 2002, p. GZ14.

4. Deborah Brandt, *Sponsors of Literacy* (Albany, N.Y.: National Research Center on English Learning and Achievement, 1997); available at <http://cela.albany.edu/sponsor/index.html>.

5. Brandt, *Sponsors of Literacy*, 3.

6. Maryland State Department of Education, *Social Studies Core Learning Goals* (Baltimore: Author, August 1999).