

**School Spending and Standardized  
Test Results for the Lower Grades  
of The Montgomery County School System**

**Follow Up**

**Jeffrey C. Hooke and Mihai Sturdza**

**Maryland Tax Education Foundation**

**January, 2006**

## BACKGROUND

In October of 2005, MTEF released a report that reviewed the recent increase in Montgomery County School System spending over and above inflation and enrollment growth<sup>(1)</sup>. From 1997 to 2005, per pupil spending increased 30% above inflation, indicating \$1.2 billion in over-inflation spending during that time. What did taxpayers receive? The report considered whether the new spending resulted in improved student performance, as measured by standardized test scores. It found no evidence of improving performance, relative to other school systems, since the increased spending began.

Despite the lack of test score improvement, MCPS is again requesting spending that is significantly higher than inflation for its fiscal 2007 operating budget.

The lack of connection between (a) better relative test scores and (b) higher spending was countered by at least two school officials, who suggested that the authors were unable to find evidence of improving performance in standardized SAT tests because the new spending focused on lower grades. One MCPS spokesman told the Washington Post that since the report relied heavily on the SAT, it could not detect improvements that occurred at lower grades as a result of that spending.

The MCPS spokesman may have not read the report fully, because the report's findings were, in fact, based also on state testing in the lower grades, including reading and math assessments for 3<sup>rd</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, and 6<sup>th</sup> graders. To support further the initial study, the authors produced this update, which takes a closer look at the MCPS argument that the new spending showed results in the lower grades. The update reaffirms the original findings that:

- Rising scores in Montgomery County's lower grades are part of a statewide trend: there is no growth in state assessment scores, even in the low grades, that is unique to Montgomery.
- Standardized tests show no evidence of improving performance at any lower grade level since spending increases began: the state test results show no improvement relative to other counties whose scores were similar when the tests were introduced. State assessment trends are also too inconsistent to allow conclusions to be drawn about genuine changes in performance.

## STATEWIDE TREND

In looking at testing in lower grades, the original report compared Montgomery's Maryland State Assessment scores to statewide state assessment scores and found that statewide scores increased more than county scores in every grade for the math and reading assessments. The authors concluded that Montgomery's score growth was part of a statewide trend.

---

<sup>(1)</sup> See "School Spending in Montgomery County as Compared to Ten Affluent Counties in Connecticut, California, Maryland, New Jersey and New York" at [www.Marylandtaxeducation.org](http://www.Marylandtaxeducation.org).

MCPS pointed out that the statewide scores started out at a lower level and had more room for improvement. To compare better “apples to apples,” the tables below contrast Montgomery to other counties in Maryland whose MSA scores began at a similar or higher level than Montgomery’s. Specifically, Anne Arundel and Frederick began at a similar level, and Howard at a higher level. As in the original report, the assessments for fourth and seventh graders are not included because the grade levels used provide a good sample of assessment scores in the lower and middle grades.

<b>Montgomery vs. Anne Arundel County</b>
As reported by the Maryland Dept. of Education on mdreportcard.org

	Maryland School Assessment in Reading (% proficient or advanced)							
	Grade 3		Grade 5		Grade 6		Grade 8	
Year	Montgom.	A. Arundel	Montgom.	A. Arundel	Montgom.	A. Arundel	Montgom.	A. Arundel
2003	66.8	63.8	74.6	74.2	n/a	n/a	70.8	65.2
2004	77.6	78.5	76.1	75.7	77.2	73.1	72.4	68.1
2005	79.2	84.7	79.8	83.3	75.9	74.5	73.9	73.1
<b>Growth:</b>	<b>12.4</b>	<b>20.9</b>	<b>5.2</b>	<b>9.1</b>	<b>-1.3</b>	<b>1.4</b>	<b>3.1</b>	<b>7.9</b>

	Maryland School Assessment in Math (% proficient or advanced)							
	Grade 3		Grade 5		Grade 6		Grade 8	
Year	Montgom.	A. Arundel	Montgom.	A. Arundel	Montgom.	A. Arundel	Montgom.	A. Arundel
2003	75.5	73.3	67.8	64.5	n/a	N/a	57.5	39.1
2004	79.4	81.4	73.5	76	62.4	58	58.8	56.2
2005	83	85.8	78.5	81	67.7	68.3	64.7	65.1
<b>Growth:</b>	<b>7.5</b>	<b>12.5</b>	<b>10.7</b>	<b>16.5</b>	<b>5.3</b>	<b>10.3</b>	<b>7.2</b>	<b>26</b>

<b>Montgomery vs. Frederick County</b>
As reported by the Maryland Dept. of Education on mdreportcard.org

	Maryland School Assessment in Reading (% proficient or advanced)							
	Grade 3		Grade 5		Grade 6		Grade 8	
Year	Montgom.	Frederick	Montgom.	Frederick	Montgom.	Frederick	Montgom.	Frederick
2003	66.8	66.5	74.6	75.7	n/a	n/a	70.8	71.6
2004	77.6	73.6	76.1	74.2	77.2	74.8	72.4	72
2005	79.2	79	79.8	77.2	75.9	77.5	73.9	76.8
<b>Growth:</b>	<b>12.4</b>	<b>12.5</b>	<b>5.2</b>	<b>1.5</b>	<b>-1.3</b>	<b>2.7</b>	<b>3.1</b>	<b>5.2</b>

	Maryland School Assessment in Math (% proficient or advanced)							
	Grade 3		Grade 5		Grade 6		Grade 8	
Year	Montgom.	Frederick	Montgom.	Frederick	Montgom.	Frederick	Montgom.	Frederick
2003	75.5	72.7	67.8	69.2	n/a	n/a	57.5	51.6
2004	79.4	74.7	73.5	69.8	62.4	61.5	58.8	58
2005	83	81.7	78.5	78.2	67.7	73.6	64.7	67.3
<b>Growth:</b>	<b>7.5</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>10.7</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>5.3</b>	<b>12.1</b>	<b>7.2</b>	<b>15.7</b>

For the Anne Arundel and Frederick Counties, which start at similar levels of students classified as proficient and advanced, the increase in those levels is very close to that of Montgomery County. Notably, the percent of students classified as proficient or advanced in third grade reading assessments was almost exactly the same in Montgomery and Frederick counties in 2003 and grew by almost exactly the same amount over the following two years. The similarities are less exact in most other areas. In most cases, Anne Arundel County starts with slightly lower scores and overtakes Montgomery. The same is true for Frederick County in the middle grades (sixth and eighth).

<b>Montgomery vs. Howard County</b>
As reported by the Maryland Dept. of Education on mdreportcard.org

	Maryland School Assessment in Reading (% proficient or advanced)							
	Grade 3		Grade 5		Grade 6		Grade 8	
Year	Montgom.	Howard	Montgom.	Howard	Montgom.	Howard	Montgom.	Howard
2003	66.8	79.4	74.6	84.1	n/a	n/a	70.8	80.8
2004	77.6	88	76.1	86.5	77.2	86.5	72.4	82.2
2005	79.2	88	79.8	88.5	75.9	87.8	73.9	85.4
<b>Growth:</b>	<b>12.4</b>	<b>8.6</b>	<b>5.2</b>	<b>4.4</b>	<b>-1.3</b>	<b>1.3</b>	<b>3.1</b>	<b>4.6</b>

	Maryland School Assessment in Math (% proficient or advanced)							
	Grade 3		Grade 5		Grade 6		Grade 8	
Year	Montgom.	Howard	Montgom.	Howard	Montgom.	Howard	Montgom.	Howard
2003	75.5	82.9	67.8	78.8	n/a	n/a	57.5	62.8
2004	79.4	87	73.5	83.2	62.4	72.1	58.8	62.2
2005	83	86.3	78.5	85.1	67.7	79.7	64.7	72.3
<b>Growth:</b>	<b>7.5</b>	<b>3.4</b>	<b>10.7</b>	<b>6.3</b>	<b>5.3</b>	<b>7.6</b>	<b>7.2</b>	<b>9.5</b>

Howard County started its growth at a higher level than Montgomery. Unsurprisingly, in the lower grades, scores in Montgomery improve faster than those in Howard. In the middle grades, Montgomery under performs.

These comparisons to particular counties reveal that with some exceptions, a consistent statewide trend of growth in MSA scores exists, in which scores throughout the state have grown. Scores in counties that scored higher in the first year grew more slowly, those in counties that scored lower grew more quickly, and those in similar counties grew at about the same rate.

There is no trend in MSA scores unique to Montgomery County. There are many categories, especially in the middle grades, where Montgomery is falling behind the apparent state trend because it's growth is too slow compared to Anne Arundel, Frederick, or Howard. There are few, if any, categories in which Montgomery seems to be ahead of the trend.

## INCONSISTENCY OF TESTING

The original report discussed in detail the changes in state assessments and used data from the MSA's predecessor, the MSPAP, to show that short-term trends in state assessments are not reliable indicators of actual changes in student performance. The 2003 to 2005 statewide trend upward in scores may not be a sign of improving school performance statewide, given that the statewide trend in scores was downward until the very moment the MSA replaced the MSPAP.

## USES OF NEW SPENDING

The County's class size initiative is clearly directed at the lower grades, yet it only accounts for a fraction of the new spending (about \$40 million a year out of \$338 million a year in new annual spending as of 2005). Most of the spending is directed at increases in already existing costs. It was beyond the scope of the report to look at whether most of those resources were being directed to the lower grades.

## MANAGEMENT RESPONSIBILITIES

Higher-than-inflation spending is not a teacher issue, a union issue or a staff-compensation issue. It is a management issue tied to the local school board, and ultimately to elected officials who exercise supervisory control. Management's job is to allocate resources in the most effective manner. The authors are not interested in Montgomery County undoing previous spending initiatives, only in its making informed decisions based on the analysis of past results. To settle for less will invite waste, erode public support for the school system, and diminish the excellent reputation of MCPS.

## CONCLUSIONS

- Test scores do not show any improvement in relative performance in the lower and middle grades relative to the rest of Maryland. When compared to the rest of Maryland, including specific counties that score at similar levels, Montgomery County's MSA scores do not show any unique improvement.
- Current standardized tests are too inconsistent to show actual changes in student performance in lower and middle grades. The MSA was introduced so recently that there is no accurate starting point from which to measure change. The scores may be increasing as teachers and students adapt to the new test format. So far, the record of the MSA is not long enough for it to provide evidence of improving relative performance either in the county or statewide.
- Since 1997, the County has spent \$1.2 billion over and above inflation, after adjusting for enrollment increases. Despite the lack of evidence on test score improvement, MCPS is again requesting per pupil spending that is significantly higher than inflation for its fiscal 2007 budget. Should the County consider limiting per pupil increases to inflation until MCPS can demonstrate a definitive return on taxpayers' investment?