THE CONTEXT FOR MONTGOMERY COUNTY'S
PROFESSIONAL GROWTH SYSTEM

Education programs are rarely developed in a vacuum. They are shaped by the times, by
the political and policy exigencies that surround them. Such is the case with Montgomery
County's Professional Growth System. It is a product both of national trends and local
pressures.

The National Context

This nation has spent nearly two decades in a focused effort to improve its schools in
order to improve student achievement. Throughout this period we have moved through three
distinct phases of reform.

Revisiting Recent History

Reform efforts began in earnest with the 1983 publication of *A Nation at Risk*. The
product of the work of the National Commission on Educational Excellence, *A Nation at Risk*
served as a kind of national educational call to arms. While its recommendations were many, at
its core, the report asserted that lagged student achievement represented a national problem,
worthy of serious policy time and attention.

Thus began the first phase of the contemporary education reform movement. In fact,
this movement has proceeded through three distinct stages. From 1983 until the late 1980s
was a period that might properly be called "intensification." Reform efforts centered on
developing and implementing more rigorous academic standards for students, designing new
curricula around these standards, ensuring that students take more-and more rigorous-courses,
and, to a lesser extent creating new assessments aligned with the standards.

This first wave of reform produced mixed results. On the one hand, the intense focus on
standards, curricula and assessments began to move policy makers' and educators' emphases
away from a traditional input-driven system to one more intensely concerned with outcomes.
In other words, education began to revolve around what students were learning rather than
simply the type and level of resources being allocated to their educations.

On the other hand, earliest reform efforts were based on the notion that if educators in
general and teachers in particular continued to do perform their jobs as they always had-but
worked harder, faster, and generally under stricter state scrutiny-student achievement would
improve. This did not prove to be the case.

By the mid- to late 1980s, the second stage of reform had begun. Policy makers and
educators acknowledged that certain characteristics of the teaching occupation and of schools
were critical factors in students' potential for academic success. In addition to continued work
on standards and assessments, reform began to focus on structural features of teaching and of
schools. In many states and districts, teachers' salaries were raised; teachers were provided
with modestly expanded decision making authority; and some opportunities were created to
allow teachers to advance professionally without leaving the classroom. But despite hard work
and good intentions, after a decade of second-wave reform efforts, the nation still could not
Focusing on Teacher Quality

We are now in the midst of what might be called the third phase of reform. Policy and program efforts focus much more squarely on improving the quality of teaching through better teacher preparation, higher quality professional development, standards for effective teaching, and a more comprehensive attempt to boost the professionalism of teaching.

As What Matters Most: Teaching for America’s Future, the influential report of the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future noted, "What teachers know and can do makes the crucial difference in what students learn" (National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future, 1996). This theme has reverberated throughout the policy community and been echoed by organizations as diverse as the National School Boards Association, the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers and the Business Roundtable. In its 2001 report, Investing in Teaching, the National Alliance of Business, Business Roundtable, and U.S. Chamber of Commerce declared:

The times demand a renaissance in teaching. If we are to remain true to our commitment to provide all students the opportunity to achieve at high levels, we must have superbly prepared teachers equal to the task. ...

Teaching matters. Study after study confirms that students who have high quality teachers post significant and lasting achievement gains. Those with less effective teachers play a constant game of academic catch-up (Koppich 2001).

Improving the quality of teaching is a complicated matter. Changing the ways in which teachers are prepared, supported throughout their careers, evaluated, and compensated are challenging enough. But added to this mix, and crucial to enhancing teachers' ability to be successful with their students, is the issue of creating a more professional environment in schools. In other words, an essential component of improving the quality of teaching is transforming the culture of schools so that they become places of learning for adults as well as for students.

The Local Context

By nearly any standard, Montgomery County is among the largest of public school districts, with 139,000 students and 12,000 teachers. As the district continues to grow, the, student population is becoming increasingly diverse. As of the 2000-2001, school year, no racial or ethnic group constituted a majority.

In addition to increasing diversity, Montgomery County is a district in transition from clearly suburban to more urban. This transition brings with it many of the attendant dilemmas of urban school systems.

And in Montgomery County, as in many school districts across the nation, the achievement gap remains an issue. While legitimate arguments can be made about the validity and reliability of various forms of assessment, the fact of the matter is that some students are undeniably achieving at higher levels than are others and these achievement differences tend to break down along racial and socioeconomic lines.
Whatever its challenges, a number of attractive features, including reasonable salaries and good professional support continue to make Montgomery County a district teachers seem eagerly to choose. While this is a situation many districts would envy, Montgomery County remains aware that it cannot rest on its laurels. Each year for the foreseeable future the district must recruit and retain a significant number of highly qualified teachers.

It is in this context that the Montgomery County has devoted considerable time and resources to developing the Professional Growth System (PGS). However, a significant difference was that before the development began, the leaders of both the school district and the union representing the 12,000 teachers, the Montgomery County Education Association, identified shared values and beliefs about the complexity of teaching and the standards of quality. Then PGS was designed, developed, implemented and is continuously evaluated by both the teachers’ union and the school district. There are joint structures in place to facilitate continuous improvement of the processes and programs. This system was created on the shared belief that improving the quality of teaching can only be achieved by changing the culture of schools so that they become professional communities in which hard questions about teaching and learning are asked, and answers collectively sought. To the extent that Montgomery County can successfully meet this challenge of cultural change over time, the district will not only have achieved benefits for itself but will also have contributed to the wider national conversation about what it takes to improve learning for all students.