MEMORANDUM

To: Members of the Board of Education  
From: Jack R. Smith, Superintendent of Schools  
Subject: Learning, Accountability, and Results: Equal Opportunity Schools

Purpose

The purpose of this memorandum is to provide an update on the Equal Opportunity Schools (EOS) strategy that was implemented in 2016–2017 to support the strategic plan of Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS), eliminate educational disparities, and create greater access to and success in Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) courses, especially for underrepresented student groups.

Background

On July 14, 2016, MCPS entered into a partnership with EOS, an organization focused on closing the AP access gap for students not equitably represented in our AP courses via the Lead Higher initiative. The program, a statewide effort supported by the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE), focuses on working with selected schools to provide technical assistance toward reaching annual goals of growing all AP programs to reflect school diversity while raising performance in those courses. Selected high schools receive expert leadership coaching, data consulting, and capacity-building support to fully close AP and IB participation gaps and increase student success.

Executive Summary

EOS has worked with the U.S. Department of Education to review every existing study on the impact of AP and IB, and with the College Board, the International Baccalaureate Organization, and the Education Trust to review data on every AP and IB student in the country. Research on the impact of AP and IB has indicated that students placed into AP and IB classes are often more engaged in instruction, which has the potential to boost their attendance and seems to impact high school completion rates. Furthermore, AP and IB participation rates are causally connected to college admission, achievement, and completion.
In addition, EOS studies schools in the U.S. that have fully closed race and income AP/IB access gaps and outperform their peers in AP/IB results. The program aligns with MCPS’ efforts focused on closing gaps in AP/IB participation and performance. EOS also works with schools to unpack detailed student-specific data. Together, this national research and the school-specific research reveal opportunities and pinpoint specific strategies that will improve access for traditionally underrepresented students to enroll in challenging courses that place them on a trajectory to achieve their college goals. In its inaugural year, four schools participated in Year 1 of the program: Col. Zadok Magruder, Northwest, Springbrook, and Wheaton high schools.

**Equal Opportunity Schools Philosophy and Approach**

Equity is a core value of our school district: we believe that all students should have equitable access, participation, and performance in all areas of our programming. EOS provides support to help schools survey and identify students and monitor progress toward the goal of increasing access to the AP and IB programs for all students. Through this partnership, schools are identifying the specific supports for teachers and students, which will include summer professional development opportunities and ongoing curriculum writing support for teachers, and utilization of counselors as key advocates to guide students to AP courses. This effort supports the district’s goal of developing a high quality continuum of educational experiences that ensures college and career readiness for all students.

- **Gather information from students and staff and create student insight profiles:** Survey students and staff to gather information on college inspirations/aspirations, views on rigor, assess perceptions of the benefits of AP/IB and barriers to AP/IB, and gain knowledge of individual learning mindsets. This information is utilized to create Student Insight Profiles that are instrumental in establishing the conditions for student success.

- **Establish relationships and structures to support equity:** With support from the EOS coach, school staff review the data and engage in professional learning to support one-on-one conversations with students, staff, and parents/guardians who will be approached for inclusion in AP/IB courses. Additional support is provided to staff to collaboratively create structures that will help students successfully participate in AP/IB courses.

- **Take action:** Mediate existing conditions to expand access and opportunity to all students through multiple pathways, including the following: inviting students to large group meetings; having adults who have positive relationships with students conduct one-on-one conversations to promote participation; and implementing positive, nurturing practices that increase engagement with families.
Learnings During the 2016–2017 School Year

The analysis of the work this past year has yielded specific data around course enrollment, student voice, and supports for moving forward. In one year, every participating high school in the district added more than 100 low-income students and students of color to their AP/IB programs. Across the four pilot high schools, the number of students of color and low-income students in AP/IB classes increased by 40 percent.

Specifically, 143 underrepresented students were enrolled in AP courses at Northwest High School, 102 underrepresented students were enrolled in AP courses at Col. Zadok Magruder High School, 113 underrepresented students were enrolled in AP/IB courses at Springbrook High School, and 107 underrepresented students were enrolled in AP courses at Wheaton High School. The total number of underrepresented students registered for AP/IB courses in 2016–2017 was 1,181 compared to 1,646 registered for AP/IB courses in 2017–2018.

A comprehensive analysis of both the student and staff survey responses on the EOS pathway examined students’ aspirations and mindsets and highlighted staff and student beliefs around AP/IB. The data were reviewed with each school to develop an outreach plan that identified potential barriers and addressed students’ concerns through feedback from the surveys.

Student voice data shared how students of color and low-income students felt about belonging in an AP/IB course. The data from student surveys conveyed that 52 percent of underrepresented students taking AP/IB courses for the first time feel like they did not belong in AP/IB. EOS research demonstrates that first-time underrepresented students who feel like they do not belong in AP/IB are:

- Three times less likely to feel comfortable asking AP/IB teachers for help;
- Three times less likely to believe their teacher thinks they are capable of succeeding;
- Three times less likely to believe other students think they are capable of succeeding;
- Two times less likely to feel comfortable asking other students for help; and
- Two times less likely to feel like part of the community in class.

The data will be used to support student success in AP/IB courses. In order to do so, the EOS schools have begun to explore the rationale/importance of belonging in our schools and in our AP/IB courses. Staff members are continuing to reflect on and diagnose barriers to belonging in our AP/IB courses and identify strategies to cultivate a sense of belonging in our AP/IB courses. The four schools identified in Cohort I will continue implementation for Year 2 in 2017–2018.

Plans for 2017–2018 School Year

As we move forward with this work, we intend to increase access by closing the equity gaps in 10 MCPS high schools, working with EOS partners and school staff to identify approximately 1,400 underrepresented students across the 10 schools by spring 2018. Staff will work to build
on existing supports for students in AP and IB classes, with an eye to enhancing the experience and achievement for underrepresented students, specifically. For the schools entering their second year in the pilot, the focus will center on examining data from exams and course grade analyses, student experience surveys, and focus groups to gain an accurate picture of supports and achievement for students, and adapt and add supports as needed.

The following schools have been identified for Cohort II and will begin Year 1 of implementation in the 2017–2018 school year.

- James Hubert Blake High School
- Clarksburg High School
- Gaithersburg High School
- John F. Kennedy High School
- Northwood High School
- Watkins Mill High School

Based on the comprehensive analysis of the EOS pathway data collected during Year 1 of implementation, Cohort II schools will receive the following additional supports:

- A **Mindset Activation Survey** to ‘jump-start’ staff and student mindsets in AP/IB classes. First-time participants focus on Growth Mindset; experienced participants focus on Belonging *(administer any time)*
- A **Semester Grade Analysis** that will delineate AP/IB student achievement by demographic, grade, and course subject *(receive in late winter)*
- A **Student Experience Survey** that will provide extensive, in-depth data about the experiences of underrepresented students in AP/IB classes, and their perceptions of support *(administer after AP exams in May)*

In addition to the challenges to student success elevated by the EOS pathway data, there are several budgetary constraints that contribute to the barriers to student success. The cost per school in Year 2 is $24,400. During Year 1, each school received a $10,000 grant from MSDE that no longer is available. Another challenge faced by students and schools is the cost of AP/IB exams:

- AP exam cost, per student/per exam is $94.00
- IB exam cost, per student/per exam is $110.00
- IB candidate per year registration fee is $160.00

These fees serve as a deterrent for some students, particularly underrepresented students, registering in AP/IB courses and ultimately participating in AP/IB exams that could award them college credit.

**Summary**

Through the EOS implementation, the number of “first time” AP/IB students increased by 593 students, 465 of these were from traditionally underrepresented groups (African American,
Hispanic/Latino, and low-income students). The goals for Year 2 of implementation are to strengthen and increase access for underrepresented students and bolster and strengthen supports for students and staff. The collaborative work with EOS partners and school and central services staff will focus on creating sustainable systems and teams to continue gap closure efforts. In addition, there will be ongoing work to assess current systems and gather student and stakeholder feedback to adapt supports with an intentional focus on mindsets and belonging, to increase engagement and achievement.

JRS:KAS:emh