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Montgomery County Public Schools

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FOR RELEASE, FEBRUARY 26, 1990 AM

MCPS COMPLETES COMPREHENSIVE DROPOUT STUDY

Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) has completed a comprehensive study of students who dropped out of school in 1986-87 and of the programs and services that are designed to help potential dropouts. The study, which examined 1,067 dropouts, concluded that dropouts come from all socioeconomic levels and racial groups, and that students drop out for a variety of reasons, some of which schools can influence, while others are beyond the reach of the schools.

The research was conducted by the MCPS Department of Educational Accountability (DEA) in response to an increase in the dropout rate from 1.5 percent in 1982-83 to 2.5 percent in 1986-87.

"We are fortunate that our dropout rate continues to be low compared to other districts nationwide, but the increase we saw in 1986-87 concerned me," said Superintendent Harry Pitt. "It was important that we act swiftly to get a better understanding of students who drop out and what the school system might do more effectively to keep them in school," Pitt said.

The study examined four facets of the dropout problem: how dropouts compared to other MCPS students in areas such as academic performance, demographic characteristics, and school experiences; reasons MCPS students dropped out; what dropouts did after leaving school, and what efforts MCPS is making to help students who are likely to leave

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school before graduation. Sources of information for the research included the MCPS database and personal interviews conducted with 508 of the 1,067 students who left school during the 1986-87 school year.

As a group, those who dropped out differed from other MCPS students in a number of important ways. Dropouts tend to be older for their grade, have failed to be promoted more often, and are more likely to exhibit poorer academic performance. Attending MCPS for a shorter period of time than their peers, the dropouts are more likely to have been suspended from school and less likely to have participated in nonathletic extracurricular activities.

"Our research also clearly shows that students who drop out come from all socioeconomic levels and racial/ethnic groups," said Joy Frechtling, director of the Department of Educational Accountability. "Dropouts today represent the social and economic diversity of the student population as a whole and cannot be neatly placed into any one category," Frechtling said.

The reasons MCPS students dropped out of school varied greatly, though problems relating to school or school experiences predominated. Dislike of school (56 percent) and school failure or poor performance (52 percent) were major reasons for dropping out. Others included family, emotional or medical problems, the need or desire to work, discipline problems, and drug/alcohol abuse. Most students gave more than one reason for leaving school and it was sometimes difficult for researchers to identify the primary reason.

The educational status of the dropout group was checked through June 1989. Follow-up data were available for approximately 60 percent of the dropouts, 26 percent of whom had completed school either by returning and

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graduating, transferring to a non-MCPS school, or by passing the high school equivalency exam. According to the researchers, it is likely that the remaining 40 percent, whose educational status is unknown, did not complete their schooling.

MCPS strategies to assist students who are at risk of dropping out also were described in the study. There is a variety of efforts in individual schools, at the administrative area level, and on a systemwide basis to deal with potential dropouts. From vocational, mentoring, evening high school and summer school programs on the systemwide level, to off-site alternative programs, MCPS combines strategies to deal not only with academic performance but also with social and behavioral problems. Intensive instruction, tutorial help, career exploration, and counseling are examples of efforts schools make to reach out to those who are likely to drop out.

"At every level we attempt to provide at-risk students with the opportunity for personal and academic success," said Superintendent Pitt. "One clear message of this study is that we need to strengthen our efforts to reach these students at the earliest possible stage of their education," Pitt said.

The dropout report concludes with a series of eight recommendations centered around the finding that those who dropped out of school regretted that decision and were, for a time, susceptible to influences to return to school. Among the study's recommendations are the assignment of one person per school to follow up on at-risk students, more aggressive efforts by school and social service personnel to get dropouts back into school, counseling of potential dropouts by former dropouts, and special supports and programs for those who give school another try. The study also

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suggests the establishment of a cooperative program with a local college for those who need a greater challenge or motivation to learn.

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For more information on the MCPS dropout study, contact Dr. Joy Frechtling at 279-3448.