TO: Members of the Board of Education

FROM: Dr. S. Dallas Dance
       Superintendent

DATE: March 7, 2017

SUBJECT: Graduation Rates

During the past four years, there has been a steady increase in the proportion of students graduating from Baltimore County Public Schools (BCPS). From 2013 to the most recent graduating class of 2016, there has been a 2.87 percentage point increase in the graduation rate.

*Figure 1. BCPS Four-Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (2013 – 2016)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Diplomas Earned</th>
<th>Cohort Size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>6940</td>
<td>6942</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>6965</td>
<td>7914</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>6982</td>
<td>7840</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>7050</td>
<td>7906</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Sources: MSDE cohort graduation rate file received January 18, 2017 and www.mdreportcard.org*

This growth in the graduation rate has been accompanied with a closing of the gap in the graduation rate between African American and White students. The bar has raised for all and gaps have, at the same time, been closed.
While this is certainly good news, the question has been raised as to whether the increase in the rate of graduation was at the expense of the college readiness of the graduating classes. In effect, was the increase in the rate of graduation the product of lowering the bar of academic rigor?

If the rigor were diminishing, one might expect to see a drop in the grade point average (GPA) for seniors over time. *Simply put*, were less qualified students being ushered across the stage?

What we see, however, is that seniors’ cumulative GPAs actually rose slightly over this same window of time. The average cumulative GPA for seniors has been 2.50 over the past eight years. During the window from 2012-2013 to 2015-2016, the average GPA for a senior rose to 2.54 and gaps between the major racial groups remained steady during this window. So, our graduating seniors were actually earning higher grades as they finished their schooling. *Based on GPA, there is simply no evidence that, as the graduation rate increased, that student academic performance was decreasing.*
Figure 3. BCPS Cumulative Grade Point Averages for seniors (2012-13 to 2015-2016)

The next logical inquiry would be then to question the rigor of the coursework. Maybe, students were simply taking easier classes in order to be able to meet the requirements of graduation. Perhaps, more students were crossing the stage but were doing so at the expense of taking the courses necessary to be prepared for career and college?

College Board Advanced Placement (AP) courses are a nationally recognized level of rigorous coursework. Scores of 3, 4, or 5 are typically accepted by colleges for credit and placement and have been demonstrated to be associated with higher college GPAs and college persistence.

During the four year window from 2012-2013 to 2015-2016, there was actually an increase in the number of AP classes taken by seniors in BCPS. In 2012-2013, seniors enrolled in a total of 5,046 AP classes. In 2015-2016, seniors enrolled in 5,809 AP classes (an all-time high). Increasing access to rigorous coursework to a broader range of students is often accompanied by an initial decline in testing performance.
No such decline was observed in BCPS. Instead, as the AP access increased, the proportion of scores at the level of 3, 4 or 5 remained constant at 68%. In summary, in 2015-2016 school year, there were an additional 763 AP courses taken by seniors, and an additional 161 AP exams with scores of 3 or more in comparison to the 2012-2013 school year. Based on AP participation and performance, there is simply no evidence that, as the graduation rate increased, that the rigor of the coursework was decreasing.

Finally, a skeptic could argue that all of the above is simply based on data from the schools themselves. Have students actually been enrolling in college? If they are, are they prepared well enough to persist into their second year?

The data for college attendance naturally lags any changes that have been implemented within BCPS. The 2015-2016 graduating class, who were college freshman in the fall of 2016, was the first class to have completed all four high school years under the present administration. On the other hand, the 2012-2013 class were seniors at the start of this administration and were entering their fourth year of college in the fall of 2016.

The proportion of BCPS students attending college immediately following graduation has remained remarkably steady for 8 years. From 2012-2013 to 2015-2016 there was no change in the proportion (61%) of students who enrolled in college immediately following graduation. Likewise, there was no evidence in a change in the proportion (11-12%) of students who enrolled in private institutions.
There was, however, an uptick in the proportion of students who returned for a second year of college (freshman to sophomore persistence). This is frequently viewed as an indicator of both college readiness and persistence and is clearly a necessary step toward college completion.

*Figure 5. BCPS College Persistence*

![Persistence to Sophomore Year](image)

Source: National Student Clearinghouse

For both the 2013-2014 and 2014-2015 cohorts, 87% of the freshman class returned to enter a second year of college. This was a 2% point increase over the prior two cohorts. In each case, this translated to approximately 100 more students per cohort persisting into their second year of college.

*Again, there is no evidence that the increase in the graduation rate has led to a decrease in college going or preparedness. Instead, college going has remained steady and persistence into the second year of college has actually increased.*

For most, increasing graduation rates are a cause for celebration. Graduation is an opportunity threshold with clear financial consequences for those students who are not fortunate enough to graduate. By a variety of indicators (GPA, AP participation, AP test scores, college attendance, and college persistence), we can be assured that as our graduation rate has increased; it has not come at the expense of the rigor of preparing students for college or careers.

Copies to:  
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