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Commentary: Our students deserve equity  
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I began my tenure as superintendent of Baltimore County Public Schools (BCPS) by listening to voices from all across the region during the 2012-2013 school year. From coastal to rural and suburban neighborhoods, this advice from students, families, educators and the community formed the foundation of our five-year strategic plan.

From many voices came a common concern: inequity. Stakeholders questioned differences in student access to academic rigor, resources including technology and modern facilities. Our high average student performance masked gaps in achievement between student groups based on race, ethnicity, gender, income level, special education status and English proficiency.

To interrupt these patterns, the Blueprint 2.0: Our Way Forward strategic plan is focused on graduating each and every one of our students globally competitive and prepared to thrive in the knowledge economy. We cannot let demographics continue to predict our students' performance, especially as our growing enrollment becomes increasingly diverse. Students of color now comprise 57.9 percent of our student enrollment, with 47.4 percent of our students eligible for free and reduced-price meals. To put that percentage in perspective, BCPS has more students eligible for free and reduced-price meals than are enrolled in D.C. Public Schools. That is today's Baltimore County student population. Additionally, students speak almost 90 languages from more than 100 countries.

As we move forward, ensuring that each of our students has equitable access to an effective digital learning environment and second language proficiency, as called for in our Theory of Action, could not rest solely on the able shoulders of the BCPS Office of Equity and Cultural Proficiency. Instead, our task was to truly build capacity across the organization to expand opportunity for every student, increase academic rigor in every classroom, and eliminate troubling achievement gaps, which in many cases are race-based.

As the first leaders engaged in the BCPS equity transformation in summer 2013, the Board of Education of Baltimore County then set the foundation for systemic equity through Board policy 0100. This landmark policy affirms that "disparities on the basis of race, special education status, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, English language learner (ELL) status or socio-economic status are unacceptable and are directly at odds with the belief that all students can achieve."

To make good on this promise, we began and are continuing to implement a three-phase equity plan supported by trainings for district and school leaders and staff: (1) developing a shared language for discussing racial equity, (2) coaching for racial

equity and (3) putting equity into practice. Applying an equity lens is our way of removing obstacles to student progress by analyzing how beliefs, policies and practices differentially impact students. Every school examines the root causes of their achievement gaps through an equity-focused School Progress Plan. Instructionally, we are creating learner-centered environments that personalize and customize learning to provide equity, giving each student what he or she needs to achieve high academic outcomes. This transformation is extremely hard work. However, we are seeing huge gains. Our classrooms are now alive with movement, visuals and sound to help all students develop needed creativity, communication, collaboration and critical thinking skills.

Teachers guide flexible small groups, advise students working on their own and provide one-on-one instruction. Furniture is strategically arranged to allow these seamless transitions. Students are empowered with the responsibility to choose how to engage with content and how to demonstrate what they have learned.

Technology is a key leverage tool for facilitating learner-centered environments across the district. Through S.T.A.T., or Students and Teachers Accessing Tomorrow, educators are using a dynamic digital curriculum and materials. The BCPS One online portal helps teachers organize flexible groups and assignments, and facilitates easy parent and student access to grades, assignments and added communication.

All of our elementary schools and seven middle schools have placed 1:1 devices in students' hands to better engage and motivate learners. These Lighthouse schools are systemwide at grades one through three, schoolwide at last year's 10 pilot elementary schools and in grade six at this year's pilot middle schools.

A self-paced online program is supplementing fourth grade Spanish instruction at 25 Passport schools to give our students the advantages of second language proficiency by graduation. Last year's 10 pilot schools have begun Spanish at grade five. We're learning from the careful roll out of Lighthouse and Passport schools in order to expand these opportunities to every student.

Parents of more than 111,000 students are choosing Baltimore County Public Schools, and we are expecting additional growth over the next decade. We owe it to each student to guide our decisions with equity, meeting students where they are, ensuring their growth and preparing them for success in the future.

Our students deserve equity. Let's continue innovating to get students at every school, all across the county, off to the best possible start. Their futures are in our hands.