

MARSHALLIANCE



The Thurgood Marshall Alliance

*Strengthening Schools and Communities through Diversity*

## Executive Summary

### In Their Own Words: The Thurgood Marshall Alliance Parent Listening Tour\*

June 2017

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\*We thank the Johns Hopkins University 21<sup>st</sup> Century Cities Initiative, Kaiser Permanente, and the United Way of Central Maryland whose support helped make the Listening Tour possible. Thanks also are due to Karen Alexander, Carol Daddazio, Eric Rice, Heidi Stevens, Kim Wiggins, and Sandi McFadden for their many contributions to the effort and to Principals Grotsky, Long, and Taylor. For more information on the Marshall Alliance visit our website at <http://marshallalliance.org/tma1/> or write to Karl Alexander at karl@jhu.edu.

## Background

The mission of the Thurgood Marshall Alliance is to support neighborhood schools in Baltimore that are committed to diversity and excellence. When fully operational, TMA will assist its partner schools with technical assistance in critical areas of programming and practice and community outreach.

With help from the Baltimore Neighborhoods Indicators Alliance, TMA identified a set of promising schools for its work: K – 5 and K – 8 schools whose attendance zones are diverse along lines of family income and race/ethnicity, but whose enrollments do not fully mirror that diversity. Three such schools are **Govans Elementary School** in North Baltimore, **Mount Royal Elementary/Middle School** in Midtown, and **Federal Hill Preparatory** in South Baltimore. These schools would be among Baltimore City’s most economically and racially diverse if they enrolled a cross-section of nearby families.

From late Fall of 2016 through the winter of 2017, TMA engaged with parents at these schools and from their catchment areas to identify their priorities. Our discussions covered parents’ goals for their children’s schooling, their perspectives on the schooling options available to them in Baltimore City, and opinions of their neighborhood school specifically.

Listening Tour sessions were held with:

1. parents of children enrolled at the school,
2. parents of preschool age children living in the school attendance zone (“Pipeline parents”), and
3. parents of school-age children living in the school attendance zone whose children attended some other school (“Opt-Out parents”).

Families were recruited through word-of-mouth, PTO outreach, and postings on community listservs, at nearby schools, and at daycare centers. Outreach was fairly successful for parents of enrolled children and Pipeline parents, with attendance at those sessions ranging in size from 5 to 20. Recruitment of Opt-Out parents was more difficult, with just two and three parents in attendance. Parents at all sessions were engaged and forthcoming.

### Discussion Group Participation

School	Current Parents	Pipeline Parents	Opt-Out Parents
Govans	5	4	3
Mount Royal	6	5	3
Federal Hill Prep	19	18	2

The families who joined these discussions were mostly young, white and highly educated. Such families are in the minority at all three schools and but a small presence at two of the three. In the ideal, there would have been more parents of

color in the room, more low-income parents, and a greater variety of voices heard. However, the parents from whom we heard are critical to TMA's mission. For Baltimore's schools and Baltimore City to thrive, it is essential that more such families commit to the city's public schools.

### **Govans Elementary**

Principal Linda Taylor believes that diversity at Govans should be apparent "when you enter the school." She has in mind diversity among both students and staff. A priority for her is that her students be exposed to different cultures at a young age and for them to know that "it's ok to be different." To achieve her goals, she continued, Govans has to be more successful in attracting families with preschoolers in the area by offering the kinds of programs and supports they expect. Technology upgrades are a priority for her.

The Govans parents who joined us for our discussion are of one mind in their high regard for their school, its leadership, and its value for their children, but they also have "bricks and mortar" concerns about the quality of the school's facilities and worry that the perception of city schools in general is holding them back. They value diversity and would like to see their school enroll more children and parents of different backgrounds.

Parents who live in the zone whose children are not at Govans also value diversity; most also value the neighborhood school concept. But diversity for them is one priority among many and there are other, competing considerations. Some are looking for things that Govans cannot offer, such as the Montessori philosophy or a language immersion curriculum. But their perceptions of Govans are not highly crystalized and the Pipeline parents among them indicated an open mind in weighing their schooling options.

### **Mount Royal Elementary/Middle**

In discussing diversity at Mount Royal, Principal Job Grotzky noted that the school has a fairly strong reputation in the African American community and a healthy income mix, but that diversity along lines of race/ethnicity needs work. We heard much the same from the parents with whom we spoke, but also a more expansive view of the diversity they value, mentioning diversity of experience, of career paths, of viewpoints, and of sexual orientation. These parents had in mind diversity among the staff as well as the student/parent population.

The parents we heard from value diversity and all of them, including the Opt-Out parents, said they want a strong public school option. The lack of diversity at some charter schools and private schools gave them pause, but we also heard that more work is needed for Mount Royal to achieve authentic diversity that encompasses the many possible meanings of the term.

The concerns that parents expressed about Mount Royal centered on rigidities and resource constraints at the district level over which the school has little control, but

also issues that fall to school leadership: that the school does not reflect its community and that parent engagement and involvement should be strengthened.

### **Federal Hill Prep**

Principal Sara Long offered that Federal Hill Prep (“Prep”) has a fairly good racial/ethnic and income mix, but that she would like the former to be closer to 50/50 and for Prep to attract more within-zone affluent families. Prep parents spoke highly of the school and its leadership. Especially among the wealthier parents, there is a core group committed to the school and diversity is a priority for them. Prep’s lower-income, African American parents also value diversity and both groups agree that work is needed for Prep to be a cohesive community that truly brings together parents and children of all backgrounds.

The more affluent parents understood what was lacking at Prep, but nevertheless felt that it was providing a fine experience and a strong foundation for their children. The school’s current leadership drew praise and was credited for the strides made in recent years. African American parents were more guarded, especially around the teaching staff, some of whom, they said, were distant and not truly engaged. Nonetheless, they spoke well of the school as a safe place and gave it generally positive rankings.

Pipeline parents expressed a desire to be part of the city, to be part of their neighborhood, and to be part of a school community that is both cohesive and diverse. They were quite positive in their view of Prep, but also insecure in their thinking – they wanted to know more and they wanted better sources of information they could trust.

The Opt-Out discussion reminded us of the schooling that parents of means are able to purchase for their children, schooling that public schools like Prep cannot possibly replicate: small size classes, across-the-curriculum integration, the ability to cater to children of different abilities, and a campus atmosphere with amenities that rival those of a liberal arts college.

### **Lessons Learned**

In strengthening neighborhood schools through diversity, the challenge going forward is to shift the calculation so that more parents will elect to “Opt-In” rather than to opt-out. Many parents are disposed to send their children to their local public school – indeed are eager to do so - but they have reservations and in some instances misconceptions. To win them over, and to retain parents of means whose children already attend these schools, requires a sound academic experience and a credible array of enrichment opportunities – those are foundational. It also requires a welcoming atmosphere that embraces children and parents of all backgrounds and fosters a genuine sense of community. Those are qualities the parents who shared their thoughts with us value; they also are qualities that, if done well, give a competitive edge to diverse neighborhood schools.