

**Extended Learning Opportunities in Fostering  
Student Achievement**

***Forest Heights Elementary School Profile***

Prince Georges County Public Schools  
Oxon Hill, Maryland



*Council of Chief State School Officers,  
Extended Learning and Development Project  
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## **Background**

Forest Heights is a small neighborhood elementary school of approximately 350 students located in the community of Oxon Hill, a subdivision of Prince Georges County in southern Maryland. The school is housed in a two-story brick building bordered by residential homes and a shopping center. Oxon Hill is a predominantly African-American neighborhood (86.7 percent) with a median family income of \$42,808 and a residential population of just over 35,000. Slightly more than half of Oxon Hill residents rent their homes and approximately 1/3 of the households in this community are female-headed households. The racial composition of Forest Heights mirrors the community, as the student body, faculty and staff are predominantly African-American.<sup>1</sup> The school receives federal Title I funds, which are used school-wide, and approximately 70 percent of the students qualify for free-and-reduced meals.

Since 1985, Forest Heights has been identified as a Racially Non-Diverse School (formerly Milliken II) because its student population is over 90 percent African-American. Forest Heights is one of approximately 20 schools identified as Racially Non-Diverse within Prince Georges County Public School system, all of which have implemented the Comer School Development Program, based on the principles of child development and relationship theory developed by James P. Comer.<sup>2</sup> In addition, as part of a memorandum of understanding between the Board of

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<sup>1</sup> Over 97 percent of the student body at Forest Heights Elementary School is African-American.

<sup>2</sup> Comer's School Development Model is a school improvement planning process based on data-driven decision-making. The model was first implemented in Prince Georges County's Racially Non-Diverse Schools (formerly Milliken II) but is now utilized in more than 90 schools in the district. The model focuses on collaboration between principals and school management teams, integrating school plans and activities, and using data to drive decision-making.

Education of Prince Georges County and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Racially Non-Diverse schools like Forest Heights all have a full day kindergarten, a full-time library media specialist, additional funding for field trips and/or cultural arts programs, computer labs equipped with several laptop computers for student use at home, a full-time guidance counselor, an afterschool tutorial program, and a summer enrichment program for students at-risk of academic failure. These additional resources are funded by Prince Georges County Public Schools.

## **Beginnings**

***“The community of Forest Heights Elementary School believes that all students can learn...Accordingly, the purpose of Forest Heights Elementary School is to provide quality educational programs designed to offer the student the opportunity to turn academic potential into a reality in today’s changing society.”*** (Forest Heights Elementary School Mission Statement)

Forest Heights elementary is a school community actively engaged in promoting the academic success of its students. The commitment to student academic achievement and overall development is evident in student interactions with teachers, in classroom instruction, and in the tightly focused curriculum. It is also evident in the school's after-school tutorial programs. While the school day instructional program is designed for all students, the extended day program at Forest Heights targets “borderline” or “middle rung” students, those students at risk of failure without significant intervention and support. The afterschool tutorial programs grew out of principal and staff recognition that additional time

on task would benefit these students based on their performance on the Maryland School Performance Assessment Program (MSPAP) and Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills (CTBS) tests. The principal, Howard Wright, and staff at Forest Heights felt it was essential to provide students additional time and opportunities to learn and master skills and be involved in enrichment activities within their natural learning environment. Several teachers under the direction of Forest Heights' Instructional Resource Teacher, Rhonda Burroughs, primarily developed the programs. The teachers examined strategies in reading, writing, and science that were shown to be effective in improving student test performance in these subject areas, and used them to develop the afterschool curriculum. What has resulted is a highly structured program that concentrates on developing student writing and reading comprehension skills, test-taking strategies, and study habits.

### **Program Structure and Content**

The MSPAP and CTBS tutorial programs are scheduled twice a week (MSPAP: Monday and Wednesday and CTBS: Tuesday and Thursday) for approximately two hours. About 1/3 of students at Forest Heights participate in either the MSPAP or CTBS tutorial programs. The MSPAP program is for third and fifth graders and the CTBS program is for second, fourth, and sixth graders, all of whom will take either the MSPAP or CTBS test the current school year.

The programs begin with snack time, which is usually held in the school cafeteria. On days in which the cafeteria is being used for another activity, the students eat their snack in their classrooms. Immediately following snack, which lasts for about twenty minutes, students are given explicit instructions for the tutorial session, which is typically one hour. In the MSPAP program, third and fifth graders are divided up into separate classrooms for this part of the afternoon. Writing is a major

emphasis in both the MSPAP and CTBS programs. Activities and assignments often involve some form of written expression, be it "writing to express" or "writing to inform" for the third grade students, or a 4-Square writing assignment for the fifth graders.<sup>3</sup>

After students complete their assignments working independently or, for the fifth graders, in small groups, the instructors lead the entire group in a wrap-up and review period. In the third grade room, students share their work aloud and are peppered with questions from the teacher. In the fifth grade room, students are asked to share their writing with the group who then offer comments and feedback. The student to faculty ratio of 8-1 allows for every student's work to be shared and fosters a more personal exchange with the afterschool staff.

During the remaining hour of the program, students transition to the cafeteria for homework help. Students sit on the lunchroom benches and are instructed to begin their homework that is due the next day. The instructors have the list of homework for each grade level and occasionally walk around to keep students on task. Some students complete their homework individually, others work in groups and a few are assisted by the afterschool program staff. The program concludes at 5:00 p.m. at which point students are either picked up by their families or board the school bus to be taken home.

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<sup>3</sup> The 4-Square writing activity is designed to help students generate and organize ideas in a coherent manner. Students write in boxes or on notecards the essay topic, supporting ideas and the conclusion. Each card contains one complete thought or idea. These cards are then used to write a five-paragraph essay. When Council staff visited the tutorial program, the fifth grade students were starting their rough drafts using their cards as the basis for their essays. Students were asked to write about their favorite sports activity and were given ten minutes to start working on their drafts. Individual students then read their draft essays aloud to the class who provided comments and feedback.

About once a month parents are invited to attend “Power Parent Workshops”. On these evenings, parents are coached by the Instructional Resource Teacher and other faculty in how to assist their children with their studies at home. The school staff discusses performance expectations with parents so that they have an understanding of what students are expected to know and be able to do on the MSPAP test. Dinner is provided and the evening usually involves a raffle or door prize that is assembled by school faculty. Power Parent Workshops are the crux of the school’s outreach efforts to include parents in a meaningful way and aid them in assisting their own children.

***“The school-day and afterschool programs are linked at the root. They are inseparable. What is done afterschool is a reflection of what goes on during the school day...We know many students that go home in the evenings do not have an environment where they can study, this has an impact. This is what the afterschool program does [provides].”*** (Howard Wright, school principal)

The MSPAP and CTBS tutorial programs are explicitly designed to foster student achievement on these high stakes tests. This is evident in the students who are targeted to participate, in the design of the lesson plans, and the student-teacher interaction during the afterschool hours. However, the programs were also established to reinforce the school day curriculum by giving students who need it additional time on task and to foster student study habits. There are clear linkages to the school day and for the instructors who staff the programs, the school day and afterschool hours are seamless. Information regarding the student’s progress in the afterschool program

is shared with school day staff during grade-level meetings. All of the afterschool instructors are also school day teachers, several of whom instruct their own students in the afterschool program. Activities and lessons for the afterschool program are typically based on the curriculum taught in core subjects during the school day. For those students who may not get the help they need at home, homework assistance provides students an opportunity to review and complete assignments with the help of their peers and/or afterschool staff.

### **Program Administration**

There are coordinators for both the MSPAP and CTBS programs. Ms. Burroughs, the program coordinator for the CTBS tutorial, also serves as the school’s Instructional Resource Teacher. According to the school principal, Ms. Burroughs is the main link between the school day and afterschool staff in her capacity as the instructional resource teacher. She meets with teachers to assess their progress and it is her role to coordinate and oversee instructional programming within the school building. As the coordinator for the CTBS program, Ms. Burroughs is responsible for all aspects of the CTBS tutorial program including: identifying students for enrollment, designing a pre-test, designing the afterschool curriculum, staffing the program, arranging for student transportation and snacks, getting parental permission<sup>4</sup> for their students to attend the program, addressing behavioral issues with parents, and any other concerns or need that may arise. Ms. Burroughs does not usually teach in the afterschool program so that she can focus on her administrative responsibilities and serve as a substitute if the need arises. Currently, however, she also has teaching responsibilities as she is filling in for a teacher who no longer

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<sup>4</sup> The MSPAP and CTBS programs are both voluntary. Students who are identified as being “at-risk” or “borderline” are not *required* to attend the program but an effort is made by the school to get parental permission for them to participate.

participates in the afterschool program. Ms. Gibson, the program coordinator for the CTBS tutorial, has similar responsibilities to Ms. Burroughs. She plans the afterschool curriculum and activities, staffs the program, plans field trips and arranges for snacks and supplies. In addition, Ms. Gibson also teaches in the MSPAP tutorial program. Both Ms. Burroughs and Ms. Gibson devote between 10-40% percent of their school time to the administration of the extending learning programs.

The principal views his primary role with the extended learning programs as providing oversight, being supportive, and identifying resources: the human and fiscal capital essential for program sustainability. He is not directly involved with program administration on a daily basis but has focused his efforts on identifying teachers, based on their interest, skill level and competencies, that can potentially administer and/or staff the programs. From his perspective, the extended learning programs are the result of a total school effort, which involves not only teachers but custodial staff, the school secretaries, and cafeteria workers.

### **Funding and Sustainability**

The extended learning programs, including bus transportation and snack, are funded through the Challenge II Grants Initiative, which was created by the Prince Georges County Public School system in collaboration with the Maryland State Department of Education in April 1999. This initiative funds high-poverty, low-performing schools in the district in order to promote sustained school improvement and student achievement. Funding for the initiative was provided by the Effective Schools component of the School Accountability Funding for Excellence (SAFE) program housed within the Maryland State Department of Education. In Prince Georges County, eligible schools ranked in the bottom

two quartiles in the school system and performed below state standards on the MSPAP.

Forest Heights is one of fifteen schools that currently participate in this initiative and the school received an average of \$120,000 dollars over the past three years (1999-02) to support improvement efforts. As part of this funding Forest Heights was required to implement school reform efforts including: adopting a school reform model<sup>5</sup>, establishing an extended day and year program, reducing class size, focusing on staff development, implementing a home-school technology component<sup>6</sup>, and a master schedule to increase learning time. In addition, Challenge II schools are expected to conduct a needs assessment and blend multiple funding streams at the building level in a manner that supports and sustains school improvement. The school is currently in the last year of its funding cycle and has made significant gains on the MSPAP over the past three years so continued funding is not guaranteed.<sup>7</sup> According to the school's principal, it is likely that Forest Heights will qualify for continued state funding at a lower appropriation level.

Forest Heights, largely through the efforts of the PTA president, has also developed a number of ongoing relationships with neighborhood businesses. Most notable is the relationship with the local McDonald's that donates 10 percent of its profits earned during

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<sup>5</sup> Forest Heights adopted the Strategic Teaching and Reading Project (STRP) as their Comprehensive Reform Model. While the Comer model, (adopted by the school because of their racially non-diverse designation), concentrates on school planning and decision-making processes, STRP focuses on reading instructional strategies.

<sup>6</sup> Forest Heights currently uses the Lightspan program and students who participate take laptop computers home with them.

<sup>7</sup> According to one district official in the Office of School Improvement and Accountability, the Challenge II Initiative has been extended through the 2002-03 school year at which point the program's future is uncertain.

a three hour span one day a month. The neighborhood Giant super market staff volunteer their time during career day to discuss their career choices with the students. Other businesses including Good Year, Ramada Inn, Suzy Chalet, Pizza Hut, Popeye's and Levi restaurant also make donations that help to support the school's Power Parent evenings. Program financial sustainability, however, is still primarily dependent on state and local funding.

### **Program Evaluation**

Forest Heights does not formally evaluate its tutorial programs. The program coordinators do collect student data and teacher surveys in order to both modify the structure and content of the extended learning programs and to assess individual student growth and progress. The coordinators rely on a range of student data including: report cards, portfolios, standardized test scores, homework completion, discipline referrals, and suspension rates, as part of an informal evaluation to assess the program's impact on individual students.

In terms of program improvement, Ms. Burroughs, in her multiple roles as Instructional Resource Teacher and CTBS program coordinator, is able to modify both the school day program and the extended learning programs so that they effectively complement one another. One example involves the sixth grade class that was having problems completing their homework assignments on time. Ms. Burroughs assessed that the students were overburdened with assignments and discussed with the other sixth grade faculty about the possibility of reducing student workload. In addition, she modified the afterschool program so that these same students could complete their homework first and then have their activities period. Another example is a teacher who shared with Ms. Burroughs that her fourth grade students were becoming bored with the afterschool program. The teacher and Ms. Burroughs then modified

the program by breaking up the extended learning time into 30 minute segments as opposed to hourly segments. The students also began to participate in the Lightspan program during the afterschool hours.

What is evident at Forest Heights Elementary School is the recent and dramatic increase in student achievement as measured by the school's performance on the MSPAP test. The Maryland School Performance Assessment Program is a criterion referenced test administered annually in the state of Maryland to third, fifth and eighth graders to test their mastery of basic skills and how well they can apply these skills in problem-solving situations. Although the school's MSPAP<sup>8</sup> scores have declined significantly since last year's test (2000)<sup>9</sup>, Forest Heights has made tremendous gains in the percentage of students achieving proficiency level in the years since the first statewide test scores were reported in 1993. For example, just 7.3 percent of third graders at Forest Heights attained proficiency level in reading on the MSPAP test in 1994, the first year scores were reported for the third grade. In contrast, 42.3 percent of third graders who took the test in 2001 achieved proficiency level. Similarly, 35.4 percent of fifth graders attained proficiency level or better in reading on the MSPAP in 2001, in contrast to just 2.6 percent of fifth graders in 1994. Moreover, Forest Height's composite 2001 index score of 47.4 percent is higher than either the county or the state

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<sup>8</sup> The MSPAP is an assessment designed specifically to drive school improvement efforts by measuring individual school performance. It does not measure individual student performance but assesses how well third, fifth and eighth graders at any given school can apply what they have learned to solving problems and relate knowledge across different subject areas.

<sup>9</sup> The MSPAP test has come under recent criticism because of statewide declines in school performance scores. Two districts to date, Montgomery County Public Schools and Baltimore City Schools, have refused to administer the test until significant changes are made, primarily regarding how the test is scored.

averages (28.3 and 45.7 respectively).<sup>10</sup> Forest Height's overall performance on the MSPAP outpaces almost all schools with similar levels of poverty within Prince Georges County Public School system.<sup>11</sup>

Forest Heights students also performed well on the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills, a nationally normed standardized test administered annually in the Prince Georges County school district. Although scores for the fourth grade declined slightly in every area except language, scores for the second and sixth grades increased dramatically in all tested subject areas. In addition, Forest Heights is one of ten elementary schools in Prince Georges County to be nationally recognized as a high-poverty, high-performing school based on data collected by the Education Trust.<sup>12</sup>

***“Any child can learn as long as what is being presented is honest, meaningful, and at their level.”*** (Howard Wright, school principal)

<sup>10</sup> The composite index score provides an indication of the average performance of students across all six content areas of the MSPAP. The percentages are derived from dividing the sum of the total number of students achieving satisfactory or better in each content area by the students eligible to take the test.

<sup>11</sup> Only Gladys Noon Spellman and Thomas S. Stone elementary schools, with FARM percentages of 66.6% and 86.4% respectively, have higher MSPAP index scores in the Prince Georges County Public School system.

<sup>12</sup> The 4,577 schools included in the Education Trust database satisfied the following criteria: (1) students' reading and/or math scores were in the top third among all schools in the state at the same grade level, (2) the percentage of low-income students was at least 50 percent and ranked in the top third of schools at that grade level and/or (3) the percentage of African-American and Latino students in the school was at least 50% and ranked in the top third of schools at that grade level. Forest Heights elementary school met all three criteria.

The school's principal cites student academic growth, as measured by test indicators, as clear evidence of the success of its tutorial programs but more importantly, as evidence of the school's systemic efforts to improve the quality of instruction for its students. Thus, according to Mr. Wright, the tutorial programs should not be viewed as a singular, stand alone strategy to improve student educational attainment, but within the context of the school's overall improvement efforts. Mr. Wright also cites the social development of the students as an equally important outcome as, from his perspective, those students who attend the programs exhibit an increased sense of self-respect, self-esteem, and responsibility for their work.

School-day staff, those not directly involved in the daily administration of the program, also view the extended learning programs as contributing to positive student outcomes. One faculty member stated that the extended learning programs complement what occurs during the school day by focusing on skills development and reiterating what was taught during the day within a smaller setting. Moreover, from her perspective, the students who attend the extended learning program exhibit increased confidence in the classroom, improved writing skills, have become “will-doers” during the school day, and share a bond that is noticeable. Both the faculty who staff the extended learning program and regular school-day staff cite the programs emphasis on targeting the middle-rung of students, those that might easily slip through the cracks without intervention, as a crucial aspect of the program as this is precisely where the majority of Forest Heights students are in terms of their overall academic achievement.

### **Challenges to Implementation and Future Directions**

As is true of most extended learning programs, Forest Heights has faced some obstacles in designing a program to meet the needs

of its students. The major issues that the school principal and extended learning coordinators continue to struggle with are staffing needs, coordinating students' time to fit the needs of working parents, structuring program activities so that they sufficiently maintain student interest, and expanding the program to increase the number of students served.

Both the CTBS and the MSPAP afterschool programs are staffed solely by certified school day faculty at Forest Heights who are paid their hourly rate. Staffing the tutorial programs with school day staff clearly has its benefits in terms of creating a seamless transition and link to the school day and in providing quality instruction during the afterschool hours to those students at-risk of school failure. Utilizing school day staff also creates the opportunity for students to develop deeper and more meaningful relationships with their teachers in a smaller setting. However, the risks associated with relying too heavily on school day faculty to staff extended learning programs are also well documented. It adds to the staff workload, which is considerable given that most teachers use their non-teaching hours to plan lessons and grade homework and tests. At the time of the site visit, Ms. Burroughs was serving as an instructor in the CTBS tutorial program because she was short one staff member. Although this solution works in the short term, maintaining sufficient staffing to address the needs of all the students the school would like to reach in its extended learning programs continues to be an issue. In terms of long-term program stability, the school might do well to consider broadening its staff beyond school day faculty (e.g. training parents to provide tutoring to students, using qualified volunteers, etc.).

The majority of students who attend Forest Heights elementary school come from working class families where both parents (if present) work outside the home. Scheduling afterschool activities so that they do not create an unusual hardship for working families is a

necessity. The school principal noted that families sometimes have to make schedule changes to accommodate the tutorial schedule. Particular difficulties arise when parents have several children who attend Forest Heights but all of them are not involved in the extended learning program. Understandably, these parents desire that the school create activities that can accommodate both children during the afterschool hours so that they do not have to pick up their children at separate times. In this instance, parental needs for custodial supervision conflict with limited school resources to fill this need and the school's desire to focus on the children who require academic assistance. This tension has been eased somewhat by the district providing bus transportation home to those students who are not within walking distance of the school. The school's desire to address the needs of at-risk students within its community might perhaps serve as a springboard to fashioning a wider and more inclusive afterschool program that can better meet the needs of parents with more than one student attending Forest Heights. Mr. Wright also acknowledges that there are key components missing that would serve to broaden the extended learning programs and strengthen the school overall. He envisions his school as a one-stop shop paradigm wherein all the students' needs, and by extension, the needs of parents, could be addressed by partnering with key agencies like the County Health Department, Human Resources, and Social Services, who would work together and provide much needed services within the school building.

The program coordinators at Forest Heights note that the students who participate in the extended learning programs enjoy the program. During the MSPAP tutorial sessions both the third and fifth graders were actively engaged in their work, which they voluntarily shared with their peers and the staff. In the subsequent homework session in the school's cafeteria, the majority of the students worked

independently or in small groups to complete their homework assignments with little prompting from the staff. Part of this intensity is attributable to the students' realization that the stakes are high. In the third grade tutorial, there were explicit references to the MSPAP, the state's standardized test, and the students recognize that their success in completing the exercises in the extended learning program, which are adapted from the MSPAP, is indicative of how they will fare on the actual test. However, the staff exhibits a genuine concern for the well being of their students that goes beyond their academic success. The supportive atmosphere, combined with clear structure and consistent discipline, conveys to students that the staff cares about their academic achievement *and* overall well-being, which may influence their behavior and willingness to attend the program.

Yet the staff also recognizes that in implementing an extended learning program, they have extended the school day. The challenge continues to be designing an engaging after-school curriculum that will foster learning *and* peak student interest. Ms. Burroughs, the CTBS program coordinator, is aware of this need as she states, "*we have a pretty good group of kids who desire to do well. But if they know they will be doing hands-on activities...they are more likely to be here and be excited about being here, not just because Mom and Dad made them come.*" The coordinators, realizing that students are tired and need a physical outlet and activities that are distinct from the school day, have tried to be intentional in how they structure the after-school hours. Thus the content, while being explicitly aligned to school curriculum and the MSPAP/CTBS tests, focuses on providing interesting activities that promote the skills development necessary to perform well on the tests and in the classroom. However, the extended learning program at Forest Heights has a way to go before it could be considered multi-faceted. In its present form, the program is narrowly focused on addressing

the issue of academic achievement and although *this is an essential component to meet students' needs*, a broader agenda might incorporate enrichment activities and additional recreational programs.

The principal, school-day staff, and extended learning program coordinators all mentioned that meeting the needs of all the students who could benefit from an extended learning program is a challenge. Although most of the staff clearly felt they were targeting the right group of students for inclusion in the program, there was also a collective need expressed to reach those students who are not presently being served. This was articulated as a resources issue (i.e. not having adequate staffing to support additional students) as the school wants to maintain a small student-to-faculty ratio even as it increases the numbers of students served. Until the school resolves this concern, it is not likely they will be able to expand the program beyond the approximately 100 students who currently participate.

### **The Elements of Success**

Despite clear challenges, Forest Height's extended learning program is successful as it has exhibited academic results for the students who participate and the program has become an integral aspect of the school's overall approach to systemic improvement. The extended learning program is *not* the sole reason why Forest Heights has garnered national recognition as a high-poverty, high-performing school. Rather, it is this program, working in tandem with other schoolwide efforts including, a reduction in class size, increased parental involvement, incorporating the Lightspan program and a Strategic Reading Program, and employing a full-time Instructional Resource Teacher (IRT), that have resulted in improved results for students.

For Mr. Wright, the extended learning program is a significant step towards creating a full-service, community school that can address the total needs of its students. As the

majority of Forest Heights students come from low and moderate income families, the ability of the school to sufficiently address their academic and non-academic needs is critical, especially when the larger community may not have the human, financial, and leadership capacity to provide key services.

When the principal and staff were asked to express, in their own words, what has contributed to the extended learning program's success, they emphasized the availability of resources, a highly committed staff, parental support, and a clearly defined, well-structured program. The program staff stressed that programs need to be staffed by staff that are not only dedicated, but also creative so that they can address the critical skills that kids need in innovative ways. The staff also discussed the importance of parental support in terms of realizing the value of the program, volunteering to assist the teachers, participating in power parent evenings, and addressing any discipline issues that might arise. The principal underscored the need for school

leaders to have the financial resources and flexibility necessary to craft programs that adequately address student needs. In addition, he stressed recognizing the human capital within the staff by tapping into their talents and abilities and building on that to develop viable programs. Finally, according to Mr. Wright, it is essential that programs have explicitly defined goals and objectives and are staffed by a highly dedicated staff that put the interests of the students above all else. A final and key ingredient for success not explicitly stated by Mr. Wright, are school principals who have a distinct vision of how extended learning programs fit within the context of overall school improvement and student well-being, and exercise decisive leadership towards this end.