

**COMMISSION ON
CHILDREN AND YOUTH**
ANNUAL REPORT 2024-2025





Mission Statement

The Commission on Children and Youth promotes the well-being of Montgomery County's children, youth, and families so that all young people may realize their full potential and become contributing, productive adults. The Commission advances its mission by: (1) identifying the needs of young people and their families, and the groups and agencies that serve them; (2) informing and advising the County Executive, the County Council, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), the Board of Education (BOE), and the community at large; (3) recommending policies, programs, funding, and legislative priorities; and (4) affirming the needs, aspirations, and achievements of all the County's young people.

Commission Structure

- The Commission and its committees meet monthly (September to June).
- Full Commission meetings are held on the **second Wednesday of every month** from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m.
- The **Youth Advisory Committee** meets the **first Tuesday of every month** from 7:00 to 8:00 p.m.
- Meetings are **open to the public** and were held virtually in 2024-2025.
- Each June, the Commission holds an **annual strategic planning retreat** to select priority issues for the following year.
- **Subcommittees** are then formed around the chosen priorities





DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
COMMISSION ON CHILDREN & YOUTH

September 10, 2025

The Honorable Marc Elrich
Montgomery County Executive

The Honorable Kate Stewart, Council President
Montgomery County Council

The Honorable Julie Yang, President
Montgomery County Board of Education

Dr. James Bridgers, Director
Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services

Residents of Montgomery County, MD

Dear Mr. Elrich, Ms. Stewart, Ms. Yang, Dr. Bridgers, and Residents of Montgomery County,

The 2024-2025 Commission year has been both challenging and inspiring. With the leadership of passionate Youth Commissioners and deeply engaged adult members, we directed our attention to three urgent and emerging priorities: **Online Safety, Youth Substance Use (with a focus on Fentanyl and Naloxone accessibility), and Unseen Health Barriers.**

This year's work was marked by rich dialogue, direct youth engagement through the 18th Annual Youth Voice Roundtable, and collaboration with local experts, parents, educators, and county officials. Together, we explored how to better safeguard young people in digital spaces, how to confront and prevent the devastating impact of fentanyl in our communities, and how to address less visible but critical barriers to youth well-being, from school nursing shortages to menstrual equity.

Our report presents recommendations that emphasize prevention, early education, parent engagement, culturally responsive supports, and accessible health and wellness resources. These proposals are rooted in data, community voice, and above all, the lived experience of Montgomery County's young people.

The Commission remains grateful for the consistent support of our County leaders, the Board of Education, DHHS, and our community partners. By acting boldly on the recommendations in this report, we can ensure that Montgomery County not only responds to today's crises but also builds a stronger future for all our children and youth. We also are thankful to our former chair, Greg Pollock; though he is no longer on the Commission, he was instrumental in leading us to this point.

Sincerely,

Michael A. Jiménez Jr.
Chair, Commission on Children & Youth 2025–2026

Commission Membership

The Commission on Children and Youth is comprised of 27 members, all appointed by the County Executive and confirmed by the County Council. Twenty-two of the members are divided equally to represent the following categories:

1. Individuals with recent experience in agencies providing services to children and youth
2. Youth and young adults from Montgomery County
3. Parents of children and youth who live in Montgomery County

The remaining five members are ex-officio representatives from the following departments:

- A representative from Montgomery County Public Schools
- A representative from an independent school in Montgomery County
- A representative from the Montgomery County Department of Recreation
- Two representatives from the Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services

Each commissioner serves a three-year term with the option of serving two full terms. Youth commissioners serve a one-year term with the option of serving two full terms.

Parent Representatives

- | | | |
|----------------------|-------------------|-----------------------------------|
| - Jane Chappell | - Sara Rosen | - Michael Jimenez (current Chair) |
| - Constance Mordecai | - Gregory Tucker | - Gregory Pollock (former Chair) |
| - Leon Peace | - Corinne Yourman | |

Youth Representatives

- | | | |
|------------------|---------------------|------------------------------------|
| - Ellyce Butuyan | - Molly McAlvanah | - Chelsea Zhu (current Vice-Chair) |
| - Alexandra Cox | - Folashade Epebinu | |
| - Angela Wu | - Sanvi Das | |

Private Agency Representatives

- | | |
|--|----------------------------------|
| - Stephanie Clark, Leaders Institute | - Chanel Speaks, EveryMind |
| - Jose Diaz, CCI Health Services | - Shané Tate, Six Tool Solutions |
| - Kimberly McLurkin-Harris, MCPS Recovery and Academic Program | |

Ex Officio Members

- Kirsten Andersen, Child & Adolescent School and Community-Based Services, Department of Health and Human Services
- Walter Pegues, Department of Recreation and Parks
- Jeanett Peralta, School Health Services, Department of Health and Human Services
- Julia Guillen Williams, Montgomery County Public Schools
- Vacant, Independent/Private School representative

Staff to the Commission

- Currently, Jameela Hyland, Children Youth and Family Services, Department of Health and Human Services
- Formerly, Dr. Pearline Tyson, Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services

Introduction



The 2024–2025 Commission on Children and Youth brought renewed energy and urgency to tackle some of the most-pressing challenges facing young people in Montgomery County. Guided by passionate Youth Commissioners and deeply engaged adult members, the Commission’s subcommittees prioritized two major areas of concern: **Online Safety** and **Youth Substance Use**, specifically related to Fentanyl, and Naloxone accessibility. Our youth commissioners focused on examining **Unseen Health Barriers**.

This year, our Commission’s work was marked by rich dialogue, direct youth engagement through the “Youth Voice” Roundtable, and extensive collaboration with local experts and stakeholders. These efforts helped inform this report, which reflects youth perspectives, current community needs, and thoughtful recommendations for systemic change.

Our work this year would not have been possible without the insights shared by students, parents, educators, health professionals, and county officials. We are especially grateful to the following individuals and the organizations they serve for their willingness to engage in open dialogue:

- Jonathan Henriquez-Lara, Program Manager, Identity, Inc.
- Ben Stevenson II, Substance Misuse and Suicide Prevention Program Manager, Montgomery County
- Captain John O’Brien, Montgomery County Police Department
- David Monahan, Campaign Director, Fairplay
- Mickie Chandra, Chair, Technology Committee, Montgomery County Council of Parent-Teacher Associations
- Dr. Sameer Hinduja, Co-Founder and Co-Director, Cyberbullying Research Center
- Diana Graber, Founder, Cyber Civics and Cyberwise

It is our hope that the recommendations outlined in this report provide a clear roadmap for improving outcomes for Montgomery County’s children and youth. We invite the County Executive, County Council, and all relevant agencies to consider and implement these proposals with urgency and care.



Commission Priority: Naloxone and Youth Addiction Support

Fentanyl use and overdoses are an urgent and life-threatening issue affecting youth in Montgomery County. As of 2024, fentanyl is the leading cause of fatal overdoses in the county (Montgomery County Public Schools, n.d.), with youth increasingly exposed to counterfeit pills and illicit substances that can contain lethal doses of synthetic opioids (Montgomery County Government, n.d.-a). In response, the Commission prioritized examining access to Naloxone (aka Narcan), the life-saving opioid reversal drug, and assessing broader supports for preventing youth substance use and aiding those who are already using.

Community-based needs assessments and student voices have been central to shaping our recommendations. Our county’s youth have made a clear call for culturally responsive education, peer-to-peer programming, and access to prevention resources much earlier than high school (Lewin & Roy, 2024). We’ve listened.

Our recommendations are organized into two categories: **Prevention and Treatment/Harm Reduction**.

I. Prevention: Helping Youth Avoid Substance Use

1. Strengthening Digital Communication: Enhancing County School, Health and Opioid Awareness Resources

Effective public education is essential to preventing youth substance use and saving lives in the face of fentanyl-related risks.

Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) took a meaningful step by launching a dedicated fentanyl information page (<https://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/info/fentanyl/>). In parallel, Montgomery County Government maintains a more comprehensive opioid prevention resource at (<https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/opioids/>), which includes local overdose data, Naloxone training opportunities, and links to treatment providers.

While these online resources are a critical first step, they currently function as static, siloed resources and lack the interactive, audience-specific design needed to effectively engage youth and families. In contrast, the county's [BtheOne.org](https://btheone.org) site, focused on youth mental health and suicide prevention, exemplifies a more dynamic and inviting digital experience. BtheOne's colorful design, youth-friendly tone, and clear action steps model the type of energy and accessibility that we need for all of our county's drug resource sites. Also, while BtheOne is an amazing resource for youth, there needs to be a corollary for parent education.

The Commission recommends the development of a specific “path” in current resources, including BtheOne for parents/caregivers and for the county to coordinate efforts between its siloed digital resources.

Parents and caregivers need culturally competent, multilingual, and judgment-free education to understand and respond effectively to youth substance use. The parent-focused section should offer clear information about drugs and alcohol prevalent in Montgomery County. It should explain risk and protective factors, signs of substance use (such as changes in friend groups, truancy), changes in behavior, and how to intervene in ways that foster safety and trust.

Parents should also be equipped with strategies for having open conversations with their children, and be offered education on the science of addiction to reduce stigma and shift away from punitive mindsets. Further, parents should be made aware of other county educational efforts in this area, such as the Community Opioid Prevention and Education (COPE) trailer developed by the Montgomery County Police Department (MCPD) and MCPS (Montgomery County Police Department, n.d.). Critically, the site should connect parents with local, language-accessible support groups where they can receive help in a safe and non-judgmental environment. While this information is currently contained in a PDF on BTheOne, it deserves additional space on the platform (Montgomery County Government, n.d.-b).

To ensure this platform has impact, the Commission further recommends bridging the MCPS and County opioid pages with design and navigation complementary with BtheOne. Also, content on all these sites should be maintained and updated regularly to reflect current realities, community input, and best practices; for example, the MCPS site is out of date as of this writing.

Importantly, we must continue to fund and give visibility to BtheOne and its associated Youth Ambassador Program. As emphasized in the [2024 Substance Use Prevention Needs Assessment](#), youth who are most at risk are often disconnected from traditional information channels. The Youth Ambassador Program and BTheOne are designed with youth input to avoid stigma and ensure that the messaging feels supportive, relatable, and trustworthy. BTheOne's efforts making access discreet, mobile-friendly, and readily available combined with the human element and engagement the Youth Ambassador Program brings – is key to reaching the youth who need it most. Montgomery County's leaders should ensure parents have a similar experience as well as continue to support the resources we have.

Our county has the infrastructure and talent to lead the nation in youth-centered digital and in-person overdose prevention. By revamping its existing digital presence into a coordinated model, with intentional entry points for

youth and parents, the county and MCPS can save lives, strengthen families, and meet this moment with clarity and compassion.

2. Begin Education Early and Often - Starting in Middle School

Montgomery County Police Department (MCPD) and public health experts emphasize that drug abuse prevention must begin earlier - even as early as middle school (Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services & Montgomery County Police Department, 2023). MCPD reports that children as young as 12–14 are already engaging in substance use and criminal activity, often accessing drugs through social media and peer networks (Montgomery County Police Department, 2025). Nationally, data shows that 1-in-5 8th graders have tried illicit drugs (National Center for Drug Abuse Statistics, n.d.). This is bolstered by our local data as highlighted in the Substance Use Prevention Needs Assessment that found students encountered substance use risks before high school.

The Commission recommends increasing parent education opportunities for middle school students and the continued investment in low cost out-of-school time (OST) programs to help engage youth at this critical juncture where exposure to drugs begins.

MCPD notes that many parents of youth overdose victims were aware of their child's use but didn't know how to intervene (Montgomery County Police Department, 2025). Parents in our community have shown a willingness to speak to their kids about drugs and drug use, but only if they have the knowledge and resources to have an informed conversation (Lewin & Roy, 2024). To assist with this, schools and agencies should host multilingual opioid education nights at middle schools, offer Naloxone training, and distribute parent toolkits that include signs of use, digital safety tips, and access to local resources like STEER (Stop, Triage, Engage, Educate, and Rehabilitate) (Tree of Hope Association, n.d.).

Out of school time (OST) programs are a powerful yet underutilized tool in prevention. MCPD identifies OST as essential to keeping students connected to positive activities before harmful behaviors begin (Montgomery County Police Department, 2025). However, access to these programs remains uneven, especially in overdose-prone ZIP codes like Germantown, Wheaton, and Four Corners. Additionally, barriers such as transportation, cost, and awareness prevent parents from knowing about OST programs, and students from participating.

The County should invest in free, high-quality OST offerings - sports, arts, youth leadership - and continue to evaluate the efficacy of curricula that teaches stress management, smart decision-making, and refusal skills. Youth-led programming, including BTheOne Ambassadors (Montgomery County Government, n.d.-c), can enhance these efforts and foster peer-to-peer engagement. The commission envisions an expansion of the program that increases exposure between high school ambassadors and middle school students.

To reduce opioid use, prevention must be timely, realistic, and widely accessible. Effective prevention requires partnership among schools, healthcare professionals, community organizations, and government officials. By prioritizing empowering middle school parents and expanding OST in high-risk areas, while also investing further into proven programs like the Youth Ambassador Program, Montgomery County can reach more youth before crisis, with the tools and trust they need to stay safe.

3. Implement the Substance Use Prevention and Resiliency Education (SUPRE) Program

Montgomery County Public Schools has publicly introduced the Substance Use Prevention and Resiliency Education (SUPRE) program as a positive, education-based alternative to suspension for first-time high school substance use violations (Montgomery County Public Schools, n.d.). SUPRE was designed to provide a psychoeducational response focused on reflection, family involvement, and healthy decision-making. However, based on our review of available materials and stakeholder input, it appears that the program has not been fully implemented or consistently offered across county schools.

As such, the Commission recommends further evaluation of SUPRE's current status and consideration of how such an intervention - whether SUPRE or a new model - can be effectively deployed to support youth through education rather than discipline for first-time offenders.

In addition, we noted that the Adolescent Substance Use Prevention Program (ASUPP), in collaboration with the Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services, brings the evidence-based Botvin LifeSkills Training (LST) curriculum into select MCPS middle and high schools. This program equips students with critical skills in refusal, stress management, and healthy decision-making - approaches proven to reduce substance use among adolescents. While ASUPP remains active and supported by recent county grant initiatives, the extent of its current adoption across schools is unclear, and public reporting on implementation fidelity or student outcomes is limited.

The Commission recommends a formal review of ASUPP's reach, consistency, and impact within MCPS. This should include an assessment of whether digital enhancements to the LST curriculum are being used and how the program is integrated into both classroom instruction and out-of-school time programming in high-risk communities.

Together, SUPRE and ASUPP represent important steps toward a more supportive, education-based response to youth substance use - but their full potential can only be realized through consistent implementation, transparent evaluation, and sustained coordination across schools and county agencies. Strengthening and expanding these efforts is essential to ensure all students have access to timely, developmentally appropriate prevention and intervention supports.

II. Treatment & Harm Reduction: Helping Youth Who Are Using or At Risk

1. Confront Stigma and Normalize Naloxone Use

A critical component of the proposed parent/caregiver pathway within the strengthened digital communication strategy (btheone.com) is addressing the stigma that continues to surround naloxone (aka Narcan).

While the life-saving benefits of Naloxone are well-established, many parents still hesitate to carry it, or even talk about it, due to lingering fears and misconceptions. Some worry that having naloxone implies their child is using drugs, or that it might somehow encourage risky behavior. But just like CPR or an EpiPen, Naloxone is a basic tool of safety and preparedness, not a signal of personal use.

The Commission recommends that the parent side of the digital platform include clear, accessible education to normalize Naloxone as a family safety resource.

This content should debunk common myths, explain how Naloxone works, and emphasize its role in saving lives. The messaging must be direct and judgment-free:

- Naloxone does not get someone high - it reverses an overdose.
- Carrying Naloxone does not mean you or your child are using - it means you care enough to be prepared.
- It is free, legal, and widely available across Maryland (Montgomery County Government, n.d.-a).

This section of the website should also highlight Maryland's Good Samaritan Law, which protects individuals who seek help or administer Naloxone during an overdose (Maryland Department of Health, n.d.). Many families are unaware of this protection, and normalizing its existence could reduce fear and hesitation in a crisis.

To strengthen the impact, the site should feature videos or testimonials from local parents, youth ambassadors, and healthcare professionals who have used Naloxone - or wish they had. These real voices

can shift the narrative, showing that carrying naloxone is not risky, shameful, or extreme, it's an act of responsibility and care.

By embedding stigma-reducing content about Naloxone within a broader, multilingual digital education platform for parents, MCPS and Montgomery County can empower caregivers to take life-saving steps with confidence. This approach reinforces the values of compassion, preparedness, and community safety that should be at the core of all youth substance use prevention strategies.

2. Expand Access Beyond Schools with a Focus on Communities Most Affected

While MCPS schools are now equipped with Naloxone, overdoses aren't confined to school grounds. These emergencies can happen in homes, parks, parking lots, and neighborhood spaces - often in communities facing the greatest barriers to care. Areas disproportionately impacted by poverty, trauma, and under-resourced health systems are also the places where life-saving tools like naloxone can be hardest to find.

To close this access gap, the Commission recommends that Montgomery County expand community-based distribution of Naloxone, with a focus on trusted, high-traffic locations in underserved ZIP codes. Naloxone should be available in places where people already go for help, connection, or daily errands - like grocery stores, libraries, Ride On buses, recreation centers, laundromats, and faith institutions.

This effort should be rooted in local partnerships, with nonprofits, grassroots organizers, and small businesses helping to distribute free Naloxone kits and multilingual instructions, especially in Spanish and Amharic. These community organizations already have the trust of residents - and with the right tools, they can become critical distribution points in the County's overdose prevention strategy.

By decentralizing access to Naloxone and meeting residents where they are, Montgomery County can shift from reactive to proactive, ensuring that life-saving medication is available not only in schools and hospitals, but on sidewalks, at cash registers, and inside family homes - where it's needed most.

Several jurisdictions have implemented community-based naloxone distribution programs, placing this life-saving medication in accessible public locations to combat opioid overdoses. Notable examples include:

- Boston Veterans Affairs, Massachusetts: One of the pioneers in this initiative, Boston VA integrated naloxone kits into Automated External Defibrillator (AED) cabinets within its facilities. This practice has since been adopted by other areas, including New York State and Cleveland (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2023).
- Rhode Island's "NaloxBox" Program: This initiative established free-standing sites equipped with naloxone, providing real-time access for overdose responses. These NaloxBoxes are strategically placed in public areas to maximize accessibility (Bloomberg, 2017).
- Laredo, Texas: The city installed health kiosks in recreation centers, offering free health essentials such as pregnancy tests, condoms, hygiene kits, and naloxone. These kiosks are strategically located in high-traffic areas to ensure privacy and accessibility, aiming to reduce barriers related to cost and stigma (Laredo Morning Times, 2024).
- Charleston, West Virginia: Repurposed newspaper boxes have been utilized as distribution points for free naloxone kits. Positioned in various locations, including hospitals, health departments, and convenience stores, these boxes allow individuals to access naloxone anonymously, promoting widespread availability and reducing stigma (Associated Press, 2024).
- University of Arkansas: The university launched an overdose prevention initiative by installing vending machines on campus that provide fentanyl harm prevention kits and naloxone. This effort aims to equip students with the necessary tools and training to respond to potential overdoses (Axios, 2024).
- Public Transit Systems: Research suggests that placing public-access naloxone kits at transit stations can improve accessibility for bystanders to assist during opioid overdoses. By targeting high-traffic areas, these programs aim to maximize the potential for timely intervention (Medscape, 2025).

These initiatives demonstrate a proactive approach to overdose prevention by making naloxone readily available in everyday community spaces. By strategically placing naloxone in locations such as libraries, community centers, public transportation hubs, and educational institutions, these jurisdictions aim to empower citizens to act swiftly in overdose situations, ultimately saving lives.

Conclusion

Montgomery County has taken commendable steps to address the youth fentanyl crisis—from expanding Naloxone access in schools to piloting peer-led prevention programs and offering in-center treatment for adolescents. Yet, the data, youth voices, and frontline experiences tell us that the current system is not reaching everyone who needs it - especially those who are younger, unstably housed, or facing systemic barriers to care.

The Commission's recommendations reflect a holistic, community-centered approach to this crisis. We believe that prevention must begin earlier, involve parents and caregivers, and be embedded across the educational experience. Treatment and harm-reduction efforts must meet youth where they are - with peers they trust, services that are visible and accessible, and support that account for trauma and housing instability.

Naloxone saves lives, but it is not enough on its own. To truly prevent overdose deaths and change the trajectory for young people at risk, we must invest in connection, education, trust, and care - early and often. We urge the County Executive, County Council, MCPS, and community partners to adopt and implement these recommendations with the urgency this crisis demands and the compassion our youth deserve.



Commission Priority: Online Safety

One of the most complex issues facing today's youth - and the adults who teach, treat, or live with them - revolves around digital technology. The promises and perils of the online world, compounded with the rapid pace at which new digital platforms and technologies are introduced, create an online ecosystem that has profound implications for the flourishing, online and off, of our children and teens. For this reason, the Online Safety Subcommittee was tasked with the following mission this year:

Exploring necessary safeguards to protect the mental and physical well-being of children and youth when using technology and online resources. We aim to develop countywide recommendations for education and practices to ensure their safety.

Our work began with the recognition that many of the digital devices and online spaces that youth use and occupy for many hours of the day are not designed with their best interests in mind. Concern for youth well-being may be generally incompatible with technology companies' bottom line, particularly when their business model is predicated on maximizing audience engagement at all costs. This business model leaves children and teens in the crosshairs and relegates responsibility for caring for children and teens' mental and physical well-being when using digital technology and online platforms to *us* - parents, caregivers, guardians, and schools. Needless to say, this is both unfair and no easy task.

For this reason, we want to commend Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) for the steps taken to safeguard students' well-being in connection with digital devices and platforms. MCPS has met the challenge in two significant ways: first, by updating and strengthening its personal mobile device regulation for the 2025-2026 school year, which will require personal mobile devices to be off and stored away during instructional time, with limited exceptions (Montgomery County Public Schools, 2025); and second, through its digital citizenship curriculum for elementary, middle, and high school students, to help make all students informed and educated users of digital technology (Common Sense Education + Montgomery County Public Schools, n.d.) (Montgomery County Public Schools, n.d.) (Montgomery County Volunteer Center, 2024), a necessary support until such time as digital devices and platforms will be redesigned to prioritize youth well-being and flourishing. We also commend the steps taken by the State of Maryland and Montgomery County to develop and abide by digital best practices that consider the physical and mental well-being of students when screens need to be used as part of instructional time during the school day (Maryland State Department of Education, 2019) (Montgomery County Council of PTAs, 2023). In addition, Maryland's Kids Code, signed into law on May 9, 2024, requires tech platforms to "provide safety-by-design and privacy-by-default protections for kids and teens online" (Kids Code Coalition, n.d.), further evidence of our state's commitment to keeping its youth safe while online through design improvements.

In making our recommendations, we are mindful that students, especially older ones, find connection, education, community, creativity, information, and entertainment through their engagement with digital devices and online platforms. We are also mindful that not every child or teen reports negative experiences while online, or that, when confronted with negative experiences, they rise to a level that adversely impacts their mental or physical well-being. And yet, statistics and reports by parents, caregivers, and teens themselves show that there are many whose physical well-being and mental well-being suffer from their digital interactions, whether from exposure to harmful content or excessive use, at home or at school.

While our recommendations focus primarily on practical matters like rules, education, and training, there is much to be gained at every school by two additional, essential considerations that can help shift student well-being, online and off, in subtle ways. We credit these recommendations to speaker Dr. Sameer Hinduja, and while he cited them in connection with cyberbullying reduction, we believe they can help keep students safer when using digital platforms generally as well as bolster resilience against negative online experiences:

- cultivate a positive school climate that is filled with joyous spirit, good morale among students and teachers, and a strong sense of community; and
- encourage supportive school relationships between students and *askable* adults at school whom students feel they can safely approach to discuss anything.

Finally, our mission for this year did not encompass the educational technology (EdTech) used in the classroom during instructional time. The issue of EdTech in the classroom poses its own concerns, from tech overuse to privacy violations, but it was beyond the scope of our inquiry this year.

I. Reasons for Concern

1. Problematic Content

Digital technology use by children and teens raises concerns about the online content they interact with - much of it designed for adults or, if intended for kids, not necessarily designed with their best interests at heart - and

how exposure to inappropriate or harmful content affects their sense of self, safety, and physical and mental health.

While the list of harms to the health, safety, and privacy of children and teens is extensive, the Online Safety Subcommittee examined cyberbullying, exposure to violent images, sexual exploitation, predatory behavior, privacy violations, and susceptibility to deep fakes, disinformation, misinformation, and privacy intrusions. Although not every child or teen reports adverse impacts from their digital devices and online lives, those who are affected report harms that can be mild to severe, short-term to long lasting. For example, cyberbullying can cause psychological consequences that can be so severe, it can trigger symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder in child victims (Hinduja, 2025). Exposure to sexual and predatory grooming and sexual and violent content can lead to increased anxiety, depression and emotional distress (Pappas, 2024). Students who fall prey to online scams, privacy breaches, and identity theft may endure long-term damage to future credit scores and personal reputations (Online Harms Prevention Work Group, 2024). And the inability to discern misinformation and disinformation “amplifies discrimination and human bias, having an adverse effect on minority groups that are already discriminated against. A significant proportion of mis/disinformation, and memes in particular, contain hate speech: incitement to hatred, justification for and promotion of spreading hateful messages based on intolerance, racism and violence.” (*Misinformation and Disinformation and Deep Fakes* | University of Essex, n.d.).

2. Excessive Usage

The fact is, with inappropriate content so easily accessible to children and teens online and through social media, and with 97% of teens browsing the internet daily, often interacting with popular social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat (Anderson et al., 2022), the problem of exposure becomes compounded by the number of hours youth, especially teenagers, spend online. Children and teens spend an average of four to nine hours daily online. (Aacap, n.d.) In another study conducted between mid-2021 and late 2023, half of all teenagers spent four hours or more on digital devices, and those teens reported anxiety or depression symptoms in the preceding two weeks. (Zablotsky et al., 2024). Roughly 50% of teens with smartphones say they are online “constantly,” and that same percentage reports feeling “addicted” to their phones. (Hahn and Katzenstein, n.d.). Indeed, nearly three-quarters of teens say it often or sometimes makes them feel happy when they DO NOT have access to their smartphones. Even when youth are exposed to developmentally appropriate content online, excessive time spent on their devices translates into less time spent on offline activities that can foster independence, competence, and mental and physical well-being, which translate into greater resilience to manage life’s many challenges, including those found online.

3. Problematic School Day Exposure

The challenges with exposure to problematic content, sometimes for many hours of the day, are not just a problem for youth in their hours away from school. In fact, excessive phone use during the school day has increasingly been shown to pose problems at school. Nearly all teenagers, 97% of 11- to 17-year-olds, report using their phones during the school day, with some students reporting using their phones for as much as six and a half hours a day. Students picked up their phones a median of 51 times per day (Common Sense, 2023, pp. 3, 5). Another study found that teens spend an average of 1.5 hours on their phones during the school day for social media, communication, and entertainment, with about a quarter of those students spending more than two hours a day on their phones at school (Christakis et al., 2025). School day phone use has been linked to an increase in school violence, where phones are used to record, amplify, and even instigate fights. A single lunchroom altercation can quickly escalate as students receive real-time texts and videos, drawing crowds and intensifying chaos (Gold, 2025). Another growing concern is the ease with which students can access explicit

material during school hours. Research indicates that a significant number of teens report viewing pornography online during the school day, raising concerns about exposure to inappropriate material in what is supposed to be a safe environment (Common Sense, 2022, pp.15-16). Phones also provide access to online gambling platforms, with some students engaging in gambling during school hours (Silva, 2024). This behavior not only distracts from learning but can also introduce students to addictive and financially risky activities at a young age.

II. RECOMMENDATIONS

While technology offers educational benefits, there are adverse exposures that can compromise students' well-being online and off, at school and beyond school walls. Based on our expert speakers this year and our research of the issues, the Online Safety Subcommittee proposes the following recommendations, which encompass a combination of policy changes, digital literacy education, and ongoing dialogue among educators, parents, and students to promote student thriving and digital well-being.

Recommendation 1: More Stringent Away All Day Policy for MCPS Students

On May 9, 2025, MCPS announced its Updated Personal Mobile Device Regulation for the 2025-2026 school year. The new policy contains several key components, primarily that personal mobile devices (including phones, tablets, laptops, and smartwatches) are turned off and stored away at all elementary and middle schools but allowed during transitions and lunch in high schools. At all school levels, responsibility rests with the student to keep their PMDs off and stashed away when use is prohibited.¹

We appreciate the clear, updated rules for K-12 schools in the County. Key to successful implementation is consistency throughout schools and even throughout the entire school system, which these new regulations provide. By limiting access to online platforms and PMDs during the school day, MCPS automatically reduces the daily amount of potentially harmful online exposure by students.

To further our interests in promoting student safety and well-being around digital devices and online platforms, we make the following additional recommendations, which we believe can even better serve MCPS's student population around digital and online safety:

- In all elementary, middle, and high schools, MCPS should clarify that PMDs are to be locked away and inaccessible, not stored in pockets or backpacks (Phone-Free Schools Movement + Fairplay, n.d.).
- In high schools, the policy should include no access to PMDs during transitions. Not only are PMD-free transitions better for cultivating a culture of community and caring through interpersonal interaction among students, educators, and administrators, but they also reduce problematic school day activities, as discussed above.
- In high schools, access to PMDs during the school day should be limited to offsite lunch only. Again, prioritizing a culture of in-person connection and the continued development of interpersonal and communication skills, while also reducing the incidence of phone-organized lunchtime fights, means leaving phones off and locked during lunch while in the school building. However, if students leave the premises for lunch, they may access their PMDs after exiting the school building. This recommendation

¹ This notion of self-control has been criticized as being unduly burdensome on children and setting them up for failure, because the part of the brain in charge of impulse control does not fully develop until they are older (Screenagers, Away for the Day, n.d.)

creates greater alignment with the call for a complete “bell-to-bell” policy by a broad coalition of respected child development experts and child advocates (Fairplay 2025).

- Schools, sports teams, and clubs in the elementary and middle school years should refrain from using social media to make announcements, as doing so forces students onto digital devices and social media platforms before they or their families may be developmentally ready.

Recommendation 2: Setting a High Bar for Digital Citizenship & Media Literacy Curricula for Students

Digital citizenship teaches students the safe and responsible use of digital tools, while media literacy instructs students on how to use critical thinking skills to analyze media messages (Cybercivics, n.d.). Both prepare students to be considerate, safe, and thoughtful users of digital media while also preparing them to manage false information (misinformation) and intentionally misleading information (disinformation) that they encounter while online, in addition to the growing challenges around generative AI. Digital citizenship and media literacy education can also help strengthen students’ “digital resilience,” their ability to recognize and recover from risks they encounter online (The U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory, 2023). Schools are the right place to educate students on how to be thoughtful digital citizens, how to avoid cyberbullying, how to verify the accuracy of what they encounter online, and how to protect their private information.

Since at least 2015, MCPS has been offering digital citizenship and media literacy education to MCPS students in all grades.² This training generally tends to be folded into the health curriculum. Based on our research this past year, we recommend that MCPS review its digital citizenship and media literacy curriculum using the following five criteria.

First, any outsourced digital citizenship and media literacy curriculum should come from an independent provider, organization, or government agency,³ one not connected with, affiliated with, or supported by the tech industry (ascertainable from the provider’s website and typically designated as a supporter, partner, affiliate, etc.). There are quality, affordable curricula designed by educators who work completely independently of tech-industry influence.

Second, MCPS may consider having digital citizenship and media literacy integrated by teachers into their classroom curricula, rather than as a component of a health class, making them more meaningful to students. Some existing digital citizenship and media literacy curricula already aim for this learning model. But MCPS educators can also generate the content themselves for inclusion in their classes. For example, Washington State offers summer educator training to help them plan ways of integrating digital citizenship and media literacy in their curricula (Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, n.d.).

Third, currently gaining traction is the notion of peer-to-peer mentorship among older high school students and younger students. For example, students in grades 11 and 12 can delve into specific digital citizenship and media literacy topics, with the guidance of their teachers, and then lead learning sessions with younger high schoolers. At the middle school level, students in grade 8 could work on developing similar peer mentorship curricula for students in grades 6 and 7.

Fourth, to be engaging, helpful, and memorable for students, Online Safety Subcommittee speaker Diana Graber recommends digital citizenship and media literacy curricula that incorporate active learning,

² We commend MCPS’s decision to introduce this training in kindergarten, as early exposure to these lessons are necessary to prepare students for today’s digital world (Children and Screens, 2025).

³ To our surprise, even the federal government offers a free [curriculum](#) to educators of children aged 8-12.

engagement in the learning process, meaningful learning, and social interaction (Hirsh-Pasek, et al., 2015), plus family engagement activities or parent letters to reinforce student learning at home.

Fifth, we recommend that MCPS evaluate the effectiveness of its digital citizenship and media literacy on an annual basis to ensure that its goals, including student knowledge, safety, confidence, and well-being online, are being served and supported.

Recommendation 3: Providing annual evidence-based training to all Montgomery County, MD educators in digital citizenship and media literacy

One factor that can contribute to greater digital wellness among students is professional training to keep school educators informed about the ever-evolving tech ecosystem that children and teens inhabit. Training should not be limited just to those educators who directly teach students about digital citizenship and media literacy but should be open to all County educators - teachers, administrators, librarians, coaches, mental health professionals, and health professionals - who work with students from kindergarten through 12th grade. We recommend that MCPS provide at least yearly, full-day digital citizenship and media literacy training to all County educators, to allow them to be knowledgeable, trusted, and askable adults and mentors to all students on topics pertaining to online safety and digital well-being.

Training all educators also ensures the possibility for digital citizenship and media literacy to be integrated into every subject taught in every class. The skills and traits that digital citizenship and media literacy support - such as curiosity, problem posing, analytical thinking, and ethical conduct - have broad application for students both in school and beyond. Rather than consider digital citizenship and media literacy as discrete subjects that are taught separately from the regular curriculum, opening training to all educators ensures that they can be integrated in ways that encourage students to think, question, and solve - ultimately helping to keep students informed and safe. This is the model that has been adopted by Washington State, which offers all state educators access to free, full-day, hands-on training in digital citizenship and media literacy, in addition to training in AI, to help them integrate digital citizenship and media literacy into their classroom activities.

The most effective training for educators is an evidence-based curriculum. Digital citizenship and media literacy training for educators should also be led by an independent provider or organization that is not connected with, affiliated with, partnering with, or supported by the tech industry.

Recommendation 4: Involve Youth Voices

We honor the interest of youth themselves in supporting their own and their peers' well-being while online. This is their world, and they should have input in their schools on how devices and platforms are used by them. Peer support and mentorship around digital technology and online resources help build resilience, knowledge, leadership, collaboration, awareness, and safety. To this end, the youth commissioners on our subcommittee devised the following recommendations for MCPS.

First, MCPS should promote offline experiences, including digital unplugging and active physical wellness, for elementary school students, which translates specifically into a robust play agenda:

- *Before and after school play:* provide [universal access](#) to afterschool and summer programs, including before-school play time or structured digital unplug opportunities.

- *Mixed-age play*: adopt a buddy system or special days that encourage older grades and younger grades to play together, fostering leadership and mentorship skills; this idea can be implemented into pre-existing programs like the fifth grade Safety Patrols or Best Buddies.
- *Organizing student-based games and learning*: vote on theme days and activities that reduce phone and online usage for free time. Ideas include pizza parties, popsicles, popcorn, pillow fort nights, board games, chalk art, movie day, etc.

Second, MCPS should foster peer-to-peer and peer-to staff communication for middle school students, to build the kind of caring communities that reduce incidences of cyberbullying and other avoidable online harms:

- *Address online harms and anxieties*: create well-being centers in each school and designate office hours and meeting times between students and staff.
- *Celebrate kindness*: create a virtual kindness wall on Padlet or positive notes that could be stored in classroom jars and opened on a routine basis; this idea can be implemented in first periods and homerooms.
- *Create school-wide pledges and student-centered rules*: invite students to apply their media literacy education to create for themselves an online climate that supports ethical and safe online practices.

Third, MCPS should cultivate safe spaces in the digital environment for high school students:

- *Create safer digital spaces*: encourage the use of private, invite-only platforms - like password-protected websites or group chats with trusted friends and family - where students can share and connect in a more secure environment.
- *Introduce a classroom or school blog or digital portfolio*: select the use of a platform (like a Google Site) that is password-protected and only accessible to students and families. This would allow students to safely showcase their work and engage with their school community online.

Needs may differ from grade to grade and school to school, but ultimately, teens in particular want to know that MCPS will give full support to their digital well-being initiatives, whether they are events, clubs, dialogues, advisory boards, policy making, media mentoring, or peer support.

Recommendation 5: Family Partnerships to Empower Parents for Youth Online Safety

In today's digital age, active parental involvement (including involvement by caregivers and guardians) is essential to safeguard youth from online risks, particularly cybervictimization. Research consistently demonstrates that active mediation, open communication, and digital literacy education by parents significantly reduce these risks. Current research underscores that empowered parents are the most effective defense against online threats. Therefore, support from governments, schools, and law enforcement for parent-focused interventions is critical to creating safer online environments and ensuring the well-being of the next generation.

Consider the benefits of family-school partnerships in the context of cyberbullying. In his presentation to the subcommittee, Dr. Samir Hinduja of the Cyberbullying Research Center shared statistics that highlighted the severity of the issue. A survey of 5,005 youth aged 13-17 revealed that 54.6% reported experiencing cyberbullying in their lifetime, and cyberbullying can cause extreme distress in victims, especially when the bullying is chronic. This study underscored the vital role parents play in mitigating cyberharassment involvement. Dr. Hinduja emphasized the importance of family-school partnerships, advocating for:

- Training for parents and guardians on preventing, recognizing, and intervening in cyberbullying.

- Youth panels to foster dialogue and share perspectives with parents.
- Regular dissemination of materials to enhance parent awareness and education.
- Consistent messaging through high-engagement communication channels, including formal events.

Numerous studies confirm the importance of engaging and educating parents as partners in online safety efforts. A 2021 McAfee study involving families from 10 countries indicated that nearly three-quarters of children believe their parents are best suited to teach them about online safety, compared to 39% who favored teachers. A 2017 study on cyberharassment found that parental mediation significantly reduces adolescents' risk of both experiencing and perpetrating cyberharassment.

David Monahan of Fairplay recommended collaborative efforts between young people and parents to develop community norms and forums on the impact of digital technology. He stressed the importance of adults listening to young people's perspectives on social media in a "coaching manner" to better understand their needs. Parents, with training and assistance from schools, can learn how to do so, given how so many adults struggle just to stay on top of constantly emerging technology popular with today's youth.

While MCPS offers various cybersafety education and awareness activities for parents, active partnerships are crucial to ensuring all children and youth are supported by informed and well-resourced caregivers. Montgomery County government and local municipalities also have opportunities to leverage the positive impact of family involvement. Effective strategies include joint task forces, regional reporting systems, community-accessible resources like police-hosted parent nights, workshops in community centers and libraries, and community-wide engagement events.

Creating opportunities that empower families to keep children safe online requires a collective effort from schools, youth-serving agencies, community-based organizations, and local governments. Initiatives such as anonymous online cybervictimization portals, community briefings on local trends, family workshops, tech safety programs, online conflict resolution training, and annual campaigns like the Montgomery County Cybersecurity Office's "Be CyberSmart" are essential steps in a comprehensive approach to ending cyberbullying, other forms of cybervictimization, and other avoidable online harms.

Finally, schools can support families looking for a collective action solution to the pressures they feel in prematurely by giving a phone to their children just because their peers have them. Delaying smartphones is an uphill battle for a single family, but when families band together - like families with kids in the same social group, class, grade, or school - and agree collectively to delay giving smartphones to their kids, they can reset the class and grade culture around phones and defuse the pressure to hand over a phone before their child is ready for it. Dr. Jonathan Haidt, social psychologist and author of the *New York Times* bestseller *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness*, recommends that families take the pledge to [Wait Until 8th](#) grade (if not later) to give smartphones to their children, and suggests that those who prefer to give their children something should opt for a simpler phone instead. Delays would also make it easier for MCPS middle schools in particular to enforce an away all day PMD policy, as there would be fewer smartphones in backpacks and lockers to tempt students during the school day. For this reason, we recommend that on a yearly basis, MCPS should host a representative from Wait Until 8th to speak with elementary and middle school parents and caregivers about how to initiate and support a healthy culture of delay in their child's class, grade, and school.

Recommendation 6: Involve Other County Agencies in Working Toward Student Online Safety

The federal government recognizes that it takes a village to keep children and teens safe online. For example, the Kids Online Health and Safety Task Force, a joint effort by multiple federal agencies, urges policymakers to “support schools, public libraries, health providers, and other institutions in developing and implementing resources that focus on best practices for protecting children’s online health, safety, and privacy ... supporting the development of digital citizenship and media literacy skills, and mitigating the risk of harm” (Kids Online Health and Safety Task Force, 2024).

For this reason, we recommend that other County agencies that interact with the County’s youth, including the Department of Health and Human Services (especially its health programs in and outside of the County’s schools, such as School Health Services), Montgomery County Public Libraries (MCPL), and Montgomery County Recreation, collaborate with MCPS in furthering the recommendations advanced in this report. To do so, we recommend that MCPS invite representatives of these agencies who work directly with children and teens to join in MCPS educator training sessions over the course of the year and share resources with these agencies, which can in turn share them with youth and family constituencies that interface with them.

MCPL is especially suited for collaboration because the Association for Library Service to Children already cultivates children’s librarians as media mentors to youth patrons and their families (Association for Library Services to Children, n.d.). We recommend that MCPS and MCPL collaborate on synergistic programming in the areas of digital citizenship and media literacy in particular, where MCPL can support and amplify the work of MCPS in this arena.

Recommendation 7: Follow Up and Accountability

The responsibility of promoting digital well-being and online safety requires constant effort as well as swift adaptation in the face of new technologies. We recommend that MCPS, the Department of Health and Human Services, MCPL, and the Department of Recreation continue to dialogue with the County Council, on a regular basis, regarding their progress in meeting this challenge.

CONCLUSION

Montgomery County has made commendable progress in creating school policies, environments, and curricula that enhance student safety and well-being around digital devices and online platforms, both by limiting exposure to devices during the school day and by educating students in digital citizenship and media literacy. Our recommendations are designed to strengthen these policies by fostering a greater culture of connection at school, providing increased and meaningful opportunities for students and their families to become more educated consumers of online content, providing frequent training for educators and County personnel to become askable adults and knowledgeable media mentors to County youth, and more.

We hope that in the near future our state will enact further legislation that will support County efforts so far. These would include:

- Maryland [HB 1316](#) | [SB 897](#) (2025), if they are reintroduced next term, for the creation of a student technology and social media resource guide that enables students and their parents and caregivers to make informed decisions on the safety of social media platforms;
- Digital citizenship and media literacy legislation that sets specific standards around quality, developmentally appropriate curricula for students statewide (for example, Washington state has enacted legislation that has inspired creative and compelling digital citizenship and media literacy

training for its educators and curricula for its students) (Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, n.d.);

- Digital well-being legislation for students to help reduce harm from screen overuse and misuse, through education, resources, and teen training to serve as peer mentors to younger students, which has been enacted in Minnesota (LiveMore ScreenLess, n.d.).

Montgomery County and the State of Maryland together have pursued an ambitious agenda to support the mental and physical well-being of youth when using technology and online resources. We are proud to follow in that legacy of advocacy and education with these recommendations.



Youth Commissioners Priority: Unseen Health Barriers

The Commission on Children and Youth's Youth Commissioners focused on addressing unseen health barriers. Unseen health barriers impact youth well-being and academic success in Montgomery County and often make students unheard and dismissed. These barriers, often overlooked or stigmatized, create significant disparities in educational access and outcomes for many of the county's youth. The subcommittee examined this topic through four critical areas: nursing and psychological services in schools, IEP/504 plans, nutrition, and menstrual health.

To better understand these issues and their impact on Montgomery County middle and high school students, the subcommittee gathered student input and relevant data and statistics to guide critical recommendations that seek to increase youth health equity in Montgomery County.

I. Supporting Students with Disabilities

Montgomery County currently provides disabled students with accommodations through the IEP and 504 Plan. The IEP plan is established after the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, a federal law that can provide services such as counseling, speech, transportation, and physical therapy for students ages 2-21 who fall within 14 disability categories (Parent Educational Advocacy Training Center, n.d.).

The 504 Plan is based on a law that promotes full participation for students with accommodation, adapting changes to the learning environment that help students succeed. After an evaluation process and meeting individual needs for the student, the IEP plan provides specialized instruction for students who require special education, and the 504 plan focuses on providing accommodations and services.

Currently, students experience a lack of awareness and information about the IEP and 504 plan, such as what it stands for and if they have ever heard about these services, which can create barriers for students and parents to learn about how to meet their individual goals and needs. **Therefore, the Youth Commission recommends increased advocacy and engagement between the county and students to learn how every individual can thrive in school.**

1. Strengthen knowledge and recruitment about paraeducators

Paraeducators are crucial for community building and strengthening the relationship between staff and students. For example, paraeducators play an important role in handling health emergencies, prescribing medicine and care, and undergoing rigorous training. They promote inclusive school activities for students with disabilities, such as overseeing recess, after-school programs, and field trips. In classroom settings, paraeducators help facilitate small-group instruction. Currently, Montgomery County has created a priority to increase the hiring of paraeducators. **The Youth Commission recommends that Montgomery County continue building partnerships and recruitment, such as connecting with universities that offer elementary/middle special education degrees and similar teaching degrees to share opportunities of being a paraeducator.**

Through recruitment, Montgomery County can ensure staff to student ratios in special classes and create an environment for academic success that addresses the needs of the students. Additionally, Montgomery County can work to provide funding for community and educational outreach and financial compensation to recruit employees, prioritizing the work of full-time paraeducators and addressing part-time and full-time special education vacancies.

2. Provide educational spaces for parents to learn about the IEP and 504 plan

Parents play an important role in helping their children thrive in an academic setting, and many parents might have a lack of knowledge, resources, and guidance in supporting children with disabilities. They may also face cultural barriers, language barriers, and intergenerational barriers to understand the importance of the IEP and 504 plan. **Therefore, the Youth Commission recommends Montgomery County to create webinars and workshops that can guide parents in understanding the IEP and 504 plan and process.**

3. Expand social and educational opportunities between peers

For the youth, the Youth Commission recommends the promotion of education and social opportunities for students without disabilities: elementary, middle, and high school. For example, clubs like Best Buddies International form lifelong friendships between students with disabilities and students without disabilities. In Best Buddies International, students can participate in events and leadership training. In classroom instruction, the Youth Commission recommends educational lessons on fostering inclusive language and becoming an ally - such as learning specific terminology for the appropriate age group and participating in interactive activities.

4. Provide support for students with disabilities beyond high school

For youth with disabilities, **the Youth Commission recommends that Montgomery County promote integrated employment for students with disabilities and job mentoring.** Building resilience and independence, Montgomery County can continue to account for the diverse and multidimensional population of students with disabilities. Additionally, to support the graduation and career journeys of students with disabilities, Montgomery County can advocate for preparing students beyond high school. For example, Montgomery County can ensure accessible diploma credits, assistive technology, and innovative learning styles for students with disabilities. Providing schools with headsets or sensory features, Montgomery County can create an inclusive learning environment.

II. Menstrual Equity

Montgomery County is a national leader in menstrual equity, with every MCPS high school equipped with at least 5 period product dispensers throughout the women's restrooms (The Wash, 2023). Menstrual products are also available in middle and elementary schools, and these free, accessible products are paired with a robust health education program beginning for MCPS students in the fifth grade (Montgomery County Public Schools, n.d.-a). However, the current measures in place to serve menstruating MCPS students are not without their gaps.

Across the U.S., biological females are experiencing their first period far earlier than they have in past decades. Due to mounting factors such as obesity, stress, and chemical exposure, the average age of first menstruation has lowered from 12 to approximately 11½, with the number of children getting their periods as early as age 9 having nearly doubled (NPR, 2024). As common as earlier menstruation is becoming, the MCPS health curriculum does not broach the topic of menstruation until fifth grade. By this time, statistically, more than a few children will have already begun their periods.

Another priority area in which MCPS period resources are lacking is LGBTQ+ inclusion. While Maryland requires that period products be available in at least 2 women's restrooms in every MCPS school (Maryland General Assembly, 2021), there are no such provisions for men's or gender-neutral bathrooms. Currently, about 1.4% of the U.S. population between 13 and 17 identifies as transgender (not identifying with the sex they were assigned at birth) or gender-diverse (Herman, Flores, & O'Neill, 2022). For transgender or gender-diverse students who menstruate, having to enter the women's bathroom to find period products could lead to gender dysphoria, which is a risk factor for mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and self-harm (Mayo Clinic, n.d.). For these students, who may already be struggling with the complex feelings that menstruation can cause for gender-diverse people, entering the women's bathroom isn't just an inconvenience: it's a devaluation of their identity.

With these issues in mind, the Montgomery County Commission on Children and Youth recommends two measures to enhance period justice and inclusivity across the county:

- 1. Begin MCPS menstrual education in fourth grade.** Expanding the already strong MCPS health curriculum to meet the needs of 9- and 10-year-old children who have begun to menstruate would ensure that no child is left in the dark about their own body or ashamed to seek help and information.
- 2. Distribute period products in gender-neutral and male bathrooms.** Instituting period product dispensers in one or more male and (if applicable) gender-neutral MCPS middle and high school bathrooms would allow LGBTQ+ and gender-diverse youth to access the resources they need without experiencing heightened gender dysphoria or embarrassment.

III. Nursing and Psych Services

Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS), in partnership with the Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), provides a range of physical and mental health services for students. While many critical programs are in place, significant accessibility gaps persist, particularly in staffing, equitable resource distribution, and consistent access to support.

Each MCPS school is equipped with a School Community Health Nurse, a registered nurse who oversees health services, consults with parents and staff, and supervises a School Health Room Technician, who provides daily care. These professionals staff the school's health room, which is present in every building. However, most nurses serve multiple schools and are therefore only onsite part time in many elementary and middle schools (Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services, 2023). This limits the ability to deliver consistent care, conduct health education, or build a relationship with students.

The county also supports a limited number of School-Based Health and Wellness Centers, which offer enhanced services including physical and mental health care, case management, and youth development programming. These are not available at the majority of MCPS schools.

Current School-Based Health Centers (SBHCs) include Gaithersburg ES, Harmony Hills ES, Highland ES, JoAnn Leleck at Broad Acres ES, New Hampshire Estates ES, Rolling Terrace ES, Summit Hall ES, Viers Mill ES, Weller Road ES, and South Lake ES. Current School-Based Wellness Centers (SBWCs) include Gaithersburg HS, John F. Kennedy HS, Northwood HS, Seneca Valley HS, Watkins Mill HS, and Wheaton HS. Schools without wellness centers, especially middle and elementary schools, are largely unsupported in this area. Some high schools have received additional services through the Bridge to Wellness Program, but coverage remains uneven.

MCPS offers a range of mental health services, including (1) School psychologists, who conduct assessments, consult on behavior management, and provide short-term interventions, (2) Certified school counselors, who support academic planning, college/career readiness, and personal growth and (3) Social workers (in some schools), who support students with more complex emotional or environmental needs.

The National Association of School Psychologists recommends a ratio of 1 psychologist per 500 students (National Association of School Psychologists, n.d.), but MCPS operates at roughly 1 per 1,200 students (Montgomery County Education Association & Montgomery County Public Schools, 2023). Many students wait weeks or months for evaluations or access to behavioral support. Services are also not guaranteed at the same level across all schools. Mental health challenges among students are rising both nationally and locally. According to the 2022 Maryland Youth Risk Behavior Survey, in MCPS (1) one in three high school students reported feeling sad or hopeless almost every day for two weeks or more; and (2) fifteen percent of students seriously considering suicide in the previous year (Maryland Department of Health, 2022).

The existing structure cannot adequately address the scope of these serious needs. The key challenges Montgomery County faces include (1) nursing shortages and part-time coverage at many schools, (2) limited wellness center access, especially at elementary and middle schools, (3) psychologist-to-student ratio far exceeds national recommendations, (4) inequitable distribution of services based on geography and income, and (5) lack of integration between existing health/mental health supports.

Recommendations:

1. Expand Staffing for Nurses and Psychologists. Fund full-time nurse and psychologist positions at all MCPS schools b. Prioritize schools with high populations of students receiving Free and Reduced-Price Meals (FARMS).

2. Scale Up Wellness Centers. Expand wellness centers to additional high schools and begin pilot programs at middle schools and extend youth programming (e.g., peer groups, health education, lunch clubs) to all school levels.

3. Broaden Scope of Health Rooms. Enable school health rooms to serve as entry points for mental health referrals and peer support.

4. Integrate and Coordinate Services. Co-locate access to nursing, psychological, and counseling services in wellness spaces and use shared electronic records (when appropriate) to coordinate care and follow-ups.

5. Invest in Retention and Training. Provide competitive pay and workload support to reduce burnout among nurses and psychologists and offer training in trauma-informed care, adolescent mental health, and cross-cultural communication.

IV. Nutrition

Good nutrition is foundational to the health and academic success of Montgomery County students, yet challenges remain: at least 14% of the county's children, about 34,000, are estimated to be food insecure (Montgomery County Office of Food Systems Resilience, 2023). While overall food insecurity in Montgomery County is lower than state and national averages, disparities persist. Addressing these gaps through expanded school meal programs, mandated nutrition education, and inclusive, community-wide initiatives can ensure all children have the opportunity to thrive.

Recommendations:

1. Gradually expand the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) or similar universal free meal programs to all schools. This initiative would remove financial and administrative barriers and reduce stigma for low-income students. As of the 2024-2025 school year, only 52 schools offer free meals under CEP: 42 elementary schools, 7 middle schools, and only 3 high schools (Montgomery County Public Schools, 2024).

2. Mandate a minimum number of nutrition education hours across all grade levels and schools. Bolstering nutrition education would ensure consistent and equitable access to nutrition promotion. 57% of schools in Montgomery County do not hold wellness activities or events that promote nutrition (Maryland State Department of Education, 2024), and among those that do, the frequency and quality vary widely. Establishing a countywide standard would help all students build a strong foundation in healthy eating habits, regardless of school or grade level.

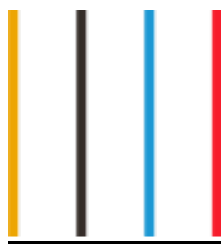
3. Complement school-based efforts by extending nutrition education into community and recreational settings through after-school programs, summer camps, and extracurricular activities in partnership with the Montgomery County Department of Recreation. Currently, the Department of Recreation holds CATCH Kids Club summer camps for ages 8-12 which encourage fitness disciplines and health/nutrition habits; however, these camps are only available at Sally Ride Elementary School, Wood Middle School, and Beverly Farms Elementary School (Montgomery County Department of Recreation, n.d.). To maximize impact, the County should expand these programs to serve all age groups - from early childhood through adolescence - and increase their availability across more geographic regions, especially in underserved communities. By broadening both the age range and the number of accessible locations, Montgomery County can ensure that nutrition education becomes a consistent and inclusive part of youth development, empowering all children and teens to build healthy habits regardless of where they live or go to school.

4. Expand and promote healthy, inclusive meal options across all schools. While some MCPS schools have made progress—introducing new vegan items and partnering with organizations like Real Food for Kids and Silver Diner to develop appealing plant-based meals—many students still report that healthy, vegan, and allergy-friendly options are limited, inconsistently available, or poorly promoted (The Black & White, 2022). To address this, policy should require every school cafeteria to offer at least one clearly labeled, nutritionally balanced, and appealing vegan or allergy-friendly entrée each day. These options should be prominently displayed through visible signage and integrated into school menus. Additionally, menus should be regularly updated based on student feedback to ensure offerings are both satisfying and responsive to diverse dietary needs.

Conclusion

The youth subcommittee of the Montgomery County Commission on Children and Youth acknowledges the significant impact of unseen health barriers on youth healthcare access. The Youth Commission's four sub-priority areas (IEP-504 plan awareness, menstrual health, nursing and psychiatric services in public schools, and nutrition access and education) affect students across the county, but schools and children from underprivileged areas often bear the brunt of these barriers. Therefore, the Youth Commission's recommendations are not only tailored to meet the needs of MCPS students but also informed by the specific challenges that lower-income students face.

The Youth Commissioners, by integrating available county data with valuable input from the Commission's 18th Annual Youth Voice Roundtable, have created a list of recommendations that we hope will serve as a springboard for policy changes that empower Montgomery County's future leaders. By promoting measures to close the current opportunity gaps that thousands of county youth struggle with, the Youth Commission hopes to help make Montgomery County a more equitable environment for every student who calls this county their home.



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