

**Interpretive Plan For Montgomery Public Schools**

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**Prepared for: CPLN 7710 and the City of Montgomery**  
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## Introduction

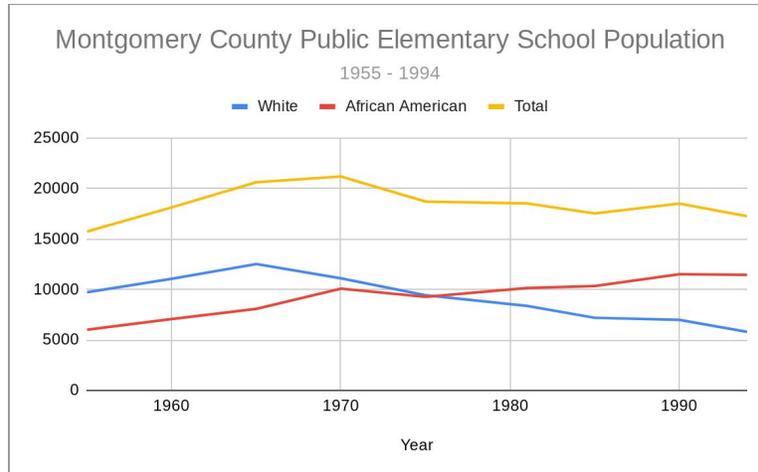
Montgomery public schools are viewed as one of the highest priorities of improvement for the city according to the latest comprehensive plan. Presumably, this has been caused by a disinvestment in the public school system as more students migrate to private schools in the area. “Segregation today... segregation tomorrow... segregation forever”, these infamous words spoken by former Alabama governor, George Wallace unfortunately remain true for many public schools throughout the United States. Although *Brown v. The Board of Education* ruled segregated public schools illegal in 1954 (*Brown v. Brd. of Educ. 1954*), there are still glaring inequalities throughout the public school system.

The purpose of this interpretation strategy will be to foster community engagement, and support for the Montgomery public school system. In order to do this, a similar theoretical framework will be used to that of the Brecon Beacon National Park Authority Interpretive Plan (Meekins, 2007). It asserts the meaning of interpretation planning is to provide understanding, which promotes appreciation, which results in conservation. However, instead of conservation, this plan hopes to promote engagement from the community driven by the interpretation of information on Montgomery’s Public School system. Community connection to support academic growth and knowledge is the primary root strategy for the success of this plan. Particular attention is given to the goals and strategies defined by the Montgomery Public School 2024 Strategic Plan. It is the belief of this project that aligning the goals and strategies outlined in this project with pre existing strategies will result in the greatest likelihood of implementation.

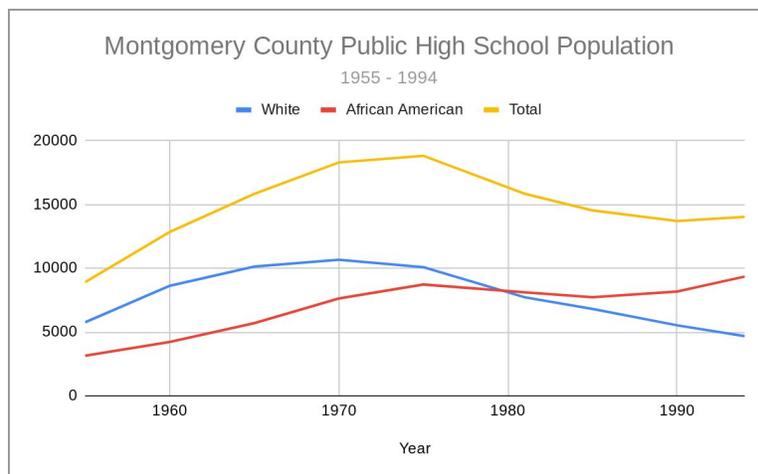
## Current Conditions

### *Public School Attendance Trends*

Historically, attendance of public schools has not grown with the population of Montgomery. From 1955 to 1994 attendance in public schools has shifted from majority white to majority African American students. **Figure 1** and **Figure 2** show how enrollment has shifted overtime. There are multiple reasons this could be happening, however, the most troubling is that the integration of Montgomery public schools in the 1960s seems to have inspired a movement of white students out of the public system and into private schools. This creates a two fold problem, not only is diversity and true integration snuffed out, but upper and middle class families are leaving the school system, and with them go the financial resources to continue investment in the schools.



**Figure 1.** Montgomery County elementary school enrollment trends 1955 - 1994



**Figure 2.** Montgomery County high school enrollment trends 1955 - 1994

Since 1995 the public schools system seems to be following a continued and possibly more dramatic shift in the same direction. The following is an excerpt from Montgomery’s Envision 2040 plan:

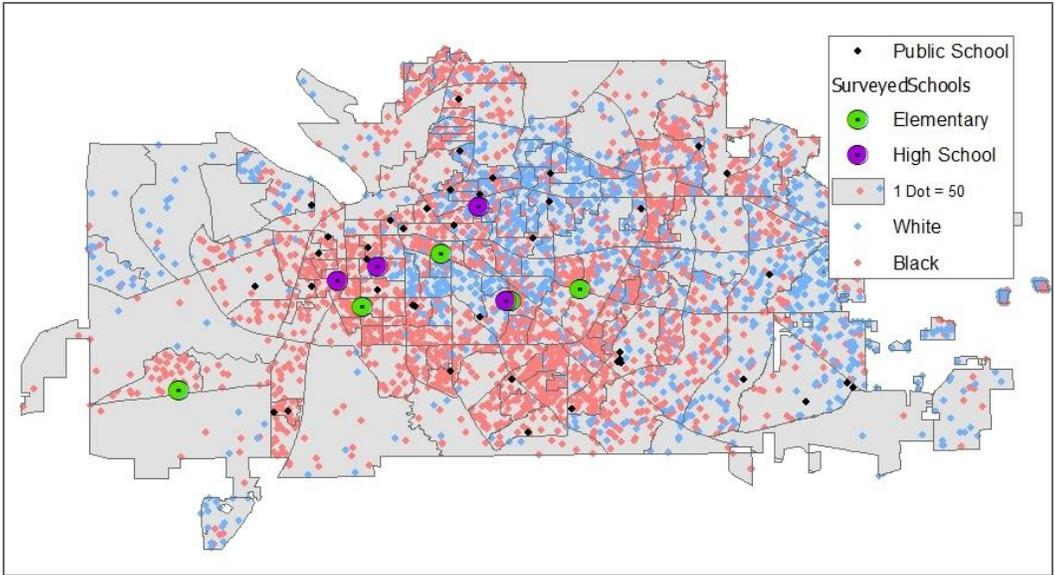
“Over this period the racial makeup of the student body has changed significantly, no longer aligning with the city’s overall racial composition. Rather, there is a significantly higher share of Black or African American students, 78 percent compared to 59 percent in the city overall; and Hispanic or Latinx students, seven percent compared to four percent in the city. White enrollment has declined significantly from 1995. White students made up just over ten percent of the student body in 2016 compared to 31 percent in 1995.” (City of Montgomery, 2020)

This statement shows that minorities are affected more than white children by the public school system. White children are leaving the public school system while Black and Latinx students

stay. This creates an inaccurate picture of what the community actually looks like demographically, essentially finding another way to establish segregation patterns. If it is a financial issue, this only amplifies the issue, because if wealthier families send their children to private schools, then there is no incentive for them to pay more in taxes to the public school system. A cycle of underfunding creates a wider gap in the quality of schools and more families that can afford it pull out and go to private schools. I have not looked at the demographics yet, but typically minorities are going to be more directly affected by cycles targeting lower income families. By addressing the needs of the public school system, the needs of low income and minority students will be brought to light. Hopefully, this will encourage action from the community to invest deeper support of the public education system.

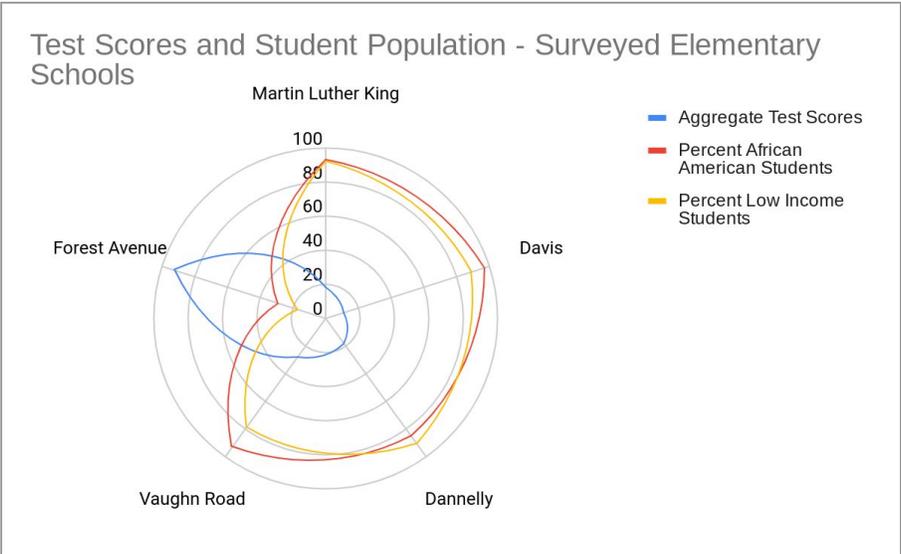
### *Survey of Montgomery's Public Schools*

To provide a further context of Montgomery's schools specifically, a survey was done for High Schools and Elementary Schools within the city limits. High Schools that were chosen for the survey were the four schools with the highest student enrollment. Additionally, none of these schools are magnet high schools. Elementary schools chosen were also with Montgomery city limits and had total student enrollments of at least 400 students. Four of the elementary schools were non-magnet schools with high African-American Populations and one was a magnet elementary that had a higher diversity rating in order to provide some contrast between the haves and the have-nots. All schools chosen represent a relatively high school population in order to grab as high a percentage of total school system population with as few schools as possible. Some schools were chosen because they actively represented an issue with the school system such as low test scores or inappropriate names considering the student body represented. **Figure 3** provides a map of the schools represented within the survey. The map also shows a population density map of both white and African American residents in Montgomery. It is clear that some segregation exists not only in the school system, but throughout the city, many areas showing almost all white or African American residents.

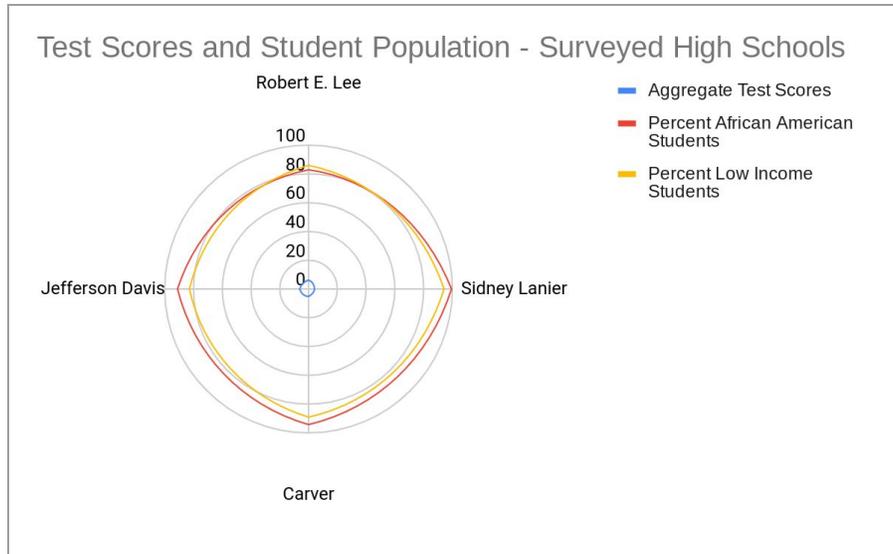


**Figure 3.** Map of schools surveyed for this project with city racial distribution

**Figure 4** and **Figure 5** show the results of the school survey. African American enrollment percentage and percentage of low income students are graphed alongside aggregate test scores for each school. These aggregate scores are an average of reading, math, and science scores by national percentile. A table of all scores and more detailed school information is provided in the Appendix.



**Figure 4.** Elementary school demographic and test score survey results



**Figure 5.** High school demographic and test score survey results

The graphs show that the schools with high African American populations and high percent low income students have severely low test scores. For high schools, the aggregate test scores were around the 6th percentile nationally. This is significant because it affects a large portion of the total MPS enrollment. Test scores by no means tell the whole story, but they do show that the school system is not reaching a very high standard when it comes to the skills students will need to get into college and be career ready. It is important to communicate this information clearly to the public so the seriousness of the situation can be taken into account.

## Themes and Goals

### *Themes*

As the project moves forward, it is helpful to have sites set on specific ideas that drive the school system forward. These themes will come up throughout the remainder of the project and provide a mantra for the public school system and how it will interact with the city of Montgomery.

**KNOWLEDGE** - the school imparts valuable information to the community it educates and helps develop new skills

**GROWTH** - the school system is a place where children grow into engaged and capable adults. This goes beyond knowledge, because it also considers the emotional and behavioral aspects of living and working with other people.

COMMUNITY - the school is a pillar of the community it brings children and families together and should inspire a sense of togetherness and common goals within its community

### *Goals*

To improve the public school systems and how it interacts and communicates itself to Montgomery specific goals have been identified. These goals revolve around addressing the themes discussed in the previous section. As stated in the introduction, the desire of these goals is that they would align with pre-existing goals defined by the MPS 2024 Strategic Plan. Each section will provide insight into how the specific strategy fits into the framework of the existing plan.

1. Provide the framework for a GIS web-based map tool that functions as a communication tool with the community
2. Provide a plan for increased community connection to schools
3. Suggest Montgomery inspired lessons to be integrated into current curriculum
4. Suggest a name change for schools whose namesake is a poor representation of the student body

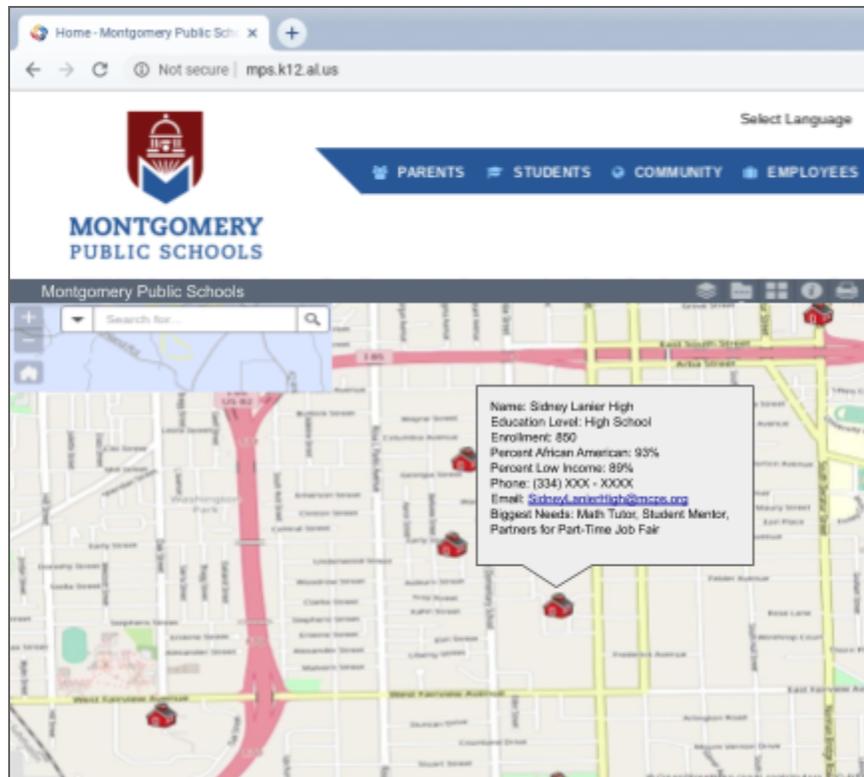
### **Design Scheme**

The design scheme will be broken down into three separate categories representing the largest pieces of the project. These three are the online interactive tool, the community garden model, and the curriculum and name change suggestions. The online tool scheme will seek to communicate clearly the current situation of the school system regarding demographics, test scores, and funding. The community garden model will seek to provide a standardized model for each school to implement a garden on site that can be shared with the community and used as a tool to encourage deeper community interactions. Lastly, the curriculum and name change suggestions will provide examples of curriculum ideas that could be implemented into schools teaching structures specifically about the city of Montgomery and the importance of its history. This section will also identify schools where the namesake is inappropriate and suggest directions schools could take to go about changing their names.

### *Online Map Tool*

The online map tool seeks to provide a communication outlet for schools and present current demographic information in order for the public to understand current issues better. The highest

priority of issues are: 1. Public school demographics do not match neighborhood and city demographics, creating a situation of both economic and racial segregation; 2. Public schools are failing to meet standards associated with sufficient academic progress; 3. Lack of funding (City of Montgomery, 2020). It is the hope of this project that making this information more accessible to the public will lead to a greater desire to invest in the public school system. Additionally the tool will provide an outlet for the school to post specific needs so that the community could donate specific items or volunteer time.



**Figure 6.** Design suggestion of online map tool

Along with school demographics, needs, and contact information other layers could be added to the map in order to display each school's context within its neighborhood. One of the issues discussed in the Envision 2040 plan is the demographics of the school system not matching the demographics of Montgomery. Layers such as race and poverty distribution could be used to show discrepancies between school enrollment and neighborhoods.

This tool would address Goal V in the MPS 2024 Strategic Plan by finding new and additional ways to communicate externally to school system stakeholders. (MPS Board of Education, 2019). In this case, the stakeholder is the community as a whole. Displaying information to increase the public knowledge about each school's current condition can help inspire support and action to meet the communicated needs.

### *Community Engagement Action Team*

One of the most integral pieces of this project is the formation of a Community Engagement Action Team. This group would be responsible for creating connections between the schools and their communities. It could be made up of local business leaders, politicians, institutional leaders, and school faculty. The idea is based off of the Clark County, Nevada School District's community partnership program (CCSD, 2020). This team would assist in connecting resources to schools specific needs, supporting the Montgomery-Based Curriculum project defined in the next section, and providing mentorships and support for MPS students. The MPS Board of Education should decide on the appropriate number of Action Team members and distribution of members across school zones. It is suggested that each school would have a representative with other supporting members within their zone.

This addresses Goal II, Goal III, and Goal IV in the MPS 2024 Strategic Plan by education professionals with the resources they need to do their job well, providing students with a support system that maximizes their educational experience, and engaging parents and community members (MPS Board of Education, 2019). The idea is that the Action Team could function in a similar way that public-private partnerships work in downtown redevelopment areas. Private businesses invest in local schools and the schools benefit by gaining additional resources both manpower and financial. The businesses then benefit by having a better prepared workforce, operating in areas with better school systems, and being able to advertise the good they are doing for their community to encourage more business. Hopefully, this creates a self-feeding cycle that results in deeper community throughout the city of Montgomery by strengthening the foundation.

### *Montgomery - Based Curriculum*

The rich history of the city of Montgomery should be used to its advantage. There are many stories that have been left untold, but could hold a great significance to the residents of the city. To take advantage of this history, it is suggested that Montgomery Based Curriculums be offered to students in Montgomery Public Schools. These courses would be used to inspire civic pride in students and hopefully provide a deeper appreciation for their city and the people who shaped it. The Community Engagement Team could identify institutions and business leaders throughout the city who would be willing to financially sponsor or provide resources for a course. Places such as local restaurants, museums, and religious institutions could all be viable candidates for program sponsorships.

These classes would address multiple goals outlined by the MPS strategic plan: Goal I, helping

students become college and career ready and Goal III, maximizing academic opportunities and providing students with unique support systems (Montgomery Public Schools, 2019). These courses would be designed to allow students to dive deeper into specific interests and help them discover career paths potentially unrealized. Additionally, it would prepare them for both college and career by providing real-world examples of interdisciplinary action. By analyzing a historic event or geographic location from multiple perspectives both social and economic.

#### Course Requirements:

- Combines two or more subject standards from at least two different subjects (Ex. Meet at least one Alabama High School Math Standard and One Social Studies Standard)
- Geographically connected to city of Montgomery or surrounding area
- At least two site visits are a part of the course to promote a hands on learning experience.
- One team oriented project is included in the curriculum.

#### *Example Course:*

“Cooking with Georgia Gilmore: Small Business and Funding the Civil Rights Movement”

This course could be sponsored by a partnership between a local restaurant business and the Rosa Parks Museum. It would follow the Montgomery Bus Boycott, specifically some of the means of funding transportation for African Americans across the city during the boycott and how this allowed people to continue to go to work and obtain necessary goods and services. Georgia Gilmore would be the focus figure. Coursework could include social studies standards, and math standards and also focus on traditional southern cooking techniques. Site visits could include a guided tour of the Rosa Parks Museum, a visit and cooking experience in a local restaurant kitchen, and a tour of important civil rights leaders’ homes to show where these actions were taking place. The project could include teams cooking meals and presenting the connections they discovered as a class showcase.

This work would not be designed to replace a school class, but if all graduation requirements are met/on track to be met, might be offered during school hours. They may also be offered outside of school hours in evenings or afternoons if scheduling during school hours is problematic.

Initial participation may be through teacher nominations or voluntary sign-ups. If over enrollment becomes an issue, admission to a course could be applied for or only through teacher nomination. This goal should start with only a couple courses and grow as success and student participation increases.

#### *School Name Changes*

The last suggestion of this project is that schools would consider changing their names when that name is an inappropriate representation of the student body. Specifically, Robert E. Lee High School and Jefferson Davis High School. Both of these schools have a student enrollment of over 80% African American and are named after Confederate leaders during the Civil War. While the names carry historic significance, they result in symbols of oppression to the students they have come to represent. The schools were opened in 1955 (Montgomery Advisor, 1955) and 1968 (Advisor-Journal, 1968), a time when integration of schools was a hot topic, so conclusions may be drawn that there was deliberate racial targeting in the naming process.

School names are a deeply sensitive subject to communities and alumni alike. This should be viewed as an opportunity to turn a new page in the history book and look forward at the hope and growth that is to come in the Montgomery Public School system. This would be an optional measure taken at the school's discretion. It could be a positive way to give the school and community a sense of ownership and pride by letting current students vote on a new name, ideally of someone who has made a significant impact on shaping the city of Montgomery in an equitable and positive way.

This addresses Goal IV of the MPS strategic plan by enhancing the image of Montgomery schools to its own student body, community, as well as the state and national level (MPS Board of Education, 2019). A name change could inspire a significant amount of positive press about the school system. It could also create a positive image for the state as a whole, since by association with the state's capital makes Montgomery a natural leader in Alabama's reputation.

## **Project Timeline and Implementation**

### *Online Map Tool*

The map tool could be created by the City's GIS team. With help from publically available data and county data, all data should be available. A portal could then be set up where school administrators could enter specific needs for their data point on the map that could be refreshed on a monthly or as-needed basis. Data collection and website design considered, this item could be implemented in 18 months. Schools and the city could then share the responsibility of advertising and promoting the webpage by providing links on their websites and communicating its existence to the public.

### *Community Engagement Action Team*

Forming the Community Engagement Action Team is an integral piece to the organization and

connection desired from this project. This should be done in the first two years. During this time, local business leaders, politicians, institutional leaders could be identified and the team would start to take shape. Depending on the response for involvement a specific number of people from each school's zone should be determined and a representative of each school or school zone should be appointed.

Once the team is formed, they should begin to plan funding needs for programs and identify resource needs for individual schools. During this time, the team would establish funding sources through local businesses and sponsors. Once needs are identified the team could begin to connect schools to individuals and institutions that would be able to fill those needs. The Clark County School District's model can be followed for ideas of what type of partnerships to offer.

### *Montgomery-Based Courses*

Two courses could be designed and organized to be ready by Summer 2022. This would provide two years for planning the courses and securing volunteers and funding for the course work. As the Action Team comes together, this could be one of their first projects. Starting the first courses during the summer when students have fewer school-related commitments may help increase initial participation in the program. As involvement and success increases, more courses could be planned. A goal of two additional classes per year should be set and a goal to offer classes while school is in session by 2024. This could be adjusted based on initial involvement and momentum of the program.

### *School Name Changes*

As the school board meets, this conversation should be started as soon as possible. Initial conversations would provide an understanding of the level of support this strategy has. If it seems like a good idea, then the Community Engagement Action Team could be a resource in securing funding for facility and uniform changes and facilitating community involvement for the project.

## **Conclusions**

Schools are vital to the foundation of Montgomery. Many of the goals and strategies defined by the 2040 plan revolve around building a solid foundation and investing in the community as a whole. There are few areas that meet those ideals as pointedly as the public school system. A quality school system provides the city with a skilled workforce and higher property values. It is a foundation for human growth, economic prosperity, and creating great places. By using schools to engage and inspire communities Montgomery would show a commitment to its residents and

social equity. As a representation of the State of Alabama, it should strive to have the best public access to education possible. Currently, the school system does not reflect those values, and is in dire need of help. However, with investment and commitment to moving forward, it can get there. As it does, Montgomery will become the solid community with a “wealth of opportunity” it envisions itself to be.

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## Appendix

School Survey Results Table

Name	Education Level	Current Enrollment	Reading Test Scores (Percentile)	Math Test Scores (Percentile)	Science Test Scores (Percentile)	Percent African American Students	Percent Low Income Students
Robert E. Lee High School	High School	1528	13	2	5	83%	86%
Sidney Lanier High School	High School	1008	9	1	3	99%	94%
Carver Senior High School	High School	1098	8	2	6	94%	89%
Jefferson Davis High School	High School	1760	12	1	5	91%	83%
Martin Luther King Elementary School	Elementary	347	12	22	20	93%	92%
Davis Elementary School	Elementary	427	11	15	6	97%	89%
Dannelly Elementary School	Elementary	595	15	25	15	85%	90%
Vaughn Road Elementary School	Elementary	515	26	27	32	93%	79%
Forest Avenue Elementary School	Elementary	707	89	93	95	29%	17%