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State Superintendent of Schools

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**TO:** Members of the State Board of Education  
**FROM:** Lillian M. Lowery, Ed.D. *Lillian M. Lowery*  
**DATE:** February 25, 2014  
**SUBJECT:** 2013-2014 National Title I Distinguished Schools Program

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**PURPOSE:**

To recognize New Song Academy in Baltimore City and Robert R. Gray Elementary in Prince George's County as the 2013-2014 National Title I Distinguished Schools for Maryland.

**BACKGROUND:**

Title I, Part A is the largest federally funded education program which provides schools and school districts with high concentrations of students who are economically disadvantaged with funding to allow them to obtain supplemental resources to enhance their educational programs. At its core, Title I, Part A should be used to enhance reading, mathematics, and science programs for students who are not performing to state standards. Distinguished Title I schools go beyond what is mandated in the statute. Each year the National Association of State Title I Directors (NASTID) recognizes Title I Distinguished Schools from all fifty states and Puerto Rico, who have been selected for their outstanding results in one of two categories: (1) exceptional student performance for two or more consecutive years, or (2) closing the achievement gap between student groups. Each state may nominate up to two of its Title I schools that have risen above obstacles of poverty to improve learning for its most vulnerable children. Two Maryland schools have been identified as the 2013-2014 Title I Distinguished Schools.

**SUMMARY:**

Three hundred eighty-five Title I schools participated in the 2012-2013 Maryland School Assessment (MSA). After comparing MSA data for the 2011-2012 and 2012-2013 school years, New Song Academy in Baltimore City scored highest in Category 1—exceptional student performance for two or more consecutive years, and Robert R. Gray Elementary School in Prince George's County scored highest in Category 2—closing the achievement gap between student groups. Profiles for these two schools are included as Attachment 1. New Song Academy and Robert R. Gray Elementary School received national recognition as National Title I Distinguished Schools at the Title I Conference in San Diego, California on February 2, 2014.

**ACTION:**

For information only and recognition by the State Board of Education.

BJS:JN:sw

Attachment

New Song Academy  
1530 Presstman Street  
Baltimore, Maryland 21217

Nancy E. Neilson, Principal  
410-728-2091

**New Song Academy-** We are a Title I school located in the Sandtown/Winchester community in West Baltimore City, Maryland. This Baltimore City public school services 149 students in Pre-Kindergarten through eighth grade, and provides a private pre-school program for three-year-olds. All of our students live in the community, and New Song Academy is a school of choice. The student population is 98% African American, and 97% of our students receive free meals. New Song Academy is committed to developing moral character and raising the leadership potential of each student while providing them with a quality education.

**Curriculum and Instruction (Teaching and Learning)-**The school provides a rigorous academic program that is aligned to the College and Career Ready Standards. We also use an Expeditionary Learning model that provides students with opportunities to explore topics as a class, in small groups, and individually, and to share their work with parents and members of the school community. The school was founded on the principle of individual attention to all students, and continues to keep classes at a maximum of fifteen students in order to maintain that focus. We utilize Readers and Writers Workshops and a STEM model in mathematics and science. The continuum of instruction begins with our three-year-old program, and continues through eighth grade and beyond. Once students graduate from New Song's eighth grade, they return as a part of our College and Career Program, where they gain skills to equip them with the knowledge and skills to think critically and become proactive leaders, receive free tutoring, academic and professional workshops, guest speakers, and college tours.

**Student Achievement-**The achievement of every child at New Song Academy is the most important aspect of the program. Students are assessed using state and national standardized tests, teacher-made tests, student portfolios, and the Measure of Academic Progress, a computer-based assessment in Reading, Mathematics and Language Usage in grades kindergarten-eight. This test is given to measure the progress of each student at the beginning, middle, and end of the year. Reading levels are continually assessed using Fountas and Pinnell materials. Students and teachers engage in frequent conferences to discuss achievement and intervention that might be needed. All formal and informal data is analyzed and used to make instructional decisions at the classroom and school-wide levels.

**School Climate-**New Song Academy features dedicated teachers, strong parental involvement, and small class sizes in a culture of empathy and caring. The school has very little mobility, and many of our students remain in the school from the age of three until they leave eighth grade. Students are on a clip chart system in the elementary grades, and a system of "names and checks" in the departmentalized middle school. All students strive for "Top of the Chart" or "Positive 2s" and positive behavior is rewarded in a number of ways. Each student has a Daily Planner and each teacher communicates daily with each parent through this mechanism. The school is on an intersession schedule, starting right after Labor Day and ending in mid-to-late July. There are six sessions, made up of six to seven weeks, each session followed by a break of one, two or three weeks. The school provides the requisite 180 days for students and 190 days for teachers, but the calendar is spread out differently than most schools. This allows for less "burn-out" and less lost instructional time between sessions.

**Professional Development-**New Song Academy maintains a customized school based and designed schedule of professional development that is aligned to the district goals and standards for professional development. Most of the professional development at New Song is developed and delivered by teachers and the administrator and covers mathematics, literacy, implementation of the Common Core State Standards, data analysis, and topics specific to the instructional program.

**Community Partnerships**-The school enjoys meaningful partnerships at many levels and for a variety of purposes. A partnership with the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, called OrchKids, provides musicianship and performance classes during the school day and in an after school program with several other schools. A partnership with Morgan State University has allowed New Song to be a Professional Development School, an environment that houses teacher candidates as they complete their internship experiences. A long-standing relationship with the Art and Art Education departments at Towson University allows college students the opportunity to complete their internships while providing a rich arts experience for all of our students at the school and on campus. A partnership with the Maryland Employees Credit Union (MECU) provides monetary support, field trips and chaperones for all students, volunteers at special school activities, and an annual book giveaway. The Middle Grades Partnership, a collaborative project between New Song and a local private school, provides after school tutoring, Family Math Nights, professional development for staff, and experience sharing between the two schools. Smile Maryland Oral Impact Project provides twice yearly dental care for our students at the school site. New Song Community Learning Center, our umbrella organization, provides the pre-school, a daily multi-faceted after school program, and the College and Career Program.

**Greatest Contributing Factor**-The outstanding teaching staff and the involvement of parents are critical to the success of our school. Because of its relentless focus on student achievement and the climate, New Song Academy is a community-focused school and can be described as a place where families and students desire to be educated. Strong teacher and parent support to include an annual attendance rate that ranges from 97.2% to 98.4%, zero in house and out-of-school suspensions, a lengthy waitlist for enrollment, and students who clamor for a spot on the Honor Roll attest to the achievement at New Song Academy.



**Robert R. Gray Elementary School**  
4949 Addlson Road  
Capitol Heights, MD 20743

**Cheryl Franklin, Principal**  
301-636-8400

**Robert R. Gray Elementary School** is a School-wide Title I school, located in the Chapel Oaks Community of Prince Georges County, Maryland adjacent to the most eastern boundary of Washington, DC. The school services a population of 428 students ranging from Head Start through grade 6. The attendance area consists of residential subdivisions, apartments, and subsidized housing. Working collaboratively with community and law enforcement partners, stakeholders seek to actively support families struggling with life sustaining needs. 85% of the student population qualify for free and reduced meals. Our overall student body consists of 83% African-American, 46% Asian, 16% Hispanic, and .23% Pacific Islander. Approximately 11% of our population qualifies for special education services, 5% are identified as Talented and Gifted, and 10% receive ELL services.

**School Wide Norms** maintain high academic expectations across all grade levels and communicate a standard of optimal achievement for each student. Consistent vocabulary is utilized throughout the school to communicate high expectations. Critical thinking strategies are modeled by teachers and reinforced with school wide artifacts supporting instructional skills. Collaborative planning offers teachers opportunities to discuss classroom successes and challenges addressing instructional strategies, intervention techniques and enrichment activities to determine how we will move forward instructionally.

**Precision in Ongoing Data Collection, Analysis and Interpretation** is at the core of every decision we make in servicing our students. Instructional teams meet bi-weekly to analyze student work through our Collaborative Analysis of Student Learning protocol. Through this, teams are able to use student work samples to determine how students are progressing with skills, focus on specific strengths and/or weaknesses based upon the samples, and determine how this translates into moving forward instructionally. Additionally, we use student diagnostic data to determine instructional safety nets, both prior to and during the school day, that will be used to provide intervention and/or enrichment to move students to higher levels of performance. Further, we use data to implement a school-wide intervention and enrichment block where all students are engaged in focused instruction to address areas of weakness or to strengthen their understanding of key skills and concepts. Finally, our data is used to determine differentiated professional development opportunities to support our instructional program.

**Responsibility for Student Character Development**, as well as the delivery of quality instruction, is owned by all school stakeholders and supported through our school's participation in the Positive Behavior and Support System (PBIS). This framework is the foundation upon which a consistent progressive discipline practice has been established, whereby adults and students feel respected and valued as a member of the school community. It is a team based process including all stakeholders for systemic problem solving, planning, and evaluation. This effort is supported by an established incentive program, and a Peer Mediator program to assist and support students with working through the process of peacefully solving conflicts.

**Sustained Research-Based Professional Development** is utilized to strengthen our community of continuing adult learners. First, we have dedicated time to becoming exemplary around data analysis by building proficiency around the use of multiple sources of evidence to gauge student progress. Second, we have strengthened our understanding of differentiated instruction and how to modify instruction to meet the needs of diverse learners through focused reflection and our Peer Observation Model. Third, we have hosted sessions with neighboring schools to understand, support, and increase the achievement of at-risk learners. Fourth, we have expanded our knowledge of technology integration and how it can be used to differentiate and supplement instruction and be used as a tool to strengthen parental communication. Fifth, we have implemented our learning of STEM instruction and how to integrate its use across all content areas. Finally, professional development has been used to develop rich math tasks using a variety of instructional strategies to support kinesthetic learning as well as, the use of manipulatives to strengthen skill retention. Overall, our efforts are designed to support the growth of College and Career Ready Learners.

**Parent/Community Involvement Initiatives** are the foundation of our success. Many parent information sessions are held during the day and evening to accommodate various work schedules. Grade Levels and Departments create parent websites to provide academic information and post Instructional videos to orient parents on current skills. Parent Focus Walks are held to encourage parents to visit classrooms to analyze various elements of instruction. Climate surveys are distributed to collect and analyze qualitative data to provide feedback and next steps to improve the academic program. The Parent Policy and Home School Compact are developed with parental participation and distributed yearly. Parents serve as volunteers during school events and assist with securing community and business partnerships. A Parent Resource Center is housed at the school to provide community supports and information about various parent/student programs. A Parental Involvement Committee meets monthly along with the PTA to receive school-wide information and to determine how they can best support the school program. Newsletters, school website, call outs, etc. continue to keep parents informed regarding events at the school.

**Greatest Contributing Factors** include the instructional partnership between our community, administration, and faculty which yields a collective sense of commitment, collaboration, and high academic expectations for every child. Both administration and teachers embrace a safe, nurturing creative environment where students and staff feel enthusiastic about learning and sharing ideas. Our school community embraces each child with a belief which inspired our school motto: *"We Soar to Achieve Academic Excellence!"*