

"Federation Corner" column
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If every school system lies about it, why shouldn't MCPS?

by Wayne Goldstein

The trade magazine Education Week recently published what it claims are accurate graduation rates for the 2002-03 school year, the most recently analyzed figures. These rates are endorsed by national education leaders and show that the rates appear to be lower in most states. In this region, the discrepancy between the claimed and adjusted rates vary widely. For example, Falls Church claims a 95% graduation rate, and the magazine estimates a 94% rate - a mere 1% difference - whereas Prince George's County claims 89.5% but the magazine estimates 67.3%, a 22.2% discrepancy. Montgomery County's rate shows a discrepancy of 11% between its official 92.5% rate and the estimated 81.5%. Of the 15 school systems in the region, nine show a lower discrepancy than MCPS and five show a higher one.

Are most of these school systems deliberately manipulating and lying about their graduation rates, or do they make mistakes in their calculations? The same concerns about such discrepancies can include the attendance rates and the dropout rates. According to the "2006 Maryland Report Card", published by the state, Montgomery County's 2003 attendance rate was 92% and its dropout rate was 2%. When I look at figures like that, my first question is: what happened to the 6% of students that represent the difference between the "non-dropout rate" of 98% and the attendance rate of 92%?

If Education Week estimates that only 81.5% graduated from MCPS, then what happened to the 16.5% of students that equal the difference between the non-dropout rate and the estimated graduation rate? That's one-sixth of all high school students. For 2006, MCPS claims a 94.8% attendance rate, a 2% dropout rate and a 91.5% graduation rate. Do we believe that in that three-year period, attendance improved, the dropout rate remained steady, while the graduation rate declined?

According to a news account, regional school systems "estimate the graduation rate based on the number of students known to have dropped out. The problem is, few public high schools track every student who drops out. 'In some states,' [U.S. Department of Education Secretary Margaret] Spellings said, 'a student is counted as a dropout only if he registers as a dropout. That's unlikely.' ... Montgomery schools reported a 93 percent graduation rate for that year, but the database puts it at 82 percent. In that county, the database shows, the largest group of dropouts exits the system during 12th grade."

I have regularly documented some of the many ways that Superintendent Weast manipulates various numbers to make MCPS look better than it really is. With these three new ways of manipulating the facts, he is joined by many of his colleagues in the region and across the nation. Should we judge him harshly for doing what everyone else is doing? We should, because MCPS so relentlessly hypes itself as one of the best school systems in the country and many parents move to Montgomery County and to specific neighborhoods in the county, likely paying an enormous premium for housing, to get what they believe will be the best possible public education.

"All 50 governors have embraced the new method -- a slight variation on the formula employed by Education Week -- for calculating graduation rates. Virginia schools will use the new formula by 2008, the District by 2010 and Maryland by 2011. Parents will probably see a precipitous drop in graduation rates reported by many high schools. 'I think you have to be honest with the people,' said Mike Easley (D), governor of North Carolina, who participated in a panel discussion yesterday with two other governors."

"Spellings also announced that graduation rates will be incorporated into the federal No Child Left Behind law by 2012 as a measure of adequate yearly progress for every high school, along with test scores and other

factors. Schools will have to meet federal targets for black and Hispanic students and other statistical subgroups, as well, a requirement likely to stir considerable anxiety in low-performing school systems."

For many in Montgomery County, a good secondary school education is a prelude to getting into a good college to get the education that will determine one's success and status in life. In 2005, 24% of MCPS graduating seniors went straight to Montgomery College, a figure that has held steady for a number of years. For some MCPS graduates, it is all they can afford or be admitted to; for others it is a logical step to take before later transferring to a four-year school. Montgomery College, like all good community colleges, also attracts many well-educated professionals taking advantage of its programs for further advancement or for a new career. However, disproportionate numbers of MCPS graduates who attend Montgomery College are less well prepared for college work. A 1996 study showed that of these graduates entering in 1992 and 1993, approximately 30% needed remedial English, 50% needed remedial math, and 22% needed remedial reading. Students pay for these classes, must pass them, but receive no college credit for doing so. It is unlikely that these numbers have improved in the last 15 years. In fact, students only pay about a third of the cost to attend Montgomery College, with the rest paid by taxpayers through county and state government subsidies. In paying for those remedial courses, taxpayers are paying twice, having already paid for these students' classes in high school.

I've heard that the unofficial dropout rate for MCPS graduates at Montgomery College is about 33%, and this massive dropping out usually occurs in the second semester of the first year. While some or all of these dropouts may eventually resume their education, the same is true of high school dropouts who may eventually get their GED and even go further. It matters when students drop out, and if 33% of MCPS graduates are dropping out of our community college, then perhaps we should increase the MCPS dropout rate or lower the graduation rate based on what happens to unprepared students in -- what becomes for them -- Grades 13 and 14.

Thus, since 1/3rd of the 24% of MCPS graduates at Montgomery College equals 8%, this could be subtracted from MCPS' newly adjusted graduation rate of 81.5%, lowering it further to 73.5%. This might be a truer reflection of what percentage of those students who attend MCPS are prepared for higher education. It won't surprise me to see such dramatic changes downward when the High School Assessment (HSA) tests become a graduation requirement for the MCPS Class of 2009, assuming the state doesn't eliminate them at the last minute because the results could make Maryland look so bad at educating its children.

Of course, there are problems with all such tests, and with the desperate tactic of making education a perpetual teaching to the test, but students aren't learning, and Weast, MCPS and the BOE are primarily focused on how to manipulate, equivocate, distract, and otherwise engage in every way that human beings use denial to avoid having to confront a serious problem. This avoidance takes the approach peculiar to MCPS of relentless, obsessive bragging at every possible opportunity for the slightest of reasons. Since the BOE has abrogated its oversight role, the fault is Weast's alone, although we probably won't know how bad it really is until he leaves or is forced out, assuming our next superintendent will realize that only when MCPS confronts the truth of its failings will it then be able to work as effectively as it can to fix them.

Many problems may be impossible to fix, as they are around the country, but we can't determine that until we admit to ourselves what is wrong. Alcoholics can't begin to stop drinking until they admit they are alcoholics; an MCPS addicted to prevarication and manipulation of the facts can't begin to improve until it admits it lies to itself and others.