

"Federation Corner" column
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Weast's MCPS PR machine is as relentless as it is deceptive

by Wayne Goldstein

Even when I've decided that Weast and his MCPS have had their share of well-deserved criticism, it seems that he all but begs me to criticize him some more, by virtue of the relentless, deceptive, never-ending promotion of his mediocre school system. He and his legions of well-paid minions never make any effort to defend themselves from my criticism, although they regularly include me in their "Dear Community Leader" letters, asking me for comments about one policy or another, policies they have been methodically changing by writing out any meaningful participation by parents and other community members.

From time to time, Weast sends out a copy of a report written by yet another outside group that has been fooled by the relentless promotion of himself and his MCPS. One such report, published in 2006, was sent to me last week, titled "Where A Diverse Community Comes Together To Make Schools Better For All." As I looked it over with some disbelief, I was also channel surfing on cable when I hit one of MCPS' two channels, just as this appeared on the screen: "MCPS Core Values - An ethical school system requires fair treatment, honesty, openness, integrity, and respect. A high-quality school system strives to be responsive and accountable to the customer."

While I have no reason to doubt the sincerity of the author of the report and the effectiveness of the organization publishing it, I was most taken aback by this statement on page 1: "On the couch in the office of Dr. Jerry Weast, school system superintendent, lies a pillow with a multicultural motif. The pillow was a gift from a parent in a North Carolina district he served earlier in his career. 'I look at it every day,' he says. 'This is how I see the world'." I do wonder how he sees the world, especially after an alert parent sent me: "Human Resources Appointments - Talking Points for Dr. Weast - Board of Education Presentation: May 21, 2007." There then follows a list of ten appointments. In front of each name is one of four abbreviations: "(W/M), (W/F), (Af. A/F), (Af. A/M)." At the end of the document is the following: "Total Number of Appointments = 10. Af. A/M = 1. Af. A/F = 3. W/M = 3. W/F = 3." While I don't claim to know how Weast sees the world, he may need a crib sheet to help him do so.

In addition, the author of the pamphlet writes: "Since 1999, Weast has led the schools and community in a "call to action" campaign to raise the bar for all students and close the gap in performance that is often defined by race, ethnicity, and poverty. 'As educators, we know how to improve teaching and learning,' Weast said. And, in fact, test scores are going up. The gap is closing."

Well, not exactly. According to the 2006 "Maryland Report Card" for Montgomery County, the gap closed for the Maryland State Assessment (MSA) test scores in reading in the first few years, from 2003 to 2004, but began to level off in 2005 and 2006. For example, 35% fewer third grade African-American students were proficient in reading than white students in 2003, and that gap was significantly reduced, to 25%, in 2004. However, for 2005 and 2006, this gap remained almost unchanged, with 91.3% of white students considered proficient or advanced, as compared to 66.5% of African-American students. Some grades have shown a similar leveling off, while others have shown steady improvements for African-American and Hispanic students.

While MSA test scores in math have also shown steady improvement, the higher the grade, the lower the starting point and thus the latest results are no cause for celebration. For example, for the 8th grade test results, 28.8% of African-American and 30.1% of Hispanic students were found to be proficient or advanced in 2003. For 2006, the numbers were 41.6% and 45.8%, respectively, a significant improvement, but well

below what will be needed for these students to pass the High School Assessment (HSA) test to be able to graduate, starting with the 2009 graduating class.

The percentage of African-American students passing the Algebra HSA has risen from 47.2% in 2002 to 60.4% in 2006. For the Biology HSA, the percentage passing has risen from 52% to 60% in the same period. However, the percentage of African-American students passing the English 2 HSA has remain almost unchanged at 46.6% from 2005 to 2006.

As I've written previously, I am not claiming that the challenges aren't immense and that the accomplishments aren't real; it's the endlessly celebratory hype that is so unreal. If MCPS really was one of the best school systems in the county, it wouldn't need to brag at the drop of a hat. In fact, it is because MCPS may only be, in effect, graduating 3 out of 4 of its students that it is putting so much money and energy into compensating and manipulating such that it will find cause to even brag at the drop of a score.

This then brings me to the subject of "Jet Set Jerry," how an alert parent characterizes Weast's travels around the nation and the world, no doubt to further embellish his alleged achievements through MCPS. In 2006, Weast went to Chicago, Miami, New Orleans, Oregon, and Boston, as well as Belfast, Northern Ireland and Tokyo, Japan to spread the word of what he has done. Should we be asking how much this form of self-promotion cost us? An internet site posting by a former BOE member, that I found so "stimulating", was for the Chicago event:

"April 10, 2006 - Gap closing in Montgomery County, Maryland: Sharon Cox, Board Vice President, Jerry Weast, Superintendent and Michael Perich, Coordinator, Montgomery County Public Schools presented the Baldrige Initiative that has led the 140,000 - student district to improved student achievement and increased community engagement. Over the last several years Montgomery County has embraced the Baldrige process to increase participation, align programs and resources, and close the achievement gap. The school system has established rigorous standards for students and staff and aligned resources so that all staff and schools are working at high levels to provide excellent programs for students."

The reader may recall that the Baldrige judges who visited MCPS last fall did not agree that the level of achievement in a number of categories was as represented to them by MCPS. They downgraded the initial scores in these categories, placing the category related to leadership and community trust at the second to lowest possible category. Weast can fool most of the people all of the time, but not the Baldrige judges. By the way, neither the MCPS Baldrige application nor the Baldrige judge's report of what they actually found can be found online. I'll have more on next steps concerning this objective measure of performance at a later date.