

"Federation Corner" column  
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### **Weast The Corruptor**

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I have regularly observed that MCPS Superintendent Jerry Weast has little concern about the ethical behavior of himself or others. This is reflected in both his behavior and in the behavior of those who have worked and do work for him. More and more, it also appears that his behavior is also corrupting the behavior of others outside of MCPS.

The first example I experienced was the obsessive partnership between Weast and a majority of the BOE to ram through the relocation of Seven Locks ES, a conspiracy that failed, although it did succeed in destroying a lot of community trust, especially when the Inspector General revealed in February 2006 that MCPS officials had concealed less costly options that would have supported keeping the school at its present site.

The next episode was the release of the disastrous internal MCPS 2005-2006 audit of Churchill High School's Independent Activity Funds (IAF) in July 2007, I wrote about the violations of regulations including: "...The school vending contract has an automatic renewal clause after the initial three-year period, and the vendor is an employee of the school. Contracts that have a performance period extending beyond 36 months and contracts with vendors who are school employees require prior written authorization from the COO." This was not done, nor had MCPS taken any action despite years of such willful violations. I also wrote: "Should MCPS employees also be allowed to provide services such as the school vending contract? While these employees' bids have to be competitive, isn't there a reason that we don't want government employees also providing goods and services to the government they work for at a minimum because of the appearance of a conflict-of-interest? Does this policy also contribute to the atmosphere of a lax morality so evident with Churchill's IAF? I don't believe that county government employees can do what MCPS employees are now allowed to do."

As it turns out, Gregory Thornton, an MCPS deputy superintendent from 2002-2004, had some problems at his next job as chief academic officer of The School District of Philadelphia in early 2007 concerning a trip he had taken to Africa in 2004:

"The Philadelphia Inquirer revealed that Thornton was one of two district officials who signed off on a \$926,000 no-bid contract with Plato Learning five months after the education-software company subsidized their trip to South Africa. According to the paper, the district acknowledged the ethics violation last year and promised disciplinary action against Thornton and the other official. In an interview today, Philadelphia School District Chief Executive Paul Vallas said the district formally investigated the matter and found Thornton had already planned the Africa trip before taking the job with the Philadelphia district. The investigation found no wrongdoing by Thornton and the district took no further action, he added."

It appears that Mr. Thornton planned his Africa trip while still working for MCPS although Plato Learning does not appear to have done business with MCPS. However, Mr. Thornton was one of two finalists to be Seattle's new school superintendent in April 2007 when the story broke, and he decided a week later to withdraw from the process. Several months later, he instead took a job leading a 4,000-student school system, a fraction of the size of the 180,000 Philadelphia school district.

Next came the allegations in January 2008 of improper reimbursements and a no-bid contract with Wireless Generation against former MCPS deputy superintendent John Q. Porter that resulted in his suspension after just six months in his new job as Oklahoma City school superintendent. While he was not found to have broken any laws in Oklahoma City, he agreed to leave that job. There have been questions about improper reimbursement for Porter while at MCPS as well as possibly using his MCPS office to run his side business,

Spectrum International. MCPS responded to the possible business use: "That was completely inappropriate. Had we known about that, we would have taken appropriate action." I have previously written about almost \$35,000 in consultant fees received by Porter from the Oklahoma City BOE in the spring of 2007 while he was still employed by MCPS.

This brings us to the latest ethical problem, that of Moreno Carrasco, principal of Richard Montgomery HS. Maryland's 2007 Principal of the Year, Carrasco welcomed a Maryland congressman's October 2007 proposal to pump \$100 million into research examining what makes first-rate principals. "The average principal works 80 hours a week and only spends two hours on academic achievement because they are so distracted with disciplinary problems and security, and not the quality of teachers and the fidelity of the curriculum," Carrasco said. "We need money to retrain principals and allow them to do their jobs."

Apparently, Carrasco took a personal interest in this issue because, in early April, The Examiner learned that Carrasco, since 2006, "has held several 'Breakthrough Principal' seminars at schools around the region, often scheduled during the week. Carrasco's two-day institutes cost \$469 for each administrator and a secretary, with a minimum of 20 'teams.' The site advertised outcomes such as 'Do the principal's job in 8 hours a day'. Minutes after an interview with The Examiner, the company Web site, savetheprincipal.com, was taken down and all future events were canceled. Earlier versions of the site listed a 'One Day Refresher Institute' open to members of his \$399 'Principals' Network' to be held Monday at Richard Montgomery between 8 a.m. and 3 p.m. Though a day off for students, Monday is a professional day for staff.

"Three glowing testimonials on the site included two from principals at Montgomery County's Beall Elementary and Roberto Clemente Middle School, and one from Carrasco himself, whose role in the company is apparent only on incorporating documents registered with the state. In an interview with The Examiner, Carrasco said seminars within the county were free of charge, and he was no longer pursuing the business. 'I want to clarify for the record that this is not a conflict of interest, and I have looked at the ethics policies,' Carrasco said. 'The story that should be written is how innovative my practices are'."

The following week: "A lawyer for the Breakthrough Coach, an educational consulting firm that ran principal seminars in Montgomery County in spring 2006, is looking into legal action against Moreno Carrasco 'for allegedly co-opting some of the company's tactics'." Several days later: "Moreno Carrasco, currently under investigation by the school district for running a side consulting business on school days with allegedly plagiarized materials, is on indefinite sick leave for an unspecified illness."

Weast's answers to this? "District spokesman Brian Edwards said Superintendent Jerry Weast knew nothing of Carrasco's business activities. 'We will investigate the matter and take appropriate action as warranted,' Edwards said. "Weast is very concerned about the allegations and has directed his staff to thoroughly investigate the situation and take appropriate measures,' Edwards said, adding 'we don't put timetables on investigations. We didn't know it was going on,' Weast's spokesman said. 'How can you know what you don't know?' "

Then, student journalists at Richard Montgomery wanted to write about the story last week. The acting principal "told them that the story wasn't appropriate in part because it had been covered in other papers and therefore 'wasn't newsworthy'. The students then appealed to [the] community superintendent for the school, who initially supported [the] decision. 'The decision now is that even though we are not in support of the article, we do not want to do anything that would keep the students from exercising their freedom of speech,' [the community superintendent] said. '[The acting principal] believed that to publish the article would have disrupted the school at a critical time as year-end exams loom'." The administrators suggested the students delay publication of the article until the investigation was complete, expected within the next month.

Although MCPS apparently sees no reason to investigate Mr. Porter, it will investigate Mr. Carrasco and will reluctantly allow the exercise of freedom of the student press. What seems to be flawed is who will do the investigation. It just so happens that this is on the MCPS website now: "Applicants Sought for Board of Education Ethics Advisory Panel. The [BOE] is seeking to fill one vacancy on its five-member Ethics Panel. Among the panel's responsibilities are: (1) interpreting the Board of Education's Ethics Policy and issuing advisory opinions concerning its application, (2) conducting hearings on any complaint filed regarding an alleged violation, (3) approving financial disclosure forms, and (4) directing the implementation of an educational program to inform school system employees and the public about the policy. Panel members may not be incumbent members of the Board of Education, school officials, employees, or persons employed by a business entity subject to the authority of the Board of Education, or spouses of such persons."

We have yet to hear from the BOE Ethics Advisory Panel about any investigations they have done or will do or how they might educate school system employees to make sure that Weast doesn't continue to look clueless about what businesses his employees are running while working for MCPS. But clueless or not, he is responsible for the repeated questionable ethical behavior of his employees. He has recently set the worst possible example through his repeated meetings in his home with union leaders, a County Council candidate, and other officials to allegedly dictate their support of the candidate. Whether or not the allegations are true, it remains an egregious violation of the principle of the appearance of a conflict of interest for the superintendent to conduct any public business in his private home, no matter how casual the conversations with other public officials. I do not expect that we will hear from the Ethics Advisory Panel on this major issue either. By indifference or by design, Weast has become The Corruptor of people and institutions. How much longer will other public officials stand silently or helplessly by as this corruption grows worse?

One of the most important findings of the Baldrige judges was this, based on their November 2006 site visit to MCPS and BOE:

"...No results have been available to indicate breaches of ethical behavior and organizational citizenship. Lack of results and comparisons for these measures of leadership and social responsibility could limit MCPS's ability to address the core value of providing an ethical school system and could also impede its ability to create a positive work environment and strengthen productive community partnership."

It's only gotten worse since the judges wrote this 16 months ago.