

"Federation Corner" column
The Montgomery Sentinel - June 19, 2008

As always, MCPS spins failures into successes

by Wayne Goldstein
Chair, MCCF Education Committee

This month, MCPS celebrates two successful failures - its exoneration and promotion of a principal and its latest graduation rate, neither achievement being cause for celebration. Moreno Carrasco was the principal of Richard Montgomery High School identified by the Examiner as running a consulting business on the side, charging as much as \$469 for a two-day seminar, as well as a "One Day Refresher Institute" that was scheduled at the high school on a professional day.

In my April 24th column, I quoted from the Examiner: "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." & "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?' "

More recently, the Examiner has reported: " 'Jonathon Drimmer, D.C.-based lawyer for Breakthrough Coach, said he has no comment on the school district's decision to promote Carrasco, but added that an investigation is ongoing.' 'We are continuing to gather and evaluate evidence, and our case only gets stronger the more that we see,' Drimmer said. Weast's spokesman Edwards said the investigation was conducted through the human resources department and 'did not focus on the content of legal issues between [Carrasco] and the other company,' adding the matters of legality between Carrasco and the Breakthrough Coach are 'not a matter for [the district]'."

This brings me again to the question of why MCPS' Department of Human Resources alone is credited with the investigation and exoneration. What, if any, was the role of MCPS' Ethics Panel? Policy BBB, that covers ethics, states: "The Panel shall 'Be responsible for hearing any complaint filed regarding an alleged violation of this policy by any person. Complaints shall be made in writing and signed by the complainant and shall be referred to the ethics officer for investigation and review in consultation with legal counsel and the Ethics Panel.'" There is no mention of the panel or an ethics officer, although MCPS announced this month that one member of the Ethics Panel had been reappointed.

In its recent press release announcing Carrasco's appointment as director of Secondary Leadership Training, MCPS wrote: "Recently, Mr. Carrasco has been the subject of accusations in the media regarding his participation in an outside consulting business. The matter was thoroughly investigated and the allegations were not substantiated. However, Mr. Carrasco has discontinued his private consulting work."

MCPS also had this to say about itself this month: " 'MCPS Graduation Rate Third Among Nation's 50 Largest Districts, Education Week Study Finds' The MCPS graduation rate of 81.7 percent surpasses the national average of 71 percent and the Maryland average of 73.6 percent. The Education Week study, Diplomas Count 2008, used 2005 data, the most recent available for this nationwide analysis. The report highlights a continuing significant disparity in graduation rates across racial and ethnic groups nationwide. While 71 percent of ninth grade students in the United States graduate four years later, the rate for Hispanic students is 58 percent and the rate for African American students is 55 percent. Native American students' graduation rate is 51 percent."

Let's take a closer look at some of these numbers. I've previously written that 25% of MCPS graduates attend Montgomery College (MC). According to an August 2007 report by the Maryland Higher Education Commission (MHEC), 39.2% of incoming MC freshman "did not return" two years after starting, which rose to 45.9% after three years and 52.6% after 4 years. This means that anywhere between 10% and 13% of recent MCPS graduates apparently dropped out of MC. They didn't transfer or graduate. Instead, they did not return. This also means that if this pattern holds for the 2008 graduating class, the "real" MCPS graduation rate could be as low as 68.7%. MCPS claims it prepares its graduates for college work. If more than half of MCPS graduates who enter MC - which accepts all applicants - drop out, then it is perhaps quite reasonable to doubt that these students should have received a high school diploma in the first place.

MHEC also reported for 2004-05 that MC required that 30% of its core curriculum students take remedial math, 13% take remedial English, and 11% take remedial reading. Thirteen other community colleges in the state reported lower remedial math percentages than MC; fourteen reported lower remedial English percentages and fifteen reported lower remedial reading percentages. Perhaps MC's numbers will improve as students educated entirely under Weast go to MC. Perhaps not. I keep hearing that students are being pushed to take advanced math courses and tests that they are not prepared for. Weast may be gifted and talented at spinning the results of such an effort, but MC officials and four-year colleges may then be left to clean up the mess as more and more students show up for college unprepared to do the work. If we really wanted to know if Weast's MCPS is doing what he relentlessly claims, this county would start to carefully track the performance of all of its high school graduates. The fact that we don't, beyond what MHEC reports about students attending Maryland colleges, really shows that we are afraid to know the truth of how our high school graduates perform in college.

I've heard that some people privately complain about what I write about MCPS, because it makes the school system look bad and may subsequently reduce their property values. If MCPS is as ethically challenged and as obsessed with making bad news look good as I have concluded through dozens of columns in the last three years, this will eventually become common knowledge, even without my participation, and by then, it may be too late to turn around a once-superior school system. These problems won't get better if most people continue to live in a state of denial about them, or perhaps hope they will get their kids through good MCPS schools and get their houses sold before the bad news finally breaks.