

"Federation Corner" column  
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## **BOE and MCPS face their greatest challenge**

by Wayne Goldstein

Superintendent Jerry Weast ran hard to be appointed to a third term as school superintendent and he achieved his goal this week. Having survived intensive criticism from all quarters, he may find that expectations on him will be far higher than he ever expected or is ready for. The expectations will be highest from the four new BOE members and several of the current members. This past Tuesday, these members repeatedly talked about planning to have "courageous conversations" with the superintendent. The BOE may not yet realize that the groundwork for having these courageous conversations has already been put in place. There are two key elements to having these conversations: Baldrige and M-Stat. The first shows them WHAT to have the conversations about and the second shows them HOW to have those conversations.

On November 16, 2006 I wrote a column with the title of "MCPS at war with itself over becoming the best." In it, I detailed MCPS efforts to win a (<http://www.quality.nist.gov/>) Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award for adopting a philosophy of continuous improvement that then achieved specific results. I criticized the leaking of this confidential effort by overeager MCPS officials and provided facts about underperformance that should have made it impossible for MCPS to win. Fortunately, MCPS did not win this award, despite every effort to exaggerate strengths and underplay weaknesses. I learned that the concerns of myself and others that the Baldrige judges could be fooled were unwarranted. The Baldrige MCPS Feedback Report, providing the determinations of the judges, found many positive attributes in MCPS, but also made far too many disturbing criticisms, which were graciously titled "Opportunities for Improvement."

"... the workforce is not representative of the diverse ideas, cultures, and thinking of the hiring community and growing diverse student population." "While there are some comparisons to Baldrige Award recipients, there are few comparisons to nearby competitors and best performing districts in other states, although these data are reported to be available and would support the mission of providing world-class education."

"Although MCPS has developed numerous policies to outline expectations for legal and ethical behavior, and a few ethical tracking mechanisms exist, there is no systematic approach for senior leaders to promote an environment that fosters and requires legal and ethical behavior... Without processes to report, monitor, and manage ethical and legal issues within the organization, MCPS may limit its ability to forge partnerships with businesses and civic organizations within a community of trust."

"... there is not a system in place to evaluate and improve the effectiveness of the board's performance beyond whether or not individuals are reelected every four years."

"There is not a systematic approach to balance the needs of all stakeholders in the planning process, including the increasing numbers of students with disabilities. Without a process in place the system may be unable to attain their stated goal for success for every student and to meet NCLB requirements."

"There is also not a systematic approach to close gaps in performance compared to benchmarks."

"MCPS does not have a systematic process through which it listens and learns to determine student and stakeholder needs and requirements."

"While MCPS believes its numerous relationship-building activities are resulting in increased student achievement and parent and student engagement and satisfaction, no measures exist to confirm this linkage."

"MCPS does not have a systematic process to manage student and stakeholder complaints to ensure their effective and prompt resolution, or to minimize student and stakeholder dissatisfaction, so that this data can be used for organizational improvement."

"Although ...more than 150 measures [are tracked and monitored], there does not appear to be a systematic process for how MCPS ensures alignment and integration of data and information to track overall organizational performance for all support groups and at the district level beyond academic goals."

"While MCPS shares some organizational knowledge within schools and clusters, there is not a well-deployed, systematic process for systematically identifying, sharing, and implementing best practices across the organization."

"There is no systematic process to seek and use input from faculty, staff, and supervisors in determining the delivery approaches of education and training, particularly related to non-academic related courses."

"Overall Levels of Satisfaction for Parents and Students... demonstrates a less than favorable trend from 2003 to 2005... This is especially significant because 59% of the elementary schools and 51.3% of the middle schools had results that declined. The declining result for these two school groups also correlates with declining teacher satisfaction in these two school groups."

"MCPS does not use measures of student and stakeholder dissatisfaction."

"Although the cost-per-pupil is the highest in the state... there are no measures, levels, or trends that reflect how effectively the additional resources are used or what results differentiate MCPS from less wealthy districts. For example, the cost-per-pupil is the highest in the state, but information on how the students and stakeholders benefit from this greater investment in the district is not provided."

"The percent of budget for instructional categories in 2004... is 63.4%, lower than the Baldrige Award recipient at 70.6%. In addition, there are no trends or current data provided. Without these data, MCPS may be limited in its ability to build partnerships in its communities of trust and to manage by fact as it strives to become a data-driven organization."

"MCPS does not currently have measures for the effectiveness of key learning-centered processes, such as curriculum, instruction, and assessment."

"Most results do not include relevant comparisons, such as Urgent Work Orders Responded to Within One Day... Warehouse Inventory Control... Annual Student Enrollment Forecast Effectiveness... and Preventable School Bus Accidents."

"Beyond a proclamation by the board, no results have been provided to demonstrate levels of stakeholder trust in senior leaders and the governance system."

"No results are available to show the accomplishment of organizational strategy and action plans beyond performance to the key performance goals of the plan. 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."

Looked at together, these "Opportunities for Improvement" are a humiliating indictment of a school system and its leaders who gather the right data but don't use it effectively, if at all; who fail to gather the right data in order

to be able to objectively determine if and how MCPS is improving; and who fail to compare themselves to other institutions which perform better. The report portrays an organization that is in decline as it ignores such negative facts, instead relying on positive anecdotes and informal practices while it relentlessly declares to the world and itself that it is the best while getting better all the time. How can any organization so determined to understate its weaknesses ever hope to become better by confronting those weaknesses?

The only effective way to achieve such a breakthrough is to use the CitiStat model of transparency and accountability (<http://www.ci.baltimore.md.us/news/citistat/index.html>). While one can see tremendous overlap between the relentless demand for continuous improvement in the Baldrige approach with the CitiStat approach, the genius of CitiStat is that it makes this process relentlessly transparent through the continuous publicity of required biweekly meetings and biweekly progress. Weast claims to have created a program he calls M-Stat, something that began while he worked with others in a program at Harvard since 2000. He claims he has used this internally to make improvements at MCPS. He has offered to share the insights learned from M-Stat to assist County Executive Leggett in starting a CountiStat program.

In fact, there is no evidence that MCPS has either a functional or effective M-Stat program, which I will henceforth refer to as "SchoolStat." The findings of the Baldrige judges lays out the long and difficult path of improvement leading to excellence that can only be achieved by a very public and, likely, very painful SchoolStat program. The BOE will need to hire a director and staff to run such a SchoolStat program, which will focus on the many lax, ineffective and counterproductive practices of MCPS as the SchoolStat staff assists and/or forces MCPS to truly embrace the Baldrige philosophy of continuous improvement and the CitiStat philosophy of accountability through transparency. The SchoolStat director will also have to turn her/his sights on the BOE itself, particularly since "Beyond a proclamation by the board, no results have been provided to demonstrate levels of stakeholder trust in senior leaders and the governance system."

If the BOE and MCPS truly want to strive and succeed in becoming one of the best large school systems in the nation, they must embrace a very public Baldrige/SchoolStat program of improvement. Otherwise, this institution will continue to drift from glorified posture to glorified posture, relying on the haphazard, unsupported work of effective MCPS employees, parents and students to cumulatively make MCPS appear to be better than it is.