

"Federation Corner" column
The Montgomery Sentinel - November 16, 2006

MCPS at war with itself over becoming the best

by Wayne Goldstein
MCCF Education Committee

All this week, judges from the Baldrige National Quality Program will be confidentially evaluating an extensive submission by Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS), among other applicants, to determine if MCPS should receive one of the coveted 2006 Baldrige awards. Some MCPS officials just could not keep quiet about their quest for a national award this fall, and this poorly-kept secret was uncovered. The problem is that the worsening behavior of the Superintendent and other MCPS administrators in the last few years have both neutralized and even reversed efforts to deserve consideration by this elite organization.

The Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award was created by law in 1987, and is intended to provide national recognition to organizations committed to continuously improving their performance in all ways. It first focused on helping manufacturers to become more efficient and competitive in a tough international marketplace. It has since expanded the kinds of institutions it evaluates to include secondary school districts. Such education winners have ranged from a remote, 22,000 square mile Alaskan school district of 214 students to school districts in New York, Illinois and Oklahoma with 2,670 to 9,300 students.

The Baldrige National Quality Program focuses on the application process as much or more than the contest winners. It asks applicants: "Do you want to improve your organization's performance on the critical factors that drive success? Are you looking for a cost-effective way to gain an outside perspective on your organization's strengths and opportunities for improvement? Are you looking for a way to energize and motivate your employees? ... Applying for the Baldrige Award is an opportunity to examine your organization critically and identify strengths and opportunities to improve... The application process accelerates your improvement efforts by going beyond the internal self-assessment process and introducing a rigorous, objective, external view of your organization's improvement process."

I have been involved in education issues since 1999, and although I am familiar with the Baldrige Award, I had never heard any MCPS official or anyone else ever discuss it until several weeks ago. This is a disturbing discovery about a nationally important program that MCPS first began to use in 2000. In an organization truly committed to continuously improving performance, the Baldrige principles would be the lens through which every key program is seen and evaluated and would be a part of most conversations on school and student performance and policies. I have not seen this at all, so I can only wonder why MCPS is being judged at this time as being effective in using the Baldrige process. MCPS staff also revealed that the application had been made in 2004 and had successfully navigated several levels of evaluation leading up to the opportunity to be judged in a site visit and perhaps win an award at the end of November 2006.

It is a supreme irony that it has been during this Baldrige trial and evaluation period of the last two years that some of the worst and worsening MCPS behavior during the Superintendent's tenure has occurred. The revelations by the Washington Post in August 2006 of the excessive construction funds that were handed over by MCPS to a private religious school, with no strings attached, to use for any purpose at all, happened at the beginning of this time period. This period spanned the debacle that became known as the MCPS Seven Locks scandal, where the Inspector General showed great restraint in revealing significant problems and MCPS officials revealed last spring that they only provide the building cost estimates to the County Council that they choose to provide, and will conceal all others unless pointedly directed to provide them by councilmembers who can perhaps read the minds of these secretive MCPS officials.

Silver Chips, the Blair HS student newspaper, has revealed that the MCPS Superintendent has tried to convince principals to prevent poor students from taking the SAT and that many math students have dropped out of advanced math classes because they never received the needed preparation before being pushed far beyond the limits of their previous learning. The Washington Examiner recently revealed that the SAT score gap between different racial groups has steadily worsened throughout the Superintendent's tenure.

MCPS first began to examine the Baldrige principles in 2000 and to implement them by 2002 at several schools which became Baldrige Academies. By 2006, most MCPS schools may have been exposed to or implemented those principles to varying degrees. However, since it has only been three years that the program has been widely shared, only a handful of schools are in the position of making substantial progress. Only half a dozen stories have been written by the Gazette about Baldrige in the last four years. MCPS is years away from having all 191 of its schools become or be on the way to becoming Baldrige Academies. Given the recent hostile and secretive attitudes and track record of MCPS leadership, it will take even longer for this leadership to become boldly committed to engaging everyone in continuous improvement, which includes swiftly acknowledging mistakes and correcting them and allowing all stakeholders to be engaged, rather than held at arms length by arms that grow longer with each passing day.

How could Baldrige officials have missed this crisis of confidence in MCPS leadership? How could they have allowed MCPS to proceed towards one of the final steps of being judged on a site visit as the crisis increased? Did they primarily rely on the veracity of what MCPS leadership told them? The most immediate concern is that Superintendent Jerry Weast began his campaign to be reappointed to a third term last summer, when he put pressure on members of the Board of Education (BOE) to recognize his years of service as a prelude to negotiations that are legally mandated to not begin before March 2007. Before the primary elections in September 2006, Dr. Weast also met with BOE candidates and sought their support for his reappointment. How can there be the kind of objective discussion and performance evaluation with an eye towards better solutions, the hallmark of Baldrige principles, when the MCPS Superintendent is pulling out every possible stop to get reappointed using political methods?

The timing of perhaps giving such a Baldrige award a few months before the Superintendent's contract negotiations, and giving it to an organization that has been slipping backwards in recent years, could possibly backfire in a county and a country where the voters recently chose greater openness and accountability in those they elected. We can only hope that the Baldrige program is too good to fall into MCPS' trap.