

"Federation Corner" column  
The Montgomery Sentinel - March 22, 2007

### **Jerry Weast: Rasputin, Richelieu, or Svengali to the BOE?**

by Wayne Goldstein

This being a column about educational issues, a little history education is sometimes appropriate. Which of these three historic or fictional characters does Jerry Weast most resemble? Is it Grigori Rasputin, a Russian holy man who, starting in 1905, was able to help the Tsar's son Alexei, who suffered from hemophilia. As a result of the gratitude of Tsar Nicholas II and Tsarina Alexandra, Rasputin was able to gain great political power by manipulating the Tsarina, even influencing her "to fill some government offices with his own handpicked candidates." His abuses of power were then used by political opponents as well as journalists and clergy to weaken the royal family. In 1916, at age 47, a group of nobles murdered him, ending 11 years of absolute influence that helped lead to the overthrow of Russian royalty in 1917.

Is it Armand de Richelieu, a French monk who rose to become a bishop? In 1616, he became Secretary of State to Louis XIII. His power grew so quickly that in 1622 he became a cardinal. He spent the next 20 years, until his death, working to strengthen France and to fight all opponents, both external and internal. However, he made many enemies, particularly toward the end of his life. When he died at age 57, the Pope said: "If God exists, the Cardinal Richelieu will have to answer for many things. If not, he will have done well in life." Richelieu has been depicted in French novels like "The Three Musketeers" as a "power hungry cynic."

Or, is it Svengali, a fictional hypnotist in the 1894 novel "Trilby"? He turned Trilby into a great singer using hypnosis, but she could only perform when he helped put her into a trance. The novel describes Svengali in this way: He "would either fawn or bully, and could be grossly impertinent. He had a kind of cynical humour, which was more offensive than amusing, and always laughed at the wrong thing, at the wrong time, in the wrong place. And his laughter was always derisive and full of malice."

Jerry Weast, a dirt poor farm boy from Pittsburg, Kansas, population 20,000, after passing through seven school districts in Kansas, Montana, South Dakota and North Carolina, hit the big time in 1999 when he was chosen to be MCPS superintendent. Like Rasputin, he had an initial salubrious effect on MCPS when he introduced an emphasis on K-2 education, before moving on to less successful programs. Like Richelieu, he amassed operating budget and school construction money for MCPS along with power and influence for himself. Like Svengali, he eventually was able to put the old BOE almost completely under his spell.

It turns out that the new BOE is so much more suggestible than the old BOE that it only took the smallest of efforts by him to put them almost immediately into a deep trance. He had no problem getting them to approve his contract and his budget, with no real disputes. When the BOE voted to close Special Education Learning Centers (SELC), despite campaign promises and despite the objections of the parents of such students, they ignited a firestorm of criticism. The BOE, rather than Weast, took it on the chin from many directions for this uninformed decision. However, when the County Council Education Committee called in MCPS last week to explain itself, MCPS officials immediately caved on both their position and the ways they deliberately cut parents and advisory groups out of the decision-making process.

It was reported: "[MCPS] deputy superintendent on Thursday conceded that the district's hotly contested decision to cut self-contained learning centers for special education students was made in the wrong way... The deputy superintendent apologized for the manner in which the public had been excluded from making the call on the sensitive budgetary matter. 'It was a huge mistake of the school system,' she said of the fact stakeholders have not been kept fully abreast of the proposal."

Despite such admissions and apologies, this MCPS deputy superintendent and her special education professional colleagues came across as insincere yet fervent ideologues whose analytical and mathematical skills were seriously deficient. For example, MCPS had been claiming that the state was mandating that the SELCs be closed, yet an official from the Maryland State Department of Education in attendance said that the state was mandating no such action. MCPS then claimed that disproportionate numbers of African-American and Hispanic students were in the SELCs as compared to the general population and to white students. However, by leaving out any mention of Asian students in their research, they largely rendered their numbers irrelevant because of that missing data.

MCPS tried to claim that special education students in regular classrooms did better than special education students in SELCs. However, since every special education student has an Individual Education Plan (IEP) created by MCPS, working with the parents, it is the requirements of the IEP that determine where the student is placed to learn. Since MCPS made the placements, then if students are in SELCs who shouldn't be there, that is the fault of MCPS. But if MCPS made the right decisions, then students in SELCs should stay where they can best be taught.

Ultimately, it was the flawed and careless thinking of doctrinaire MCPS officials who created a secret plan of action where none was warranted. Now, it is up to the County Council to help provide the forum and the transparency to get MCPS to clean up the mess that it created. No BOE members or staff were at this important meeting, because they are currently incapable of providing any oversight. Of course, Weast was not there because he prefers to send others to take responsibility for the mistakes that he makes.

At this meeting, I saw this latest version of the ways that MCPS baldly and badly manipulates numbers to get predetermined results. Everyone there could easily see through these phony numbers. However, that is not usually the case because there are so many numbers manipulated in so many ways. Because so much money is given to MCPS based on so many unexamined numbers, I urge the County Council to create two new Council staff positions. The sole responsibility of these new staff would be to do independent analysis and verification of all of the numbers released by MCPS, whether budget numbers or test scores. BOE should be doing this job, but it is unable to do so now. Therefore, in order to ensure that the County Council better understands what it is getting for its billions in appropriations, it needs the oversight and analysis provided by this dedicated staff.

The Baldrige Feedback Report had this to say about MCPS' "learning-centered approach": "... MCPS is unable to evaluate the efficiency of each of the learning-centered processes. Also, MCPS cannot ensure that day-to-day operations of key learning-centered processes are meeting key process requirements."

I conclude that of the three choices, Jerry Weast is most similar to Svengali. He is more like a fictional character who can cast a hypnotic spell on those with weak wills, although, unlike the novel, they don't then become great at what they do. Fortunately, such spells don't work on those who can think for themselves, and it is those people who can now limit how much Weast manipulates school policies and finances for his own glory.