

"Federation Corner" column
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Weast continues to rule his kingdom from a distance

by Wayne Goldstein

In ways large and small, MCPS Superintendent Jerry Weast continues his style of leading by excluding the public from the decision-making process, with the active or passive participation of the Board of Education. In two columns written in March, I documented how MCPS, with the support of BOE, made secret plans to close Special Education Learning Centers, only to then confess to the Montgomery County Council Education Committee that the entire process of doing so was wrong. At that time, I did not discuss the imminent plans to also close the Kingsley Wilderness Project, a small school operating since 1978 to provide a unique special program of work and study, by the end of this school year. For decades, Kingsley students have built projects such as bridges and trails in several nearby large wilderness parks, while also helping to maintain those parks. At one time, Kingsley students cut up fallen trees and branches from storms for firewood and delivered it to residents, often just accepting donations as payment. Students also created crafts from this wood which they sold to help raise money for the school.

The MCPS website describes Kingsley and other special programs in this way: "Alternative programs educate students in a non-traditional school academic environment with additional social and emotional supports from on-site social workers and/or counselors. Students in a small classroom setting receive group and individualized instruction from teachers with assistance from paraeducators. The goal is for students to return back to their home-schools after successfully completing the alternative program exit requirements." What distinguishes Kingsley is the requirement to do hard physical labor in the outdoors - with an emphasis on environmental awareness - to complete a day that is only partially spent in a traditional classroom setting. Several county educators came up with this program in the '70s as a way to reach certain troubled students who were at-risk of dropping out of school for a number of reasons. A number of Kingsley graduates have come forward in recent months, since news of the imminent closing became known, to tell how Kingsley had changed and even saved their lives.

Kingsley bears a number similarities to the Outward Bound program, and may have been initially inspired by it. According to its website, Outward Bound began as a small school in Scotland in the 1930s by educator Kurt Hahn. "Here, Hahn refined his philosophies into a practical curriculum that rewarded development of physical skills such as running, jumping and throwing, as well as learning to live in the outdoors through an expedition, and embarking upon a hobby or project, in addition to achievements in the classroom." In the 1940s, his program was adapted "... to teach young British sailors the vital survival skills necessary during World War II." Josh Miner, an American student "inspired by Hahn's philosophy and teaching model... founded the Outward Bound movement in the United States, based upon the principles of hands-on learning through outdoor adventure."

Today this international program has schools in thirty countries, combining adventure and learning in the wilderness but also in urban areas. "Outward Bound Urban Centers, currently located in Atlanta, Baltimore, Boston, New York City, and Philadelphia, teach leadership, craftsmanship and self-reliance, foster a greater understanding of community, and inspire continued commitment to the values of fitness, compassion, service, and care for the environment." These urban programs were founded between 1986-1992. NYC Outward Bound website states "We are full partners in seven small, public high schools in New York City, along with the City's Department of Education. With support from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and others, we are building a network of college-preparatory schools where the curriculum is challenging, the lessons clearly relate to our students' lives, and an adult advisor for every 12-15 students challenges and supports them to achieve."

Kingsley has capacity for 27 students, and the main reason given for closing the school is that there are currently just 16 students in the school. Since the program relies on referrals from our 25 high schools, which together have 41,000 students, it is not believable that there is not at least one student in every high school in the county who would benefit from this type of program. MCPS only shows 204 students in what it calls "Alternative Programs." The largest of them, the Mark Twain Center, is also slated for closing in several years. Thus, while other large, urban school systems like New York City partner with organizations offering programs like Kingsley to reach those in need of such support, MCPS has done nothing to encourage its alternative programs and now wants to use under enrollment and other questionable excuses to close such programs. Without engaging the community and the affected students and parents, MCPS secretly and unilaterally decided to close these schools rather than support and encourage them as a way to keep thousands of at-risk students in MCPS rather than allowing them to just take up space or drop out.

The plan to close Kingsley and other alternative programs is a small example of how Weast distances himself from those he claims to serve. A larger example of this version of remote leadership was how he recently revealed his "M-Stat" program to the world. Billed as a successful educational version of NYC's CompStat crime statistics program and Baltimore's CitiStat program, which is being used by dozens of major cities around the U.S. and internationally, MStat is claimed to be how MCPS holds its employees accountable. While Weast has made several mentions of it at BOE meetings since January 2007, and released some information about it at that time, this program has operated in secret since November 2005. Last week, state and county officials and reporters "listened as school officials gave a PowerPoint presentation showing three schools, one each from affluent, middle-class and low-income neighborhoods, all with moribund math achievement among blacks and Hispanics. 'Trying to keep the pace and move the kids along has been very difficult,' one school's principal said. He sat at a table of administrators at the school system's headquarters, in Rockville. School officials asked that none of the schools be identified as a condition of opening the session to visitors." "At one school, for example, 39 percent of the school's African-American students do not attend class." Reporters who were asked not to reveal these schools agreed to this secrecy.

Governor O'Malley, who as Baltimore mayor began the acclaimed CitiStat program, is quoted as saying: "I'm just very appreciative that citizens are willing to hold themselves accountable to the most important work that we do, which is educate the next generation of [students], so that they can compete at a much faster pace," However, the Governor seems not to have noticed that no citizens were invited to this meeting, nor would citizens have known about the secret MStat meetings over the course of at least fourteen months, just as they knew nothing about the secret MCPS meetings last year when the decisions were made to close Kingsley, Mark Twain, and Special Education Learning Centers. If MStat meetings continue to exclude the public, it will remain nothing more than the typical kinds of closed-door staff meetings that accomplish nothing because there is none of the effective public accountability that comes from transparency. Weast can order his staff to do this and that, but it hasn't worked in the eight years he has been here because these seemingly-intractable problems can only be solved by a concerted, democratic effort of all stakeholders working together to provide what is needed. A superintendent like Weast, who is as disconnected from the public as a monarch is from his subjects, has not and will not succeed.

We are fortunate to have a County Council Education Committee, which, along with other Councilmembers, are willing to ask questions and request information in ways not done by a BOE that continues to be a passive captive of Weast. It is greatly hoped by a number of county parents and others that the County Council will very strongly encourage, if not require, MCPS to not to move ahead with the closure of Kingsley and other essential schools and programs.