

"Federation Corner" column
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Time for Weast to stop the lying

by Wayne Goldstein

By now readers may be really tired of my near-weekly attacks on Weast. However, with his MCPS publicity machine relentlessly and routinely churning out very large lies and misrepresentations, I have to confront the crop of deception planted just in the 7 days since my last column went to press. It wasn't all deceptive, as it never is. The results of the latest Maryland School Assessments (MSA) were announced last Thursday. Scores were up in many categories. Only 3rd grade and 8th grade math scores for African-American and Hispanic students remain unchanged. Unfortunately while 69% and 74%, respectively, of these groups of third graders were found to be proficient or advanced, only 43% and 46% of the eighth graders were also rated as proficient or advanced. The gap for these eighth grade students as compared to ratings of 84% for white students and 87% for Asian students is 41 points. The hope is that the students in the lower grades will hold and increase their percentage of proficient and advanced as they approach 8th grade after years of what may be more effective instruction or at least more effective teaching to the test.

The MSA scores were better, although not good news, and if it had been the only such patting-on-the back that MCPS/Weast had engaged in last week, it might have almost been a great week for Weast by virtue of his showing himself capable of self-restraint. Unfortunately, he simply could not resist doing the equivalent of gilding a wilting, decaying lily. In my column three weeks ago, I revealed that Education Week had come up with a new way of measuring graduation rates by taking out the "unofficial" dropouts that our nation's school systems have relied on to varying degrees to falsely boost their graduation rates. Last Tuesday, Weast embraced this new, lower graduation rate in characteristic fashion, by stating: "I am pleased that again this year MCPS has among the best graduation rates in the nation..." His emphasis for the recalculation of the 2003-04 graduation rates that put MCPS at 80.3% was that MCPS ranked No. 6 among the 50 largest school systems in the country. This ignores hundreds of school systems around the country, with some in our region, that have considerably higher graduation rates, such as Falls Church's 90% + graduation rate.

Jerry Weast is not an eternal optimist for whom the glass is always full. He is a deluded or deluding showman who will instead emphasize that MCPS' glass is more full than a small group of comparable glasses, even as the water levels in this group of glasses steadily drop. This was made clear to me when I came across Weast's first response when Education Week's stunning revelation was presented last year. The headline on the June 20, 2006 MCPS public announcement, covering the 2002-2003 graduation rate, proclaimed: "MCPS Graduation Rate Among Top Four in Nation." Weast may have betrayed just a smidgen of hesitation as he tried to spin this shocking news when he is quoted as saying: "It is encouraging that we are among the best in the nation in terms of our graduation rates,"

Even as MCPS has reported and continues to report a 91%-92% graduation rate to the state of Maryland for the last 10 years, and this now false rate remains on the state and MCPS websites, Weast instead focuses on the relative superiority of having about an 80% graduation rate. The rate was 81.5% for the 2002-2003 year, meaning our graduation rate, by dropping further to 80.3% for the 2003-2004 year, also shows that by going from No. 4 to No. 6 among the 50 largest school districts, we are either dropping faster than others in the group or others are actually raising their graduation rates.

When a colleague wrote to a top MCPS last week about the huge disparity between the now-celebrated Education Week graduation rate and the "official" rate, here is the response that he received: "The Ed Week graduation rate calculation is based on their formula as cited and linked to in the press release. It provides an apples to apples comparison among the 50 largest districts in the nation. The official graduation rate as

calculated by the state is what is listed on the about page. I'm sure that you can find the state formula on the Maryland State Department of Education [MSDE] website if you need further information."

Does anyone believe that MCPS would not vehemently protest how Education Week does its calculations, which are independently determined for each school district, if they thought the calculations were wrong? Education Week could have ranked the largest 100 or the largest 500 school districts. Every calculation for every school system in the country is "apples to apples" because the same method is used for all. Does anyone believe that MCPS does not know how MSDE calculates the rate, which isn't on their website, and would not also protest what it thought was an unfair interpretation of the submitted information? MCPS still claims it has a "official" 2% dropout rate, meaning a few dropouts took on the responsibility to fill out a dropout form, so when it reports that lie to MSDE, which MSDE makes no effort to verify, then that results in a false 91%-92% graduation rate.

What I want to know - RIGHT NOW - is: what are the real MCPS graduation rates for the last three years? I don't want to forever be three years behind in finding out how fast we may be going downhill. When I suggested earlier this month that MCPS dropouts from Montgomery College be counted against the MCPS graduation rate, and I very roughly calculated that doing so would result in an effective graduation rate of 73.5%, I may have been overstating what the actual Education Week graduation rate for MCPS for 2006-2007 will turn out to be.

Equally bad news concerns the gap between MCPS SAT scores for African-American and white students. Since the College Board added a writing component to the SAT and increased the highest possible score from 1600 to 2400, it is more difficult to quickly see what gaps might remain. Another colleague has focused on the math and verbal sections for the last decade in order to be able to accurately track those measures, and he recently sent me his latest figures. Since 1999, when Weast arrived, the math and verbal total for African Americans has dropped from 922 to 906 in 2006 and has risen for white students from 1150 to 1163. The gap between the two groups has grown from 228 to 254. The total SAT score for African Americans in 1997 was 924 and the gap then was 215.

Don't you agree that the time is long overdue for Weast to stop the lying? Ask him to stop doing so and then I may be able to write fewer columns about him.