

"Federation Corner" column  
The Montgomery Sentinel - August 16, 2007

### **Latest Weast BS on AYP, NCLB and AP**

by Wayne Goldstein

By now, a regular reader of this column has seen the many ways I have challenged the many ways that Weast and his cronies have manipulated information to make MCPS look better than it actually is. Here's my latest challenge, which is that Weast is deliberately trying to downplay the number of middle schools that have not made Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) under No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and that the triumphant increase in minority participation in taking and passing Advanced Placement (AP) tests is greatly overstated and backed up by dubious research. The term BS is too technically complicated to explain here.

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 came about because Congress, after giving money - with no strings attached - to states for years and seeing no improvement in academic performance, decided to create a system of accountability. One major piece of NCLB is AYP. The goal of NCLB is to get every student to 100%, performing at or above grade level, by 2014. AYP requires that a school system determine where it is and where it has to go in a certain amount of time. For example, if a school scored at 56% of proficiency in a subject in 2003, it would have to improve by 44% to reach 100%. If it has 11 years to reach that goal, then dividing 44% by 11 requires the school to improve by 4% per year for each of the 11 years.

If a school does not make this 4% AYP, a series of requirements come into play. If a school does not make AYP for a year, the school is put on an alert status by the local school district. If a school does not make AYP for 2 years in a row, it "must be identified as needing school improvement... [and] school officials must receive help and technical assistance. These schools must develop a two-year plan to turn around the school." Students may be allowed to transfer to better performing schools. If a school misses AYP for a third year in a row, "students from low-income families must be offered" free tutoring services and other programs. If AYP is missed for a fourth year, the principal and teachers could be removed and there could be "a takeover or complete reorganization of the school." In order for a school to come out of this process, it must make AYP for two years in a row.

MCPS writes: "... 71 percent of middle schools in Montgomery County made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) on the 2007 Maryland School Assessments (MSAs), according to Maryland State Department of Education data released Wednesday... School performance at the middle school level increased significantly, with 27 out of 38 middle schools meeting the testing targets this year compared to only 15 out of 38 middle schools last year." The claim of 71% is a totally false "fact" designed to manipulate and obfuscate, which MCPS further achieves by also writing: "Ten schools that were on the state's improvement list last year met AYP this year and will be removed from the state's list if they meet their targets again in 2008." In fact, 20 of the county's 38 middle schools are not making AYP, instead of the 11 which MCPS admits to. This means that 53% are not making AYP, instead of 29%. Until a middle school has exited the list, it is not considered to have met AYP.

If Weast can say that 10 of them will get back on track if they make AYP next year, he should also acknowledge that many of those now in compliance may not make AYP next year. In fact, "Silver Spring International Middle School, which made AYP in 2006, missed its targets for 2007 and will be placed in Corrective Action." This means that other middle schools which made it back to AYP this year could go straight to a more draconian corrective action and even restructuring if they miss AYP next year. Is that, perhaps, why Weast is spinning this so furiously and in so many ways? For anyone learn that there are 20 middle schools that remain on the list, one must read all the way to the bottom of the press release and then click on the link as indicated by "A complete list of the schools not making AYP is at the link below."

This past June, Weast had this to say about minority participation in AP classes and tests: " 'Eight years ago, we started knocking down barriers and eliminating prerequisites so more African American students could enroll in rigorous AP courses,' Weast said, 'because the bottom line is that AP is the way to go. It is the best way to prepare kids for success in college.' " One must look hard to discover that, as is always the case with Weast, the truth is far different. I found *Advanced Placement Exam Participation and Performance for the MCPS Classes of 2002 to 2006*--done in November 2006 by a Ph.D who works for the MCPS research arm, the Department of Shared Accountability. She wrote: "AP exam achievement records set by the MCPS Class of 2006 include the following: The highest percentage (55.7) and number (5,282) of graduates who took at least one AP exam in MCPS history, including the highest ever reported numbers of males; females; Asian American, Hispanic, and White graduates; and graduates who received FARMS and special education services. The highest percentage (44.6) and number (4,234) of graduates who earned at least one AP exam score of 3 or higher in MCPS history, including the highest ever reported numbers of males; females; Asian American, Hispanic, and White graduates; and graduates who received FARMS and special education services."

It sounded impressive to me, until I looked at the various tables of figures at the end of the report. While a score of 3 is considered passing, the mean AP score for all African-American students was 2.5 in 2002 and 2.4 in 2006. By comparison, the mean AP score for all white students was 3.3 in 2002 and 3.2 in 2006. In 2002, 19% of all African-American graduates took one or more AP tests, with 27.4% doing so in 2006. By comparison, 55% of all white graduates in 2002, and 65% in 2006, took one or more AP tests. Of those who took AP tests, 55.6% of African-American students scored 3 or higher in 2002, rising to 57.9% in 2006. By comparison, 84.1% of white students scored 3 or higher in 2002, rising to 84.7% in 2006.

The performance of African-American students was consistently at the lowest level compared to all other demographic groups, yet there was not a single mention of this fact in this report that repeatedly referred to superlatives in achievement. Instead, the author had this to say: "Nationally, increases in participation-which tend to include graduates with a wider range of academic talents-are associated with decreases in average exam performance. Maintaining a mean score above 3.0 over a five-year period, even as AP participation rates increased 43.2%, is a noteworthy accomplishment for MCPS. The MCPS Class of 2006 attained an AP exam mean score of 3.1 because more test takers than ever before earned scores of 3, 4, or 5. While MCPS is making progress toward the goal of increasing AP exam participation and performance, some challenges remain. There are differences in AP exam participation and performance associated with gender [and] race/ethnicity..."

This statement really says that less prepared students are taking AP tests, are not doing well, but are not doing so poorly as to drag down the already-low mean scores for some groups. Nearly half of African-American students who took AP tests scored 1 or 2, with about one-fourth scoring 4 or 5. What is the value of having unprepared students take AP classes so that they can then fail AP tests? Here is the researcher's justification that echoes Weast's claim: "The findings provide evidence that MCPS is making progress in meeting Goal 1 of the Strategic Plan, namely, to ensure success for every student. Graduates who participate in the AP program not only demonstrate high school success, but also leave high school with a high likelihood of success in college. Graduates who take even one AP exam during high school are more likely to complete a bachelor's degree within four years and have higher earning power when they join the workforce."

Who really believes that having students get a 2 on an AP test, the equivalent of a D, means they will finish college and get a better-paying job? How many of the 26% of MCPS graduates who attend Montgomery College are African-American, and how many of them have to take remedial courses and are among the one-third of freshman who drop out the first year? Persuading and pressuring such students to take advanced courses and get low scores is not how students are educated. Having an MCPS researcher provide the propaganda to support this dubious theory also makes me wonder what else the Office of Shared Accountability is sharing as part of Weast's perpetual good news campaign.

The current manipulation of the facts about AYP and AP, like the manipulation of the facts about the gap in MSA and SAT scores, is ongoing evidence that Weast is working harder than ever to fool us about how he is educating our children. It's not working, is it?