

"Federation Corner" column
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Weast and Grasmick: a team making students Dumb and Dumber?

by Wayne Goldstein

On paper, the Montgomery County Board of Education (BOE) employs MCPS Superintendent Jerry Weast. On paper, the Maryland State Board of Education (MSBE) employs Maryland State Superintendent of Schools Nancy S. Grasmick. The heads of the largest Maryland school system and the state education department could be a team for the similar ways that each of them are fooling the public about the quality of Maryland secondary education. Regular readers of this column are well-acquainted with the criticisms I have directed at Weast and at a BOE too polite and inexperienced to do more than applaud his latest pronouncement of MCPS "greatness", a greatness achieved through the large and small manipulation of facts that instead reveal a school system slipping ever deeper into mediocrity. Eight years after his coming to MCPS, only two of the BOE members who initially chose him are still members. Even under the best of circumstances, it is almost impossible for newer BOE members to question an entrenched incumbent superintendent who is as glibly manipulative as Weast.

However, as critical as I have been of Weast, it may be time to aim some of my criticism at his "boss", Nancy S. Grasmick. I don't have evidence that shows she controls MSBE, but since she has held this job since 1991, it stands to reason that the state board members are likely to be rubber stamps. That is, all except Montgomery County's Blair Ewing, who distinguished himself as the lone dissent in a recent MSBE decision approving the secret decision of MCPS to close Special Education Learning Centers.

What causes me to think we have two birds of a feather here is Grasmick's biography web page. Let's compare Weast's and Grasmick's web pages. His: "Dr. Weast is directing an ambitious comprehensive reform effort designed to raise academic standards and narrow the achievement gap for nearly 140,000 students... In recognition of his innovative leadership in early childhood education, professional development, school accountability, and parent involvement, Dr. Weast was named the Maryland Superintendent of the Year in 2003. He is one of a few superintendents to have won the state superintendent of the year award in two different states... He holds... an Ed.D. in Educational Administration from Oklahoma State University, where he was named to the Hall of Fame in the College of Education."

Hers: "First Lady of Education... A woman of courage who dared to make a difference... A tireless advocate for education... These are just a few of the phrases Maryland's media and civic leaders have used to describe Dr. Nancy S. Grasmick, Maryland's first female state superintendent and the U.S.'s longest serving appointed schools chief. Dr. Grasmick is known for her strong focus on student achievement, teacher quality, parent involvement, public school funding, and early care and education... Under Dr. Grasmick's leadership, Maryland has been nationally recognized for its many achievements... Dr. Grasmick received her doctorate from the Johns Hopkins University... Dr. Grasmick has received numerous awards for her visionary leadership... She was also named a 2007 Influential Marylander by The Daily Record."

In trying independent verification of her most grandiose statements, the closest I found was from 2002: "Nancy Grasmick is Our Lady of the Public Schools, the saintly state superintendent..." Perhaps the worshipful quotes on her website predate the Internet. Someone who doesn't worship her is Governor O'Malley, who last week stated "We need greater alignment between the governor and the superintendent of schools... That trust does not exist between Dr. Grasmick and myself."

Grasmick's braggadocio makes Weast look like a modest fellow indeed, a bird of subtle plumage next to the garish flashiness of Grasmick's feathers. Her web page may have value as background to what is really happening with Maryland's High School Assessment (HSA) tests. As I've written previously, students must

pass four HSAs in algebra/data analysis, biology, government, and English in order to receive a high school diploma. While I had previously questioned that likelihood, I hadn't then realized that the tests measure what a typical student is expected to learn in the early grades. A columnist recently noted: "These exams aren't hard - they test eight- and ninth-grade skill levels, say testing experts. Yet students who repeatedly fail may still graduate under Grasmick's 'new loophole'."

I am outraged that Maryland high school graduation is predicated on passing middle and beginning high school classes, "new loophole" or not. It is as if what is learned in 11th and 12th grade does not matter. As for this loophole, in a late August press release: "...Grasmick said the goal of the HSA program is to raise achievement, not decrease the graduation rates for conscientious students. The Bridge Plan-being developed in collaboration with local administrators, school-level officials, and teachers-is aimed at bringing those few students closer to their dreams of a high school diploma without decreasing standards. Students who have special difficulty on one or more of the HSAs after several attempts at passing them, and have received remediation, will have several options to add to their scores. These include grade point average, attendance figures, and other individual academic validation activities."

For years, 25% to 35% of MCPS graduates have gone straight to Montgomery College, where many, if not most of them, have been required to take non-credit remedial classes in high school math, reading and English, often becoming first-semester or first-year college dropouts while trying to complete the high school work they had successfully avoided through social promotion. There is little likelihood that HSAs and Bridge Plans will change that shameful tradition of institutional failure. If MCPS is the best in the state, then we shouldn't expect student performance in the rest of the state to improve either. There can be no comfort in Grasmick's press release that crows "Class of 2009 on track to pass [HSAs]".

Grasmick states that she "... is a frequent guest columnist in such journals as Education Week..." In a March 2006 commentary in that magazine, she writes of: "A 'New Model' for a New World Giving Our Students the Math and Science Education They Deserve... What was once a dirty little secret is now being exposed: America has dropped the ball on science, mathematics, and technology education... We need more physicists, mathematicians, chemists, and other technically skilled people in the pipeline... That process begins with a new emphasis on mathematics and science in elementary and secondary schools... Math and science teachers must not receive watered-down training in their disciplines. This is a cross-campus issue and requires schools of education to work far more cooperatively with departments of mathematics and science than ever before... Project Lead the Way [a] pre-engineering program adopted by more than 40 high schools in Maryland and hundreds nationwide, is a four-year sequence of courses designed to introduce students to the rigor and discipline of engineering before they enter college. That type of fresh thinking is needed in math and science education today... Bring more students into AP and IB science and mathematics courses..."

The longest serving appointed state school superintendent in the U.S., who thinks that HSAs and Bridge Plans are important, also wants to convince us that she believes in the teaching of rigorous math and science. But rigor for most appears to mean passing Algebra and Biology, not Calculus and Physics. When a bar is set so low by an educational leader that all should be able easily step over it, how can we really believe that she can also set the bar high enough to produce physicists, mathematicians and chemists? My initial observation is that Grasmick looks to be a worse version of Weast, and shows that Weast still could fall a lot further, especially if he sees Grasmick as a role model.