

"Federation Corner" column
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What's new In MCPS Land?

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Welcome to MCPS Land, where the news is always good, especially when it isn't. The relentless outbursts of good news have never been louder and more joyous, all to ensure that no one pays attention to what is really happening. Last week, MCPS announced: "MCPS Students Set New Advanced Placement Records - Scores of African American Students Surpass National Average for All Students." Last month it was "Performance of African American and Hispanic Kindergartners Closes Achievement Gap" with 93% of kindergartners now able to read a simple story. However, a story being told by the independent Office of Legislative Oversight is neither simple nor optimistic. "The mission of the Office of Legislative Oversight (OLO) is to provide accurate information, analysis, and independent findings and recommendations that help the County Council fulfill its legislative oversight function."

Last month, OLO released a report titled: "Defining and Describing [MCPS]' Progress in Closing the Achievement Gap." OLO found that progress was made in closing the gap in nine categories, that there was mixed progress in seven categories, and that ground was lost in four categories. However, not all categories are created equal. While it is always encouraging to have young children perform well in their first years in school, when the SAT gap still continues to grow as these students approach graduation, the early progress ends up signifying little when it really should count. Although the unvarnished truth is back in the report's Appendix, it is in plain sight, undisguised by the relentless cheerleading that accompanies reports done by MCPS' Office of Shared Accountability.

While 90% of Black kindergartners read at grade level in 2007, only 78% of Black first-graders and 56% of Black second-graders read at those grade levels. Although 87% of Hispanic kindergartners read at grade level in 2007, only 69% of first-graders and 50% of second-graders also read at grade level. While Black and Latino students made good to impressive gains between 2003 and 2007 on the Grade 3 and Grade 5 Maryland State Assessments (MSA) tests in reading and math, the percentage of Black students passing Grade 8 reading MSAs went from 51.1% to 61.8% in this 5-year period and from 48% to 58.5% for Latino students. In 2007, only 43% of Black eighth-graders and 45.9% of Latino eighth-graders passed the math MSA.

The performance of Black and Latino students taking the High School Assessments (HSAs), needed to graduate, is abysmal, with only about 68% of both groups in the Class of 2009 passing the English HSA in 2007, about 74% passing the Algebra HSA, and about 78% passing the Biology HSA. With 16 months to go until this class is to graduate, it looks like thousands of MCPS students may need to take advantage of the newly-created HSA special project escape clause to have a chance to receive a diploma.

The OLO report focuses on the wide disparity in suspension rates between White and Asian students and Black and Latino students, with as many as 16% of Black students and 10% of Latino students being suspended in 2006 as compared to about 3% each for White and Asian students. Of even greater concern is the first disclosure that I have ever seen of the different graduation rates. Unfortunately, OLO used a now-discredited method that still shows that 90.4% of MCPS students graduated in 2007, when MCPS has already accepted and "embraced" a new method that puts the overall MCPS graduation rate at about 80%. Keep that discrepancy in mind as the OLO report states that the 2007 graduation rate was 95.6% for Asian students, 93.9% for White students, 87.2% for Black students, and 80.4% for Latino students. If it turns out that all of these graduation rates are as much as 10% lower for each group, then MCPS has nothing to brag about and so much to explain when the day eventually comes that we demand to know the truth.

As for the glorious news about recent Black student performance on AP tests, in 2002, 55.6% received one or more AP scores of 3 or higher, and in 2006, it was 57.9%. MCPS always makes sure to compare our scores with students in other parts of the state and country to make our students' performance look better than it really is based on all of MCPS' amazingly effective programs. What really surprised me was the performance of MCPS 10th graders on the Preliminary SAT (PSAT), a free test taken by most students that is designed to show which students can do well in honors and AP classes. Only 26.2% of Black students and 22.2% of Latino students who took the Verbal PSAT test scored 44 or higher. For the Math PSAT, only 21.6% of Black students and 22.6% of Latino students scored 45 or higher. For the Writing PSAT, 29.4% of Black students and 28.7% of Latino students scored 43 or higher. These 2007 percentages were all lower than 2003, much more so with the math than with the verbal and writing percentages.

It should then come as no surprise as to what's really happening with the SATs, the "acid test" for predicting the ability of high school graduates to do well in college. The most recent scores are from 2005, and have been adjusted to remove the new writing portion so that past math and verbal performance can be accurately compared to current performance. Using the benchmark of a score of 1100 out of total of 1600, only 20% of Black seniors and 22% of Latino seniors scored at or above this level in 2005. In 2001, 18% of Black and 23% of Latino seniors reached this level. 67% of White seniors and 63% of Asian seniors reached this level in 2005, increases of 4% and 6%, respectively, from 2001.

The best that can be said after more than eight years of relentless good news from MCPS' superhuman superintendent and his multimillion dollar PR machine is that Black and Latino students are now performing much better in elementary school, are doing somewhat better in middle school, but have made little, if any, improvement in high school and in preparing to go to college.

While our County Councilmembers are wonderfully polite and even solicitous of MCPS and BOE officials, they continue to make good use of OLO to find the truths, even as OLO, diplomats that they are, do sugarcoat some of the facts and recommendations that they make. Since the BOE is incapable of providing oversight of MCPS, even if its members actually wanted to, only the County Council has the will and the ability to gather the facts and make informed judgments. In these very tough budget times, let's hope that the County Executive will have the courage to challenge the black box that is the MCPS budget, make hard choices, and encourage the County Council to do the same.

The one place that MCPS is full of fat is amongst the legions of \$100,000+ per year administrators who do no teaching in classrooms, yet are alleged to be part of the teaching program, rather than part of the bloated, hidden MCPS administrative bureaucracy. Liposuction of this part of MCPS by the County Council is long overdue, even if they cannot order MCPS to cut specific positions. However, when MCPS and BOE instead cut the programs that serve their most vulnerable students, the Council and the Executive will need to stand their ground and keep telling the truth of what they want cut.

In good times, we put up with an ever growing MCPS bureaucracy that has produced few lasting improvements. In bad times, we cannot afford to underwrite such a relentless failure.