

"Federation Corner" column
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Did MCPS deliberately misstate Newsweek's high school rankings?

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Whenever an annual milestone is reached by MCPS, whether test scores or graduation rates, I scrutinize both the data and MCPS' spin on the results because they invariably ignore real failures while joyously celebrating spurious successes. Since MCPS announced two weeks ago that Newsweek Ranks Six MCPS High Schools in the Top 100 in the Nation, More than Any Other District Nationwide", I thought I better look beneath the surface of this milestone as well. I expected to find furious spinning, but I did not expect to learn that MCPS may have misstated the actual results, even though I have previously documented some ways that MCPS has either made false statements or taken harsh criticism of it and managed to transform it into praise through selective misquoting.

This time, it appears that for both 2007 and 2008, MCPS has improved the rankings of its high schools from what was reported by Newsweek by anywhere from 1 position to as high as 64 positions in the ranking order. This seems like it would have been a remarkable gamble for MCPS to do something like this because anyone comparing the ranking on the Newsweek website with the claimed ranking in the MCPS press releases would not have missed the discrepancies. There is also the much larger issue of how well MCPS has done in this national performance measure and how it really compares to other schools.

In 1998, Jay Mathews, a Washington Post reporter and Newsweek editor, created a different way to rank high schools by taking the total number of Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB) or Cambridge tests given at high schools in May, and then dividing that by the number of seniors graduating in June. He has reported the local rankings of Washington area public high schools in the Post every year since 1998 and has reported the national rankings of all high schools in 1998, 2000, 2003, 2005, 2006 and 2007. Only those among the 27,000 high schools in the nation that earn a score of 1 or greater are ranked. This has been as few as 804 in 2003 and as many as 1391 in 2008.

Whether or not one believes this is a meaningful way to measure the academic quality of high schools in this country, Mr. Mathews has been consistently doing this work for a decade, and MCPS has unequivocally embraced it as being extremely important to them. In 2003, the first year of national rankings that are online, the top six MCPS high schools were Richard Montgomery (RM) at No. 38, Walter Johnson (WJ) at 47, Wootton at 64, Churchill at 78, Whitman at 89 and Bethesda-Chevy Chase (B-CC) at No. 203. In 2008, Newsweek's website ranks the top six MCPS schools as follows: RM - 32, Wootton - 60, B-CC 64, Whitman - 69, WJ - 76, Churchill - 98. In 2005, RM had been at 11, Wootton at 17, B-CC at 29, Churchill at 71, WJ at 80, and Whitman at 107. For RM, MCPS' top performer, to have gone from No. 11 in the nation to No. 32 between 2005 and 2008 hardly seems to be cause for celebration.

With the scores of most of these and the other MCPS high schools moving up and down at the same time, the message is quite mixed. While there has been a very public campaign in the last two years to get more high school students, particularly minority students, to take more AP classes and tests, the results have been remarkably inconsistent. The ranking of 12 schools went up (became worse) and those of 11 went down (became better). Some changes were truly dramatic. For example, the ranking of Quince Orchard went from 456 to 708 and Watkins Mill went from 229 to 444, while Northwest went from 840 to 480 and Blake went from 847 to 344. For what it might be worth, rankings went up - became worse - by a total of 1286 places and went down - became better - by a total of 1134 places, although just four of the eleven schools accounted for 85% of the lower - better - ranking. By this cumulative measure, MCPS fell further back compared to others.

As for the discrepancy in 2007 and 2008 between MCPS' version of ranking in its press releases and Newsweek's ranking on its website, what is interesting is that it appears that the higher - worse - the ranking, the greater the discrepancy, as if the author of this effort would have perhaps assumed that no one would have compared those schools with the worst rankings. For example, in 2007, RM was ranked 25 by MCPS' seeming "interpretation" of Newsweek's ranking, but was ranked 27 by Newsweek itself, a seeming improvement by MCPS of 2 positions. The gap then appeared to increase by 3, then 4, then 6, then 11 and so forth until the highest - "worst" - ranked MCPS school that year, Damascus, was ranked 870 by MCPS but was actually ranked 934 by Newsweek itself, a seeming gap of 64 positions.

For 2008, the gap appears to be much smaller. RM's ranking is correct for 2008, the only one that appears to be correct out of 46 rankings for both years. The gap then appears to "improve" by 1, then 2, then 3, then 4, then 6 and so forth until the highest - "worst" - ranked MCPS school this year, Seneca Valley, is ranked 906 by MCPS but is actually ranked 928 by Newsweek itself, a seeming gap of "only" 22 positions. All in all, MCPS appears to have made cumulative "unilateral improvements" in this way by a total of 512 positions in 2007 and by a total of 224 positions in 2008.

It's entirely possible that there is an innocent or completely justifiable explanation for these seeming discrepancies. However, no such reference about this is made on either the MCPS or the Newsweek websites. Since I've been so skeptical and since I've accused Superintendent Weast and his MCPS and his BOE of so many things so many times in the past few years, it would be so redundant to do so again this time. Instead, I will pass this information along to Mr. Mathews and his colleagues and see what they make of it. Meanwhile, if you like, you can go to the websites for the two years and do your own comparison.

<http://coldfusion.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/press/index.cfm?page=showRelease&id=2158>
MCPS Press Release - 5/20/07

<http://www.newsweek.com/id/39380/?q=2007/rank/1/>><http://www.newsweek.com/id/39380/?q=2007/rank/1/>
2007 Ranking from Newsweek Website

<http://coldfusion.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/press/index.cfm?page=showrelease&id=2339>
MCPS Press Release - 5/18/08

<http://www.newsweek.com/id/39380/?q=2008/rank/1/>><http://www.newsweek.com/id/39380/?q=2008/rank/1/>
2008 Ranking from Newsweek Website