

"Federation Corner" column
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How good is the cream of the crap served us by Chef Weast?

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When Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) Deputy Superintendent of Schools Dr. Frieda Lacey led a delegation to the Fourth Annual State-of-the-Research Conference of the Achievement Gap Initiative at Harvard University in June of this year, she added a little something to her presentation. First she bragged about what MCPS accomplished in its self-described "Red Zone" celebrated that 93% of MCPS kindergartners can do "text reading" and promised that "80% of our kids will be successful in Algebra I at the eighth."

Then she said: "What we look for are incremental gains over a period of time and when we see it leveling off or starting to go down, what do we do? We have to do something different, we have to diagnose and problem solve, we have to have a strategy. So as long as we see the incremental gains, we are reasonably comfortable with what we are doing. Our superintendent likes to say we are the cream of the crap." She added: "They're his words, not mine! But I think it conveys a powerful message because we can never be satisfied with the work that we are doing."

While the "crap" comment got laughs from the conference audience, some members of the Parents' Coalition - a scrappy and independent group of MCPS parents who have formed a Political Action Committee - criticized the comment, sparking media coverage. In response, Ronald Ferguson, professor and director of Harvard's Achievement Gap Initiative, said: "His point is that nobody's good enough yet! Montgomery County is doing very well compared with the past, but he doesn't want people in his district to become complacent or superior." Weast spokesman Brian Edwards said the superintendent uses "crap to mean school systems, not individual students."

If "Cream of the Crap" were a savory dish prepared by our very own Chef Superintendent, would he be serving it at Jerry's Diner or at Chez Weast? Or have we been getting diner food at haute cuisine prices?

How does our culture use the phrase "cream of the crap"? My Internet search found that it can mean the best of the worst, the worst of the best, the worst of what's left, but mostly, the worst of all. One website proclaimed: "We downloaded the cream of the crop and left the cream of the crap." A volume of New Yorker cartoon rejects was called "The Rejection Collection Vol. 2: The Cream of the Crap is the ultimate scrap heap of creative misfires/" A Swedish band called The Hellcopters released "Cream Of The Crap. This collection features 'out of print odds and sods' culled from various releases..." The 2007 Anime Awards announced that "this first day of the awards is our own tongue-in-cheek equivalent of the Razzies, acknowledging the best of the worst and the worst of the best - the Cream of the Crap, if you will." A baseball website revealed: "The Cream of the Crap (Part 1) Chris Jaffe takes the worst teams of all-time, puts them in a League of the Damned and runs a thousand sims. Will his computer be able to process all that bad baseball?"

A website of scatological poetry revealed: "The Best Rated Poems, the Cream of the Crap - View the best offensive poems (must be over 18 and very brave)." The 1993 search for the Worst Band in America was called Cream of the Crap. The winner? Florida's Scraping Teeth. Then there was the 2007 version of "The Cream of the Crap: 20 Films That Are So Bad They're Educational." The worst was judged to be "The Terror of Tiny Town", and "Manos: The Hands of Fate" is also considered by some to be the worst film of all. There is a "Cream of the Crap" website for cosmetics, photographs, and "Pathetic Personals."

Clearly, the best minds at Harvard and MCPS are sharply at odds with the rest of the nation as to what "Cream of the Crap" refers to. That Dr. Lacey would be referring to "incremental gains" in almost the same breath as "Cream of the Crap" tells me that it is MCPS' relentless effort to eke out positive news where there is little, to engage in a nonstop game trying to spin such poor straw into gold in press releases and at conferences is what is the real "Cream of the Crap." This is what the MCPS communications department has cooking in its kitchen every day.

The latest menu from them features this creamy concoction of the week, how MCPS students did on the 2008 Maryland State Assessments (MSA). "July 15, 2008: MCPS Students Achieve Sixth Consecutive Year of Higher Scores on Maryland School Assessment. African American and Hispanic Students Make Significant Strides in Narrowing the Achievement Gap." I wrote about the 2007 MSAs on 6/14/07 and 6/21/07. Then, as now, my biggest issue isn't whether MCPS students do well in the lower grades, but do they gain or retain enough of that learning in the upper grades to be prepared for high school and college? The 3rd grade African-American students who showed a proficiency of 48.3% in reading and 55.8% proficiency in math in 2003 now, as 8th graders, have 71.4% proficiency in reading and 51.1% in math in 2008. Hispanic 3rd graders who had 39.9% proficiency in reading and 56.5% in math in 2003 now have 67.8% in reading and 55.7% in math as eighth graders in 2008.

If you look at this year's scores at MCPS for African-American and Hispanic students, grade by grade, with the exception of the improvement between the 3rd and 4th grades, each higher grade is the same or less than the grade immediately below it. African-American students show 85.3% proficiency in reading in 4th grade but 71.4% in 8th grade and 80% proficiency in math in 4th grade but 51.1% in 8th grade. Hispanic students show 86.8% proficiency in reading in 4th grade but 67.8% in 8th grade and 82.9% proficiency in 4th grade but 55.7% in 8th grade. Is MCPS anywhere near reaching Dr. Lacey's stated goal that "80% of our kids will be successful in Algebra I at the eighth grade?" You can see the results for yourself at: <http://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/info/pdf/2008MSATables.pdf> .

MCPS often sounds "complacent or superior" when it tells everyone how great it is, with excerpts like these just for 2008: "MCPS Graduation Rate Third Among Nation's 50 Largest Districts! MCPS High Schools Ranked Among Top 100 in Nation! MCPS Students Set New Advanced Placement Records! MCPS students account for 36 percent of the AP exams taken in Maryland earning the mastery score of 3 or higher, propelling Maryland to the number-two spot in the nation. Without MCPS graduates included, Maryland's ranking would drop from number two to number 13 in the nation."

How does MCPS rate among the 24 public school systems in Maryland on the MSAs? MCPS ranked 11th out of the 24 jurisdictions for the 2008 MSA Assessments in Math for the average of Math 3 through Math 8 test results. It ranked 12th for Math 3, 18th for Math 4, 7th for Math 5, 11th for Math 6, 9th for Math 7, 9th for Math 8. Even though MCPS' Math 4 scores were the best of all MCPS Math scores, it was still far below most of the rest of the state at #18. Compared to the top ranked county at each grade level, Montgomery County was behind by 6.7 percentage points for Math 3, 4.5 points for Math 4, 4.1 points for Math 5, 7.3 points for Math 6, 11.6 points for Math 7, 6.2 points for Math 8. Worcester County is ranked #1 in the state for Math.

MCPS ranked 6th out of the 24 jurisdictions for the 2008 MSA Assessments in Reading for the average of Reading 3 through Reading 8 test results. However, the county ranked 11th for Reading 3, 11th for Reading 4, 7th for Reading 5, 6th for Reading 6, 7th for Reading 7, 5th for Reading 8. Even though MCPS' Reading 4 scores were the best of all MCPS Reading scores, it was still 11th out of 24, perhaps a "Cream of the Crap" rating of the "worst of the best" upper half of state school systems. MCPS was only able to achieve its overall 6th place ranking because the many other school systems that performed better only did so in one grade. Compared to the top ranked county at each grade level, Montgomery County was behind by 6 percentage points for Reading 3, 2.2 points for Reading 4, 2.6 points for Reading 5, 4.4 points for

Reading 6, 5.6 points for Reading 7, 3.8 points for Reading 8. Carroll County is ranked #1 in the state for Reading.

Worcester County Public Schools (WCPS), in the southeastern corner of the Eastern Shore, which includes Ocean City and Berlin, was first in the state out of the 24 jurisdictions in Grades 3, 7 and 8 on the 2008 Math MSA and first in the state in Grades 3 and 8 on the 2008 Reading MSA. It was first in the state in five of the twelve categories for the 2008 Math and Reading MSAs. The closest that another school system came to WCPS in 2008 was Howard County, which was first in the state in three of the twelve categories. WCPS was also first in the state in Grades 3, 6, 7 and 8 on the 2007 Math MSA and first in the state in Grades 3 and 8 on the 2007 Reading MSA, a total of six of the twelve categories.

With 6,830 students, WCPS is 70.8% white, 24% African-American, 3.2% Hispanic, 1.5% Asian, 32.2% Free and Reduced Meals (FARMS), 10.1% Special Education, 3% English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). By comparison, MCPS is 40.1% white, 22.9% African-American, 21.5% Hispanic, 15.2% Asian, 24.7% FARMS, 12% Special Education, 10.7% ESOL. While MCPS has a 63% larger African-American and Hispanic student population as a percentage of the student body, WCPS has 30% more students living in poverty as a percentage of the student body.

How much should we be paying for Chef Weast's best and only entree? Do we want to invite others to dine with us, or do we want to see what they're being served, how flavorful and nutritious it is, and what it costs?

The views expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect formal positions adopted by the Federation. To submit an 800-1000 word column for consideration, send as an email attachment to waynemgoldstein@hotmail.com