

"Federation Corner" column  
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### **Weast losing his war against the SAT**

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I have documented the myriad ways that School Superintendent Jerry Weast has manipulated test data and other objective facts to make MCPS performance look better than it is. The Washington Post finally began to see through Weast's ongoing subterfuge last week: "The latest SAT report from Montgomery County brims with bad news." In response to Weast's latest round of excuses, the Post also wrote: "Such factors do not, of course, explain why the county has lost competitive footing to neighboring counties on the SAT--[T]he SAT achievement gap is growing. On the core reading and math sections of the test, the disparity between white and black average scores has widened from 243 points in 2001 to 274 points this year. That makes the SAT a notable failure for Montgomery school officials in addressing the achievement gap, which has narrowed in several other areas, such as Maryland School Assessment [MSA] testing and [AP] participation. Test participation is down, as well."

Will the Post permanently join the growing ranks of those disaffected of Weast? Whatever happens, it is clearer than ever that Weast's most implacable opponent has been and continues to be the SAT. As much as he has fooled the Post and so many others about the real progress with MSA and AP test scores, his repeated failure to do the same with the SATs has finally caught up with him, showing that the results of this test may be as tamper proof as any educational measure can ever be.

Let's go through his excuses for his continuing failure. In his 8/26/08 memo to his BOE, he wrote: "The SAT combined scores for the (MCPS) Class of 2008 continue to be statistically significantly higher than the mean SAT combined scores for Maryland and the nation, but are lower than scores for the MCPS Class of 2007. On average, MCPS outperformed all test takers in Maryland and the nation, including private school students..." In his August 2007 memo, he wrote: "The systemwide average remained significantly higher than the average score for Maryland and the nation, both of which declined compared with the year before. The average score in MCPS was 'higher than the statewide' and 'national average'." The response in August 2006 was: "The first MCPS graduating class to take the new SAT scored significantly higher on the revised and lengthened exam than other graduates in Maryland and across the nation. Our students on average outscored the state and nation by greater margins this year on the new SAT compared with previous years."

What Weast makes absolutely no mention of at all is the fact that Hispanic students in the state of Maryland scored HIGHER than Hispanic students at MCPS in all three years, except for tying the Math scores in 2007. Weast was careful to repeatedly use the word "average" but never specifically commented on this recurring failure while he repeatedly implied all-around superior MCPS SAT results compared to others. Could this glaring omission be tantamount to a cover-up?

The other, even greater, unacknowledged failure is that African-American students are performing worse than ever on the SAT. The Post partially noted this. I have the Math and Verbal/Critical Reading scores from 1997-2008. In 1997, African-American scores for the two sections totaled 924. For 2008, the scores dropped to 887, which was also the biggest one-year drop in this 12-year period, having declined 17 points from what had then been the then-lowest score of 904 in 2007. This represents four years of a relentless decline totaling 30 points from 917 in 2005. The gap between African-American and white students has increased from 215 in 1997 to the largest gap ever of 274 in 2008, an increase of 59 points. This still happened even as the scores of white students declined by 13 points from a 2005 peak.

Weast blamed his version of Simpson's Paradox - an increase in the number of less-prepared students - for the decline last year. However, the percentage of African-American students who took the test in 2005 (67%) was almost identical to the percentage who took the test in 2008 (68%). In fact, when the percentage of African-American test takers made the largest jump from 61% in 2004 to 67% in 2005, the total score for the two original sections remained at 917, even though the SAT test also included the new Writing section. Even when there was a second, equally-large jump from 66% in 2006 to 72% in 2007, the total scores, which had already declined by 8 points the year before, only dropped by another 5 points. Will Weast be able to explain away the 17-point drop from 2007 to 2008 even as the number of African-American student test takers declined by 4%?

I've studied Weast's chart covering 2006 & 2007 that compared the SAT performance of students at MCPS three years or less and four years or more. He had written: "[I]nsufficient years of enrollment in MCPS are difficult to mitigate." When I mathematically adjusted for what were much small numbers of shorter-term students who also took fewer tests, I calculated that the overall effect on the group Hispanic student SAT scores in the two years was a mere 1-3 points per test section. Group African-American SAT scores were lowered 1-4 points per test section in 2006 and 3-6 points per test section in 2007.

Yet Weast unequivocally declared: "The effect is more apparent among African American students than any other group." However Asian-American student SAT scores were pulled down far more by the newer students, 11 points for Critical Reading and 9 points for Writing in both 2006 and 2007. Weast also claimed that the groups of established and newer African-American students were greatly diverging from one another in SAT performance. However, the actual point gaps of the six tests over two years for these students were 8, 19, 19, 25, 26, 40. For Asian-American students, the gaps were 12, 31, 84, 96, 100, 117. For Hispanic students, the gaps were 16, 20, 21, 24, 32, 38. White students had gaps of 13, 17, 19, 19, 29, 44. In fact, the numerical gap for 2006 and 2007 was lowest between the two groups of African-American students and highest among Asian-Americans.

Next week I will show the truth of Weast's self-serving efforts to "blame" ACT- the American College Test - for the decline in SAT scores and reveal surprises when MCPS is compared to Fairfax County Public Schools.

*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](mailto:waynemgoldstein@hotmail.com)*