

"Federation Corner" column
The Montgomery Sentinel - September 18, 2008

Weast's ACT doesn't hide the truth of the SAT

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Last week, I revealed that Weast's traditional group of excuses for MCPS' "bad news" 2008 SAT scores were untrue in many ways. This week, I focus on Weast's newest excuse of desperately seeking to blame ACT- the American College Test - for this precipitous decline. Weast appears to have planned ahead, laying the groundwork for the ACT excuse in 2006. His Office of Shared Accountability found: "About 18% of interviewed students (234) reported that they took an alternative college admissions test. A review of MCPS records for the Class of 2006 confirmed that about one half of the interviewed students (110) who chose to take an alternative college admissions test took the ACT." This means that only about 8% of this large, representative sample of students took the ACT in 2006.

Weast wrote in his August 2008 memo: "Although SAT mean scores for the MCPS Class of 2008 exceeded those for Maryland and the nation, they were lower than for the MCPS Classes of 2006 and 2007... One reason for this may be changes in test-taking patterns that have resulted from an increase in ACT participation. Between 2006 and 2008, the percentage of graduates who took the ACT increased by 8.3 percentage points to nearly one fourth of all graduates. Both participation and performance on the ACT have increased steadily over the last five years. At the same time, there was a decrease in SAT retesting among MCPS graduates of 5.5 percentage points between 2006 (65.5 percent) and 2008 (60.0 percent)."

In his 2008 memo, for the first time ever, Weast provides ACT test results in Table A11. However, he does so by listing test participation as "Took SAT and/or ACT", meaning one can't find out how many students took the ACT and how they did by race, sex and other groupings required for all other tests. However, I was able to subtract the numbers in Table A2, that only listed SAT participation, from the numbers in Table A11 that combined SAT and ACT participation. In 2006, 201 - 2.1% of the 9469 graduates - only took the ACT. In 2007, 107 - 1.1% of 9680 graduates, only took the ACT, not an upward trend. 350 students only took the ACT in 2008 - 3.5% of the 9844 graduates. Even if growing numbers of students are taking the ACT, almost all of them are also taking the SAT. A decline of 5.5 percentage points in SAT retesting is marginal on its face as well as compared to the fact that "nearly one fourth of all graduates" took the ACT. If this increased use of ACT really signifies something important, then Weast should be willing to release those scores without mixing them in with SAT scores. Could he have something to hide about ACT test performance?

Weast also uses contradictory excuses for declining SAT performance by claiming: "The College Board reports that, on average, students who retake the SAT increase their combined critical reading, mathematics, and writing score by approximately 40 points. The cumulative effect of the change in retesting, perhaps due to greater ACT participation, may contribute to the decline in MCPS SAT mean scores." Then, he questions the performance of SAT retakers by adding: "The student may then decide to retake the test in order to better his/her score in that one distinct area while not concentrating on the performance in the other areas. However, this 'cherry picking' technique could potentially create a problem for the school results because the score that is reported for the student to the district is the last comprehensive score, not necessarily the best comprehensive score." Weast wants us to believe that some students are taking the SAT only once because they then take the ACT and other students are taking the SAT more than once but are only trying to improve their score in one category on the later tests.

Finally, one of Weast's strongest lines of defense, MCPS' parity with or superiority to Fairfax schools, has been breached by the Washington Post: "Montgomery's composite score this year falls 38 points shy of the

Fairfax average... Just four years ago, Montgomery's composite score trailed Fairfax by just three points." The Post then equivocates with this: "In that span, the pool of low-income students taking the exam in Montgomery has grown significantly. Fairfax [County has] considerably less poverty." According to the Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) website, 20% of its students are eligible for Free and Reduced Meals (FARMS) compared to 25.8% at MCPS. FCPS has 14.8% of its students in English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) compared to 12% for MCPS. FCPS is 10.6% African-American, 18.3% Asian-American, 17.1% Hispanic, 47.7% White and 5.7% Multi-racial. MCPS is 22.9% African-American, 15.2% Asian-American, 21.5% Hispanic and 40.1% White. FCPS' FARMS rate is quite substantial, although MCPS has a 29% higher FARMS rate. However, FCPS' percentage of ESOL students is 23% greater than MCPS. Fairfax County may have less poverty than Montgomery County, but not "considerably less poverty" of its students.

It is still true that Asian-American and white students at MCPS have higher SAT scores than those groups at FCPS. However, African-American students at FCPS outscored African-American students at MCPS in all three SAT categories (Critical Reading, Math, Writing), in the last three years, by the following number of points: 2006 - 11, 15, 3; 2007 - 17, 13, 5; 2008 - 24, 27, 14. The gap between these two groups of African-American students has dramatically widened. Hispanic students at FCPS also outscored Hispanic students at MCPS in all of the categories as follows: 2006 - 28, 24, 22; 2007 - 24, 22, 14; 2008 - 28, 28, 22. While the achievement gap between these two ethnically identical groups didn't increase at all in this time period, it was already huge to begin with. By the way, Hispanic students at FCPS outscored Hispanic students in Virginia in every category in this three-year period, the opposite of how MCPS Hispanic students compared to Maryland Hispanic students. The gap in the 2008 SAT Critical Reading and Math sections was 204 points between African-American and white FCPS students, as compared to 274 points for those groups of students at MCPS. FCPS also releases its ACT scores separately and has not noted any impact on SAT scores despite thousands of its students taking ACT every year.

I have no doubt that Weast and his PR machine are working harder than ever to divert attention from this most significant failure to date, and I also have no doubt that no member of his BOE will challenge him on his extremely poor performance. In any other part of the country, such abysmal results would likely cause school board and other government officials to publicly express doubts about Weast's abilities and to perhaps even begin to call for his replacement. But, can it happen here? How many second chances do we give to someone who has promised so much for so long but has delivered so little?

Read Weast's 2008 memo at: <http://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/info/pdf/SATScoresClassOf2008.pdf>

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 waynengoldstein@hotmail.com