

"Federation Corner" column
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President Obama, take my Superintendent, Please!

by Wayne Goldstein
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This column could also be titled "Weast leads MCCF in its race to the bottom." But first, let's consider the persistent rumor, or perhaps the wishful thinking of the last few years, that Montgomery County's own P.T. Barnum of Education, Jerry 'There is a sucker born every minute' Weast, dreams of being the next U.S. Secretary of Education. Alas, the short list of 19 names in the Chronicle of Higher Education for this position does not include Weast. It's interesting that Michelle Rhee, D.C. school chancellor/superintendent, is on this list, even though she's only had that job for a few years. While I really don't want to inflict Weast on America's schoolchildren, I don't know how Montgomery County can survive almost three more years of this glitzy showman who has had his educational version of the Cardiff Giant on display for the last nine years and has forced us to pay immense sums to see it.

I've done much research in the last 2 1/2 years to document MCPS' precipitous descent into educational mediocrity and worse. With the amazing team of talent who make up the Parent's Coalition, I can now go to their list serve or website--<http://www.parentscoalitionmc.com>-- to get additional examples of MCPS' growing performance failures. This week's focus is on the High School Assessments (HSA) and the bizarre claim by Weast that people should pay no further attention to the HSAs but should instead agree that the American College Test (ACT) is a much more accurate gauge of the level of learning achieved by MCPS students.

Here's what the Parent's Coalition charts, developed from state data, show: MCPS ranks 19th in the state, out of 24 school systems, on the pass rate for the four HSA tests, which can be repeatedly retaken up to 12th grade to measure what students learned in 9th grade. 81.8% of MCPS 12th graders have passed all four HSAs. 20.6% of MCPS seniors are in the Free and Reduced Meals (FARMS) program, a measure of poverty. However, six other counties with higher rankings than MCPS have much higher FARMS rates, ranging from 24.9% to 47.8%, and spend less per pupil than does MCPS. MCPS spends \$12,647 per pupil, the highest in the state. Baltimore County, ranked 18th - just ahead of MCPS - with its higher 27.2% FARMS and its higher 84.6% pass rate, does better than MCPS while spending just \$10,079 per pupil, \$2568 less per pupil than MCPS. Carroll County, with its 9.6% FARMS and a 95.2% pass rate, ranks number 1 in the state while spending \$9,278 per pupil, \$3369 less per pupil than MCPS. Caroline County spends \$9,035 per pupil, the lowest amount in the state, which is 71.4% of what MCPS spends per pupil. However, it ranks 15th with an 87.4% HSA pass rate, but also has a 35% FARMS rate.

Every extra thousand dollars per pupil costs Montgomery County taxpayers about \$140 million per year. For what amounts to hundreds of millions extra every year, we are getting much poorer performance than counties that spend much less per pupil, even when they also have much higher poverty. Perhaps our county taxpayers should either demand their money's worth or demand a refund. Perhaps we should examine the administrative structure of these better performing counties, and use those findings as the basis for possibly eliminating hundreds of high-salaried, non-teaching MCPS educational bureaucrats.

Since Weast has not been able to figure out how to game the HSA system, he and his BOE choir are now whining about some very strange things in unison, as reported this week in the Gazette: "In its opposition of the HSAs, the county school system has criticized the state education department for requiring students to pass the tests, even while officials continue to tweak them. 'If you're going to put in something like this, you need to put it in with some degree of planning,' Weast said. 'When you shoot low, the floor becomes the

ceiling.' " In defending the HSAs, state Superintendent Nancy S. Grasmick said the tests represent the bare minimum of what students should know when they graduate.

Apparently, Weast and his BOE are hoping that no one has noticed how poorly MCPS seniors are doing trying to pass these "bare minimums" as compared to most of the rest of the state. They deserve to be criticized for their desperate strategy of trying to divert attention from such poor performance by demanding that a much tougher test, the ACT, instead be used. In my September 18th column, I pointed out that Weast was reporting ACT scores lumped together with SAT scores, causing me to wonder what he had to hide by not showing separate ACT test performance, something that Fairfax County Public Schools has done for years. I believe Weast is just trying to buy some more time to delay his next day of reckoning when we eventually learn that ACT test performance is no better among minorities than SAT and AP test performance.

We have two new members about to join the currently irrelevant and enervated BOE. Do they come in ready and willing to have the life force sucked out of them by Weast and the co-opted school union leadership, or are they intent on creating a nucleus of reform that will miraculously bring their comatose colleagues back to life? Daring to hope against experience, here are my top ten reforms for a possible Berthiaume-Kaufman tag team to introduce:

1. Hire enough BOE staff to provide independent verification of MCPS performance claims. Take these staff from MCPS, including part of its Office of Shared Accountability, put them under a Chief of Staff who reports only to the BOE, and make the Ombudsman a separate position where the office is also physically removed from the BOE offices.
2. Ask the state legislature to double or triple BOE salaries so that members will be able to justify to themselves and their families putting in the hours that the job demands.
3. Ask to be part of CountyStat and accept their advice, ask the independent County Inspector General and the County Council Office of Legislative Oversight to do lots of audits and studies and make lots of recommendations for improvement.
4. Greatly strengthen MCPS and BOE ethics laws and enforcement so that MCPS officials who cut big corners will find themselves out of a job.
5. Provide very tight oversight of all school Independent Activity Funds, even putting them under centralized control.
6. Rewrite regulations to strengthen community involvement, and otherwise bring back unscripted community participation.
7. Put all MCPS contracts, checks, and credit card charges online in a searchable data base.
8. Make contract funding sources and actions for all goods and services as transparent and as detailed as possible.
9. Have BOE staff regularly scrutinize certain of Weast's and his top staff's activities, such as his attending conferences for 57 days in 2008, and the extravagant amounts spent on staff meals and entertainment.
10. Start thinking about what you really want in the next superintendent, which means ruthlessly examining all of Weast's big failures, studying his modest but genuine successes, deciding what kind of leader can best clean up the mess he created over 12 years, and deciding how you can most honestly try to improve

student performance and not to be fooled again by yourselves or another superintendent more focused on marketing claimed successes than enacting genuine positive change.

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