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## What's Behind a School Division's Baldrige Success?

*Montgomery County, Md., Public Schools has been named one of seven 2010 recipients of the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award, the nation's highest presidential honor for performance excellence. MCPS was the only school division named, the other recipients were business and health care related.*

### **Superintendent Jerry Weast answers AASA's questions about his school division's win.**



#### **Q: What are you most proud in terms of your districts' performance?**

A: Since I arrived at Montgomery County Public Schools in 1999, this district has undergone huge change, including dramatic increases to the number of students who need economic and academic assistance. Consider that the number of students receiving Free and Reduced-Price Meals (FARMS), an indicator of poverty, has increased by more than 57 percent and the number of students who don't speak English as their first language has more than doubled. These types of shifts have been seen in other large districts, but few—if any—have been able to maintain, and even improve, student performance in all areas. But that is exactly what MCPS has done. We've done this by using our resources strategically, supporting our staff, setting high expectations and embracing the idea of continuous improvement. The results speak for themselves.

- MCPS has the highest graduation rate among the nation's large school districts, according to Education Week

- Nearly 30,000 Advanced Placement Exams were taken in 2010, more than three times the number of exams taken in 1999.

- The class of 2010 scored an average of 1,653 on the SAT, an all-time high and well above the state and national averages.

- More than 90 percent of kindergarteners have met or exceeded reading targets, narrowing the achievement gap by race, ethnicity and socioeconomic status.

- Last year's graduates earned \$234 million in college scholarships, an immediate 10 percent return on the MCPS budget.

**Q: What was the role of leadership in encouraging the workforce to come on board and use the Baldrige Criteria for Performance Excellence?**

A: When I was appointed as superintendent of MCPS I conducted an environmental scan of the organization to see where we needed to focus our time and resources. One of the things I chose to do was to use the Baldrige Criteria and develop a mock application that was submitted to the University of Maryland's Center for Quality and Productivity. I chose the Baldrige Criteria because it is the most rigorous criteria any organization can measure itself against. The University contracted a number of Baldrige examiners to study our organization and give us feedback on our responses in the application based on the criteria. We then took that feedback report and began to analyze our opportunities for improvement cited by the examiners and develop action plans to address concerns and vulnerabilities. I believe this process established the tone in MCPS that we were going to focus on continuous improvement and that the Baldrige Criteria would form the foundation of our continuous improvement model. We have used the Baldrige Criteria during my entire tenure as superintendent and have participated in both the state and national awards programs. The awards are nice, however, the feedback you receive through the process is most valuable and staff realize that continuous improvement in MCPS is not an option it is the way we do business.

**Q: How do you guide and sustain the school district?**

A: Consistency is a huge part of the equation. When I arrived, the community developed and embraced a strategic plan, *Our Call to Action: Pursuit of Excellence*. This has been the foundation of everything we have done over the past 12 years. Each year we update it to make sure we are addressing our current needs but the underlying ideas and guiding principles have remained constant. It has helped everyone from the Chief Operating Officer to the bus driver; from the classroom teacher to the maintenance worker, from the principal to the school counselor know exactly what we are about and what is expected of them. I also believe in distributing leadership and sharing power. So many school districts around the nation are struggling with their unions as they try to make difficult cuts. But at MCPS, we have built a trusting, respectful relationship with our employee associations and they are at the table as we are building our budgets and making difficult decisions. I don't think it is very productive if you are constantly beating up the troops and that seems to be happening more and more in education. At MCPS we have a culture of respect and that extends from the board room to the classroom and everywhere in between.

**Q: Since you're retiring in June, what type of succession planning and future leader development is in place? How will the use of the Baldrige framework be sustained?**

One of the best reasons to implement the Baldrige Criteria is that your organization doesn't become dependent on one person. I feel comfortable retiring knowing that we have the people, the programs and the processes in place to continue our excellent work. Whenever possible, we try to grow our leaders from within because they have a deep understanding of what we are doing at MCPS and they understand the Baldrige Criteria and what it has meant to us in our journey. We make a strong investment in leadership development because it is what sustains the organization. In fact, we have a leadership team attend Harvard University's Public Education Leadership Program (PELP) each summer to learn about effective leadership and management strategies from experts at the Harvard Business School and Harvard Graduate School of Education.

**Q: How do you communicate with the workforce and encourage high performance?**

In a school system, communication must be a constant for the organization to thrive and survive. I communicate with staff through a variety of ways. I meet with all of my principals and administrators several times a year to share the latest information with them and, in those meetings, we attack specific issues and discuss how—as school system leaders—we can make a change. We give our community, our students and our employees many ways to give us feedback, from public hearings and focus groups, to “study circles,” which provide a safe environment for people to share with each other and break down barriers. Through the Montgomery County Business Roundtable for Education, our senior staff meets with area business leaders to discuss leadership, problem solving and continuous improvement. With their help, we are building a bridge between outstanding education and sound business practices that will benefit our employees, our students and our entire county.

**Q: What challenges did MCPS' socioeconomic diversity bring to the task, and how did the school**

### **system work that through?**

We have high expectations of all of our students, regardless of their zip code, their family income, their race or ethnicity. But we also realize that different schools have different needs and that we must distribute our resources and our talent in an equitable manner. This doesn't mean everyone gets the same—it means the resources meet the needs. When I arrived, we recognized that there were two school districts within our boundaries—one was generally affluent and one had a higher percentage of students living in poverty, and that rate was growing. We allocate more funding to the schools with the higher needs, which can be spent on programs and initiatives that deal directly with the socioeconomic achievement gap, such as early grade reading skills and the need for robust prekindergarten programs. This has allowed some of our schools with a poorer population to achieve at the highest levels and allows us to maintain those high expectations for all students.

### **Q: How have you established and maintained such a collaborative relationship with your unions?**

The short answer is respect. We realize that the leadership of our employee associations have a job to do—they must represent their members zealously. But, we also know that they are motivated by the same goals that we are: providing our students with the best education possible. With that mutual respect for each other, we have been able to engage in interest-based bargaining with our unions and they are a partner in our teacher evaluation system. The union heads attend our Executive Leadership Team meetings and they are part of the team that helps me develop my initial budget recommendation. They have also been a key part of helping us reduce costs and make difficult budget cuts during the economic downturn. Most notably, the unions have voted to forgo their cost of living increases for the past three years and this has been done with relatively little acrimony.

### **Q: How is the district closing the achievement gap?**

We follow our strategic plan. We set clear, high expectations for all of our students. We build the capacity of our staff and we have the courage to confront head on the issues of poverty and race. We will not allow these challenges to be used as an excuse for low achievement because we know that all students can achieve at high levels if given the right supports. One of the efforts I am most proud of is the fact that we have opened to all students the opportunity to take rigorous classes, such as Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate. Too often, students are sorted out of these classes, but we have implemented processes for making sure students who can handle advanced work are identified and encouraged to take rigorous classes. Consequently, we had nearly 30,000 Advanced Placement exams taken in 2010—more than triple the number of exams taken the year I arrived. And in Maryland, more than half of the exams taken by African Americans that receive a college ready score are from Montgomery County.

### **Q: How did you get the district to adopt and become a data-driven organization?**

Data is only useful if it leads to action. From my early meetings with staff, I established the expectation that we would study our student data, drill down into what it is telling us and then take appropriate action. One way we are making this happen is through the “M-Stat” process. We take a specific data point from our strategic plan and bring our teachers, principals and staff together to discuss it and develop an action plan for improvement. This process has become ingrained in our culture and is key to continuous improvement—a hallmark of the Baldrige Criteria. Over the last several years, I have begun collecting college completion data, so we can determine how well we are preparing our students for post-secondary work. If we are going to ask our taxpayers to continue to invest in Montgomery County Public Schools, we must make sure that our students are ready for college and work when they cross the stage on graduation day. We are doing well in this area, but there is certainly room for improvement.

### **Q: How could smaller districts and completely urban districts apply performance excellence?**

Each district—large and small—has its own set of circumstances to deal with. But it is vitally important that every district take a strategic approach and be willing to stick to that plan, despite external pressure. Too many districts are chasing the education reform “flavor of the month,” scrapping their previous school improvement plans even before they've had a chance to take hold. At MCPS, *Our Call to Action* is the foundation of our school improvement efforts. And it takes courage. Once districts come up with the right plan, they have to have the courage to see it through regardless of the challenges and difficulties that occur.