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Exit Interview: MoCo superintendent Jerry D. Weast on lessons learned

By Nick Anderson, Sunday, April 10, 4:14 PM

Blind in his right eye since a childhood accident, Jerry Dean Weast sees further than most education leaders. He grew up on a Kansas farm, the son of a teacher in a one-room schoolhouse, and became a school superintendent in Kansas, Montana, South Dakota and North Carolina before he landed one of the most demanding posts in public education: running the high-flying Montgomery County schools. [Weast will retire as superintendent](#) in June after a 12-year run that has drawn widespread praise for [narrowing academic gaps](#) between the haves and the have-nots.

Weast, 63, spoke with The Washington Post recently in his Rockville office and in a follow-up telephone call. The following are excerpts.

To attack achievement gaps, you split the school system into two parts. The “green zone” was better off economically and academically. The “red zone” was not. What was your goal?

I had a simple way to capture people’s imaginations when I came — by taking a map of the whole county, putting everybody’s school district lines on it for the elementary schools so they could actually go see where their house is. Then I showed the differentiation by using red and green to ensure that everybody vividly understood that we were dealing with two different worlds.

People would push back.

I said: “Let’s just assume it’s your lawn. Would you make the green grass brown? Or would you make the red grass green?”

Everybody would always come back: “Well, you make the red grass green.” They seemed to understand that concept. It’s emotional.

And then how would you do that? Everybody had an answer: “We’d adjust the water, give it the right fertilizer. Put the right seeds in. We’d nurture [it]. Because if we had a totally green lawn, we would actually be able to sell our house better.”

But aren’t people upset if their schools are labeled the red zone?

Of course. You know, the first thing that you have to do is get people to face up to a problem. If I’m going to the doctor, I might not want to look at the X-ray. But guess what? I will not cooperate and I will not face the issue until I have to see it.

Did it take a lot of extra money to help the red zone?

Just a couple thousand dollars a student. It's a 10 to 15 percent difference. If I've got to pay 10 to 15 percent extra and get a similar or close-to-similar outcome, I'd keep investing.

How hard is it to persuade folks in the green to give more money to those in the red?

Easier when they understand the problem. Easier when they know you're not lying to them, that you're really going to stick with it. Easier when you show that you're not just there to rob them, to transfer, to have another failed program. This isn't just a social experiment.

When you concentrate on process, and who gets what, you get a lot of warfare. We got people to not look at the inputs but to examine the outcomes. The question is, are you and your children better off than before? And the answer is yes, overwhelmingly, no matter where you are in the county.

People understand it, by and large. They understood that we are in charge of our entire front lawn — Montgomery County — and if we chose not to do anything about it, it was going to hurt us all.

What was the payoff?

Quality has gone up when historically the demographics that would cause white flight have increased: poverty, the number of kids that don't speak English as their first language.

We set the highest scores in the history of the district. The highest SAT scores. The highest graduation rates. The highest college attendance and college graduation rates — and we have the evidence to prove that.

In fact, we're now 2 1/2 percent of United States children who check the box that they are African American and are able to get a 3 [out of 5] on an Advanced Placement test. And nearly 1 percent of all of the Latinos in the United States of America who scored a 3 on an AP test came from this system.

But there are still major achievement gaps. Hispanic students, for example, are much less likely to graduate on time than non-Hispanic white students. Black students trail far behind white counterparts on state math tests. Is it realistic to expect such gaps will close?

It actually is not only realistic, it's something we're going to have to do. What America needs to understand is how much time it's going to take and how much effort it's going to take. We're going to have to have ... the discipline to stay over a long period of time.

If budgets tank, will the Weast strategy fall apart?

No.

Why not?

Because it's the people's strategy. It's the community's strategy; and even more important, the people who work in the system now believe, and it has become their plan.

What have you learned from this quest?

The hardest lesson to learn is patience. I mean, everybody wants everything right now. It's America. And it's hard, hard to hold people steady for a 10-to-12-year period of time.

I've learned the people who work in the schools came there for the right reasons. The majority of them. Yes, we've had to figure out how to weed our garden, if you will. There are folks who get into our profession, and it isn't a good fit. They're not very effective or productive.

But, you know, our own people figured out how to weed the garden [through] professional support and peer assistance and review. They do a better weeding process than I ever could — and it's cheaper, quicker, better, faster.

Does the focus on achievement gaps mean you pay less attention to other problems?

Certainly you have to talk about the achievement gap, or people will think you don't notice. But a more important gap is high expectations for all. That's the conundrum you fall into: If you just concentrate on closing the achievement gap, people think you're going to lower the bar. If you concentrate on just excellence, people think that you are going to leave bunches behind.

So we came up with a phrase — raise the bar and close the gap.

You can't do this at the expense of your high-end kids that metabolize quick, who had good language skills when they came to school, whose parents give them extra training and support, stuff like that. You cannot, cannot. That's a lesson for every superintendent. Do not leave those kids behind. They need a push just as much as anybody.

Now, the target in America is not high enough: It's getting out of high school. What's the good of getting out of high school if you haven't learned anything? I think graduation rates are important, but I'd just as soon when they graduated and cross the stage, they actually had the skills to do something.

Many people are focusing on graduation rates.

I'm telling you, they're chasing the wrong rabbit.

But there are a lot of kids who aren't even graduating.

I understand. But for every one that is graduating, you better have them ready. The real issue is, we're shooting too low.

You have strong feelings about how we track children in school. Why?

Because who gets sorted? On every occasion, they are kids of color, socioeconomic, you know, "wrong" parents. In the old days, when you came from Europe, you had to be born in the landed gentry or have some title or something like that. We came to America to get rid of that.

But don't your schools perpetuate sorting? Kids go to your schools, and they're assigned to a gifted-talented track or a regular track.

Well, I'm gradually moving that away. Over time, we've got everybody moving toward college. The problem is, you can't go in and do this social engineering that you see happening all over the country, because it never worked, and it blew up in everybody's face.

What you can get everybody in this country to agree on is everybody needs a certain quality of education in order to choose their options and opportunities.

You have close relations with labor.

I have close relations with people who work in the school business. They happen to be unionized, and I find that good, because it's easier to actually visit with them because they have an organized structure. We have 22,000 employees. It's just hard to have a sit-down conversation with all 22,000 of them.

Is there a downside to working with unions?

None.

Suppose you find an efficient solution to a budget problem, but the union objects. Would you go forward anyway?

I'd have to know why they were objecting to it. If they were objecting to it just for power — yes, I would override. If they were objecting to it because the theory I had was wrong — mmm, not so much. You see, we're in this together.

When I look at the good companies, they want to be the place where everyone wants to go to work. They want to be the place where people feel engaged. They want to feel a part of the leadership. Heck, they want to pull the lever and stop the assembly line if there's a bad product. But yet, when we go over to schools, we want to work just the opposite.

Did all the No Child Left Behind tests take the joy out of schools?

No. Look, it pointed out the sorting. It also said you need metrics to see where you are going, and you need to be more transparent. Granted, they chose the wrong metrics. They left that to every state. The variability was horrible. States gamed the system.

Last year, Maryland won a federal grant called Race to the Top. It is President Obama's signature reform program. [But Montgomery refused to participate and lost millions of dollars. Why?](#)

We've worked years to get where we are. We weren't going to [switch] what we were doing to something that wasn't built, had no curriculum, didn't have a testing regimen and was going to offer us \$3 million in a \$2 billion budget. Can't go backwards. That's the problem with a lot of the reform agenda: It is a whole bunch of theory and not a whole lot of action.

You were a superintendent before the Department of Education was created in 1980. What is the right federal role?

To try to get us emotionally to accept that we're going to have to change. The wrong federal role is to try to figure out how to structure that and monitor it in 15,000 localities. The right role is to be tight on standards but loose on how people go about getting there.

[Montgomery students face a lot of academic pressure from home and school. Is it too much?](#)

No. Some kids think so. Some parents think so. I have heard this for 12 years. This isn't anything new.

What does it take for your kid to get into college? You want 'em out of the basement when they grow up. So, do you want them to go to college?

I'm not pushing your child. You're pushing your child. Your children are pushing themselves because they want to have a life!

You fought a special education case all the way to the Supreme Court. Schaffer v. Weast tested the power of parents who challenge education plans for students with disabilities.

[And we won.](#)

But you made a lot of parents unhappy.

I've also made a lot of friends. There are 17,000 of these children who have special needs in the school system, and we're not talking about 17,000 of them having problems.

Why did you fight so hard?

I don't want special education kids sorted out of classes. I want them to be pushed like all children. I want them to have a great teacher. And I want them to be around all the children, not off in some other wing of the building or in some special school.

How big a deal is rising class size?

If you're a teacher, it's a huge deal. There comes a time when you put so many kids in, and you're asking [teachers] to differentiate between the child who is already studying precalculus and the child who is trying to learn the language, [and] that teacher then starts saying, "You don't care, I can't trust you, and you have absolutely no clue what my job is."

What will be the biggest challenge for your successor?

Everybody's got a theory. Nobody understands quite what executing those theories is like in a large system. There will be people coming in saying: "Don't follow this curriculum. Here, try this new technique." There will be people who come in and say: "You got along too well with the workers. Let's take that power back."

You've got to resist that temptation, and you've got to stay the course.

What do you plan to do next?

Hopefully, I'll have opportunities to work with people who really want to make a difference in education and children's lives, who understand that it's going to take time, and want to solve teacher and student problems.

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