

# Engage Educators in Order to Achieve the Best Results for Students

Investing in a vision is essential, but the real work of school improvement can't be done unless leaders engage the hearts of the educators who must do the work.

**By Jerry D. Weast**



*The author talks with 4th-grade teachers at Beall Elementary School, Rockville, Md.*

Open a newspaper or watch a primetime television show that features schools and you'll find stories that are pointedly critical of some aspect of public education. As an educator, these aren't easy debates to hear or depictions to watch, but the stark reality is that we *are* confronted with public schools that aren't delivering on the promise of a high-quality education for every child. Schools face unprecedented changes as poverty increases, and districts battle for scarce budget dollars even as they are expected to do more — produce college-ready and career-ready graduates — with less. Although much of the current conversation cen-

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ters on teacher “accountability” for student achievement, as the leader of Montgomery County Public Schools, one of America’s largest, most diverse — and arguably one of the most successful — systems, I can say the fault lies not solely with the teacher, but rather with a *system* that frequently doesn’t serve the interests of the teacher or the student well.

**Every community that faces the challenge of integrating more students who are poor and from less educated families must decide whether to pursue equity or excellence as mutually exclusive goals or equity and excellence as an integrated strategic solution.**

As any leader can attest, knowing *what* you want to accomplish and *why* it matters is vastly different than knowing *how* it can be done. How do we build a system that cultivates and supports a workforce that is resilient and capable of serving the increasingly challenging needs of students?

Whether the leader of a district, a school, a classroom, or a supporting services team, our job is to seek and find the answer to several related questions: Under what conditions can the seemingly impossible become possible? Under what conditions do teachers excel? Under what conditions does every child learn and grow?

The best organizations are about more than the best leaders, the best product, or the best service. The best organizations create value for those they serve by bringing out the best performance of everyone who is a part. We will likely spend more than a third of our waking hours at our chosen profession, but under what conditions does a job transform into our calling? Under what conditions do we find both our own sense of fulfillment and feel confident that we contribute regularly to that of others?

Over my 11 years as superintendent of Montgomery County Public Schools, we overcame tribal entrenchment among constituencies by creating a shared vision that empowered us to set aside our entitlements and build a system and a culture of achievement. With the right people, the right plan, and the right process — and a healthy dose of persistence — we finally achieved here what I have strived for the whole of my career: to ensure race and class are not predictors of academic success. We did this by creating and supporting a culture that enabled the best people to do their best work — not by attacking the competencies or the intentions of our workforce. That mindset has paid off in real results for students. As minority students exceeded 60% of student enrollment, the number of English language

learners more than doubled, and students receiving free or reduced-price meals increased by nearly 60%, we still managed the following unlikely successes:

- Almost 90% of kindergartners enter 1st grade with essential early literacy skills.
- Nearly 88% of 3rd graders read proficiently.
- About 90% of 12th graders graduate from high school.
- 87% of graduates enroll in college, including 77% of high-poverty students.
- Our college graduation rate is nearly twice the national average.
- African-American and Hispanic students participate and succeed on Advanced Placement examinations at nearly twice the national rate for all students.
- SAT scores in 2010 were the highest in the history of the school district (1653 composite); scores for African-American and Hispanic students increased by 49 and 54 points, respectively, narrowing the achievement gap with Asian and white peers.

I’ve led systems where almost everyone in the community was white and middle class and where students thrived in homes with well-educated parents, “can do” attitudes, clear expectations, and the knowledge and means to support learning and growth both in and out of the classroom. It’s not that the kids or their families were better or smarter — or that we worked any less diligently — but as a system, we could rely on those families to know which courses their children should take, how to study effectively, and how to prepare for and apply to college. With over 15,000 school districts, there are still areas in America where communities possess this combination of both *desire* and *knowledge*, which serves to keep alive a student’s hope for a robust future. These communities taught me an important lesson about the value of a pervasive culture of high expectations.

I’ve also led systems where the majority of students were significantly challenged by issues related to race and poverty. Nationally, nearly 70% of African-American children are born to unwed mothers, and only 35% live with two parents. These and other conditions affect the education level of parents, the economic earning power of households, and the time and money available for learning outside of the classroom. Regardless of their circumstances, I learned that aspirations did not vary in those communities, but many lacked the strategies and supports to achieve those aspirations, acquired from generations of previous family experience. I was inspired by these students and families, but in the past was unable to bring together the political and finan-



cial will to support both investments in teacher capacity and differentiated financial support for students who were more at risk of failure.

## EQUITY AND EXCELLENCE

A suburb of Washington, D.C., Montgomery County, Md., is home to nearly 1 million people. Historically, many of the residents were both well-educated and well off. However, 12 years ago, the county became a magnet for recent immigrants and the poor, hungry for work related to the economic boom of the time and hopeful for a great and transformative education for their children. In 1999, minority students already accounted for nearly 50% of the school population, and demographic data forecast nearly all new growth would occur in this cohort. Many schools in America will soon face the same situation. Every community that faces the challenge of integrating more students who are poor and from less educated families must decide whether to pursue equity *or* excellence as mutually exclusive goals or equity *and* excellence as an integrated strategic solution. Pursue equity alone and you may drive away the benefits of a pervasive culture of high expectations. Pursue excellence alone and you could find yourself with even sharper divides in performance and the system ultimately overtaken by low achievement associated with the lack of school readiness frequently linked with economically challenged students. MCPS chose to pursue both equity and excellence and charted a course that would enable us to achieve both.

Using data to expose variability in performance, we leveraged this new knowledge to persuade and lead staff and the community to craft a vision and plan of excellence and meaning for all graduates. However, if we in MCPS were going to achieve our goals, rather than just talk about them, we needed more than the inspiring message or the plan on paper. We needed our 22,000 people — with the right support — to get it done.

## SPECIFIC GOALS


Getting the system right means translating the vision and mission into specific strategies and tactics and measuring progress through milestones and goals. But a system also has to ensure that the questions answered by the plan are translated into intuitively actionable roles and responsibilities for each employee. Getting from “what do we do” to “what am I responsible for” specifically identifies

how each position in the system connects to goals for student achievement. Bus drivers are responsible for students arriving at school both safely and on time. Cafeteria workers serve nutritious meals on schedule. Curriculum writers work with professional development and data teams to ensure that what is taught is learned and that what is learned leads to meaningful results for students and capable citizens for the community.

**The best organizations create value for those they serve by bringing out the best performance of everyone who is a part.**

Extensive collaboration with employee organizations allowed creation of a network of supports through mentoring and professional development, as well as a means for terminating those who remained unsuccessful in their roles. Having a clear sense of purpose and mission also enabled us to create a new hiring and onboarding process that screens for our key cultural touch points and inculcates all new employees with our culture and values and their roles and responsibilities.

The significance of developing a workforce whose




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members share values, a sense of pride in the school system “brand,” and a common culture can’t be overstated. Developing that core of high expectations doesn’t occur overnight. It happens when the system

dates for higher level coursework.

Staff members also took it upon themselves to develop a process to monitor and share best practices among school leaders on critical student performance measures. Called M-Stat, the process brings together school leaders to address such topics as successfully implementing an advanced math curriculum in elementary school or identifying processes and practices that result in reduced out-of-school disciplinary suspensions.

## DELIBERATE EXCELLENCE

Over my 35-year career as a superintendent, I’ve developed the Deliberate Excellence® framework to articulate the five phases of systemic change through which a system moves — and through which MCPS continues to move — as it creates and builds a culture that will deliver on the values the organization has agreed are important. The examples in the preceding paragraphs illustrate Stage Four engagement. The system’s most important work is to optimize interaction between student and teacher. This requires investing in building teacher capacity so that teachers are prepared, in turn, to build the capacity of every student.

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- Stage One: In “discovery,” system and community leaders evaluate the efficacy of current operations and build the commitment to work together to ensure their high school diplomas translate to something of value for students.
- Stage Two: Committed education and key constituency leaders craft a “North Star,” an operating vision and compelling story grounded in college readiness and data, and develop a reporting system to gauge progress.
- Stage Three: Self-identification of existing conditions exposes what a system is organized to do versus what leaders have set out to do. School systems working in this stage delve into the efficacy and effectiveness of data systems, curriculum alignment, policies, practices, and processes. Work in this stage focuses principally on the system as separate from the people who do the work.
- Stage Four: Change processes and structures into a cohesive culture and a coherent structure.
- Stage Five: Innovate and monitor for continuous improvement. At this stage, culture drives changes in processes, and innovations originate from the teams doing the work.

attends to the aspirations of both students and employees. The convergence between the interests, needs, and college readiness goals of students with the talent, skills, and knowledge of our workforce occurs in one simple word: engagement.

The evidence of workforce engagement has percolated through this school system. Staff created the Seven Keys to College Readiness because of their desire to explain the academic pathway to college readiness to all families and especially those who didn’t believe college would be an attainable goal for their child. This communication tool provides a clear illustration of academic milestones, kindergarten through high school. This tool also has proven to be a unifying reference point for staff systemwide, putting the district’s goal of producing college and career-ready graduates in sharper focus.

## ATTACKING RACISM

In Montgomery County, we have tackled head on the vestiges of institutional racism in an effort to break down barriers to success for students of color. For example, we confronted the propensity to track talented minority students away from rigorous courses. To address this, staff developed a tool to identify overlooked students by building on student performance information from the school system-funded administration of the PSAT to all 10th graders. The database, Honors Advanced Placement Identification Tool, or HAPIT, provides in one place the PSAT score along with other selected data on each 10th-grade student to flag promising candi-



*Jerry Weast interacts with children at Twinbrook Elementary School, Rockville, Md.*

William E. Mills



Over the past decade, MCPS has moved through these stages. Today, most of the moving parts of the system operate in Stages Four and Five. A compelling Stage Five illustration of staff-driven innovation is the development of an integrated curriculum for the elementary grades. This pioneering project is the next generation of elementary curricula and was made possible because of the strong culture of collaboration among teachers and central office curriculum staff. Curriculum staff listened to classroom practitioners, and both recognized that to prepare students for the rigor of college, critical and creative thinking and academic success skills had to be more deeply embedded in the early grades in a compelling and engaging way. The curriculum also delivers on-line instructional resources and professional development, saving teachers time and providing more opportunities for collaboration. The curriculum is being piloted and launched sequentially, with completion of a K-5 continuum scheduled in 2013.

#### ENGAGING THE STAFF

Many reform efforts today are missing the systemic approach that engages and supports the workforce, as we've done in Montgomery County. Fed-

eral initiatives and foundation resources overwhelmingly are directed toward rectifying challenges of urban systems, yet these initiatives rarely encompass a systemic approach to change. Little attention is paid to many regions of the country, like Montgomery County, that find themselves on the cusp of change.

Suppose that, in addition to continuing efforts to turn around urban areas, we craft and support strategies to ensure that we have focused and sustained high expectations for all children. Can we ensure that borderline communities stay strong by leveraging the education system as the unit of change without compromising the high-achieving components of the system? We did it in Montgomery County. We can do it as a nation if we have the will and commitment, but we must be committed to more than common standards and effective assessments. Just as important is our commitment to the well-being of the millions of employees who work in education.

An engaged workforce that is motivated by the intrinsic value of the work will translate those standards into something meaningful for each student as well. A nation of graduates poised to thrive in college and *their* prospective careers will be a result worthy of investment.

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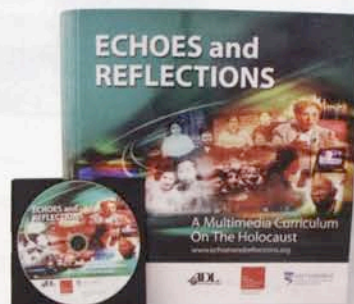
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