

EXCERPT

Challenging the Status Quo

An Excerpt from *Leading for Equity: The Pursuit of Excellence in Montgomery County Public Schools*

by Stacey M. Childress, Denis P. Doyle, and David Thomas

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Challenging the Status Quo

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| STACEY M. CHILDRESS, DENIS P. DOYLE, AND DAVID THOMAS

[Weast's] focus on the moral imperative—that one group of children should not be consigned to schools that were substandard while a relative handful of children in excellent schools were flourishing—was the basis for a strategy that would blend *equity* and *rigor* in equal measure.

Great opportunities often come disguised as insoluble problems. When Jerry Weast arrived in Montgomery County in 1999, the school board gave him a mandate to dramatically improve performance, especially for students who had historically not been served well by the district. The gaps between students of different races, ethnicities, and family incomes were wide and entrenched, and many talented, committed educators had worked on closing them for years. But neither the board nor the community had a full picture of the dramatic shifts in assumptions, strategy, and education practices it would take to create the necessary change.

Weast's first challenge was to identify existing barriers to high performance for all students and develop some working hypotheses about their causes, and then propose an approach for tackling the barriers that the entire community could embrace. This required building shared understanding of the purposes for which children would be educated, the standards necessary for ensuring that all students could attain those purposes, and a blueprint for action to move from the current condition toward a new shared vision of success for every child. It also required a blunt and clear-eyed assessment of why performance disparities existed in the first place.

Excerpted with permission from *Leading for Equity: The Pursuit of Excellence in Montgomery County Public Schools*, by Stacey M. Childress, Denis P. Doyle, and David A. Thomas (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2009). For more information, please visit <http://www.hepg.org/hepg/book/101/LeadingforEquity> or call 1-888-437-1437.

A Long, Complicated History

The achievement gaps in Montgomery County in 1999 were not a new phenomenon. For more than four decades, MCPS had wrestled with the issues of race and the low performance of specific student groups, recent immigrants, racial minorities, and the poor in particular. The difference was that minority populations in the district had been small enough that they had a minimal impact on overall perceptions of performance in the district. Because of demographic changes in the 1980s and '90s, the disparities became more apparent.

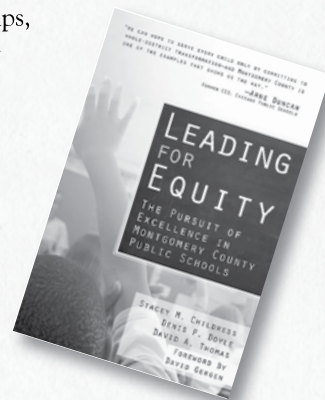
Before *Brown v. Board of Education* was handed down in 1954, Montgomery County had two separate school systems, one for African American students and one for white students. Separate and unequal, the schools with African American students received fewer resources than the white schools. One month after the landmark *Brown* decision, the Montgomery County Board of Education appointed a committee of administrators to develop an integration implementation plan, but the district was slow to desegregate, leading the NAACP to repeatedly criticize the board for perpetuating inequities between the races.

By 1980, demographics had changed. Newer immigrant populations made up primarily of Asians, Africans, and Hispanics had moved into the county, and the total minority population had doubled. In a new political climate, board members who had opposed "social engineering" removed some busing plans and disbanded the board's minority relations committee.

The board also attempted to shut down several integrated schools, but community members challenged the plan, and the Maryland State Board of Education stepped in to halt the closures. In response, MCPS created magnet programs in schools with large numbers of minorities to attract white students and also used race-based admissions as a way to integrate other schools. The number of minority students continued to grow, and even though many attended schools with magnet programs, most did not participate in the advanced academic programs offered there. Minority leaders in the community became vocal opponents of the magnet schools, saying they served only white students, further contributing to the achievement gap.

In spite of the changing demographics and the struggle with race relations in the district, MCPS was still considered to be one of the best school districts in the nation. Students in affluent areas of the county received a high-quality education and consistently scored well on standardized tests. But in 1990, the school board commissioned Yale University professor Edmund Gordon to study minority student achievement. The study, known as *The Gordon Report*, confirmed that the district "need[ed] several more elements for the improvement of minority students... it was widely perceived that teachers and other school staff members tended to have low expectations of minority students and tended to invest less effort in the academic support and challenge of minority students."¹

In response, African American superintendent Paul Vance implemented a program of action—Success for Every Student (SES)—to address the issues, when he assumed the superintendency in 1991. Vance had worked on integration and achievement gap issues for many years as a deputy superintendent in MCPS and Baltimore. His team had included specific language about addressing the needs of minority students in their original SES plan, but the board had refused to approve it until the rhetoric was changed to focus on "all students." Staff members at the time were disappointed with this refusal to publicly acknowledge that race was a significant issue in the schools. From the spring of 1992 to the end of 1999, the district implemented the approved initiatives. However, despite well-intentioned efforts on the part of administration and staff, the achievement gap persisted; there was very little improvement in minority student test scores. Most of the activities were programs aimed at particular student groups, without an overarching strategy for improving teaching and learning across the district. Although white and Asian students, on average, maintained some of the highest performance levels in the state, the data showed lack of academic progress for African American and Hispanic children. >



In 1997, a committee was commissioned to study progress under Success for Every Student. *The Larson Report*, as it is known, highlighted gaps in achievement. The authors found that race and class could largely predict academic success. Most significantly, researchers found that by third grade, educators could determine which students would go on to participate in honors and advanced placement (AP) courses.

In 1999, a *Washington Post* article uncovered a vast grading disparity across the district. Schools with high African American and Hispanic populations were giving children passing grades, when similar scores across town would have earned a D. The lack of standardization in grading and curriculum—which was made public in the article—highlighted the critical need to find a workable solution to the growing problems within the district.

Almost exactly ten years after the release of *The Gordon Report*, Vance elected to retire at the end of his second contract. The Montgomery County Board of Education conducted an extensive search for a superintendent and in 1999 unanimously selected Jerry Weast, the superintendent of Guilford County (Greensboro), North Carolina. Weast was raised on a farm in Moran, Kansas. His father farmed all his life, and his mother taught in a one-room schoolhouse before Weast and his three siblings were born. Throughout his career, Weast's rural upbringing influenced his communication style. Those who worked with him marveled at his seemingly limitless supply of analogies based on farm life, such as comparing incremental change to putting a new coat of paint on a rickety barn instead of tearing it down and building a new one.

Weast got his first job at age fourteen and worked his way through Allen County Community College in Iola, Kansas, earning an associate's degree in business and then a bachelor's in business education with a concentration in accounting from Pittsburg State University in Pittsburg, Kansas. Rather than entering the corporate world like most of his classmates, Weast took a job teaching accounting and psychology and coaching football at a local high school. The rest, as they say, is history. After three years, he worked his way up to principal of the school, and a few years later took his first

superintendency. He ran a number of districts in Kansas before earning his doctoral degree in education from Oklahoma State University. He subsequently served as superintendent in Great Falls, Montana; Durham County, North Carolina; and Sioux Falls, South Dakota, before taking the Guilford County job in Greensboro, North Carolina. Throughout his career, he was known for having a deep understanding of teaching and learning as well as organizational management, and for having an innovative approach to using technology to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of his districts. In Guilford County, he engaged in a number of efforts to open up opportunities for minority students, and was known in particular for expanding the number of students enrolled in advanced placement courses. With his track record of addressing equity issues, the MCPS board gave him a mandate to raise student achievement across the board, regardless of race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic factors.

Getting Started: Assessing The Problem

Montgomery County is located on the western border of the nation's capital. It is not only the state's most populous county; it is the state's most affluent. But in addition to the older, established neighborhoods and the new subdivisions, in 1999 there were deep pockets of poverty—a situation that is even truer today. Over the previous decade, the makeup of the student population had changed dramatically. In 1990, 52 percent of MPCS students were white; by 1999, the white student population had shrunk by 10 percent, while the overall student population had increased by 21 percent.

In order to get to know the district after he was hired, Weast literally “rode the bus,” hitchhiking with the early-morning mail run as it left headquarters for the district's two hundred-plus mail stops. Up close and personal, in late summer 1999, Weast “discovered” a district within a district. Once upon a time, Montgomery County had been a racially homogeneous affluent area. Indeed, that had been its brand. No longer.

Today Montgomery County is heterogeneous—racially, socially, and economically. In the mid-1980s, the district was predominantly white. In 2008, the

district had about one hundred and forty thousand students, more than 60 percent of whom were racial or ethnic minorities, with burgeoning numbers of poor and nonnative English-speaking students. Students came from more than 163 countries and spoke 134 different languages. And the bitter truth is that, across the nation, these characteristics have strong predictive power. Typically, they are harbingers of low expectations and poor academic performance.

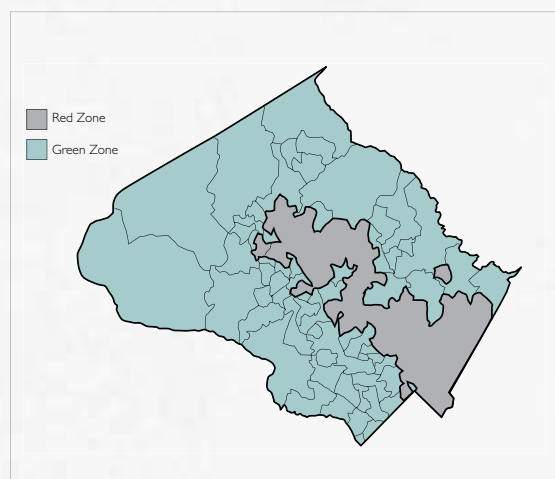
Weast's reading of the data, combined with his school-visiting blitz, convinced him that there were two Montgomery Counties, one nested within the other. One area was largely urban, surrounding municipal centers and major transportation arteries, stretching from one end of the county to nearly the other, beginning at the border with Washington, D.C. Weast called it the Red Zone. Everything outside of it he called the Green Zone (see figure 1.1). The Red Zone was made up primarily of immigrant families, Hispanics and African Americans, many of whom were living in poverty. The performance of students in this area was far below the academic performance of the students in the Green Zone. It was only a matter of time before the weight of the Red Zone's inequalities engulfed the Green Zone, which would have a profound effect on the county's traditionally high average test scores.

To Weast, the realization that the county was failing to educate large number of students, and consequently families as a whole, was surprising and simply unacceptable. He used this information to reach out to stakeholders in the community—stressing the sense of urgency he felt about the need to solve the issue of the achievement gap. Describing the situation, Weast said, “The only thing we could predict was failure, with a great deal of consistency. We could also predict who would fail, because the evidence didn't show any substantive type of *systemic* approach to raising the level of education in our high-poverty schools.”²

Establishing A Vision And Setting Goals

Weast and his executive team knew that to bring about full-scale, wide-ranging reform, they had to take an honest look at the causes of academic

FIGURE 1.1 RED AND GREEN SCHOOLS



disparities in Montgomery County. Not only did they have to define the problems and present them to the community; they had to collectively assume responsibility for the system's failures and set new goals. A piecemeal approach to problem solving might help some students, but it would do nothing to address the equity issues that affected the system as a whole. MCPS needed a goal that everyone could rally around and that could anchor a systemic and coherent reform strategy.

Weast and his team believed that the twenty-first century's economic realities had already established the school district's goal, its North Star. Readiness for college and high-wage work was the standard to which all graduates would be held. Historically, public schools acted on the premise that there were two, even three sets of graduation standards: one set for the college-bound, one for the vocationally inclined, and a third never-never land diploma called general education. But the MCPS team was convinced that these distinctions no longer made sense, if indeed they ever had; in today's world, work readiness and college standards are one and the same. This assumption dictated one set of rigorous academic standards for all students and specific benchmarks to measure minimum readiness for college and high-wage work:

- A score of 1650-plus on the SAT
- A score of 24-plus on the ACT
- Demonstrated success in AP courses and exams or ▷

- Successful completion of an International Baccalaureate (IB) program

If they were to adopt this standard as their North Star, Weast and his team needed to ask a number of important questions:

- How can we create world-class schools that give all students access to a rigorous education that will make them college-and-work ready by the time they graduate?
- How should we best tackle the issue of racial disparity in academic achievement?
- Under what conditions can we change long established trends in outcomes?
- What is our strategy for creating those conditions?
- How will we measure achievement and mastery?

Weast and his team did not have all the answers, but these questions guided their engagement with the community and their early work to create a strategy to challenge the status quo. They did not spend significant time planning to change things that were outside their sphere of influence. For instance, they acknowledged that they could not change their students' socioeconomic status but committed to changing school and district factors that were in their control in order to bring the quality of education in the Red Zone up to that in the Green Zone.

A Call To Action

Over a period of three months in the fall of 1999, district and school staff, consultants, board members, and citizens (a group that numbered in the hundreds) worked together to analyze the critical issues facing the school system. They organized into various committees and convened meetings and conferences on a range of relevant topics that brought the community together. They assembled research and examples of best practices, and committees used these findings to recommend a strategy to raise student performance and close the achievement gap. At the conclusion of the period of data mining in the fall of 1999, Weast and his team gathered to write a blueprint for change. They wanted to communicate to the people of Montgomery

County the sense of urgency they felt about the state of education in the district and the desperate need for reform.

Entitled *Our Call to Action: Raising the Bar and Closing the Gap*, the report was the hallmark of Weast's first few months in office. Staff characterized the report as a "plan to plan" rather than a fully developed recipe for success. While no one would have predicted it at the time, the report would serve as a foundation for the MCPS strategy over the next decade.

Building on earlier work in the district and Vance's Success for Every Student program, the report contained specific academic milestones for the district, including some related to racial disparities, such as encouraging larger numbers of students from each racial and ethnic group to participate in the SAT; reducing the suspension rates of African American and Hispanic students; and eliminating the disproportionate number of African American students in special education programs.

It identified six "trend benders," or concrete steps MCPS could take to change conditions in schools so that downward performance trends would begin to bend upward:

1. Developing a system of shared accountability
2. Workforce excellence through targeted training and action research
3. Broadening the concept of literacy
4. Family and community partnerships
5. Organizational excellence—reorganizing assets for school success
6. Integrated quality management and data-driven decision making

The report reflected the best thinking of the community that had emerged during the data mining work and included supportive quotes from a wide range of stakeholders. Henry Quintero, director of the Latino Civil Rights Task Force of Maryland, offered, "We support the Call to Action to raise the achievement of students and close the gap of Hispanic and African American students. We're behind the superintendent and board of education 100 percent."³ Linna Barnes,

president of the Montgomery County PTA, added, “All children achieve more when families become involved in their children’s education. The efforts to increase parent and family involvement will go a long way toward closing the achievement gap and improving the education of all students.”⁴

The plan proposed developing a new curriculum and systematically linking quality standards for teaching, learning, support, and progress monitoring—of teachers, students, and administrators. Building on some of the teachers union ongoing work, specific components of the plan outlined ways to think about and change teaching by creating a culture where teachers critiqued each other’s work and investigated best practices together. The report also touched on the impact of adult expectations on student performance and pushed for the development of a fact-based accountability system that focused on student learning. It proposed that academic milestones and student performance measures should be linked to a staff evaluation. The report also envisioned accountability as part of the daily work of students. Students and families would use self-assessments to chart their progress in achieving goals and to identify areas that needed improvement.

Embedded in *Our Call to Action* was a new vision of shared accountability and a shared governance structure. It called for the collaboration of parents, the general public, county and state government, colleges and universities, advocacy groups and civic organizations, and the business community in order to be successful. It attempted to make reform a priority for the whole community and was designed to present the early reform ideas in a way that gave all of the stakeholders a sense of ownership of the change process. The report put forth the innovative idea that everyone involved in public education should play a part in leadership and in problem resolution. Joint ownership of the system by the board, unions, staff, and community groups meant shared responsibility for decision making as well as joint ownership of outcomes and results. Weast believed that blurring the lines between leadership and governance would diffuse former antagonisms and encourage everyone to work together in a collaborative process. In fact,

Our Call to Action made the point that the process of employee contract negotiations, the capital budget, the capital improvement plan, and the operating budget would all inter-act and be critical in identifying and accessing the resources needed for the ideas contained in the document.

As Isiah Leggett, then president of the Montgomery County Council (the body that funds MCPS), remarked at the time, “The single most important issue that we must resolve is raising the level of achievement for all students. We have a diverse population, but we don’t want diverse levels of expectation or education. Every student deserves the same opportunity for high standards of teaching, available resources, and equal expectations of academic results.”⁵

Clarifying Assumptions

Our Call to Action proposed a goal for the district that could be paraphrased as “Greening the Red Zone.” In order to reach the goal, the team felt it was necessary to put forward six key assumptions, each of which challenged the status quo. The overarching message was that business as usual was no longer acceptable.

- First, policy makers could not mandate change. Change would only come about through local capacity and local will. To that end, resources had to be reorganized to help instructional staff—teachers, support staff, and administrators—to act in new ways.
- Second, there must be an end to the culture of blame. A new environment had to be created, one that valued risk taking, recognition, and shared accountability.
- Third, because quality of teaching makes *all* the difference in the children’s experience, resources should support teaching and learning. Further, the workforce should strengthen itself and integrate research and practice into its activities.
- Fourth, antiquated structures and institutional systems were in large part responsible for current failures. As a result, school quality discussions should focus on new factors: class size, student groupings, attitudes and expectations, dispute resolution, and family involvement. ▷

- Fifth, it was up to the whole community to participate in the *Call to Action*. The authors acknowledged that there was not a consensus on the ideas for reform, and it was up to the people of Montgomery County to flesh out ideas, identify key problems, quantify them with data, and examine possible strategies.
- And finally, MCPS should be guided by findings from research and by decisions and suggestions made by those closest to the problem—in other words, principals and teachers. It was important to be able to evaluate ideas to determine whether or not they were successful. The success or failure of a reform strategy ultimately depends on what happens in thousands of individual classrooms. Without the buy-in and support of an entire organization and the people it serves (parents and children), change will not take place. If teachers feel genuine involvement with their task and feel a sense of ownership and accountability, change will occur.

Our Call to Action wisely concluded, “We do not have all the answers. But like many of the most vexing problems we have faced in Montgomery County, the answers are likely to be among us.”⁶ It was released with the expectation that annual reports to stakeholders would detail progress and adjustments to the plan.

Mobilizing Community Support

Bringing the community on board with this vision involved a massive public relations effort. Weast and his team worked to craft his messages and to develop video and slide presentations. By speaking with small groups of people across the community, chatting informally with families, and going through data in a simple but compelling way, the executive leadership team made the case for reform.

One of the most politically sensitive issues in *Our Call to Action* was the idea of using resources equitably rather than equally. The problem analysis indicated that the district was poorly designed to ensure a high-quality education experience in every neighborhood, because of significant problems in the allocation of financial and human resources.

MCPS had been distributing resources nearly equally across all schools, regardless of performance. To address the problems in the Red Zone schools, the team proposed that more resources be allocated to them so that the quality of education would increase to the same level as that in the Green Zone schools. This concept was met in some quarters with suspicion and mistrust, and generated resistance and pushback from parts of the community. Some parents in wealthier parts of the county did not like the idea of forgoing resources in their area so that additional funds could be invested in lower-performing schools. They were concerned that their children would be shortchanged in the process and that overall performance across the district would go down. Red Zone parents had their concerns as well. Then-board member Sharon Cox, a Green Zone resident who had previously been president of the Montgomery County Council of PTAs, recalled the tensions: “The concern in the community was (about) how can you both raise the bar and close the gap. People in the wealthier sections of Montgomery County, identified as ‘green’ were afraid that all resources would go to the needier or ‘red’ area. People in the red area were afraid they wouldn’t get the attention they needed because of the raising the bar issues in the green area. And I remember... saying that the expectation is that while we’re increasing achievement levels and working to fulfill every child’s potential, children with more dramatic barriers would improve at a faster rate than the other students who were already up there.”⁷

In the face of skepticism, the team pressed ahead with the message. At the time, a union official who asked to remain anonymous said in a *Washington Post* article, “There was a great deal of denial before Weast... Some of it was believing your own propaganda. We always had a group of kids you could hang the world-class system on. And you could kind of close your eyes and not see the other school system. Dr. Weast came and said we can’t just not see it anymore.”⁸

Through endless outreach visits, town meetings, and presentations, Weast and his team were able to communicate a moral imperative that the community eventually recognized. In a feat that has been

profoundly difficult in public education, Weast was able to convince enough people that resources should be distributed for equity because *it was the right thing to do*.

He also convinced people that *it was the smart thing to do* economically. As academic achievement rose in all parts of the county, home values would rise, employers would increasingly see the area as a good place to create jobs, and the overall health of the community would improve. Together, these twin imperatives—the right thing and the smart thing—would guide the work of district staff, the board, and the community.

Weast's communication style—unassuming and colloquial—was a sharp contrast to the controversial ideas he was proposing. He was not afraid to talk explicitly about race and ethnicity. Some members of his leadership team recalled that, at first, his forthright discussions of the district's African American and Hispanic students being short-changed by the system were often met with stunned silence by white business leaders and county power brokers unaccustomed to hearing another white man talk in those terms. Deputy superintendent Frieda Lacey had worked in the district since 1971 in a variety of roles, including teacher, principal, and multiple central office roles. In that time, she had seen many efforts to address the achievement gap. As an African American educator, she had observed a range of responses from the community over the years to efforts to address the achievement gap. She drew a contrast between Weast and former superintendents, saying, "What made it different for Dr. Weast was that he was 'one of them.' It is like a family member saying we have a problem within our family."⁹

Armed with the powerful visual aid of the Red and Green Zones, Weast was able to very publicly demonstrate how MCPS was not meeting the needs of all students. The map clearly showed the pattern linking poor achievement to highly impacted schools. It was a dramatic tool that caught the attention of everyone in the community. To garner support for his idea, Weast met with a variety of stakeholders, including union leaders, members of the business community, teachers, parents, and administrators, asking for their input, counsel, and recommendations.

“Through countless presentations and discussions, the message that people needed to work collaboratively to improve the schools began to work its way into the community’s collective conscience.”

Our Call to Action was presented in a series of back-to-back regional meetings with principals and their staffs at the end of the school day and at community meetings in the evenings. After community presentations, Weast and his team of facilitators would break into small groups with the audience to discuss questions and continue the dialogue. In addition, Weast gave presentations for different segments of community, presentations translated into multiple Asian languages and Spanish, for example. And Weast was fair game for questions and comments: not everyone was enthusiastic, but he stood his ground. Through countless presentations and discussions, the message that people needed to work collaboratively to improve the schools began to work its way into the community's collective conscience. Although not everyone agreed with the specifics or with the pace of change, it was a first step to creating unity of purpose.

Defending Rigorous Standards

With a new North Star—college and work readiness as measured on a number of dimensions, including achievement on standardized tests—Weast and his team would eventually create standards in several content areas from kindergarten through high school that would ensure that students were well prepared. ▸

These standards were dramatically more aggressive than the definition of *proficient* that the state of Maryland adopted in the wake of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. As Weast describes it, the state standards are a minimum level of acceptability, not a goal to aspire to. Describing the state standards as baseball sized, Weast declared that the new MCPS standards needed to be basketball sized to ensure that students had more than basic skills, but were instead prepared for college and

high-wage work. With the above definition of *college and work ready*, the MCPS executive team set a goal: 80 percent of graduates would meet the internal standard by 2014. If the district aimed for these goals, state test scores would take care of themselves without an explicit focus on preparing students for the exams. In the beginning, though, Weast and his team had to build momentum for the changes that would be necessary for successful implementation.

The DMC's Q&A with Dr. Jerry D. Weast, Superintendent, Montgomery County Public Schools

DMC: As you reflect on the progress that MCPS has made toward improving the equality of outcomes, what elements do you wish you saw more districts tackling?

Dr. Weast: The challenge facing many districts is that they are not setting high enough standards for their students and instead are setting their sights on making adequate yearly progress under No Child Left Behind (NCLB). The problem is what might be considered adequate progress under NCLB is not adequate to prepare a student for success in college. Districts need to set higher standards and align their curriculum all the way from pre-Kindergarten through high school to ensure their students are college-ready. Once you establish clear, high standards, you can begin aligning your district's systems and processes to hit the target. I call it finding your North Star. Once you've identified it, you can navigate the waters. There's no question that this is hard work, but if you pick out that star and bring your community along, you can devise the plan to reach it. We owe it to

every single child to provide the preparation needed for college; we can't do that unless we aim higher as a nation.

DMC: What significance did a "systems-thinking" approach like Baldrige have on your efforts?

Dr. Weast: A systems-thinking approach is critical to creating a successful reform effort. Obviously, the most critical element of our work is making sure we put a great teacher in every classroom. Hiring and training great teachers doesn't happen by itself. It takes an integrated, aligned approach starting with your Human Resource functions and carrying right on through your professional development operations. Thus, it is critical to align your systems and processes to 1) hire the best qualified and most capable staff from teachers to support staff to administrators; 2) provide them all with the training and support they need to be successful, including providing a top quality curriculum built on high standards; and 3) make sure that all of the support systems are in place to create the best possible learning environment for students. One of

the benefits of Baldrige is that it keeps us focused on the details and processes necessary for success, and it makes a commitment to continuous improvement an essential part of the work. So throughout my ten years here, we have refined and adjusted our approaches to get the best results. And we will continue to learn and improve each and every day because we have so much work left to do to truly reach our goal of creating a school system where student success is no longer predictable by race.

DMC: What unforeseen challenges have you encountered in this reform effort?

Dr. Weast: The trickiest challenge is pacing and time. So many superintendents do not have the gift of time to phase in necessary reforms in a manageable way. Most need to come in and show immediate progress; otherwise, support for their work begins to weaken. And sometimes, the superintendent wants to show quick progress so that he or she can move onto a bigger job.

If there is one thing that I have learned in being a superintendent for

Resistance emerged from teachers and parents alike. Many felt that the new standards were too hard for students to reach and too hard for teachers to teach. But the board and the leadership team held fast and continued to present their vision for a school of the future, where all children succeed and teachers rise to the challenge by providing their students with the education they need to reach their goals.

One frequent argument was that not all children would attend college, so the focus on rigorous standards was unnecessary for them. Of course this was true, but for too long in MCPS college going was highly predictable by race and income. High standards would open up the gateway to college for every student. But even if students chose different paths, Weast often told stories of a world of work so dramatically changed, it is almost unrecognizable to ▶

34 years, it is that there is no silver bullet or quick fix to magically improve schools overnight. It takes time, and it takes a community commitment to stick with a reform effort for a number of years so that it can take root and bear fruit. I have had the gift of time in Montgomery County with a tremendously supportive Board of Education and a community who knew that we could not solve all of our problems by waving a magic wand. The Board and community understood that it would take time to build the capacity of staff to deliver on our promises of improvement.

Even with the gift of time, you have to find the right pace of reform so that you do not overrun your staff's capacity to deliver. This is one of the hardest challenges because one needs to find the right balance of pushing the work forward while being mindful of the staff's ability to metabolize all that is required of them. I believe this challenge is only going to become more difficult as our schools need to deliver better and better results lest we fall further behind our international competitors. Our

nation's schools simply cannot afford to waste even one day.

DMC: What tips would you give to other superintendents looking to replicate your approach?

Dr. Weast: First, I want to say that I think that Harvard professors Stacey Childress and David Thomas and writer Denis Doyle did a magnificent job in recounting our reform journey in *Leading for Equity: The Pursuit of Excellence in Montgomery County Public Schools*. They spent a lot of time with us and saw just how hard the work is and how critical it is to build a strong leadership team to carry out the mission. Creating that cohesive leadership team is critical to the success of a reform effort because the team has to carry out the vision.

The leader and the team have to make that vision explicit to everyone and create a realistic plan to accomplish it. You cannot try to eat the elephant in one sitting, as I like to say. You have to phase in your reform in a sequence that makes sense and that does not overrun your team's capacity to implement it. Finding that balance is critical to success.



I think you can summarize the roadmap to successful reform in four key ideas. First, you have to establish high expectations about where you are going. Second, you need to identify the existing conditions that are impeding progress as well as those conditions that will give your effort a boost. Third, you have to align your support systems, resources, and structures to help the district reach its target. Fourth, it is essential to create monitoring and accountability tools to assess progress so that you can refine your approach and fashion innovative solutions to advance the work to the next level. □

our grandparents. Look at the place where your car is serviced, he would say. Mechanics use computers to assess problems. They need to be independent thinkers. They must also be technologically sophisticated enough to understand and diagnose discrete problems. Mechanics need communication skills to order parts and to talk with customers. What is true for mechanics, plumbers, and carpenters is true throughout the traditional blue-collar world. Consider nursing and the sheer volume of technology-based equipment that nurses use on a daily basis. Patient records are on computers, monitoring systems are computerized, and nurses must be able to read, understand, and respond to complicated data. Because of this, Weast argued, our children must be able to finish high school ready to move into this increasingly complex world. Over time, teachers and parents became more invested in the North Star and the blueprint for reaching it, but the journey was bumpy at times. In subsequent chapters, we will explore the twists and turns along the way.

Conclusion

America can meet the competitive challenge it faces if its citizens can agree on a national approach similar to the one the MCPS community has adopted: reduce variability while improving overall quality by agreeing to a set of common, high standards in a few important areas, creating a system in which teachers and students have the support they need to reach those standards and be successful. The majority of staff and stakeholders in Montgomery County have come to believe that all students are *entitled* to the same rigorous academic education. Weast strongly believes that children should not be sorted into vocational or general tracks, but rather they should all be given the foundations for academic mastery. This belief has permeated the district. His focus on the moral imperative—that one group of children should not be consigned to schools that were substandard while a relative handful of children in excellent schools were flourishing—was the basis for a

strategy that would blend *equity* and *rigor* in equal measure. This vision has enabled MCPS to make significant progress in closing the achievement gap in less than a decade.

Many districts have a document such as *Our Call to Action*, and superintendents often use community meetings and stakeholder task forces to build momentum in the early days of their leadership. One difference in Montgomery County is that leaders at all levels—board members, community organizations, teachers, principals, parents—committed to the “plan to plan” over the long term rather than moving from one issue to another without regard to the work done in the original plan. Another difference is that MCPS *actually implemented* the ideas in *Our Call to Action* and allowed the elements of the plan to evolve over time as it learned more about what worked and what did not, rather than throwing out the plan every couple of years and starting over.

But the task is ongoing. As late as 2005, five years into the implementation of the Red Zone strategy, a board member reported a comment by Green Zone parent: “Those children don’t need an all-day kindergarten, they’ve got Head Start.” The board member’s reply? “It’s not about equity of resources; it’s about equity of opportunities. If you believe your children are challenged to their fullest potential, then the resources we are putting into these other areas aren’t taking away from your children.”¹⁰

The catalyst for change described in this chapter began the MCPS journey that continues today. Having outlined the North Star and some guiding principles, how did MCPS push the agenda forward? How did Weast and the team develop an academic strategy that would allow them to begin making progress without trying to do everything at once? The next chapter describes the differentiation strategy and the first phase of its implementation. □

Subsequent chapters of Leading for Equity discuss the key elements to MCPS’ success. The authors analyze and describe how the MCPS team crafted a sound academic strategy, built strong stakeholder

relationships, invested in its people through strategic professional development, aligned systems and structures, and directly confronted the effect that beliefs about race and ethnicity have on student learning. Leading for Equity identifies key lessons other districts can draw from MCPS's experiences, and offers a framework for leaders interested in using MCPS's approach to strategy development and implementation.

Echoing many of the themes we have been discussing at the District Management Council, Leading for Equity and the story of MCPS underscore the importance of revisiting resource allocation, aligning resources and strategy, investing in human capital, and the importance of communications. In this period where the nation is looking for innovations in education, improved

performance, and bringing scale to innovations, the case of MCPS as told in Leading for Equity offers timely and valuable insights.

- ¹ **Edmund Gordon**, *The Gordon Report: A Study of Minority Achievement in MCPS—If Not Now, When; If Not Here, Where?* (Pomona, NY: Gordon and Gordon Associates, 1990), 374.
- ² **Jerry Weast**, interview by author, from a series of interviews with him conducted in person in Rockville, MD, or by telephone, October 2008–January 2009.
- ³ **Montgomery County Public Schools**, *Our Call to Action: Raising the Bar and Closing the Gap* (Rockville, MD: Montgomery County Public Schools, 1999).
- ⁴ **Ibid.**
- ⁵ **Ibid.**
- ⁶ **Ibid.**
- ⁷ **Richard Elmore**, David A. Thomas, and Tonika Cheek Clayton, "Differentiated Treatment in Montgomery County Public Schools," Case 9-PEL-028 (Boston: Harvard Business School, 2006), 6.
- ⁸ **Ibid.**
- ⁹ **Scott Thompson**, "Breaking the Links Between Race, Poverty, and Achievement," *Strategies for School System Leaders on District-Level Change* 13, no.1 (2007): 8.
- ¹⁰ **Ibid.**



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