

Montgomery County waiting on urban education award

School system is first-time finalist for \$1 million Broad Prize

by Andrew Ujifusa | Staff Writer

For those who say Montgomery County Public Schools is becoming more diverse and urbanized, an upcoming national award announcement could be the clearest sign so far that they're right.

The school system is a first-time finalist for the Broad Prize in Urban Education for the 100 largest U.S. school districts. Given every year since 2002, the Broad Prize recognizes excellence in closing achievement gaps for students, based on race, poverty levels and other academic factors.

The winner among the five finalists will be announced Tuesday and receive \$1 million in college scholarships; the others will receive \$250,000 in scholarships.

The 144,000-student school system frequently puts its status in a national context. Earlier this year, for example, the school system publicized it has the highest graduation rate among large U.S. public school districts. Claiming the Broad Prize also could neatly cap Superintendent Jerry D. Weast's career, during which he has prioritized closing achievement gaps and increasing access to rigorous courses for all students.

"They spend a lot of money on outside validators of programs and processes and outcomes that actually make a difference in the lives of children," said Weast of the Broad Prize evaluators.

But if county schools win the Broad Prize for excellence in urban education, it will sound an odd note in some people's ears, especially when the county's median income of \$93,895 is considered — the 10th highest of any county in the U.S.

"If you asked people to think of the county school district, they would think of the schools in the Green Zone as what typifies the county," said Joe Hawkins, an education researcher at the research organization Westat in Rockville and former school system employee, referring to schools in affluent areas.

The four other Broad Prize finalists are Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools in North Carolina, Gwinnett County Public Schools outside of Atlanta, and two school districts in the El Paso, Texas, area, the Socorro and Ysleta independent school districts.

Weast had the courage to end the de facto segregation that denied minority children access to rigorous courses, said Pedro Noguera, a sociology professor at New York University and executive director of the Metropolitan Center for Urban Education in New York City.

The county's largely Democratic politics, meanwhile, don't apply to local issues such as student achievement, meaning Weast has had to face strong opposition, Noguera added.

"It's a national trend. The trend is that the inner-ring suburbs are becoming more diverse. They're becoming more diverse racially and socioeconomically," he said.

Blacks and Hispanics combine to make up 46.8 percent of all students this year, compared with 37.1 percent for whites. This school year, 31.2 percent of all students enrolled in the free and reduced-price meals program, a key indicator for poverty levels.

In 1998, the year before Weast was appointed superintendent, 22.5 percent of students enrolled for free and reduced-price meals. The same year, blacks and Hispanics made up 34.9 percent of students, compared with the 41.9 percent of students who were white.

Despite this backdrop, the county's 36,000 low-income students outperformed similar students in other districts in reading and math at all school levels in 2009, the Broad Foundation noted in an analysis. In the same year, its black students achieved higher average proficiency rates than their statewide counterparts in reading and math at all levels.

There are significant gaps between county schools and their Broad Prize competition in notable demographics.

For example, 31,383 Montgomery County Public Schools students were eligible to receive free meals last year, 22 percent of all students. Gwinnett County Public Schools, by contrast, had about 66,060 students, 41 percent of

all students, qualify for free meals this year. In the Ysleta school district, the most recent statistics show a little more than 69 percent of all students qualified for free meals.

But Weast said such disparities were not relevant in this case, because the Broad Foundation's formula controls for demographic disparities, and using demographics to explain results is itself a flawed approach.

"I don't know what it's going to take for America, or even Montgomery County, to wake up and understand that they can educate all children at high levels," Weast said.

The temptation to define a school system's character based on racial and poverty demographics can lead some to draw unfair inferences about the schools regardless of student performance, said school board member Michael A. Durso (Dist. 5) of Silver Spring.

"I think we get into some real tricky stereotypes here," Durso said.

But the crucial question is how well a school system is succeeding with its urban student groups, said Erica Lepping, a spokeswoman for the Broad Foundation.

"It's only about a third of the largest city systems and the largest suburban systems like Montgomery that are making any progress in closing gaps relative to the state," Lepping said.