

Joshua Starr's first year as Montgomery schools chief reflects shift in educational eras

By Michael Alison Chandler, *The Washington Post*. Published: June 30, 2012

By the time former superintendent Jerry Weast finished his first year at the head of Montgomery County public schools, he had issued a "Call to Action" plan to close the racial academic achievement gap, hired three dozen new administrators and pushed one of the biggest budgets in memory through the County Council to launch a laundry list of programs.

Twelve years later, his successor, Joshua Starr, is winding down his inaugural year with an intentionally short list of changes. He restructured the central office, built on the close relationships Weast had forged with employee unions by brokering a controversial and generous pay raise during a tight budget cycle, and began to articulate a vision for a school system dedicated to graduating not just good students, but good people.

The leaders' different introductions to the nation's 16th-largest school system reflect changing marching orders and shifting educational eras. Weast ushered in a decade that became defined by No Child Left Behind, a federal law that highlighted achievement gaps by escalating the role of standardized tests. Starr is positioning himself to lead the next phase of education reform, which he hopes will bring more success by thinking beyond test-bubble sheets.

"As we have become increasingly focused on rigid conceptions of what success is — that are directly aligned to standardized tests . . . are we missing something? Have we lost something? I think we have," Starr said at a May forum at Walt Whitman High School about the importance of social and emotional learning.

In a series of book clubs and community meetings, Starr hosted discussions about the best ways to motivate students and teachers through perseverance and teamwork, and how to emphasize the emotional intelligence, creativity and communication skills that also are important in work and life.

His meetings attracted many parents, glad to participate in the intellectual exercise. But some county leaders question whether he should spend more time developing hands-on leadership and cultivating political relationships.

"Josh is a learned scholar. . . . He reads a lot of theories about schools and policies and about how kids learn. But I would like to see him get his hands dirty and drill down below what he's read in a book," County Council member Valerie Ervin said.

She said she was dismayed that Starr relied heavily on his staff to deal with council members in budget talks. Ervin and others on the council were especially critical of raises given to school employees.

Educators have protested the limitations of standardized tests for as long as No Child Left Behind has tied high-stakes decisions to one-day snapshots of student achievement. But Starr finds himself in a unique position to do something about it, given what he often calls the “luxury” of Montgomery’s successful track record and a window of opportunity that opened this year. After Congress failed to reauthorize the federal education law in the fall, Maryland became one of 24 states to be granted a federal waiver from its most punitive aspects.

The upshot? When state test results are released this year, Montgomery could emerge without any schools labeled as failures.

Rather than racing to meet the next testing goal, Starr seized the moment to reflect on the future of public education in Montgomery, and the country.

Changing the culture

The 42-year-old upstart, who came from a 20,000-student district in Stamford, Conn., is warming to a spotlight that shines on a prominent county school system next to the nation’s capital. Starr uses his platform to criticize state and federal reform initiatives as simplistic or punitive.

“In the name of ‘accountability,’ too many people are pointing fingers at our educators and telling them they are to blame for the woes of American public education. Let me be clear: Our educators are responsible for all that is right in our public education system,” Starr told a congressional budget panel in March.

At a time when labor unions are under attack, Starr cemented a tight alliance with the Montgomery teachers union by defending the district’s prized professional growth system — calling it a “hill to die on” — as the school system reconciles it with new federal requirements that more closely link teacher evaluations to student achievement.

He also secured a deal for two pay raises for school employees in the coming fiscal year. The move, which brought strong criticism from a County Council concerned about long-term costs, built on his predecessor’s investment in teachers as the surest way to improve schools — through pay and professional development.

Starr has mostly praised the system’s accomplishments, but he wants to shift the culture away from a zealous focus on results.

The largest school system in Maryland, with 146,500 students, has an 88 percent graduation rate, an average combined SAT score of 1637, out of 2400, and a nearly 66

percent participation rate in Advanced Placement courses — all exceeding state and national averages.

But performance disparities persist. A gap of at least 30 percentage points separates the portion of African American and Hispanic students who received advanced scores on eighth-grade state reading and math tests in 2011, compared with their white and Asian peers. And African Americans and Hispanic students are far less likely to score a 3 or higher on AP tests.

Fixating on outcomes such as test scores can encourage the use of “diet pills,” Starr said, or whatever hits the target, rather than healthy lifestyles.

He wants to hold schools accountable not only for good results but also for implementing sound practices, such as giving teachers time and training to work together in groups to plan lessons and analyze results — an increasingly common approach known as “professional learning communities” he plans to make the norm in all 200 schools.

He replaced the “Office of School Performance” with an “Office of School Support and Improvement,” led by a fellow graduate of the Harvard Urban Superintendents program. He hopes to shift the role of top administrators from checking off boxes on monitoring forms to visiting classrooms and helping teachers and principals improve.

The office also is considering tracking data that aren’t strictly academic. Starr talked about expanding the Seven Keys, the milestones Weast identified that prepare students for college, such as taking algebra by eighth grade or scoring at least a 3 on Advanced Placement tests.

The system could, for example, track how ready children are to transition from elementary to middle school or from middle to high school, Starr suggested.

But Starr is unlikely to dictate specific changes anytime soon. He wants to challenge his employees to come up with ideas.

If you encourage people to craft their own solutions, he said, “they will go at it a lot harder with more innovation and more creativity and follow-through.”

‘In listening mode’

Starr’s penchant for collaborating and delegating signals a sharp change in leadership style. Weast was famous for his dominating approach and for delivering lengthy sermons about the future of education.

Starr is more of a professor, skilled in the Socratic method.

Chris Lloyd, vice president of the Montgomery County Education Association teachers union, compared the experience of working with Weast to a fast drive down a

superhighway. “Sometimes people were like, ‘Can we stop at a hotel? We’re exhausted.’ But Jerry was like ‘No, we’ve got to drive through the night.’”

With the new superintendent, Lloyd said, the system is still moving down the highway, but Starr is riding shotgun and “throwing out ideas.”

“We are not really sure who’s driving,” Lloyd said. “We’re not used to that.”

Many employees and parents say the shift is refreshing.

“He genuinely seems to have been in listening mode,” said Janette Gilman, the president of the Montgomery County Council of PTAs. “In terms of making himself available and being interactive with parents and the community, it was a great start.”

Still, others aren’t satisfied with his more pedagogical approach to leadership. They want to see concrete plans.

After a parent forum on gifted education, scores of parents left frustrated. Starr said his goal for the event was not to announce an initiative, but to give people a chance “to learn together about a really complex issue.”

“I already know my opinions,” said Lisa deBastos, a mother of three who attended the forum. “I needed to hear more about his views.”

There could be political risk in Starr’s more measured, exploratory approach, particularly in a community accustomed to celebrating a carefully charted upward trajectory of academic successes.

But Daniel A. Domenech, executive director of the American Association of School Administrators, said Starr will probably not have his foot off the gas for long. With a new round of standardized tests being developed, and a new curriculum and national standards to roll out, he will be under quick pressure to show results.

The first year is the “honeymoon period,” said Domenech, a former superintendent in Fairfax County.

But “he’s going to have to get back to making sure that kids are performing,” Domenech said. “The community will be very upset if the kids in Montgomery aren’t getting higher SAT scores than the kids in Fairfax.”