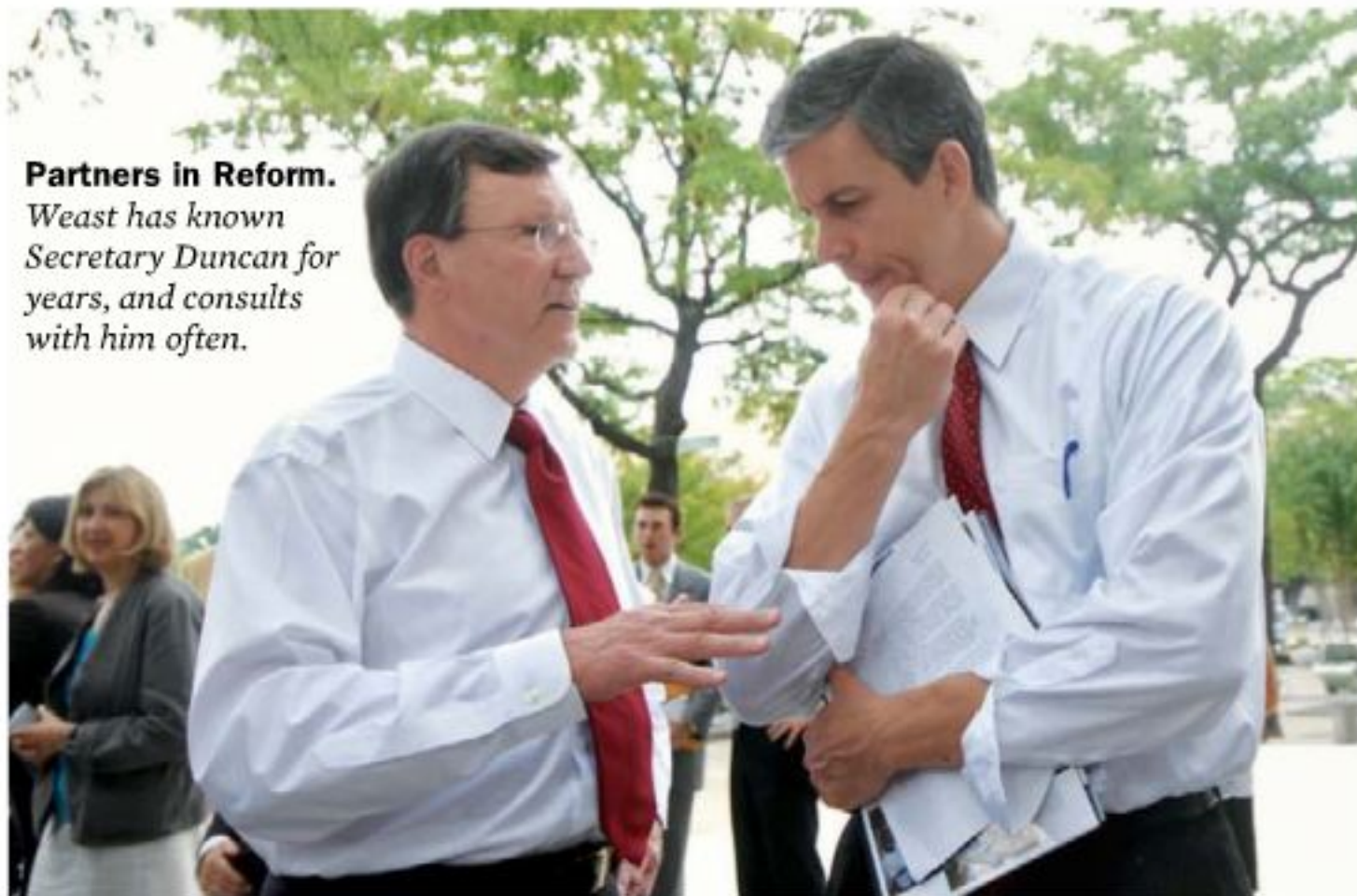


Partners in Reform.

Weast has known Secretary Duncan for years, and consults with him often.



College Prep Starts in PreK

A district's 10-year march pays off with higher graduation rates, top-ranked schools, and a shrinking achievement gap.

BY PAM DERRINGER

PRESIDENT OBAMA POPPED into Viers Mill Elementary School in Montgomery County, Maryland, for lunch one day last fall and urged the cheering students to read and study hard. When he asked how many planned on going to college, every hand shot up.

Obama's choice of public school was no accident. For 10 years, Montgomery County has worked on its college readiness plan, and three of its seven "keys," or benchmarks, are set in motion before students even hit middle school.

The school district is not only among the largest in the country but one of the best. And Viers Mill, which became a National Blue Ribbon School in 2005 despite its high-poverty/high-minority enrollment, is itself a showcase of what

students can achieve when schools encourage every one of them and their families to strive for great goals.

"College is a clear and compelling dream for all students," says Superintendent Jerry Weast. "It's what they want."

Weast started the district on this path when he first became superintendent in 1999. While the district's accomplishments have steadily improved, this year the accolades seem to have multiplied. Graduation rates surged to 83.1 percent, higher than the national average, and the highest rate in the country among the 50 largest school districts. Seven of the district's 25 high schools ranked among *Newsweek's* top 100 schools, and all the high schools are ranked in the top 3 percent in the

nation. And SAT and AP test scores were at their highest levels ever.

Overcoming a Daunting Divide

WHEN WEAST ARRIVED A LITTLE OVER a decade ago, his district's schools presented quite a different picture. Teachers, principals, and board members were at loggerheads. And the district had essentially become "a tale of two school systems," with rapidly growing numbers of minority and non-English-speaking students clustered in specific neighborhoods falling behind their white and Asian peers.

After countless meetings with constituents, Weast set a goal that would engage the hearts and minds of parents and teachers alike: to prepare 80 percent of students for college, without reme-





College Prep Starts Early
President Obama talking to third- and fourth-grade students at Viers Mill Elementary School.

MONTGOMERY COUNTY'S ACHIEVEMENTS

The Maryland district of 141,777 students is the 16th largest in the nation.

- ▶ Led the nation in AP class enrollment (64%) and AP grades (48.7% earned 3.0 or higher) for the entire student body, and for African-American and Hispanic students as well
- ▶ The gap between African-Americans and whites on NCLB tests narrowed from 32 points to 13 in seven years
- ▶ The percentage of African-Americans graduating from high school rose to 84% and Hispanics to 78%, less than whites and Asians at 95% but still among the highest in the nation
- ▶ The number of fifth-grade students enrolled in advanced algebra rose from 196 kids in 2000 to 45 percent of all students in 2009

diation, by 2014. Then he created a clear and consistent pathway to get there.

Working backwards, Weast's team identified the key building blocks from preK through 12 and concluded that advanced reading, advanced math (including two years of algebra), completion of an AP course, and combined SAT scores of 1650 or higher were critical for success in college. They revamped the curriculum, toughened some benchmarks, and gave teachers new tools to ferret out underperforming students. The basic restructuring took three years.

"The existing curriculum wasn't rigorous or connected enough," Weast says. "It wasn't clear and motivating. And it wasn't tied to measurements."

Next, Weast decided to allocate more

resources to the 66 elementary schools with the highest number of minority and ESL students, dubbed the "red" schools, to level the playing field with the 65 more affluent "green" schools: extras like all-day kindergarten, lower class sizes, additional teacher support, and coaching. The cost was \$2,000 more per child. (When a parent who lived in a green zone asked Weast how his child could get all-day kindergarten, the superintendent said: "That's simple. Move to the red zone.")

Finally, Weast encouraged a change to school culture, fostering collaboration among teachers, administrators and parents, to rally everyone around the common goal.

"We can't help kids if we're fighting," he says.

COLLEGE READINESS

Changing the culture required a partnership with the unions (the teachers' association needed no convincing), some probing questions, and frank discussions about often uncomfortable topics like race, Weast says.

The environment has energized teachers and students alike, with constant reinforcement of the college goal starting early, with teachers sometimes wearing college sweatshirts to class or organizing visits to college campuses as early as fifth grade.

"Everyone knows the seven keys and their part to play," says Jody Leleck, the county's chief academic officer. "We're not all there yet but it's all laid out very simply. This is where I need to be if I want to get a college degree. And the data is very open and transparent and we're always trying to get better."

Results Roll In

POSITIVE STORIES ABOUND. DEPUTY Superintendent Frieda Lacey, Weast's first hire, remembers noticing that Arthur Hill, a Hispanic youth with the highest score on the PSAT, hadn't signed up for any AP courses, so she sought him out and convinced him to take statistics. Hill graduated, was accepted at American University, and later wrote a letter to thank her.

"It was all based on a 10-minute conversation," Lacey recalls.

Lacey also noticed minority students were avoiding the PSAT by calling in sick on test day. She solved the problem with a community pancake breakfast and by circulating copies of old tests to relieve student anxiety.

"We needed to have higher expectations for the red zone," says Lacey, who pored over lists to coax minorities into AP and honors courses.

Teacher Collaboration

LELECK REMEMBERS HIRING Kimberly Oliver Burnim, a first-year teacher who became such a strong leader in the team environment in 2002 that she was named a National Teacher of the Year four years later.

Kimberly and the other kindergarten teachers at Broad Acres Elementary would eat lunch, plan lessons, and analyze data together, Leleck says. They created a professional learning community and worked hard in the belief that all children could

meet or exceed expectations, changing their school in the process, Leleck adds.

Rachel Pedri, a second-grade teacher at Woodlin Elementary School, loves teaching in her red zone school because people "drop everything to help you out," she says. "There are always others to share ideas and help you improve."

The signs that changes were taking hold were many: Students were more engaged; the teacher retention rate rose; teacher applicants climbed tenfold; and student attrition to private schools dropped.

As for the cost, Weast says Maryland County's \$2.2 billion budget is average for East Coast cities, despite \$2,000 extra for each red zone elementary student. The operating portion of the budget is \$14,919 per pupil.

Creating a True Union Partnership

BONNIE CULLISON, A SCHOOL BOARD member since 1985, says the teachers had been pushing reform for years before Weast's arrival, but no one would listen. The teachers weren't getting along with the principals and the system was dysfunctional, she says.

Now, teachers are part of top decision-making, although, she admits, "progress has been uneven at the individual school level."

Nevertheless, the union's partnership with the district paid big dividends for Montgomery County last year when teachers agreed to forgo 5.3 percent in contracted raises because it would require a tax increase, Cullison says.

"Overall, the benefit to members of helping to build a strong school system is much more powerful than fighting for pennies," she says.

Weast's "Secret Sauce"

SO HOW DID WEAST PULL THIS OFF? The answers are consistent. Smart as a whip. Never forgets anything. Sets the vision. Forges relationships and stays the course. Gives staff what they need. Hires the right people. And counseled out 400 teachers who still didn't succeed despite extra help.

"He has a sense of urgency about what we need to do. And he expects results," says Lacey.

Weast himself downplays his role. "I helped facilitate the process," he says. "But the staff were the ones who aligned the system to make it work for them and the children."

Cullison agrees. "Jerry is one of the best superintendents in the country and he's under attack all the time," she says. "But even the best can't do it all by themselves. He's been successful because he was willing to partner."

Weast is the first to admit the schools haven't met all their college and career readiness goals yet. And in some areas, the gaps between black and white achievement have actually increased.

But Weast remains optimistic that the district will have prepared at least 80 percent to go to college without remediation by 2014. "We're well over halfway home," he says. ■



HOW TO SHRINK YOUR ACHIEVEMENT GAP

In her book, *Leading for Equity: The Pursuit of Excellence in the Montgomery County Public Schools* (Harvard, 2009), Stacey Childress identifies the six strategies the district used.

- 1** Set the same rigorous standards for all students but give more resources (professional development, staff support) to teachers and students in struggling schools to help them achieve districtwide goals.
- 2** Connect benchmarks with a "value chain" pathway so all learning builds upon the prior benchmark

- and leads to the next one, and all children and teachers understand what is expected.
- 3** Blur the lines of power so everyone (administrators, teachers, and board members) feels part of the solution and works as a team to achieve success.
- 4** Help teachers recognize the potential of all students to master rigorous

content by creating a framework of data and accountability tools that assumes all students can do the work. As teachers see students change in response to the structures, they will become believers.

- 5** Confront beliefs that students and teachers may have about race and achievement and encourage open exchanges that dispel stereotypes and promote equity in the classroom.

- 6** Enlist all constituencies in a team effort to strive for equity in education. This takes more than great people; it takes ambitious goals, and the right strategies and support systems to reach them.