

## Getting education right from the beginning

Written by Marian Wright Edelman, NNPA Columnist  
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[We found that] if we created the right wraparound programs, the right preschool programs that were strong enough and rigorous enough, that fed into a rigorous pre-K through 3 program that fed into a middle school and a high school that actually works and inspired as well as prepared the child, you could have marvelous things happening . . . It all starts in the first 720 days—pre-K, K, 1, and 2. If you don't get those right, the last 720 days—grades 9, 10, 11, 12—won't be right.”

—**Superintendent Jerry Weast**

In 2011, Jerry Weast retired after serving for 12 years as superintendent of the Montgomery County Public Schools, a district just outside Washington, D.C. that was the largest and most diverse school system in Maryland and the 16th largest district in the nation. During Weast's time as superintendent, the county underwent a large demographic change, with growing numbers of students of color and students living in poverty. The district adapted by doubling down on strategies for helping all of its children succeed.

Narrowing the achievement gap for the district's nearly 145,000 students during his tenure was a key priority for Weast. Under his tenure, Montgomery County earned national recognition for achieving the highest student graduation rate among the nation's 50 largest school systems. Several of its high schools consistently rank among the best in the country. As Superintendent Weast explained in an interview with the Children's Defense Fund, Montgomery County achieved many of its successful outcomes for its graduating seniors by deciding from the beginning where they wanted their students to end up as they entered adulthood, and working backwards to build the right path from their earliest years to get them there.

Weast said he sees children's education as a chain that begins at birth, includes quality preschool, continues with a quality K-12 school experience, and is then connected to college and career training. The county wanted a clearer understanding of what links they needed to build at the start so children would have the most success at the end, so they did careful research. They worked closely with the business community both to determine what kind of education would prepare students for the jobs the county's business leaders wanted to create in the future, and to see what the school system could learn from best practices in business about successful problem-solving.

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They obtained data from the Department of Labor and the National Student Clearinghouse and cross-matched their graduates against it to identify the children who had gone on to become the most successful adults, and then studied the paths those students had followed during school.

“And what we found is that there were actually milestones that those children all hit, regardless of race or ethnicity or poverty. For example, we found that they needed to be able to read at some level in kindergarten. Well, that demanded that we have an early childhood program,” Weast explained.

When the county began setting goals for kindergarten readiness, only about 30 percent of kindergarteners met the standards. The schools shared their new standards for school readiness with everyone in the county from Head Start programs to private preschools and child care providers and offered early care providers curriculum materials and training. A decade into their efforts, even with large increases in the number of children living in poverty and children who didn’t speak English at home, 90 percent of incoming students were ready for kindergarten and 90 percent were leaving kindergarten with the right reading skills—“and then bingo. They were on a track for success.”

The district also developed new ways to engage parents and serve families, creating “parent academies” to teach parents how to access school services, arranging for local doctors and counselors to volunteer services at trailers stationed at schools, and providing summer feeding programs – “anything we could do to make the school the hub.”

Eventually parents, educators, business leaders, and even students themselves were all on the same page about where they wanted the county’s children to be.

We all worked together as a team, kind of like the old game of Tug the Rope. We all got on the same rope, and we all pulled,” Weast stated. “The success that Montgomery had was due in a major part to listening to the Montgomery County employees, the Montgomery County parents, and putting it in a particular perspective [so] people could see that we weren’t doing this just to be do-gooders, but it was an economic imperative. It was an imperative to bring jobs into the community. It was an imperative to help those who are here and who are about to come.”

It’s a strategy for getting it right right from the start that has had great results for Montgomery County’s children. As Superintendent Weast emphasized, what Montgomery County has done could and should be happening all across the nation.

“Everything that we did could actually easily be replicated anywhere in the country,” he said. “All you have to do is learn to work together. All you have to do is ask under what conditions can we get these outcomes. All you have to do is to quit talking about it and start doing it, because if you start doing it, you will learn from your mistakes . . . We have to do this, and it’s going to take every one of us pulling together.”

*Marian Wright Edelman is president of the Children’s Defense Fund whose Leave No Child Behind® mission is to ensure every child a Healthy Start, a Head Start, a Fair Start, a Safe Start and a Moral Start in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families*

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*and communities. For more information go to [www.childrensdefense.org](http://www.childrensdefense.org).*