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## New schools CEO Deasy preparing battle plan

by Guy Leonard

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County Schools CEO John Deasy says he will have a comprehensive plan to tackle the minority achievement gap and help turn around under performing schools by December.

Deasy, 45, made his first large-scale public appearance in an Upper Marlboro press conference last week to lay out his expectations for the school system once he officially takes over in May.

Deasy says he wants to develop a world-class system where all children have access to a superior education and the tools they need to acquire it.

Quality education is “a fundamental civil right, and it will guide this administration,” Deasy said. “That means you get to get in, but you also get to acquire the same high levels of education as the child sitting next to you.”

Among the things that will help get the system in shape: strengthening teachers' skills, monitoring individual school performance and providing classroom material that has a track record of success, Deasy said.

He commended county teachers for trying to increase student achievement.

“Everybody's doing the best they can the way they know how,” Deasy said. “This plan will be our guiding document. We must be willing to criticize each other's work and get better.”

Deasy said it will take several months to identify the most pressing problems in the system and marshal resources to deal with them before a plan can be developed.

“We're talking about literally thousands of meetings with the community, educators and principals,” Deasy said. “From the beginning, our time will be dominated by being in the schools and observing.”

He said partnerships are key to success.

“We don’t invite them [parents, community leaders and faith-based organizations] to the table unless we meaningfully want to partner with them,” Deasy said. “Isolation is the enemy of improvement.”

Deasy said one of his short-term goals is having every high school student ready to pass the High School Assessments (HSAs) on the first try. The school system should be ready with programs to help those who don’t pass finish the work they started.

“It’s a dead-serious issue,” Deasy said of high school achievement.

Starting with the Class of 2009, all high school students must pass the HSAs to receive a diploma.

Deasy said turning around the school system could take a decade, but he is encouraged by progress the system has already made.

“Academic achievement has actually improved over the past few years,” Deasy said. “The tall order before us is doable.”

Deasy defined ultimate success in the school system as having all students in possession of “powerful literacy” and all schools exceeding state and federal standards in test scores.

Deasy also challenged parents to become more involved in their children’s education.

“Insist on knowing what’s going on inside the schools. Find out what your children are learning,” Deasy said. “When you ask them [what’s going on] let them know that [answering] ‘nothing’ is not OK.”

County Councilman Thomas R. Hendershot (D-Dist. 3) of New Carrollton said that Deasy has to rebuild bridges between the school system and the community to be effective.

“If he does that, there’s no limit to where we can go,” Hendershot said.

Strife under the past two superintendents has turned many people away from working with the system.

“There’s been too much turmoil in recent years, and the citizens are sick and tired of it, and it’s made attaining success more difficult,” Hendershot said.

David Merkowitz, head of the Prince George’s County Business and Education Alliance, said broad support for Deasy is a sign that interest groups are ready to work with each other.

“Were talking about different groups being able to put higher interests ahead of their own, and the ability to check some of their own interests at the door,” Merkowitz said.

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