

Next Schools Chief Wins Applause

John E. Deasy Sets High Goals in Session With County Leaders, Principals

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Imagine county schools that are the envy of every other system in the state and deliver on a promise to offer all students a high-quality education. Suppose the school leadership opens itself entirely to public scrutiny. Consider a schools chief who talks incessantly about teamwork and expresses a desire to put down roots in the county and find a place of worship for his family.

Are we talking about Prince George's County?

John E. Deasy is.

The incoming Prince George's schools chief, who takes office May 1, outlined his goals and initial plan of action last week in a speech and question-and-answer session lasting nearly an hour in a packed school board chamber in Upper Marlboro.

On academic expectations, Deasy said: "Every kid can learn at high levels. That is not a political platitude."

On his view of student achievement: "Smart is something you become. It's not something you are."

On his commitment to excellence in all 199 county schools: "All means all. And it will mean all."

Deasy, 45, until now the head of the 12,500-student Santa Monica-Malibu Unified School District, will arrive from Southern California with many people here rooting for him to succeed and stick around awhile.

The 133,000-student Prince George's system has had five leaders in 15 years: Howard A. Burnett (now interim chief), Andre J. Hornsby, Iris T. Metts, Jerome Clark and Edward M. Felegy. The last superintendent (as the chief executive's job was formerly known) to survive more than four years was John A. Murphy, from 1984 to 1991.

In the board chamber March 31 were County Council members, school principals, administrative staff and community leaders. Board of Education members seated around Deasy beamed. Their decision to hire him for four years ensures that the board, which was appointed by a governor and county executive in 2002, will leave a legacy even after an elected board supplants it at year's end.

"It's the best move they've made in the four years they've been here," said council Chairman Thomas E. Dernoga (D-Laurel). He described the selection of Deasy as "a home run." Dernoga, an influential voice on education affairs, often criticized Hornsby.

Council member Samuel H. Dean (D-Mitchellville) said of Deasy: "I have high hopes, based upon what he has said. We look forward to working with him. He's coming into the system with the right approach. He wants to listen."

Deasy described a two-stage plan for his first months. He will spend the tail end of the current school year and the summer break on an outreach and observation tour. From mid-August to mid-December, he'll develop what he calls a "road map to success" -- building on a recent trend of rising test scores.

Within three years, Deasy said, he wants "the overwhelming majority" of the system's high school students to pass state graduation exams that will take effect for the Class of 2009. Currently, more than half of county students are failing those standardized tests.

And he wants to turn around eight struggling schools that are at the furthest stage of sanctions and scrutiny for low test scores under the federal No Child Left Behind law. "We have very little time to waste," Deasy said.

He staked out other eye-catching goals. For instance, "in the not-too-distant future," he wants Prince George's to have a school system "where people are

begging to work . . . just like I chose to come here." That line drew an outburst of applause. So did his assertion that "Prince George's County is not Baltimore City," a reference to test scores that put the county a level above the state's lowest-achieving school system.

Deasy said he wants to forge partnerships with parents and community institutions. And he pledged that the teamwork will be real. "We don't invite parents to the table unless we want to work with parents," Deasy said.

He also said he would spend a lot of time meeting with students. "If you want to know how our schools are going, ask them," he said. That remark drew titters from the crowd.

Deasy made a commitment to "transparency" in his dealings with the public. And he invoked African American leaders Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King Jr., as well as Latino leader Cesar Chavez, in an effort to show his commitment to erasing what he called "deplorable" gaps between minority student achievement and that of white students. He spoke a bit of Spanish and asked forgiveness for his errors. "No hablo español bien," he said.

Afterward, principals lauded his talk. "I'm excited," said Bowie High School Principal John Bircckhead. "We're moving in the right direction. He's committed to making sure we keep going in that direction. What I like about him is the feeling of openness he has."

Forest Heights Elementary School Principal Theresa Merrifield said: "The key word is 'all.' I do believe he means it. It's going to be a collaborative effort."

David R. Merkwowitz of the Prince George's Business-Education Alliance said he was impressed with Deasy's pledges of transparency and cooperation with other local officials and community leaders.

"This is not a guy who's ever going to walk out of a [County] Council meeting," Merkwowitz said. "They're going to have to kick him out."