

BUDGET DAZE 1: Confessions of a BoE Junkie
by Mark R. Adelman, Chair, MCCF Education Committee

[Note: This may seem a bit more editorial than most of our newsletter articles. It was originally intended for submission to the Sentinel, but there were/are many pieces waiting in line.]

We spend a LOT of money on Public Education in Montgomery County: almost TWO BILLION DOLLARS on MCPS in FY 2007 - if you add the \$1.837 billion in the Superintendent's projected budget to the more than \$100 million in debt service for MCPS projects (the cost of repaying money borrowed by the County to pay for schools construction and the like) that is in the County budget. Is it worth it? You bet! If we spend the money wisely and we give every kid the best shot possible at a quality education. The task is daunting and, like all educational matters, it requires hard work and attention to details. That's why the budgeting process is so extensive (it spreads out over the entire calendar year) and, at times, intensive (especially in the December - March time period when so much citizen input is involved). We all get a little tired, which is perhaps why one Board of Education member chose to refer to those of us who attend so many of their meetings as "BoE Junkies". [Which I actually thought was kind of funny.]

Definition?: BoE Junkie - someone who spends excessive amounts of time attending BoE meetings and hearings, occasionally testifies at same, and writes articles about such events.

Alternative Definition?: Someone who believes that Public Education is too important to be left solely to those hired to deliver it and/or those elected to oversee the process.

The characterization of anyone as a BoE Junkie seems indicative of a failure to understand the big picture; a failure of Attitude. A sort of arrogance. Now, arguably, I am guilty of being a BoE Junkie. I admit to having attended some 7-8 hours of recent hearings on the MCPS FY 2007 Budget, to having also attended some 4 or more hours of BoE work sessions on the questions raised during those hearings, to having testified at and written about those hearings and work sessions. And to having spent considerable additional time reading (and writing) about such matters. I even (blush) attend some meetings of Board committees! Both my wife and our son will testify to my addictive behavior.

I confess to being a patriotic citizen of our County and our Country and to having an abiding faith that an educated public is critical to the proper functioning of our democracy. I also confess to the perception (frustration) that our society is operating under the delusion that our educational system is doing the best it can do. I further confess to believing that someone has to mind the store and that most of life consists in showing up. And I confess to finding it quite educational (and thus enjoyable) to observe the workings of our government up close and personal.

So what does a BoE Junkie learn? Many things. For example that the numerous questions raised in testimony are often seriously considered. Take a look at this url (http://www.mcps.k12.md.us/departments/budget/FY2007/budget_questions.shtml) to see the results of Staff work done to provide Board members with answers to some of those questions. But not all questions get answered: take a look at my testimony (<http://www.montgomerycivic.org/render.asp?docarticle=000009&doctype=CI>) for some unanswered ones.

But there are other things a BoE Junkie learns. Like the extent to which public input informs and educates the Board and its Staff. And the enormous amount of time and effort that the Board and Staff put into wrestling with the complexities of making our system work. If they succeed, we all are better off. Their mistakes are OUR mistakes. The big picture is NOT who wins (or loses) a particular issue. Not whose question is (or isn't) answered. Not whose complaint is (or isn't) redressed. The big picture is that we are all in this together. Every kid whose educational needs are met is our victory; every kid we fail is our failure.

As I said, the task of using our educational resources well is daunting. As with all educational processes, we must focus on developing Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes. There is no doubt that the Members of the BoE and the MCPS administration have lots of Knowledge. In my opinion, they need some work on how they apply that knowledge (Skills). But our real concern is about their Attitude. As recent behavior at BoE hearings and recent assessments of MCPS actions (e.g. the Inspector General's report on the Seven Locks ES issue, <http://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/oigtmpl.asp?url=/content/InspectorG/igproduct.asp>) suggest, there is a lot of room for improvement. And we must not simply sit on the sidelines and criticize. We have to educate ourselves so we can educate our leaders and thus help them do a better job. There was much to learn in this year's sequence of budget hearings and work sessions. Many questions remain to be answered. Many decisions still to be made - by the County Council. And, as the title of this article suggests, much more to be said, in testimony and in written format.

So become a BoE Junkie. Attend a meeting, or hearing. Find out what is wrong (and right) in your local school. Educate yourself. Help educate the Board during the Public Comments segment of the meetings. Everyone is entitled to have some fun, so join in. [Of course, I'm constantly reminded of the notepad our son gave me that is entitled "IDIOCY" and has the slogan "Never Underestimate The Power of Stupid People in Large Groups".] But seriously, it IS your right and responsibility to pay attention and participate. This BoE Junkie believes we can win. This BoE Junkie wants to win for EVERY kid. Don't we all want that?

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