

EDUCATION MATTERS: Changes (part 2)

by Mark R. Adelman, Chair, MCCF Education Committee

My final article as Chair of the MCCF Education Committee is a status report on issues with which our committee has been involved. Our efforts have been connected by the common thread that ALL members of the community should be engaged in the dialogue about how best to deliver high quality education to every child in Montgomery County because, even if one does not have a child in our public school system, the fabric of our society and the quality of our lives is vitally dependent on how well MCPS does its multiple jobs. This means not only that the Board of Education (BoE) and all elements of MCPS must seek out and value community input, but also that each of us has an obligation to monitor what MCPS is doing and to offer comment when we believe something can be improved.

What we learned during the revision of the BoE Policy on Long-Range Educational Facilities Planning (FAA) and the associated implementing document (FAA-RA) lead us to participate in the dialogue regarding revisions of a number of other policies (ABA - on Community Involvement, IQD - on Academic Eligibility for Extracurricular Activities, BFA - on Policy Setting, BNB - on Board Staff, IEB - on Middle School Reform, JFA - on Student Rights and Responsibilities). We not only read and discussed draft revisions before submitting comments on them, but also attended some meetings of the relevant BoE committees so as to better understand the process and to demonstrate to BoE members the interest of the community in these matters. We consistently argued for more clarity in such policy statements, stressed the need to explicitly recognize the community in all such matters, and emphasized the many ways in which public education not only provides students with knowledge and skills but also must develop in them the attitudes required of citizens in our society. Some (but of course not all) of our suggestions were followed. The discussion of Policy JFA (visit the MCCF website) is the most recent example of this ongoing effort.

We have continued to track the many issues raised by the Seven Locks ES replacement controversy. No one has informed us of problems in the planned upgrading of SLES. Most seem pleased that the Kendale Road site is not scheduled to be used for an elementary school, but many are cautious as to whether the site might be "lost" to the school system at some future date. The numbers of relocatable classrooms has been reduced even as many defective ones were replaced; some feedback from activists in the Churchill cluster suggests that a significant number of newly installed relocatables have had problems and that getting these corrected takes time and effort on the part of PTAs and other parts of the community. Many remain suspicious of the accuracy of MCPS financial projections (the yearly budget battles over transparency have not helped the effort to rebuild trust). The overall issue of retaining MCPS sites that are (or are not) currently needed is a mixed bag. The Edson Lane site was declared surplussed, but the actual transfer to the County (for possible use in building affordable housing) has been tied up in litigation for some time. We are informed that sale of the Perry HS site has not progressed and that little action on this appears likely in the immediate future. The objections to possible transfer of Carver ESC from MCPS to Montgomery College lead to the establishment of a "Rockville Campus Expansion Task Force" (<http://www.montgomerycollege.edu/rvexpansion/index.html>) which is in the final stages of studying options and making recommendations. Assuming that acquisition of Carver is recommended, the BoE will evaluate the proposal. When we last inquired about this, we were given to understand that there was no urgency and little enthusiasm to proceed along this path: it will be up to the community (including MCCF) to

decide if/how to respond should transfer of Carver appear imminent.

As part of our routine of contacting the appropriate offices for status updates, we pursued the question of whether the Carver site parking lot improvement that was done to accommodate overflow parking from the college had employed pervious paving: it did not, but we have learned that MCPS is participating in a county-wide effort to test this technology at a series of sites, including portions of some school parking lots. We perceive growing concern about the extent to which MCPS construction does/does not follow guidelines that would be applicable to other construction in the county. The entire issue of "green construction", the independence of MCPS from county regulations, and the costs - to the community - of building and maintaining public schools is exceedingly nuanced. The relationship of schools as educational sites AND as focal points of the communities in which they are housed is likely to become an ever greater component of the public dialogue as MoCo approaches "build-out" and accelerates "build-up".

The MCPS budget continues to comprise approximately one half of the entire Montgomery County budget. The process by which this budget is proposed, debated, and funded takes up an enormous portion of the time and effort of those who choose to engage in the dialogue. In our testimonies before the BoE and the County Council (posted to our website), we continued to stress the need for documentation that is clearer and less laden with overt positive-spin propaganda. The decisions that must be made in each cycle are neither trivial nor easy; the entire community must participate and it is - to us - distressing to see so many citizens unwilling to engage in the process, no matter what the reason.

Because election of members of the BoE is a critical part of the process by which the community can indicate how it wishes MCPS to proceed, our committee has experimented with several methods of allowing candidates to present their views and positions to the public. Public attendance at candidate forums appears traditionally low. Public interest in the results of questionnaires (such as the one we posted to our website in 2006) is difficult to assess. What remains clear is that voters come to the polls less informed about BoE candidates than about almost any other element of the ballot and are less likely to cast a vote in BoE contests than any others.

It is the essence of a truly democratic society that all citizens are educated so they can participate in an informed public dialogue, the goal of which is to reach some consensus as to the best way in which to resolve each of the many complex challenges facing that society. This participation is one's right AND one's responsibility. It is rare that the average citizen wins or loses any such debate. However, in the broadest sense each of us gains if we participate and our opinion is heard; the corollary is that each of us fails to gain if we choose not to participate or if others choose not to hear us. Another essential feature of our society is that each of us may step forward and offer to serve, for some period of time, in a role that reflects our interests and experiences. Each of us has developed a base of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that enable us to serve in some form of leadership role; each of us has an implicit obligation to do so and should regard such a period of service as a privilege. I wish all the best to the MCCF delegate who steps forward to chair our Education Committee. It has been my privilege to serve the Federation.

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