

## **WE CAN AND MUST DO BETTER**

*by Mark R. Adelman, Chair, MCCF Education Committee*

Some of us believe MCPS is doing a great job of educating our children. Some of us are not so sure. And some of us believe it is doing a good job for some of our kids, a bad job for many of our kids, and could do MUCH better for all our kids. I'm in that last group, as are the other members of our committee. I'm writing this article - as an individual - to engage the Civic Federation in the long-term struggle to change and improve how MCPS does what it does.

You may know that I am also active in a group called the Montgomery County Education Forum ([www.mcef.org](http://www.mcef.org)). MCEF has recently joined forces with other "progressive groups" to form the Equity in Education Coalition (EEC). We held a conference, on December 10, and the number of "breakout sessions" attests to the complexity of the issues we are addressing (<http://www.mcef.org/EEC2005/Breakouts.pdf>). So I do NOT want to imply that there is a simple solution to the problem. But it IS possible to state simply what the problem is: MCPS (and most other systems of public education in our country) is operating based on flawed premises, which lead to flawed practices, which lead to disappointing education of all of our kids and inequity in the educational opportunities afforded them. I contend that understanding the flawed premises and practices is fundamental to achieving a BETTER educational system. So I ask you to consider a few commonly held beliefs, and their implications.

Do you believe that all children learn in the same way and at the same rate? Most of us would say NO. Do you believe that some children are BETTER learners than others and that we can determine, EARLY ON, which are better? I suspect that many would say yes to the first half of that and be a little hesitant about the second part, probably asking what is meant by EARLY ON. Can we pretty much decide by the end of second grade? Well that's what MCPS does, with the "Grade 2 Global Screening Process", by which it determines which students are "gifted and talented" and which are not. About 40% of all our kids are labelled G&T (it varies from year to year depending on what tests are used, how the results are adjusted, etc.) and the rest are NOT. If your kid is Hispanic or African-American s/he is about twice as likely to be labelled NOT as if s/he is Caucasian or Asian-American. While MCPS says that the system works to move kids back and forth between the two tracks (G-T and NOT), depending on their performance, the data show that such movement is very infrequent. Why is that? Well there are many factors and many theories. But fundamentally, educators (including me) see the labelling as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Curricula for the NOT are "dumbed-down", expectations (of teachers, students, and parents) are less for the NOT. Challenges and resources are less for the NOT.

Suppose we change the prophecy? Suppose we say that all kids learn differently; that what they learn depends on a number of factors, including what skills they bring to school on day 1, how hard they work, how much we expect of them, and

how hard we work with them? Suppose we predict that all kids can achieve a LOT and that we won't know what they can do until we work with each and every one of them, using every tool in the toolbox, for many years. Suppose we ASSUME every kid can learn a LOT and will challenge them ALL to the same extent, and will give extra help to the ones who don't do as well as we BELIEVE they can do. And we do this for as many years as the kids are willing to try. No labels, no limits.

Some people hear this and get very nervous about a "dumbing-down" of the curriculum for ALL students; some are really only concerned about the potential dumbing-down of the curriculum for their own kid(s). But what most people don't recognize is that, by making the absurd statement that almost half our kids are gifted and talented, MCPS has ALREADY dumbed down the curriculum for most students! MOST students are not really "gifted and talented" (otherwise the term has very little meaning) and most students are in fact "not-gifted"; there is actually a wide range of gifts and talents and almost no way to place each student accurately and meaningfully into any particular bin. In every arbitrary bin, no matter how many bins we create, some students are being challenged too little. In the face of the fact that all students learn differently, it is STONE STUPID to create "tracks" in the curriculum. All students MUST be taught as individuals: this is sometimes called "differentiated instruction" and it is NOT a trivial task. It is being done, successfully in some school districts, but it takes a sea-change in attitude and practices and it takes time. Some people in Montgomery County demand that we be shown how it works elsewhere before we try it, because our system is already one of the best, so why change it. I say, given the terrible state of public education throughout our country, that being one of the best is setting the bar WAY too low and we should do better than the best: we should set the bar high for ourselves and we should do better. We are NOT educating our kids to the max: we are not even doing that for most of the "gifted and talented", and we are certainly not doing it for the NOT.

I, with my colleagues of the EEC, am demanding that MCPS stop using the Grade 2 Global Screening Process as a justification for sorting our kids into arbitrary bins that serve no purpose except to guarantee that almost none of them is challenged to their full potential. Our teachers (maybe not all, but certainly many) know how to push some kids to their max; for example, they give them challenging reading assignments and indicate that they expect the kids to do the work. If they can do that for some kids, they can do it for all kids - push them to their max. I am demanding that the Board of Education and MCPS use ALL its resources (including its convictions) in an equitable fashion that maximizes the chance each of our kids can reach his or her potential. I am asking MCCF as an organization, and each and every member as an individual, to make this same demand and commitment. It's morally right. It makes educational sense. Sure it will be hard work, not just for teachers but also for parents - but we owe it to our kids. Think about it.

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