

EDUCATION MATTERS

by Mark R. Adelman, Chair, MCCF Education Committee

By the time you read this, the composition of the Montgomery County Board of Education (BoE) will have changed, reflecting the recent electoral results. While incumbents Patricia O'Neill and Nancy Navarro have been elected to continue serving us, Charles Haughey and Gabe Romero (both of whom chose not to seek re-election) have been replaced by Shirley Brandman and Judy Docca. In addition, incumbent Valerie Ervin, having campaigned successfully for a seat on the County Council, will have resigned from the BoE and the process by which the new BoE (sworn in on December 1) chooses her replacement should be nearly complete. Whether the turmoil surrounding the behavior of BoE member Steve Abrams will result in another vacancy on the board is unclear.

From the point of view of public education in MoCo, changes at the County Council may prove to be significant as well. Gone are two members of the ED committee, Mike Subin and Howie Denis. Many speculate they will be replaced with Ms. Ervin and another new Council member, Marc Elrich. How the Council will work with the new BoE and the new County Executive, Ike Leggett, is of critical importance to resolving the many challenges facing our school system. And these elected officials will benefit from the thoughtful insights of all sectors of the community. We must not simply elect our representatives and then sit back expecting them to do the 'right' thing. The issues are too complex for any small group to determine, without error, what is the best course of action. Citizens must observe how well those we have elected are doing and offer comment, not only when we are asked for comment, but also - and especially - when we believe we see a mistake being made. While the PTAs will continue to do an enormous amount of critical work in this arena, those of us (now a majority of the taxpaying public) who do not have kids in the school system must share the burden, because the effectiveness of our public schools is vital to the quality of life in MoCo.

The process of determining the FY2008 MCPS budget is well underway and no one should be surprised if the initial request is for somewhat more than 2 billion dollars (including debt service on monies borrowed for MCPS construction). When we all are called to testify before the BoE and the Council early next year about the proposed budget, we must do so in a responsible manner, informed by careful reading of a budget that has been made more transparent (than in the past) by the collaborative work of MCPS, BoE, County Executive, and Council Staff. We must not only point out where more funds are needed, but also offer suggestions where justification for budget items is unconvincing. It is our hope that the additional budget analysts added to Council staff will be helpful, that the BoE will recognize the need to add to its own staff in this area, and that all will work collaboratively to maximize the likelihood that every dollar appropriated is used to benefit all of our children equitably.

Calendar year 2008 will bring the renegotiation of major contracts, with teachers,

support staff, and the superintendent. To the extent possible, the entire community must offer thoughtful comment about all of these contracts, recognizing that resources are not limitless, that debts incurred by our generation are passed on to our children (and theirs), but that education is a people-driven and people-directed process. Getting rid of portable classrooms, upgrading aging schools, purchasing needed tools for teaching are all critical objectives. But none of these 'hardware' decisions can accomplish much if we do not make prudent expenditures that maximize the probability of having optimal numbers of qualified and dedicated people to deliver education.

Finally, the entire community must pay more attention to defining and measuring education. The words we use, the policies we approve, the laws and regulations we put in place are all critical pieces of the puzzle. We must all expend more effort to define our goals - avoiding vague terms and empty phrases - so that we can then better define our methods and our means of assessment. There are no simple fixes to the problems our educational system confronts. We must not expect those we elect to work magic, nor can we accept glib assurances that everything is going as well as it can be. Each and every one of us is a part of 'the solution' (as well as a part of the problem): we will make progress in proportion to the effort that each and every one of us expends. The MCCF Education Committee is committed to the effort. In the coming months we will be making numerous detailed statements and suggestions about public education in our community. We welcome your comments, we will accept your criticisms (and hopefully learn from them), we need your help. So do those we have most recently elected. So do all of our children.

11/23/06; Mark R. Adelman