

Interim Report Card on BoE and MCPS: Policy FAA and Other Matters

by Mark R. Adelman, Chair, MCCF Education Committee

This is a follow-up to my recent articles on Policy FAA (Long-Range Educational Facilities Planning), the proposed revision of which, by the Montgomery County Board of Education (BoE), has generated so much controversy. It is also an open-ended commentary on the BoE and the Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) system that invites Civic Federation members to issue an interim report card on the performance of the BoE and MCPS.

On May 5 our committee sent the BoE Policy Committee our comments on the proposed revisions to Policy FAA; a pdf version is available on the MCCF website. On May 11, Wayne Goldstein and I attended the final meeting of that committee regarding Policy FAA. We were the only people in attendance, other than the members of the Policy Committee (three) and about seven staff members. Notable by their absence were representatives of the Montgomery County Council of PTAs (MCCPTA). The MCCPTA had submitted recommendations that, like ours, urged the revision process be slowed to allow more time for discussion of the reasons for the extensive nature of the changes and the limited time for public input. Unlike us, MCCPTA did not propose specific "options" if the BoE insisted in proceeding and, by their absence, they sent a clear message that the process was unacceptable. We were not asked to comment during the Policy Committee meeting, nor did we feel it appropriate to ask to be heard. The tone of the meeting was disturbing in that, while a number of modifications were discussed (and apparently adopted), each was seemingly considered because of the desire to mollify unreasonable concerns of citizens who did not appear to trust the intentions of the committee, the BoE, or MCPS. The entire BoE is to vote on the recommended revised Policy FAA on Monday evening May 23. We will be there and will offer comment (if given the opportunity); however, it is our expectation that the recommendations of the Policy Committee will be adopted by the full BoE. [We have also submitted comments on the proposed revision of Policy BFA (Policy on Policies). This revision is much less controversial than is FAA; again our comments are available (pdf file) on the MCCF website.]

It is my perception that this has been a very bad year for the BoE and MCPS. While the statistics they use to rally public support for the system attest to progress, most citizens are concerned about the quality of the education our children receive, and question the "meaning" of those statistics. While MCPS will no doubt cite the number of Montgomery County high schools that are ranked high in a recent Newsweek survey, I would argue that one should measure the quality of any public education system by the quality of the programs at the weakest schools, not the strongest. An increasing number of parents are contesting the "two-tier" nature of MCPS programs, which have a frankly discriminatory appearance; the recent challenge, by the AAPMSA, of the appalling statistics as to admission of students of color into magnet programs, and the equally appalling speed with which MCPS "caved" on this issue, without even pretending to do any sort of meaningful study, are NOT good signs.

In the last year BoE/MCPS actions have infuriated citizens who feel that school property should not be surplussed for any reason - most certainly not to a poorly thought out "plan" to increase "affordable housing". They have ignored the reasoned arguments of

the "Save Seven Locks Coalition" that question the wisdom and fiscal soundness of replacing the SLES with a new facility on the Kendale Road site. BoE/MCPS actions lead to the promulgation of a "sex-education" program that has been successfully (and embarrassingly) challenged because, among other reasons, it inexplicably mixes judgments as to the quality of various religions with a discussion of the need to be tolerant of alternative forms of sexuality. BoE/MCPS insistence on a hasty (and bewilderingly complex) revision of grading policy has meet with wide resistance. Decisions as to allocation of funds for the purchase of PDAs, and for funding of a coalition with local businesses (MCBRE) have been questioned by many in the PTA world. And, with the probable decision to adopt the contested revision of Policy FAA, the BoE/MCPS hierarchy would appear to have achieved the unbelievable: they appear to have alienated MCCPTA!

As with any report card, the one I propose on BoE/MCPS could have many line items. I will list just a few, complete just one and leave it to you to make other entries:

- Interaction with the community (including the MCCPTA): F
- Sound management of MCPS resources: ?
- Careful promulgation of educational programs: ?
- Education of all of our children: ?

The Civic Federation Education Committee continues to research these and related issues. We will continue to publish and testify - and attempt to dialogue with members of the BoE/MCPS power structure. We would like to help the BoE/MCPS do a better job and get a better report card next year. We need all the help we can get. Please join us.

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