

Board of Education Policy FAA: Problem of Perception?

by Mark R. Adelman, Chair MCCF Education Committee

This is yet another story about differing perceptions related to public education policy in our County. It highlights the need for MCCF to work toward a 'reality' that serves everyone. The Montgomery County Board of Education (BoE) has proposed a revision to its Policy FAA (Long-Range Educational Facilities Planning). [The announcement of this change is on the Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) website: <http://coldfusion.mcps.k12.md.us/press/index.cfm?page=showrelease&id=1595>. You can access the current policy at: <http://www.mcps.k12.md.us/departments/policy/pdf/faa.pdf>.] Unfortunately, this proposed revision has generated a LOT of controversy, largely because many people do not trust the BoE or the upper level administration of MCPS. The BoE announcement about the revised Policy FAA implies that critical elements of the old policy statement are "regulatory", do not belong in a policy document and will be shifted to a regulatory document. This of course leads to an argument about the differences between "policy" and "regulation" used to implement policy. The critical element in this particular instance is that FAA is, in fact, a carefully-crafted mixture of policy and regulation; as a policy statement it "guarantees" the community a place at the table in all considerations related to "long-range educational facilities planning". Whether an abbreviated policy statement and a set of regulations (in the development of which the public has little role) will continue to guarantee this critical community involvement is not at all clear. On the one hand, many civic activists and MCCPTA (Montgomery County Council of Parent and Teacher Associations) members have expressed the opinion that the revised Policy is designed to reduce the input (increasingly negative of late) of 'the community' into BoE/MCPS decisions about school construction, MCPS land use, etc. On the other hand, MCPS staff say that there has been an ongoing program, for several years now, involving systematic revision of BoE policy papers, many of which are very old and much in need of updating. And that the proposal of this revised FAA is simply a part of that ongoing program; the policy, it is argued, states that community involvement is important.

Believing it was essential that this issue be aired publicly, the MCCF Education Committee proposed "emergency action" at the March 14 regular meeting. After appropriate discussion, the delegates approved the following (revised) motion:

*"Whereas the Montgomery County Board of Education (BoE) has proposed an extensive revision of Policy FAA (Long-Range Educational Facilities Planning), and
Whereas the revised FAA appears to differ significantly from the current version of the FAA, and
Whereas the BoE has indicated that public comments on the proposed revision must be received by May 9, 2005, and*

Whereas numerous delegates to the Montgomery County Civic Federation (MCCF) have expressed concerns about the reasons for revision of the FAA, and

*Whereas the MCCF Education Committee believes that more time is needed for public evaluation of, and comment on, the proposed revised FAA,
Therefore be it*

RESOLVED that MCCF requests the BoE to delay action on the proposed revised FAA for at least three months, during which time the BoE can provide public commentary regarding the reasons for revising the FAA, and hold several hearings on the matter.

And be it also

RESOLVED that the MCCF invites the President of the BoE to meet with the delegates to MCCF in the format of a "standard" MCCF pro/con discussion, with, for example, a representative of the MCCPTA, so that the various Montgomery County Civic Associations with interest in this matter can become better informed as to the reasons for, and ramifications of, the proposed revised FAA."

Since our March 14 vote, the press has picked up on this issue (<http://www.potomacalmanac.com/printarticle.asp?article=47656>). And the MCCPTA Executive Board has sent to the BoE a long and very thoughtful letter reviewing the history of creation of Policy FAA, explaining why the proposed revision is problematic, and asking the BoE to "reconsider your proposed action on Policy FAA" and "defer formal consideration of any changes to Policy FAA until the fall of 2005" to "allow all stakeholders adequate time to consider the need for changes and alternative approaches and for public hearings and testimony to occur."

Pending response of the BoE to our (MCCF) resolutions, the Education Committee is attempting to arrange some informal discussions with the BoE and its staff, in the hope that progress can be made in crafting a version of Policy FAA that is a reasonable compromise between the extensive (older) version that the BoE seeks to refine and the overly condensed (newer) version that has been put forward. If this can be achieved - in the course of a real public dialogue - then the two different perceptions may just possibly

become a shared reality, to the benefit of all parties in this controversial issue.

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