

EDUCATION MATTERS

by Mark R. Adelman, Chair, MCCF Education Committee

In the past month we have offered comment on the Board of Education's proposed revision to Policy JFA (Student Rights and Responsibilities) and have testified before the BoE regarding the proposed MCPS FY2008 budget. Those comments and the text of our testimony are posted to the Civic Federation website: we urge you to read these documents and provide us feedback. By the time you see this newsletter the BoE will have held work sessions on the proposed budget. Hopefully the "new" BoE will pay more attention to citizen suggestions than has been the case in the recent past. We - and every other citizen in Montgomery County - will have the opportunity, in April, to testify before the County Council regarding the County budget, of which the MCPS budget constitutes some 50%.

As we have repeatedly said, it is the right and responsibility of every citizen to help elect officials, to continually audit their performance, and to provide them feedback on that performance. One critical judgement that each and every one of us must make involves the question of how much "honeymoon time" we should allow newly elected officials. I would argue that it is not so much a question of how long the honeymoon, but rather the rate at which we increase the volume of our feedback if we are displeased with the actions of those we recently elected. The challenges facing our school system are all of the challenges facing our society, amplified by the mistakes all of us have made over a period of many years. It is at once too easy and not completely fair to blame every problem on "them". Remember the wise words of Pogo? To the extent that any one of us has helped create so many problems by ignoring the consequences of actions (and ALL actions have consequences), we are part of the problem and must be part of the solution. We cannot ask for everything without recognizing the realities of limited resources. And we must communicate clearly and forcefully, without claiming to know what is in someone else's mind.

Communication between the community and the school system (which is overseen by the BoE) must be frequent, informed, honest and consistent. We have, for example, repeatedly criticized numerous defects in the "Citizens Budget" and will continue to do so until they are corrected. Education is one of the results of effective communication and education should not stop when we leave the formal classroom. If you know of instances where our critiques are inappropriate, you need to inform us of our mistakes. And if you know of a problem that we have not addressed, we expect you to tell us. A recurrent theme of my comments at monthly MCCF delegate meetings is that all of us have valuable knowledge and skills. And different perspectives, which shape our attitudes. The members of our Education Committee need your insights and your help. We may not always agree, but we will always attempt to incorporate your comments into ours. And, if you believe we have failed to do so, you must avail yourself of the multiple opportunities to offer public comment of your own. To the extent that the community ignores problems, those problems will persist or perhaps even worsen. And, since no one group constitutes the community, no one group can solve the problems of the community. We continue to reach out to others, whenever possible, to engage in thoughtful and probing dialogue. We are working with others,

for example, to help prepare Sentinel articles. Send us an Email, join us at one of our meetings, urge others to communicate with us.

And remind us - if we appear to forget - that many of the issues that concerned us in the past remain to be resolved. Are the portables (especially the moldy ones) gone from our neighborhood schools? Have MCPS and the Council resolved the controversial matter of how to manage school sites, like Peary HS, that are temporarily not needed but may soon become urgently in demand? What about the issue of involving all elements of the community in decisions about the fate of the Carver Educational Services Center? We cannot give you a simple answer to any one of those questions; some appear to be works in progress, while others are on hold. We continue to track all of these matters, and work to make sure that lines of communication with relevant officials are open. But we need your help because none of these sorts of problems is going to be "fixed" quickly - much less instantly. And the community is only beginning to deal with the real problems of equity and quality of education. The multiple Emails we receive are a constant reminder of how much various citizens know about pieces of the puzzle. So many have insights as to how to assemble them. Pick up a piece, turn it over, consider where it fits, and educate us.

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