

Can We Expect More Transparency On MCPS Issues?

by Mark R. Adelman, Chair, MCCF Education Committee

A new year has begun for our public schools; what does this part of the future hold for us? And another electoral cycle is drawing to a close, with General Elections to be held on November 7. No matter what the exact outcomes, it is already clear that there will be changes in the composition of both the Montgomery County Board of Education (BoE) and the Montgomery County Council (as well as the County Executive, of course). These changes, and events of the past year, will have impacts on how the school system handles charges that it has not been sufficiently transparent regarding many matters. Here I address the question of how open the BoE and MCPS have been regarding their budget, and the extent to which the public can expect more transparency about how the nearly two billion dollars allocated to the school system are spent. I chose to comment on two developments, one macro, the other micro.

From the big picture point of view, we are cautiously optimistic that the current Council acted (when it finalized the FY 2007 Operating Budget in May), to create two staff positions devoted to analysis of the MCPS budget. This action was in response to repeated testimony (from many citizens, including our committee) that the MCPS budget was needlessly obtuse and that concerned citizens found it extremely difficult to get clear answers to many budget-related questions. The Council - following portions of our specific recommendations - announced that the two new staff positions would help assure openness, accountability and "sunshine". Our optimism is cautious because the two staff positions were not added to the Board of Education staff (where we believe they are most needed) and because the funding for them was not derived by compensatory reduction in the MCPS budget staff. From discussions with Council members and Council staff, we understand the various reasons why these actions were taken (or not taken), even though we do not entirely agree. It is our understanding that one of the new Council staff will be assigned to the Office of Legislative Oversight (OLO) and that the other will be added directly to the Council Staff, with tasks assigned by the entire Council, presumably with special weight given to the recommendations of the Council's Education Committee. It is not clear to us how well these staff will be able to work with MCPS and BoE staff, nor is it clear how much they will address our expressed concern that the average citizen finds it so difficult to get clear answers to seemingly straightforward questions about the school system budget (and other aspects of its operations). We have been told that, if enough citizens raise similar questions, those questions will be addressed. Which leads us to the other development (the micro).

On an arguably smaller issue, we are pleased that the Board of Education finally responded to our repeated requests for information on the costs of producing, distributing and publicizing documents related to the proposed MCPS FY 2007 Operating Budget. In a letter (dated March 31), from the President of the BoE, we were informed of detailed costs totaling some \$36,000; this was somewhat more

then our 'low end' estimate (\$25,000) and significantly less than our 'high end' estimate (\$100,00). Now that we have an official cost estimate from the BoE, it is perhaps worth noting several points. First, because the cost of staff time spent preparing the various documents was not included in the estimate we were provided, we are still not sure how much what we have called propaganda really costs the school system. One can get a rough estimate as follows: it is routinely stated that almost 90% of the costs of running our school system are for personnel. So let's say that the \$36,000 figure we were provided actually represents only one-tenth of the true cost. Which means the true cost is really more like \$360,000? We are all left to decide. And to ponder the question of whether such funds were wisely spent. But what is NOT in question is the persistence it took to get a response from the BoE on a very simple question: multiple Emails, testimony, and a rather pointed column in the Montgomery County Sentinel. But we did, in fact get a response, and that is encouraging. Because the MCPS budget is prepared anew each year, and citizens are asked for input.

The process of preparing the FY2008 MCPS budget has already begun, coupled with the continuing process of revising the MCPS Strategic Plan. Citizen input into both is again being sought. On September 21, representing the Civic Federation, I attended a "Planning Forum for Community Leaders". We met at the Carver Educational Services Center in Rockville and were provided with a great deal of information about the Strategic Plan, the Process of developing the Operating Budget Proposal, and the status of MCPS. We were asked to solicit input from our constituencies and make sure that as many people as possible know about the multiple means available to them for input into these processes. So our Education Committee will be discussing this at its October 2 meeting. And mark your calendar for the evening of Thursday, October 12. That night, beginning at 7:00 PM, there will be a Public Forum, again at Carver, to discuss the Strategic Plan and the FY 2008 Operating Budget. And note the following URL - www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/community/forums/feedback/ - because that is where you can point your browser if you wish to provide the BoE with your answers to some questions it believes are relevant to the decisions facing our school system officials.

But please don't just fill out the form. Think about how our school system affects you and your quality of life. Ask the BoE questions of your own. Provide them insights into how YOU view the issues we are facing in our schools. I close by repeating a theme made many times in our columns. It is the essence of the democratic process that we thoughtfully elect our public servants from those who offer to serve. But is it equally important that we stay in contact with those we have elected, so as to inform them of any concerns we have, or suggestions we wish to make. The BoE and MCPS are providing us with the opportunity for input. It is our obligation to provide that input, to ask questions (of them and of the County Council), and to persist in asking questions until we get answers. It is NOT acceptable to vote, then sit back and observe, grumble if things aren't going as we wish, and 'vote the rascals out' at the next electoral cycle. If you want light to shine

in on our school system, then you must be prepared to help open the blinds.

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