

BAD NIGHT FOR THE BOARD OF EDUCATION - AND FOR THE COMMUNITY

by Mark R. Adelman, Chair, MCCF Education Committee

The Montgomery County Board of Education (BoE) held its regularly scheduled public meeting on Monday evening, May 23, at the Carver Educational Services Center in Rockville. It was neither nice to hear, nor pleasant to see: in the opinion of several who routinely attend such meetings, it was one of the most unsettling performances of the BoE in recent memory. Articles have been written and Emails exchanged; the entire spectacle was available on streaming video and replayed on cable TV. No one can capture, in words, all that transpired; I will only highlight a few critical elements.

1. Superintendent Weast proposed (and the BoE passed) a "Rescission of the Family Life and Human Sexuality Pilot and Other Actions". This was a pathetic effort at whitewashing the disastrous path by which MCPS had proposed a sex-education program module that was successfully challenged in court, largely because it not only offended several vocal segments of the community but also inexplicably got MCPS hoisted on the petard of judging certain religious groups as tolerant or intolerant. The Citizens Advisory Council that so valiantly struggled to find a middle ground through this swamp was summarily disbanded, without also dismissing BoE and MCPS staff who so grossly erred in bringing forward a set of documents with a deeply embedded poisoned apple.

2. The always lively "Public Comments" segment of the evening was enriched by a series of gaffs by various members of the BoE by which they -

a. essentially dismissed as irrelevant a speaker (about item 1 above) who had the temerity to admit he does not have kids attending MCPS.

b. impugned the intellectual integrity of a member of the African American Parents of Montgomery County, because he cited information provided by MCPS staff without adequately (judgment call here) acknowledging the source of the data.

c. implied, in a discussion of the contested revision of Policy FAA (on Long-Range Educational Facilities Planning), that the MCCPTA is one of several special interest groups concerned about BoE policy revisions. [Uh, hello; aren't PTAs the MOST VITAL element of community support for MCPS??]

3. The BoE then spent nearly two hours debating the "final" revision of Policy FAA, during which it displayed limited grasp of parliamentary procedure, very little respect for the community it is supposed to serve, and stunning lack of understanding of the nuances of the policy or the yet-to-be-created set of regulations (FAA-RA) that are critical to implementation of the policy. The "discussion" would have been hilarious ("best free show in town", said a friend) had it not been so depressing. At one point it actually appeared that the BoE would show unheard of wisdom (there ARE a few reasonable members of the Board) by sending the draft policy revision back to committee until the Fall (as had been urged by the MCCPTA and the Civic Federation). But, at the last moment,

snatching defeat from the jaws of victory (and thus pleasing almost no one), the BoE passed the policy revision, inserting a few changes that made it a bit less unsatisfactory.

It is, at this point, nearly irrelevant whether the new Policy FAA is good enough. Some would argue that what was passed can be made to work IF the regulations piece (FAA-RA) is wisely crafted. But few trust the BoE (or the Superintendent, who must prepare the draft of FAA-RA) to do an adequate job. And even fewer trust that community members (special interest groups all) who critique the draft will be listened to. For an elected body, the BoE has shown a stunning lack of common sense and little understanding of public relations.

The bottom line here is trust; and judgment and respect. Many people feel MCPS is NOT educating all our kids as well as they ought to be educated. Many people do not trust the rosy numbers being presented by the Superintendent; nor the judgment shown by the BoE and MCPS . Many people are deeply disturbed when those entrusted with the education of our kids behave as the did on May 23, showing so little respect for the citizens of our county. Most people who live, vote, and pay taxes in Montgomery County do NOT (and will not) have kids in MCPS. Increasingly they are demanding "show us the action". If the action is only at such disastrous BoE meetings, does this augur well for the education of our kids?

5/30/05; Copyright Educational Assistance