HOW MUCH DOES MCPS WASTE ON PR?

by Mark R. Adelman, Chair, MCCF Education Committee

As we write these columns, we are never really sure what the title will be when they appear because our submissions sometimes get edited. That's why they call him the Editor and he gets the big bucks! But I usually submit the article with a short, provocative title and sometimes I guess right. This one should be titled "Budget Daze 2007, Part 2: How much does MCPS and the Board of Education waste on not informing the public about the school budget?". But that would be WAY too long (and perhaps too inflammatory).

This is about the interesting things that have been going on over the last couple of months. I'm not talking about the Inspector General's report (http://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/oigtmpl.asp?url=/content/InspectorG/igproduct.asp), because I do not have the authority to write about that. No, this is the second of a series of articles about the MCPS Budget-making process. The first piece in the series was the MCCF newsletter article in which I confessed to having spent so much time educating myself about this annual circus. Now you have to keep your eye on the ball here, because I'm juggling a lot of threads and juggling threads is hard work. Both for me and for anyone willing to try to follow what's going on. Kind of like watching a magician or the old shell game. Or trying to follow the money in the MCPS store. This one is about education, waste, and some of those unanswered questions. [Aha!- you either didn't read that last article or you weren't paying attention!]

One of the issues I raised in my testimony before the BoE was how hard it was to find out how much the system spends publicizing (oops - explaining) the "Citizens Budget". I tried, I REALLY tried. Read a lot of pages. Asked a lot of people, all of whom told me "That's a difficult question to answer". So I made a guesstimate (between $25,000 and $100,000), threw in a not-so-subtle comment about how worthless the propaganda is, and waited to be educated as to the true cost (and value) and chastised for my tone. No response - no answer. So I used the MCPS website, which has a button to click entitled "Ask a budget question". I asked three:
a. What was the full cost of production and distribution of the booklet entitled "The Citizens Budget. FY 2007"?
b. What was the full cost of the event (Superintendent's Rollout) at Rockville HS in December 2005) at which the proposed budget was presented to the public?
c. What was the full cost of the production and distribution of the full budget document (The Superintendent's Recommended FY 2007 Operating Budget and Personnel Complement)?

And in due course I got a response! "I don't have any information on the questions you ask as this subject is not under my jurisdiction." [Or was it authority?] So I forwarded my questions to the BoE, who surely would respond this time. After all, SOMEbody must be minding the store! I'm still waiting for a response.

What do the three items about which I requested information have in common? They all purport to educate us. But what they really do is subject us to a combination of propaganda ("feel good, we're doing a great job"), or bread and circus ("let's all celebrate"), and/or pure hypocrisy ('here are the disaggregated data, buried so deep you need a super shovel to find the truth"). They waste our time and the energy we bring to the shared effort to educate our kids and ourselves.

So who cares? It's just a small amount of money, whatever it is, and why not spend it to "inform the public"? Well, we can't AFFORD to waste! Money or anything else. How many books would the money buy? Another good question! How many Study Circles could it be used to fund, at which parents could find out how to help their kids? Since they (the parents and the kids) don't have the textbooks that would allow them to dialogue and help one another. How many doors for bathroom stalls and rolls of toilet paper (yup, we really get into the nitty-gritty) could be bought to fulfill the unfunded mandates about which so many PTAs complain?

I'm still waiting for an answer. Perhaps we should file a FOIA request (Freeedom of Information Act), or do we lack that authority? Maybe you all should ask. It's about waste and education. If we don't educate the parents and we don't provide the kids with a decent environment in which to learn, aren't we wasting part of their minds? And a mind is a terrible thing to waste.

3/2/06; Copyright Mark R. Adelman