Board of Education FY2006 Budget Testimony
Thursday, January 20, 2005

President O'Neill, Members of the Board of Education, Dr. Weast:

My name is Mark R. Adelman, I reside at 3206 University Blvd. W. in Kensington, MD (20895) and I am here tonight to testify as Chairman of the Education Committee of the Montgomery County Civic Federation. We share the perceptions of most who have already spoken on the proposed budget: it seems reasonable and we wish only to make a few suggestions aimed at assuring what we all hope for - that every tax dollar allocated to MCPS is put to the most efficient use and the maximum educational benefit of the maximum number of Montgomery County children. We offer comments on three specific points:

1. We applaud the planned expenditure of some $73,000 to enhance the MCPS website, because that seems a valuable tool in the critical effort to assure transparency of Board and MCPS actions and to make available to all interested citizens, in a timely fashion, the details of Board and MCPS plans. We urge that these funds be used to increase the number of documents made available for download via the website and that more attention be paid to making background materials related to upcoming Board meetings available as far in advance of those meetings as is humanly possible. Concerned citizens of Montgomery County deserve access to such materials days, rather than hours, in advance of the meetings. In addition, we believe that the MCPS website offers an especially cost-effective means for disseminating information to the interested citizens of Montgomery County.

2. In a related thread, we vigorously question the wisdom of expending limited funds for the preparation, production, and distribution of documents such as "The Citizens Budget. FY2000" and the "Annual Report. Building Our Future. Fall 2004". We find both to be embarrassing in their tone of self-congratulation (they are largely propaganda pieces), poorly written, and fraught with flaws that are so obvious that the reader is led to wonder whether the intent was to inform or mislead. Because of these flaws, some of which are noted below, we doubt that many citizens read such documents, and even fewer read them in order to gain information about MCPS policies or operations.

a. To cite one particularly egregious example, on page 5 of the budget brochure, in the context of a discussion of "five years of progress", a bar graph is presented, showing only four years of data. And that data shows a total "trend" of some 8 points improvement in SAT scores, all of which hover around 1100. There is no explanation of the missing year's data, no error bars, no indication of the significance - compared to national trends, etc. - of the small increases presented.

b. As another example, the text at the end of page 19 bewilders the reader by proclaiming that 27 schools without a "second full-time secretary" will receive the necessary 13.5 positions; one is left to <u>presume</u> that 13.5 half-time positions already exist.

c. Most of the graphs and tables are not numbered, which makes it difficult for the reader to be certain which graphic is being referenced by a given segment of text. And many of the numbers in the tables are either erroneous (e.g the top number in the far left and far right columns of the table on page 12), or presented so confusingly that one is left to guess what the data means.

d. If you or your staff are interested, we would be happy to sit down with you and go over our marked-up copy of the document.

Regardless of the specifics of the flaws, these documents should not be produced by a public agency entrusted with the education of our children. And precious tax dollars should not be used in their production. Whatever the costs involved (we have been unable to determine the amount, but

let us say for purposes of discussion that each cost some $25,000), such monies would be better spent to buy much-needed textbooks or to increase the funds made available to teachers for purchasing classroom supplies, so that our teachers do not feel compelled to use their own salaries to buy such supplies.

In urging that hardcopy production of such documents be eliminated - or at least drastically-reduced - we are cognizant of the possibility that this would negatively impact some citizens with limited access to website documents: we would be happy to discuss with your staff ways to mitigate such potential negative impacts.

3. Our third point arises from reading not only your own budget projections, but also those of the Montgomery County Taxpayers League and the Maryland Tax Education Foundation. All agree that some 90% of the MCPS budget goes to pay personnel costs - salaries and fringe benefits. And all project that these costs will increase in the coming years, as will of course all costs. We question whether the Board and the County Council have given sufficient attention to the need to constrain the rate of increase in these costs. Although it is quite difficult to read the available data clearly, it appears to us that personnel costs have increased at a greater rate that the rise in the consumer price index. While we certainly do not suggest that MCPS personnel costs should rise at a rate slower than inflation, we question whether they should rise faster. We point out that, if, in the next round of contract negotiations with the unions representing teachers, support staff, and administrators, you could reduce by a mere ONE percent the rate of increase in personnel costs, you could increase by TEN percent the potential rate of increase of funds available for school supplies, much needed repair of bathrooms, etc. Some factors you should consider carefully in advance of the next round of contract negotiations:

1. Consider slowing the rate at which MCPS employees progress up the various salary ladders.
2. Make sure that the level of retirement contributions for MCPS employees are no greater than those made by the school systems in surrounding jurisdictions.
3. Reevaluate the efficacy of the current merit raise system. Are merit raises so universally applied as to be little more than an automatic pay raise and thus no real incentive to improved performance?

We do NOT dispute the need to attract and retain high quality teachers, support staff, and administrators to MCPS. But we remind you that failure to be fiscally conservative in contract negotiations is in essence a form of forward funding of our school system. Given that some 50% of our county tax dollar goes to MCPS, given that an increasing portion of that tax dollar is being paid by citizens who do not have children in the school system AND will not have them in the system in the future, and given that taxpayers can only be expected to make a reasonable commitment to the "value" of a good public education system, it is your obligation, along with other public officials, to make every effort to assure that dollars allocated to personnel costs are spent as frugally as those used for teaching supplies and maintenance of critical MCPS facilities.

Recognizing the difficulty of achieving the suggested savings in personnel costs, we would be happy to meet with you or your staff to discuss concrete recommendations. We also urge that you seriously consider getting the advice of some external agency, such as the Maryland Tax Education Foundation.

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