

December 13, 2006

Dear President Navarro and Members of the Board of Education;

The members of the Montgomery County Civic Federation Education Committee have carefully read the proposed revision of Policy IEB (Middle School Education) posted to the BoE website and welcome the opportunity to offer comment.

1. With respect to your request (lines 279 - 305 on page 11), we prefer Alternative Language A at this point. This is consistent with the position we took previously (12/10/05) in connection with the revision of Policy IQD. At that time we expressed concern that the policy was unnecessarily restrictive. Here, we believe that Alternative Language B has a similarly restrictive character and is thus less satisfactory than alternative A.
2. We are both puzzled at the length of the proposed revision and concerned at its apparent lack of focus. Most of the revised policy is full of language that can best be described as an extended mission statement totally lacking in specifics to help guide middle school education. Under Policy History, the first mention of this subject is "Junior High School Policy, adopted by Resolution No. 163-74, March 25, 1974." This policy is described in "The Superintendent's Bulletin" dated 4/1/74, with the title: "Board Endorses Junior High Policy." We have chosen to quote this document extensively here, for purposes of comparison.

*"The policy seeks to promote academic excellence and to provide students a sense of community, increase their self-awareness and self-concept, provide some control over their lives in school, make the peer group a more positive force, and make learning a more satisfying experience. To do this, it sets forth the following ten guidelines:*

- 1. With the involvement of parents and students, each middle and junior high school will do a yearly examination of its program to bring it into line with the policy.*
- 2. Each school will share its successes and problems with other schools, with the help of area and central offices.*
- 3. These schools will be staffed with teachers and other professionals "who have the skills and are trained to work with adolescents."*
- 4. By the fall, a plan for reviewing the curriculum will be implemented.*
- 5. These schools will study such structures as the seven-period*

*schedule, interdisciplinary teams with block scheduling, school-within-a-school, and "possibly offer more than one alternative where parents, student, and staff support it."*

*6. Each teacher will also act as a teacher-advisor and receive the help to do so. School staff, with help from parents and students, will develop a counseling program for teachers and students.*

*7. Time should be provided each week for teachers and counselors to work with students in informal settings such as activity periods.*

*8. Staffing ratios should be at least equal to high schools and should be used flexibly with assistance from parents and others to provide remedial and enrichment activities. Consider allowing staff and community members to help select principals and allowing staff participation in teacher interviews.*

*9. Schools should examine organizing into sub-units such as school-within-schools or interdisciplinary teams. The optimum size of 800-1,000 students for junior highs should be maintained where possible, and the desirability of creating middle schools and converting junior highs to middle schools should be explored with the community.*

*10. The Superintendent will make an annual progress report on this policy to the BOE by September 30. It will consider reports prepared by area assistant superintendents and MCCPTA area VPs in consultation with junior high staffs, students and parents."*

While each of these ten guidelines might be adjusted somewhat to reflect changes in realities over the intervening 32 years, they seem to us a model of brevity and specificity that the proposed current revision of Policy IEB would do well to emulate.

3. In particular, what distinguishes these 32-year old guidelines are the multiple references to involvement by staff, parents, and other community members in various important school matters. The 1974 policy made real efforts to include all stakeholders; in contrast, the currently proposed revision of Policy IEB only briefly refers to parental roles concerning student grades and overall achievement. The closest to specific information that the proposed version of IEB achieves is a recommendation to try to communicate in the languages spoken in the community and to provide extracurricular activities such as the arts, athletics and clubs. One might argue that if there were no such written Policy IEB, it would make no difference at all.

4. Related to points 2 and 3 above, the very breadth of the proposed document

tends to obscure many specific policy elements. In particular, we would have preferred to see more substantive comments on the need to instill in middle school students a sense of the rights and responsibilities of an informed citizen. Similarly, the importance of beginning to orient students to the realities of 'the world of work', seems to be lost in the large number of general statements.

5. Consistent with our previous recommendations, we urge that lines 1-4 be deleted and replaced with a footnote (at the end of the document, immediately preceding Policy History) specifying the related documents and spelling out the complete name of each document. The issue of reducing the use of obscure or confusing acronyms is related to our belief that optimal communication with interested citizens is best achieved by reducing the use of such jargon.

As always, we thank you in advance for your thoughtful consideration of our comments.

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