

EDUCATION MATTERS: Changes (part 1)

by Mark R. Adelman, Chair, MCCF Education Committee

My time of service as Chair of the MCCF Education Committee will end in June. The Executive Committee, seeking a new Chair, has asked me to describe the responsibilities of the Education Committee and what we have done over the past few years. This article will focus primarily on some general themes; the June Newsletter will discuss specifics of some of our past (and present) activities.

According to MCCF By-Laws (as most recently refined), the Education Committee "shall monitor, evaluate, report, and make recommendations concerning the programming, financing, and operation of schools and colleges within Montgomery County." With such a broad mandate, it is up to the Chair to assemble a committee that can reach consensus on what seem to be the most timely issues and agree on how to proceed. MCCF is fortunate that a number of delegates were willing to work on the Education Committee. We met monthly and were able to tap the knowledge and perspectives of many other delegates, as well as citizens who, while not active members of the Civic Federation, were eager to help us better define our tasks. I would urge anyone considering taking over the post of Chair of this committee to continue to expand and strengthen such contacts, because they are vitally important to the functioning of a group of activists as small as ours.

We have operated under the consensus that Montgomery County Public schools (MCPS) does a pretty good job of educating the children of Montgomery County, but could do much better. One critical problem is the inability of the Board of Education (BoE) and the MCPS administration to fully utilize the knowledge, talents, and energy of the community - especially the many citizens (about 75% of all taxpayers) who do not have kids in public schools. We became aware that the various PTAs, which constitute the deepest reservoir of knowledge about problems (in our schools) and willingness to work (very hard) to help resolve those problems, often faced the immense challenge of trying to decide between what seems best for a specific school (or cluster) and what others might deem best for all children. We consciously sought to help resolve the frustration this creates for many parents, by listening as carefully as possible to individual perspectives and seeking threads of common concern. The MCCPTA is the time-honored mechanism for this; we simply hoped to help out - as is illustrated with reference to two issues that consumed so much of our time.

The controversies over the revision of BoE Policy FAA and over the Seven Locks ES replacement have been described in countless newsletter and newspaper articles, public hearings, etc. Since much of the information is available on the MCCF website, I will only describe them from a few "big picture" perspectives.

1. Both issues were (and are) intricately interrelated and reflect underlying tensions in how the BoE/MCPS interfaces with the community it serves (including PTAs). Unfortunately, many such issues are (or become) needlessly polarizing, even though it usually does not serve much purpose attempting to assign blame (there is more than enough to go around and - in my experience - focussing on one or two people who are "most guilty" rarely solves underlying problems).

2. Our work on Policy FAA, as well as the associated implementing document FAA-RA, took many hours and involved much frustration, but it was also educational, reinforcing the

knowledge that solving complex problems requires a long term effort and acceptance of progress in small steps. It also helped us learn some of the arcane jargon of the politics of public education, the difficulty of getting many citizens to pay attention to often-unexciting battles, and the importance of trying to get more people to think about what is being said and done. We continue to read BoE Policy revisions carefully, to speak out with recommendations (when appropriate), and to urge the BoE and the administration of MCPS to be more open and receptive to dialogue with all citizens.

3. The extended struggle over the SLES replacement matter was an eye-opening (but educational!) excursion into the reality that many issues of concern to MCCF over the years resonate with problems facing the public school system now. These include the impacts of rapid growth, inadequate funding of needed public facilities, political polarization and gamesmanship, and the unwillingness of almost all segments of our community to accept realities such as the linkages between rights and responsibilities. Our testimonies before the BoE and the County Council forced us to address such issues as constrained budgets, perceptions that segments of the community were being pitted against one another, growing lack of trust, and how to satisfy unlimited demands with limited resources.

But we are encouraged by some recent events and, in my final newsletter article, I will attempt to summarize some of the issues in which we are currently involved and why they are items that my successor might wish to keep on the Education Committee agenda.

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