

Policy FAA, FAA-RA, and the Role of Citizen Task Forces

by Mark R. Adelman, Chair, MCCF Education Committee

Given the number of times you have heard or read about Policy FAA, the interim regulatory document FAA-RA, and the citizens Working Group established to recommend revisions to FAA-RA, as well as the length of this report, you would be fully justified in skipping over it. Especially those of you who have served on various Citizens Advisory Boards, Task Forces, and Working Groups in our County over the years. But maybe you ought to read on.....

A brief background review: When we were made aware, last Spring, of the concerns of many in the PTAs about proposed revisions to Board of Education (BoE) Policy FAA (regarding Long Range Educational Facilities Planning), we talked with them, educated ourselves, and joined them in expressing objections to the proposed revisions. Much of the concern at the time centered on the fact that many crucial elements of Policy FAA would be moved to an implementing ("regulatory") document (FAA-RA) and it was unclear whether citizens would have the same level of input into FAA-RA as they had had into the existing Policy FAA. Many argued that implementing documents are prepared by the Superintendent's office and routinely approved by the BoE, with little opportunity for discussion by the community. Certain BoE members assured us that citizens would continue to have input into both FAA and FAA-RA, but we expressed strong opposition to the revised policy, which was - nevertheless - adopted. [Our website has several Newsletter articles and Sentinel pieces related to all this.]

The FAA-RA Working Group: After adopting the revised Policy FAA, the BoE and the Superintendent quickly prepared an Interim FAA-RA, included it in the CIP, and invited members of the PTAs, MCCF, and other constituencies to serve on a Working Group to review the interim RA and propose revisions. I have reported to you on that process and the position paper we filed (also available on our website), along with the recommendations of the Working Group. The BoE Policy Committee reviewed the recommendations on February 8, 2006, making - as best I can recall - no substantive suggestions to the Superintendent's office regarding the matter. On February 27 we were informed of the Superintendent's response to our recommendations, which were transmitted to the BoE for its information at that evening's Board Meeting. I was unable to attend that meeting but have since had time to review the (now-operative) FAA-RA, as well as the memorandum the Superintendent sent to the BoE explaining his decisions to accept/reject various recommendations of the Working Group.

What is/isn't in the revised FAA-RA: The regulatory document includes a number of the revisions suggested by the Working Group; it does NOT include several others. I find the Superintendent's decisions with respect to three issues particularly unfortunate.

1. *Preferred Range of Enrollment:* The Superintendent insists that upward revision

of these numbers is necessary for a number of reasons, including the fact that several of our schools are already operating above the previously established "preferred range", that keeping the previously established range numbers would create unreasonable expectations as to construction of smaller schools, and that studies of optimal school sizes have been inconclusive. I urge all involved in this "dialogue" to recognize that the range numbers "preferred" by the working group are NOT those of the "little old school house" that proponents of larger schools seem to be dismissing as "unrealistic" when they purport to educate us on the cost effectiveness of larger schools. The "dialogue" is not about the lower end of the size range (both the Superintendent and the Working group agree on lower end numbers of 300, 600, and 1000 for ES, MS, and HS, respectively); it is about the upper end, and the differences are actually quite modest (620 vs. 750, 1125 vs. 1200, and 1800 vs. 2000). I believe the real issue can be stated as a (rhetorical) question. Whose "preferences" are we talking about, those of the parents and other citizens who pay for the operation of the school system, or those of the Superintendent and the various elected officials who make decisions in these matters, insist on "growing" our county without "growing" the funding sources needed to assure adequate public facilities, and then find it preferable to declare "preferable" the overcrowded schools that their ill-advised decisions have created?

2. *Relocatable classrooms*: In the recommended revision, a section was added regarding relocatables (portables, temporary classrooms) that was intended to define their "proper" use and maintenance. Our efforts to make some statement as to what was an appropriate length of time that such classrooms might be used had resulted in the vague term "interim basis", because it was felt that any more definite phrase (e.g. a maximum of ten years) would place unrealistic constraints on the system. The draft that the Working Group sent forward did, however, contain wording specifying that such classrooms be adequately maintained and have minimal negative impact on the surrounding communities. The Superintendent found our wording "vague", but rather than revise the wording, he simply deleted that part of the section entirely. I have personal knowledge of places where such "temporary" classrooms are so poorly maintained (if they are maintained at all) that they constitute a blight on the surrounding community(ies). This is not the case in all places where such facilities have been placed, but we do not have the time or people-power to go around the entire County collecting relevant information. The Education Committee would welcome brief reports (including pictures) from delegates who share our concerns. With such pictures and a summary of the reports, we might be able to educate our elected and hired officials as to what is meant by "adequately maintained" and "minimum impact".

3. *Community involvement*: One of our major goals in participating in the Working Group was to achieve a document that more fully emphasized the need for involvement of the wider community in the school planning process. In our view it is important, but not sufficient, to involve PTAs. They have worked hard on this process and contributed greatly to MCPS having many great educational facilities. But citizens who are not involved in PTAs also have potentially valuable insights -

and certainly have a stake in achieving the best possible outcome in each instance where a new school is built, an old one upgraded, or an unused one closed. The version of FAA-RA that the Superintendent sent to the BoE contains many of our suggested revisions. But not all. One place where our recommendation was not accepted was the wording that civic associations be involved in Site Selection Advisory Committees (SSACs). There had been much discussion of this issue by the Working Group, and the MCPS staff who guided us during the process made clear that this was a delicate issue because inclusion of community members whose property values might be impacted by the choice of a new school site could lead to instances where there was a perceived conflict of interest, in that the SSACs have input - however indirectly - into the necessary negotiations by which such sites are acquired. Once again, the Superintendent did not offer alternative wording, but merely deleted our suggestions. It seems to me an insult to the civic community - and citizens in general - to thus suggest that while those who work on SSACs as representatives of the PTAs can work with MCPS staff, other citizens should not. We ALL know how important MCPS is to our property values - and our taxes. I urge you all to read Section VI.2.a.3 of the Superintendent's Draft (dated 2/22/06 - not yet posted to the BoE website) and consider whether you concur with the decision not to include the broader community in SSACs.

The Big Picture: A great deal of time and effort has been expended on the revisions to Policy FAA and the FAA-RA document. The results are not perfect, but no human enterprise ever is. Was it "worth it"? Some will say no - and argue that those who chose not to participate were "right" because "we" would not be listened to. I would say yes - it was worth the effort and not just because we were listened to (albeit not enough). It WAS worth it, because we learned a lot, including how complex the process is, how much such factors as potential for lawsuits impacts the decisions as to wording, how hard our colleagues in the PTAs work on these matters - and how much they can teach us. Like many of you, I have served on other such advisory bodies and have left many of them feeling that my insights were not given adequate value. But that is the nature of the democratic process. Should we be satisfied with FAA and FAA-RA? NO! Should we continue to participate in the process and insist that we be listened to? What do you think?

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