

EDUCATION MATTERS

by Mark R. Adelman, Chair, MCCF Education Committee

Since our last newsletter, the new members of the Board of Education (BoE) have been seated, a new member - Mr. Christopher Barclay - has been chosen to fill the district 4 vacancy, and new Board officers have been elected. Mrs. Nancy Navarro is the new President, Ms. Shirley Brandman is the new Vice President. All of these events have been attended by citizens, but not as many citizens as we would have wished. The video-records of the events are available on the BoE website (<http://www.mcps.k12.md.us/boe/>), as are brief biographical sketches of all the Board members.

If you will take the time to attend a meeting of the BoE, or of one of its standing committees, you will realize that the Board does many things in its role as our elected overseers of the functioning of MCPS (Montgomery County Public Schools). One of the most important functions of the BoE is the establishment - and continual revision - of a large number of BoE Policies. Each time a policy is prepared, or revised, citizens are offered the opportunity to comment and make suggestions for modifications of the proposed (revised) policy. Recently our committee has provided the BoE with comments on Policy FFA (Naming of Schools) and Policy IEB (Middle School Education). Both of these comment documents are posted to the MCCF website. In addition, we are working on comments regarding proposed revisions to Policy JFA (Student Rights and Responsibilities). We would welcome your suggestions regarding JFA (and any other policy revision), but remind you that any citizen is encouraged to comment directly to the BoE on such matters if s/he so wishes.

In addition to such issues and the ones we mentioned in the December newsletter, the new BoE has the added task of rebuilding the trust of those elements of the community that were so offended by the actions of certain members of the previous BoE. In my Sentinel article of December 4, also posted to our website, I expressed our concerns about actions suggesting some Board members are still insisting on making sure that citizens understand the authority of the BoE, especially when it comes to "submitting to external audits". We hope that the new board - and the County Council - will not lose sight of the reality that the authorities being so vigorously defended are in fact authorities that the voting public has delegated to elected (and appointed) officials at all levels of government and that citizens will retain the implicit right to audit the actions of those we elect if and when it seems appropriate to us to do so. "Debates" about such issues are inherently counterproductive, especially at a time when so many citizens are so dissatisfied with the actions of our elected representatives.

The proposed MCPS budget for FY 2008 has been released and a summary is widely available, including via the MCPS website (at <http://www.mcps.k12.md.us/departments/budget/>). We are pleased that the length (and thus the cost of publishing) of this document is reduced significantly from previous years, without,

we would argue, reducing the amount of actual information provided the interested citizen. As we predicted, the cost of operating MCPS in FY 2008 (including debt service) is projected to be in excess of 2 billion dollars. We will be studying the budget (not just the summary, but also the details). The overarching question is not whether to spend the money, nor is it really exactly how much money should be spent. The question is how we spend these dollars - and other precious resources. Are we spending them as wisely as possible? If not, what can we do better? We will be offering testimony before the BoE (probably on January 11) and, subsequently, before the County Council. We would welcome your suggestions as to what we should stress in our testimony. More importantly, we urge each and every one of you to offer your insights, in oral or written testimony. We suggest that you focus on those "pieces of the puzzle" that most concern you and about which you feel you can bring something to the dialogue. This is not rocket science. It is the democratic process. The bottom line will remain essentially the same. We will be trying to suggest changes that are cost neutral, but are cost/benefit positive. A tricky task. But no one says it's easy. And no one should suggest that the effort is without value.

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