

The MCPS Budget Is Neither Simple Nor Rocket Science

By Mark R. Adelman, Chair, MCCF Education Committee

The discussion around the Board of Education (BoE) table at the recent FY2008 budget work sessions was a refreshing mix of serious dialogue, thoughtful questions, and light moments. One is tempted to comment on many of the statements made. I was struck by the assertion, by the superintendent, that many citizens want the budget book to be made simpler when, in fact, the budget is very complex. To paraphrase, his assertion was that the budget "IS rocket science".

Excuse me, but such statements are yet another example of misuse of language (and we are not talking here about stylistic differences), because they misrepresent what concerns so many elements of the community. Such statements display a stunning misunderstanding of the difference between massive amounts of detail and complexity of concepts.

I am unaware of any citizen who has demanded that the "Citizens Budget" (catchy title, don't you think?) be simple. The demand I have heard is that the budget be made "more transparent". In our recent testimony before the BoE we criticized "documents that are intended to communicate with citizens but are not cost effective. Communication is effective if it is clear, free of jargon, and honest. A community bombarded by massive amounts of confusing and/or misleading information is NOT likely to become engaged in a dialogue with the school system, nor to believe it is being asked to be a true partner in a complex set of tasks."

Those who still read the budget documents (many have given up and one despairs that they will ever again pay attention) understand all too well that the budget for a two billion dollar enterprise cannot be simple. They understand that putting all the pieces together requires a lot of work. The community recognizes that there are many more needs than resources, and that attempting to allocate limited resources to address unlimited needs (often expressed as demands) is a daunting task. It is at least as hard as budgeting for the needs of a family with the income of one or two breadwinners. But most of us do that, and could describe our budget with some degree of clarity. Is it unreasonable to expect the school system to do the same? Granted, there are a LOT more categories and a LOT more zeroes, so there is a LOT more detail, which makes the task more complex.

But "rocket science"? Leaving aside the issue of crisply defining "rocket science", let's assume that most people use the term to imply tasks involving really astonishing feats of creative thinking - higher order thinking - that require awesome mastery of analytical skills, etc. Although I am NOT a "rocket scientist", I know a few. Their skills are NOT required to prepare the MCPS budget and their skills are certainly NOT required to make the budget more transparent. How about a thorough index so citizens who want to know, for example, what is being spent on maintaining portable classrooms can look it up? What about a glossary including abbreviations so that someone who is not familiar with the jargon and wants to know what "OCIP" means, is not forced to do a web search (or contact someone on the MCPS, BoE, or Council staff, who probably has more important things to do)?

Take the short booklet (20 pages) that is also the first section of the massive full budget document. Now tear out the piece of paper that forms pages 5 and 6. You are now holding the recommended MCPS FY2008 budget. The rest is an intricately woven fabric of explanation, justification, self-congratulation and - well you can supply the missing word. Much of that fabric is needed; much is not. Is budgeting for the operation of our school system simple? Of course not. Is it complex and hard work? You bet. And we all need to be able to find the pieces of the puzzle that concern us. So we can do some parallel processing and help the BoE come up with

the best possible way to use our resources to do an even better job of educating our children. That's why the budget document MUST be made more transparent. And if our school system and our County Council cannot figure out how to do this, my bet is that a group of citizens could sit down together and come up with, say, 50 questions that would serve as a strikingly good start.

If you are one of those citizens who read at least part of the MCPS budget book, found something confusing, but did not communicate your questions to the BoE, please do so now. The official window for testimony is closed, but this is an ongoing project. If you are one of those citizens who did not read any part of the budget documents, please take a little time, read any one section (or even one page), and communicate any questions you have to the BoE. They want and need input from the community.

If MCPS believes that preparing the budget is "rocket science", what are they teaching our kids? By the way, OCIP does not stand for "Office of Continuing and Intentional Propaganda". It stands for "Office of Curriculum and Instructional Programs". But you knew that, or did you?

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