

WORDS: Use, Abuse, and the Effect on Public Education

by Mark R. Adelman, Chair, MCCF Education Committee

Like most civic activists, I wear many hats and have many perspectives. When I testified before the Board of Education (BoE) on September 26, it was as an individual. My comments, of course reflected my experience in the Civic Federation, as well as in the Montgomery County Education Forum (and the Equity in Education Coalition). But I was primarily speaking as a professional educator who, for over 35 years, has been concerned about the steady decline in our system of public education. I tried to make the point that it matters very much how words are used, because, if they are MIS-used, or AB-used, the results, especially in the arena of public education, can be extremely detrimental to achieving our shared vision: educating each and every child to his/her maximum potential.

I began with a couple of cheap shots (just to get everyone's attention), pointing out that the constant use of the vapid term "world-class" to describe MCPS was devoid of meaning other than - perhaps - the desire of some to deflect attention from the problems that plague us, and how far we have to go. Warming up, I chastised those who refer to MCPS as "one of the best in the country", pointing out that, given how bad things are elsewhere, this is in essence stating that our goals are VERY low.

But my main scorn was focussed on the way MCPS (and the BoE) uses the term "gifted and talented". To an educator, the term refers to a very small percent of all students (somewhere in the range of 2-5%, depending on who is doing the counting). In Montgomery County, where some 30-50% of all kids in the school system are considered "gifted and talented" (again depending on who is doing the counting), the use of the term is ludicrous; laughable were it not for the implications. If THAT many kids are considered "gifted and talented", what value does the categorization have, unless we live in that mythical society where almost all children are above average? From my point of view it means two things, and each implies MCPS (and the BoE) is NOT doing its job.

First, it means that our educational leaders are pandering to a lot of parents, including the MANY who "know" their kids are "special" and want them so-labelled and then favored with special resources and programs. And the FEW (at least I hope they are few) who can only feel good about themselves (and their kids) if others are categorized as inferior. The sad thing is that any school system that considers nearly half its students "gifted and talented" cannot possibly understand education well enough to give each kid (even the "upper half") the best education s/he can achieve.

But worse, by labelling nearly half of all students "gifted and talented", MCPS is categorizing all the rest of our kids (yours?, mine?) NOT. And we all know who the NOT - mostly - are. I won't elaborate on that point, but I ask YOU to think about it. What happens to a kid who is labelled NOT? To his/her self-esteem and drive? To

the attitude that other students develop about him/her (and themselves)? To the teachers who are given lower level curricula to teach the NOT? Those who prattle on about the value of "gifted and talented" programs and worry about the "dumbing-down" of curricula if the NOT are admitted to "gifted and talented" programs simply refuse to understand that there is no educational justification for maintaining the two-tier system that characterizes MCPS. Such a curriculum is already "dumbed-down" because most of the kids who are categorized as gifted and talented are NOT and thus cannot handle a curriculum that is really tuned for the gifted and talented.

The only way that MCPS can achieve our shared vision is to use words correctly and stop dividing our kids into two (or more) tracks, and start teaching all kids with educational tools that are differentiated according to the needs of each and every kid - as an individual. This is, of course, a very difficult task, but other school systems have begun to do it. If MCPS is really as good as it claims (and we would like to believe) and if MCPS can really teach ANY gifted and talented child, then MCPS (and the BoE) should use the words correctly, address the issues honestly, and educate each child as an individual. Because that is what they are.

10/1/05; Copyright Mark R. Adelman