

**Comments Before the Board of Education Regarding The Proposed MCPS FY2008
Operating Budget**

*by Mark R. Adelman, Chair, Education Committee, Montgomery County Civic Federation;
11 January, 2007*

My name is Mark Adelman; I am testifying as Chair of the Civic Federation Education Committee. I will be reading from the initial portion of the text you have before you. The remaining sections provide context and details. The entire text will be posted to our website and widely disseminated. Our comments align most directly with the Strategic Plan goal to "Strengthen Productive Partnerships for Education". One of the most critical of such partnerships is the link between MCPS and the broader community - by which we mean ALL citizens of Montgomery County. For those of us who no longer have children in the school system, a major focus is on the enhanced quality of life that results when all children are provided the best possible education, including an understanding of, and commitment to, being "good citizens". Our committee has four major recommendations. Two involve increased expenditures, while the third will result in compensatory cost reductions. The fiscal consequences of our final recommendation remain to be determined.

1. We repeat our recommendation that you increase the staff of the Board of Education. If you wish to communicate with the community, evaluate our concerns, respond to our questions, and convince all of us of your desire to partner with us, you need more staff and you need to budget for that staff in THIS budget cycle. An increase of 2 FTE would require an increased cost of between \$80,000 and \$200,000, depending on exactly what level of staff you recruit. We would regard this as money extremely well spent.
2. We urge you to increase the staff of the Family and Community Partnerships Unit (of the Department of Communications). You should budget several additional parent community coordinators and leverage their abilities to engage more citizens willing to serve as bridges to their respective communities. But please be sure that these positions are used to enable such community members to **work with MCPS**, rather than being treated as simply more citizens needing MCPS services. We suggest that budgeting 2-3 additional FTE, would be very cost effective.
3. You can offset the cost of the additional staffing we are recommending, by reducing the amount of money you allocate to the production of materials such as the "Citizens Budget" and other 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. We urge that you reduce the staffing responsible for the writing of such documents, by eliminating two staff positions from the Department of Management, Budget and Planning (in the Office of the Chief Operating Officer), as well as two staff positions in the Public Information Unit (of the Department of Communications).
4. Finally, recognizing the importance of the major contracts you will be negotiating this year, we join others in requesting that you hold public hearings on these negotiations and provide open input into County Council Committee sessions on the benefits and long term

cost implications of these contract agreements. The community understands the importance of attracting and retaining qualified and dedicated teachers and support staff. But many citizens are concerned that contract negotiations have already lead to unsustainable cost increases. You must do everything possible to control inflationary wage/benefit increases, especially those that manifestly exceed what individual citizens are experiencing in their private sector jobs.

In the remainder of the written text you will find more detailed comments and a number of additional recommendations. We hope you will read and consider them carefully. As part of the community that sincerely wants MCPS to achieve even more for every child in our county, we share your vision and stand ready to partner with you. We are able and willing to help. Please recognize the resource we constitute and put us to good use.

Our school systems are increasingly charged with helping resolve many of the challenges facing our society. We all recognize the critical relationship between educating all of our children and assuring the optimal functioning of our democratic society. It is to be expected that we may view these matters from differing perspectives. For example, from the point of view of each individual parent, it is about assuring the best future for their children. From the point of view of civic activists, many of whom no longer have children in the school system, it is about the enhanced quality of life that results when all children are provided the best possible education, including an understanding of, and commitment to, being "good citizens". Even though this may lead us to make slightly different recommendations, there is not necessarily any conflict among such differing perspectives. The complexity of issues facing MCPS implies a multiplicity of tasks and demands. No one group can hope to suggest "the" key improvement. But all should recognize that resources (money, time, energy) are limited. We have chosen to assume that the final approved MCPS budget will be about 2 billion dollars and have suggested several changes that - taken together - are cost neutral but very beneficial.

Since some 90% of the MCPS budget is for staffing, it is logical that we focus on cost effective decisions regarding staffing. And, given fiscal realities, this requires suggesting eliminating staff positions we view as less essential in favor of positions that are more cost effective. We have also commented on supply costs where appropriate.

1. Since we began to urge you to increase BoE staff by 2-3, you have NOT done so. Because of continuing inadequacies in "The Citizens Budget" documentation, it remains nearly impossible for the interested citizen to determine answers to many simple questions; but it appears to us that, again, you have NOT budgeted for an increase in your support staff. We have repeatedly explained why we - and others - believe you need more staff. We will not repeat those explanations here, except to stress your needs for help in providing specific oversight, including auditing programs for effectiveness and clarity of communication. Many of YOU have conceded that you need more staff, for a number of reasons. We expect you to take action now to fulfill the need that you - and the community - agree exists. The cost to do so is a very small percent of the overall MCPS budget. The cost of failing to do so, in terms of community partnership, is incalculable.

2. We urge you to regard the citizens of Montgomery County not simply as taxpayers who

support MCPS with dollars. Nor simply as voters who elected the Board of Education and thus are another constituency that should be served. We urge you to regard us as a largely-untapped resource that can and must be utilized more effectively. Show, by your actions, that you understand the value of each and every citizen who volunteers his or her special talents to help our teachers. Reach out to the community, not just to serve on advisory committees and to provide part-time help with non-professional "chores". Aggressively encourage many more of us, for example, to serve as reading tutors. Use us to serve as advocates for the many children whose family members, for whatever reason, do not provide the vigorous advocacy that each and every student needs and deserves. If you want to add a powerful force for communication with those parts of the community that are not yet fluent in English, augment your limited capacity to provide translation services, but NOT by hiring more translation staff who, no matter how talented and hardworking they might be, can never be the kinds of bridges that are needed. Instead, reach out to those members of each and every "immigrant" community who are already bi-lingual (and often multi-lingual) and ask them to help by becoming living transporters of information (and a sense of mutual respect) between the school system and those elements of their communities that - for whatever reasons - do not yet feel welcome at the table. We believe you can do so by increasing the staff of the Family and Community Partnerships Unit, have explicitly stated this in the initial portion of our testimony, and would be happy to partner with you to suggest possible mechanisms for implementing this.

3. Given the realities of finite resources, we would be remiss, having urged you to spend more money in two specific areas, if we did not also suggest ways in which to reduce the proposed budget by comparable amounts. Fortunately, there are logical changes that will not only save money, but also improve on communication. To repeat: "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." Given our previous criticism of these budget documents, we would like to recognize improvements in them. Unfortunately, we can find only one: the summary booklet entitled "The Citizens Budget 2008" is significantly shorter than last year's. Otherwise, we find these documents as unsatisfactory as in the past and reiterate every one of the criticisms in our testimony last year. We will continue sending you detailed critiques of these documents, including the suggestion that all portions not truly related to the budget be placed in a separate package, one that explicitly focusses on evaluating performance; this would align with actions you have already demonstrated in the publication of the "Annual Report on Our Call to Action". [**Listed below are several related recommendations.] But you should not be surprised if community response to calls for comments on the budget and/or the strategic plan is disappointingly low. To the extent that more and more citizens recognize discrepancies between reality and the contents of these documents, you must expect a diminished willingness amongst the community to pay attention to these issues and increasing belief that their participation in the process will have little impact. In short, if you wish to improve communication with the community and benefit from its partnership, you must recognize that these materials are counterproductive and you must massively reduce the funding used to produce them. We urge you to reduce the amounts expended for other publications as well, such as "The Bulletin", unless you can demonstrate to the community that such publications are needed and cost effective. By combining reductions in production costs (supplies) with reductions in relevant staff positions, you should be able to save at least \$400,000 to \$500,000.

Please note that the staff positions we urge you to reduce are NOT ones involved in the actual printing and distribution of these materials (presumably in the EGPS unit), but rather some of those involved in the selection and writing of information that is included. Since we cannot identify exactly what staff carries out these functions, YOU must identify those positions and eliminate some of them. One possible approach, which we suggested last year, would be to eliminate two staff positions from the Office of the Chief Operating Officer, in the Department of Management, Budget and Planning. Additionally, you should look into reducing the staffing of the Public Information Unit (of the Department of Communications). We were unable to find, in chapter 9, an explicit budget for the Public Information Unit, although it appears to have a staff of 8 FTE. If you can provide us with more information as to the staff that prepares the CONTENT of these documents, we will be better able to suggest how those FTEs can be re-allocated, to your own staff and/or to the Family and Community Partnerships Unit. But we would strongly disapprove of eliminating any category 3 staff positions, unless you can unequivocally demonstrate that such positions are truly NOT personnel who deliver class room instruction. Your focus should be on reduction of category 2 and/or category 1 staff positions.

****Additional specific recommendations:**

a. Create an M-Stat program that is transparent to the public and holds principals and MCPS department heads accountable to solve problems and reach goals.

b. Tie this to a Baldrige program for all schools that identifies meaningful continuous improvement as evaluated by those who run the M-Stat program.

c. Document - in a clear and concise fashion - if the Baldrige approach, or the version of Baldrige used by MCPS, actually works.

d. Make all raw data of test scores and all other measures of individual school performance available to the public electronically, so interested citizens can do their own analyses.

e. Require that all claims for improvement by MCPS officials be verifiable, by showing exactly how conclusions were reached.

f. Require transparency and accountability of every possible aspect of MCPS operations. If there is public interest, hold regular open houses for any and all MCPS departments, not just for individual schools or clusters.

g. Create an MCPS version of the federal What Works Clearinghouse to review scientific research about the effectiveness of learning programs. Work closely with the federal agency to take programs found to be effective by scientific methods and work to either implement these "as is" for MCPS or make verifiable improvements to adjust for circumstances unique to Montgomery County.

h. Determine to what extent the Office of Shared Accountability can be the foundation for any of these new approaches.

4. Finally, although we cannot put a dollar value to this item, we strongly urge you to show restraint in the extent to which upcoming contract negotiations are allowed to commit the school system to cost increases that exceed the rate of inflation. You need to open up these contract negotiations to community scrutiny because, while the community recognizes the importance of attracting and retaining excellent teachers and support staff, there is growing concern that MCPS salaries and benefits have - for some years now - increased at a significantly greater rate than can be justified in terms of demonstrable improvements in the numbers and credentials of those employed by our school system, or in the retention of such employees. There are many factors that lead to success in

attracting and retaining valued employees; salary is only one of them and for many people salary above a reasonable level is NOT the most essential factor in job decisions. Many citizens are concerned that contract negotiations (into which they have no input) have already lead to unsustainable cost increases. You must do everything possible to control inflationary wage/benefit increases, especially those that manifestly exceed what individual citizens are experiencing in their private sector jobs.

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