

"Federation Corner" column
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Spend limited school funds wisely

by Mark Adelman
Chair, MCCF Education Committee

The following is part of the MCCF testimony given by me to the Board of Education on January 20 concerning their proposed FY2006 budget. The testimony made three points.

First, we applaud your budget proposal of \$73,000 to enhance the MCPS website, because it's a cost-effective means for sharing information with interested citizens. It's critical in the effort to assure transparency of Board and MCPS actions, by publicizing your plans in a timely fashion. We urge that these funds be used to increase the number of documents available via the website. Please pay more attention to posting background materials, related to upcoming Board meetings, as far in advance as is humanly possible. Concerned citizens deserve access to such materials days, rather than hours, in advance of your meetings.

Second, we urge you to cease expending limited funds for the preparation, production, and distribution of documents such as this "Citizens Budget" and this "Annual Report". Both are poorly written, contain numerous errors, and are embarrassing in their tone of self-congratulation. They are largely propaganda pieces. We suspect that few citizens read such documents, and certainly not to gain information about your policies or practices. Precious tax dollars should not be wasted in their production. Whatever the costs involved, such funds would be better spent buying much-needed textbooks or for purchasing classroom supplies, so that our teachers don't feel compelled to use their own salaries to buy such materials.

Our third point arises from reading not only your own budget projections, but also those of the Montgomery County Taxpayers League and the Maryland Tax Education Foundation. All agree that some 90% of the MCPS budget goes to pay personnel costs - salaries and fringe benefits. And all project that these costs will increase in the coming years. We question whether the Board and the County Council have given sufficient attention to the need to constrain the rate of increase in these costs. Although it is quite difficult to read the available data clearly, it appears to us that personnel costs have increased at a greater rate than the rise in the consumer price index. While we certainly do not suggest that MCPS personnel costs should rise at a rate slower than inflation, we question whether they should rise faster. We point out that, if, in the next round of contract negotiations with the unions representing teachers, support staff, and administrators, you could reduce by a mere ONE percent the rate of increase in personnel costs, you could increase by TEN percent the potential rate of increase of funds available for school supplies, much needed repair of bathrooms, etc.

Some factors you should consider carefully in advance of the next round of contract negotiations:

- Consider slowing the rate at which MCPS employees progress up the various salary ladders.
- Make sure that the level of retirement contributions for MCPS employees are no greater than those made by the school systems in surrounding jurisdictions.
- Reevaluate the efficacy of the current merit raise system. Are merit raises so universally applied as to be little more than an automatic pay raise and thus no real incentive to improved performance?

We do NOT dispute the need to attract and retain high quality teachers, support staff, and administrators to MCPS. But we remind you that failure to be fiscally conservative in contract negotiations is in essence a

form of forward funding of our school system. Given that some 50% of our county tax dollar goes to MCPS, given that an increasing portion of that tax dollar is being paid by citizens who do not have children in the school system AND will not have them in the system in the future, and given that taxpayers can only be expected to make a reasonable commitment to the "value" of a good public education system, it is your obligation, along with other public officials, to make every effort to assure that dollars allocated to personnel costs are spent as frugally as those used for teaching supplies and maintenance of critical MCPS facilities.

Recognizing the difficulty of achieving the suggested savings in personnel costs, we would be happy to meet with you or your staff to discuss concrete recommendations. We also urge that you seriously consider getting the advice of some external agency, such as the Maryland Tax Education Foundation.