

"Federation Corner" column  
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### **Voters forget who are the real education decision makers**

by Wayne Goldstein

In the tidal wave of paper and phone campaign materials about to engulf you in the next three weeks will be all sorts of sincere promises about education. Most of these education promises will include a miraculous simultaneous reduction in both class size and numbers of portable classrooms, even from those who claimed that the reduction of class size was responsible for much of the increase in the number of portables. The problem with these and other promises about education is that they are NOT being made by those who would bear the responsibility for fulfilling those promises, the Montgomery County Board of Education (BOE).

Incumbents and challengers running for both county and state offices promise to do much more for education. Many voters who would claim to be influenced by these promises then choose to not vote for BOE candidates. In 2000, over 140,000 voters, almost 39% of those who voted, ignored BOE races. In 2004, 115,000, or 27%, didn't vote for BOE candidates.

In the next four years, the nine people elected to the County Council will appropriate at least \$16 billion. They won't spend the money; they will give it to other agencies to spend. In the next four years, the County Council will give at least \$8 billion to the BOE who will then decide how to spend that money. If you could vote for either the County Council or for the BOE, who would you most want to be able to choose if you really care about education?

There are people who believe that the current Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) superintendent has created a cult of personality that is so overpowering that most current BOE members don't dare to question the decisions that he, in effect, makes for them. Some people believe that the job of the BOE and its staff is to provide independent oversight of MCPS, not to rubberstamp whatever is placed before them by a domineering superintendent. This superintendent has, like many in his unique profession, acted like an itinerant traveling educational salesman who has frequently changed jobs throughout his career. When he comes to a new town, he initially offers a standard package of policies likely to improve student performance such as reducing class size, increasing teacher training and largely following in the footsteps of Head Start by providing a broad range of education and other assistance to young children.

Although the superintendent has a well-oiled and well-financed publicity machine to relentlessly celebrate his endless achievements, this straightforward package of initial actions has now been completed. As a result, the initial blush of success has come and gone, and now, seven years later, the hardest part has begun. Last week, the Washington Post reported: "Montgomery Sees Middle Schools Fail Despite Aid," revealing the same shortcomings that were previously learned through Head Start, which is that as soon as the comprehensive assistance for disadvantaged students is ended, so does most of their achievement. For years, this superintendent has also sliced and diced test scores and target groups and kept the publicity machine working overtime to make pockets of test score improvement or broad test score stagnation always appear to look like relentless, seemingly inevitable, widespread improvement.

Any voter who cares about what happens in education would do well to ignore everyone except the BOE candidates. They may then want to consider which candidates will be best able to provide independent oversight of the superintendent and MCPS, to require verifiable information on student performance, or to perhaps feel free to hire a new superintendent altogether when this current superintendent's contract comes up for possible renewal next year. Perhaps the next BOE might even want to contemplate what it

would mean to give up federal education aid in order to avoid the enormous disruptions and the huge direct and indirect costs caused by the relentless teaching to the test. Could this BOE rebel against the simplistic regimens and timetables of the No Child Left Behind law and instead seek to allow MCPS to teach and test in ways that once again support genuine education of students rather than only support learning how to have students look educated?

MCCF does not endorse any candidates for BOE or any other political contest. We regularly provide factual information on BOE candidates because we observe the greater importance and the greater cost of education. We want you to be as informed as possible when deciding who you would like to lead this public agency that watches over MCPS. For this election, we are providing, on our website, the answers of the BOE candidates to a series of 12 questions prepared by MCCF. This year, four BOE seats are up for election. Only two of the contests will appear on the September 12 primary ballot while all four will be on the November 7 general election ballot. Every voter can vote for EVERY seat. If you don't vote for BOE races, please don't complain about BOE performance. See our BOE candidate information at [www.montgomerycivic.org](http://www.montgomerycivic.org). You can also find information about the BOE itself at [www.mcps.k12.md.us/boe/](http://www.mcps.k12.md.us/boe/).

You may also find additional useful information from candidates' literature and websites.