

"Federation Corner" column
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MCPS deception undermines new BOE reputation

by Wayne Goldstein

With the many new members of the Board of Education (BOE), it is clear that it will not be business as usual in how this body requires accountability of MCPS; it will no longer be seen as the rubber stamp for MCPS actions. However, the BOE may find that it is put in very difficult positions if actions such as the publishing of several passages in a recent MCPS document entitled "The Citizens Budget 2008" are allowed to stand without strong challenge. These important passages underscore MCPS' way of communicating what it purports to be the truth.

On page 6 of this slim document, which also is the introduction to the larger "The Superintendent's Operating Budget and Personnel Complement FY 2008," is this first passage in the margin of the page:

Fast Fact: In 2005, the Maryland Tax Education Foundation, an independent think tank, concluded that MCPS provides taxpayers "a relative bargain" compared to similar school districts throughout the northeast and "spends less and performs better."

At best this statement could be described as taking something utterly out of context. At worst, it is a wholesale deception, making it appear that one of the most thorough of recent critics of MCPS is instead an admirer. The title of this October 2005 report by the Maryland Tax Education Foundation (MTEF) is "School Spending in Montgomery County as Compared to Ten Affluent Counties in Connecticut, California, Maryland, New Jersey and New York." On page 3, the Executive Summary, is: "Relative Bargain: Compared to similar affluent counties in Connecticut, New Jersey and New York, The Montgomery County Public School System (MCPS) delivers better SAT scores at a lower cost per pupil." On page 27 is: "In short, citizens of Montgomery County get more for their money in terms of education than citizens of comparable counties in New York, New Jersey and Connecticut. Montgomery County spends less and performs better."

However, it is what is said between these statements that should be of real interest to the BOE and county officials. After all, by quoting from this study, MCPS has given great credibility to MTEF, which it obviously refers to in a positive way when it calls MTEF "an independent think tank." An organization that quotes from and highlights a strong critic is really telling everyone to take what the critic says quite seriously.

The MTEF study's authors write on page 3: "After adjusting for inflation and enrollment growth, Montgomery County spends 30% more than it did eight years ago. This increase amounts to \$330 million per year in extra spending in 2005 dollars. The cumulative extra spending, 1997-2005, amounts to \$1.2 billion. Despite the extra spending, the County's SAT score advantage over the national mean SAT score was flat over the eight year period. Scores on statewide standardized tests were inconsistent, rising in 1998 and 1999, and then declining... The MCPS seniors participating in the SAT test rose from 76% in 1997 to 77% in 2005. A larger participation gain was observed at the national level, from 42% to 49%."

On page 4 is this: "In Montgomery County, the higher spending produced no major change in outcomes from the measuring point of standardized test scores." Page 27 states: "The County is more efficient than five of the other counties, but that will not be the case for long if current trends in spending growth continue. The spending for smaller class sizes accounts for about \$40 million annually, but an authoritative study on the subject indicates that the "small class size" strategy does not lead to higher test scores."

Three months later, in January 2006, the same MTEF authors released: "School Spending and Standardized Test Results for the Lower Grades of The Montgomery County School System Follow Up." They wrote: "In October of 2005, MTEF released a report that reviewed the recent increase in Montgomery County School

System spending over and above inflation and enrollment growth. From 1997 to 2005, per pupil spending increased 30% above inflation, indicating \$1.2 billion in over-inflation spending during that time. What did taxpayers receive? The report considered whether the new spending resulted in improved student performance, as measured by standardized test scores. It found no evidence of improving performance, relative to other school systems, since the increased spending began."

They concluded: "Test scores do not show any improvement in relative performance in the lower and middle grades relative to the rest of Maryland. When compared to the rest of Maryland, including specific counties that score at similar levels, Montgomery County's MSA scores do not show any unique improvement... Despite the lack of evidence on test score improvement, MCPS is again requesting per pupil spending that is significantly higher than inflation for its fiscal 2007 budget. Should the County consider limiting per pupil increases to inflation until MCPS can demonstrate a definitive return on taxpayers' investment?"

On page 7 of "The Citizens Budget 2008" is this second passage:

In addition, MCPS regularly receives a series of external and independent financial and operational audits by local, state, and federal agencies. In every case and for every subject area, the audits of the MCPS system found no weaknesses, noncompliance, or other problems.

This is a completely dishonest statement. It is as if the February 2006 "Audit Report - Office of Inspector General - Seven Locks Elementary School Projects" never was written. The IG wrote in his 2/15/06 cover letter: "We believe action needs to be taken by the Board and Council to ensure that oversight of financial and other information used to present CIP facility projects is more effective." The IG's findings were:

"Finding 1 - Cost data for the Seven Locks Elementary School project presented by MCPS to the Board and Council was limited to two construction options, even though at least two other apparently less costly options existed, including one studied by MCPS for the existing site.

"Finding 2 - A quality control process that ensures the use of complete and reliable cost data to analyze facility construction options and present recommendations to the Board and Council is needed to improve fiscal accountability.

"Finding 3 - Evidence does not support MCPS statements to the Board that the Seven Locks Elementary School community proposed or supported a Kendale Road replacement school option.

"Finding 4 - Procedures used to award an \$817,500 architect contract for a Kendale Road replacement school were inadequate and may have violated Board requirements."

I believe the language used by the IG to describe the findings speaks for itself, and what is written is utterly contrary to the MCPS statement that: "the audits of the MCPS system found no weaknesses, noncompliance, or other problems." This reform-minded BOE may want to consider what the self-serving misuse and abuse of important, verifiable truths in a document sent by MCPS to hundreds of thousands of county residents means to its still-new reputation. The BOE may also want to carefully study the conclusions of the MTEF studies highlighted by MCPS as it relates to MCPS budgets and the effectiveness of MCPS programs.

References:

The Citizens Budget: FY 2008

<http://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/departments/budget/citizens/>

The Citizens Budget 2008

http://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/departments/budget/citizens/pdf/Citizens_BudgetFY08.pdf

"School Spending in Montgomery County as Compared to Ten Affluent Counties in Connecticut, California, Maryland, New Jersey and New York", by Jeffery C. Hooke and Mihai Sturdza, Maryland Tax Education Foundation, October 2005

<http://www.marylandtaxeducation.org/pmreportfinalversion.pdf>

"School Spending and Standardized Test Results for the Lower Grades of The Montgomery County School System - Follow Up", Jeffrey C. Hooke and Mihai Sturdza, Maryland Tax Education Foundation, January, 2006

<http://www.marylandtaxeducation.org/schoolspendingtestresults.pdf>

Audit Report, Office of Inspector General, Seven Locks Elementary School Projects, February 2006

<http://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/content/inspectorg/finalreport.pdf>

Inspector General Statement to the Council, March 2, 2006

<http://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/content/inspectorg/slescouncilmemo.pdf>

Appendix to Audit Report, Response of Montgomery County Public Schools

<http://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/content/inspectorg/mcpsappendix.pdf>