

"Federation Corner" column
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Why don't we just abolish our Board of Education?

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In 2002, the Maryland legislature abolished the elected Prince George's County Board of Education and replaced it with an appointed Board because of the incessant infighting between the Board and the school superintendent. In 2006, an elected Board was reestablished. In 2007, the Washington, D.C. City Council abolished the elected D.C. Board of Education and turned control of the schools over to the Mayor because of the massive failure of schools to meet standards. In 2008, if the Montgomery County Board of Education (BOE) were to be abolished for lack of relevance, would anyone really notice a difference?

The BOE is irrelevant by choice. Its mission is: "The Montgomery County Board of Education is the official educational policy-making body in the county. The Board is responsible for the direction and operation of the public school system. The Board consists of seven county residents elected by voters for a four-year term and a student elected by secondary school students for a one-year term." However, none of these eight members have personal staff although there are seven staff to serve the BOE. The staff positions are Legislative and Intergovernment Relations, Policy and Communications, Administrative Secretary to the [BOE], Administrative Secretary, Fiscal Assistant, Administrative Services Manager. There is also a Chief of Staff, but he is also has the full-time job of Ombudsman. "The Ombudsman is appointed by the [BOE] and is considered an independent or neutral party who seeks to resolve school-related problems as quickly and efficiently as possible." It would seem to be rather difficult, even impossible, to be the Chief of Staff, with a duty to the BOE, and to also have a duty to be "an independent or neutral party" on school-related matters.

These fifteen people, eight Boardmembers and seven staff, are responsible for the direction and operation of a \$2.1 billion per year enterprise made up of 137,745 students, 21,840 employees, 1,265 buses, 200 schools and numerous other offices and warehouses. The adult Boardmembers are paid \$18,500 per year for this work. By contrast, the nine members of the Montgomery County Council, who are paid \$90,000 per year, with the Council president receiving \$99,000, have about 35 personal staff and 35 legislative staff. "Some of the Council's principal responsibilities are: Appropriates money to fund the capital and operating budgets and sets the local property tax rate and other local taxes; Approves all land use plans including the General Plan, area master plans, and sector plans prepared by the Planning Board; Exercises oversight over County programs to ensure efficiency and effectiveness; Enacts all County laws and amendments to the Code."

While the County Council has a much more varied range of responsibilities than the BOE, they manage a fraction of the number of employees with a fraction of the budget of the BOE, yet they have at least ten times as many staff people as the BOE. I heard a BOE member state earlier this week that she receives a stack of emails and letters an inch thick every day and she reads all of this mail herself and then calls her chief of staff or MCPS officials to deal with the issues. The hours she spends on that one daily task must greatly restrict what else she can accomplish in the time she gives to her low-paid, part-time job.

It must be obvious to the reader by now that the BOE is incapable of being responsible for the direction and operation of the mammoth, multi-billion dollar enterprise known as MCPS because they have given themselves no resources to do the job. Thus, they must rely entirely on MCPS employees for all information, employees whose duty and loyalty are first and foremost to the boss who hires and can fire them, Superintendent Weast. They may be friendly, cooperative, and informative to the BOE, but the BOE has absolutely no way of determining if they are being given all the information that is available on an issue or if the information is even truthful. By contrast, the County Council has staff which it can direct to provide such oversight, and the Council can also use its Office of Legislative Oversight to research issues in even greater

detail. The Council also funds an Inspector General who can launch independent investigations concerning possible government waste, fraud, and abuse. Any research that BOE might ever want to have done can only be provided by the Department of Shared Accountability, except that this office is only accountable to MCPS, not to BOE.

Would anyone really notice a difference if our BOE disappeared tomorrow? Sometimes, BOE meeting discussions are not a cacophony of the relentless happy talk that pervades all written and electronic communications sent out to the world by MCPS. I might miss the philosophical discussions concerning why so many students do so poorly and how hard it is to figure out how to educate them because no one really knows what programs work, although MCPS has a lot of programs and is creating more of them all the time.

This week's BOE discussion concerned Weast's latest version of accountability that he calls M-Stat. I've written about this effort in a previous column in February 2007 ("BOE and MCPS face their greatest challenge"). Weast's perkier administrator described M-Stat's roots in the Compstat program that slashed crime in New York City. She claimed it started in 1994, although it was really begun in the '80s in NYC's then-deadly subway system by the late, legendary transit cop Jack Maple, who personally advised Martin O'Malley in 1999 to expand a Baltimore crime-fighting plan into a government waste-fighting plan that became known as CitiStat, a model used around the nation, including most recently in Montgomery County, which just launched its CountyStat program.

MCPS officials apparently don't know about the Compstat scandal: "Scandal erupted in the New York City Police Department in March 2004 when a police officers union accused various precinct commanders and other officials of 'cooking the books' on crime statistics. In addition to police officer denunciations, an array of community members, from residents to delivery people, have come forward to describe incidents where they were turned away at the police station when they sought to file theft or other reports. In addition to these 'non-reports,' officers from the 50th [precinct] claim that crime was often mis-catalogued and understated. A central aspect of Compstat is regular meetings where precinct commanders are grilled by NYPD top brass. Precinct commanders must explain their statistics and strategies under the glare of giant monitors replete with graphs, charts, and maps displaying their success--or lack of it. These meetings are reported to be very tense. The rhetoric and procedures center on the idea of 'accountability' and precinct commanders are rewarded or punished, depending on their performance.

"As odd as it may seem, there are striking similarities between this policing strategy and current national trends in K-12 education. The rhetoric and ideology of 'accountability' are paramount in both these trends and they both rely on standardized measures of achievement and on the visibility of performance directly tied to rewards and punishments. Much like school principals, precinct commanders are under tremendous pressure to generate new numbers and, much like teachers, the discretion of officers is taken away as the job becomes standardized. Through Compstat, the importance of keeping crime statistics was shifted from a clerical task to a central administrative obligation around which data-driven decisions are made. This has led to fraud by precinct commanders and to a 'lean and mean' style of management that often ignores the needs of the community. Furthermore, Compstat data can lead to causal connections where they may not exist, leading, for example, to a crack down on porn shops if these are correlated with high crime areas. It is important to understand that a data-driven system is only as good as its data; that which does not get recorded does not get analyzed."

At this BOE briefing about M-Stat, there was discussion of data points and other serious-sounding jargon and included graphics with lots of arrows showing the "Plan, Do, Study, Act" strategy at the heart of M-Stat. One high school principal talked at length about how his school increased AP participation by minority students. Some of it sounded really good, but who knows if the wrong kind of Compstat might be at work, if not now, then perhaps later. At the end, Weast told his staff and the BOE just how proud he was of them and how far they had come. He sounded like a very proud father, a rather strange role for someone who ostensibly

works for the BOE. Of course, since the BOE neither has nor apparently wants its own tools to "Plan, Do, Study, Act" about real oversight and understanding of MCPS, he really is master of all he surveys.

At this point, we might as well abolish the BOE and allow Weast to only have to expend his energy trying to charm and control the County Council, the only body still able and willing to provide oversight. When Councilmembers reiterated their oversight role to Weast and his BOE sidekicks this week, one Boardmember talked at length about wanting to ensure that nobody was "operating with cynicism" as the Council tries to balance a budget that is perhaps \$300 million out of whack this year and will be far worse next year. It seems it's a little late for Weast and his BOE to be trying to discourage cynicism in others.