

"Federation Corner" column
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Search for a new school superintendent

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The program for the December 13, 2010 Civic Federation monthly meeting was on the search for a new school superintendent to replace the departing Jerry Weast. The following is a synopsis of the panel discussion, as recorded in the MCCF minutes for that meeting, with some minor elaborations.

Paula Bienenfeld (Civic Federation's Education Committee Chair) introduced the program which was a panel discussion on the selection process for the next Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) Superintendent. The speakers were Lyda Astove, Special Education Advocate; Emily Barton, Executive Director, Teach for America, DC Region; Phil Kauffman, M.C. Board of Education member and the Board's Ad Hoc Superintendent Search Process Group; Neal McLusky, Associate Director, Center for Educational Freedom, Cato Institute; and Fred Stichnoth, President, Montgomery County Gifted and Talented Association.

The initial discussion dealt with what qualities the new superintendent should have. This was followed by budgetary concerns and transparency in management of MCPS. There are about 144,000 students in the MCPS system. However the demographics are changing with more children requiring subsidies.

Mr. Kauffman announced that the School Board has engaged the executive search firm, Hazard, Young, Attea & Associates to conduct the recruitment process for the new superintendent. They will hold a series of public forums expected to start in January for citizen input into the selection criteria. (Citizen forums will be held January 31 at Northwest High and White Oak Middle School, February 1 at Bethesda Elementary and Montgomery Village Middle School, and February 2 at Wheaton High and Carver Educational Services Center--all forums start at 7 p.m.) A separate firm will be retained to conduct background checks of the candidates.

Opinions varied from having someone who will continue the policies and strong authority of the current superintendent to having the Board of Education take a more active oversight role while the new superintendent would primarily be an educator with a CFO (Chief Financial Officer) who would have primary responsibility for the fiscal management of MCPS. Mr. McLusky argued for allowing charter schools in the County as an educational alternative to MCPS (see last paragraph for further discussion of charter schools).

The current policy of having the County divided into "green" and "red" zones was also debated since this allowed resources to be directed to those areas with higher needs children. Ms. Astrove stated her belief that the closing of the Learning Centers has resulted in lower testing scores and graduation rates for some children with disabilities.

Ms. Barton allowed that with the complexities of large school districts and the various factions that school superintendents must deal with, that no one approach has been an unqualified success. She suggested that the six leadership qualities that have been identified for successful principals and teachers might be a start. These are listed at the website www.teachingasleadership.org as the following:

1. "Set big goals. Powerful, big goals that are measurable, ambitious, and meaningful are developed by considering four questions: What measurable progress should my students achieve?; What pathways to opportunity are in front of my students?; What interests and inspirations could shape the big goal?; and, What traits, mindsets and skills will best serve my students?"

2. "Invest students and their families. Many highly successful teachers and experts boil the idea of student investment down to two factors: the students' belief that they are able to achieve at high levels alongside their desire to do so. For any endeavor, consciously or not, students are asking themselves 'Can I do this?' and 'Do I want to do this?' Your responsibility is to be sure that every student answers yes to both questions. Here are three key elements of doing so: create a welcoming environment; create a culture of achievement; and, offer relevant, appropriately challenging academic content."

3. "Plan purposefully. Think of purposeful planning--for any type of plan, large or small--as comprised of these three sequential principles: vision; assessment; and plan."

4. "Execute effectively. We see three general characteristics exhibited by strong teachers as they implement plans: do well what must be done (teachers must develop knowledge and skills that enable them to be effective executors); insist on seeing reality (assessing whether students get it and are engaged); and, adjust course as circumstances change (make adjustments to insure students achieve your vision of success)."

5. "Continually increase effectiveness. A cycle of reflection leads to increased effectiveness. The steps are: identify successes and gaps in progress, and the deeper story behind them; identify teacher actions that are causing those successes, and gaps and underlying factors leading you to take those actions; and determine learning objectives and access learning opportunities, and change course to alter student outcomes."

6. "Work relentlessly--persist in the face of considerable challenges; pursue additional time and resources; and, sustain energy to reach ambitious goals."

Mr. McLuskey noted that a recent study of several large school systems found that few have detailed financial information available for decision making. When the panel was asked to suggest performance measures that could be used for assessing the new superintendent's success, Ms. Barton suggested the MSA (Maryland School Assessment) test scores.

There was disagreement over the implications of Maryland's participation in the national Race to the Top program. Some felt this will result in additional tests being administered to students and further distraction from teaching, while others believe that current tests such as the MSA would be sufficient. A major difference of the Race to the Top is its focus on growth measures rather than just simple performance. How this will be determined has not been decided. Also to be determined is whether Montgomery County will participate or not, since the Board of Education did not sign onto the State's application.

It was agreed after some discussion that the issue of charter schools would require action by the State Legislature before the County could allow them.

The views expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect formal positions adopted by the Federation. To submit an 800-1000 word column for consideration, send as an email attachment to theelms518@earthlink.net