

Comments on MCPS Strategic Plan and FY2008 Operating Budget Planning, October 12, 2006, by Mark R. Adelman, Chair, Education Committee, Montgomery County Civic Federation

The Civic Federation Education Committee welcomes the opportunity to make public comment as you begin the process of defining and refining these important documents. We choose to revisit four generic issues we have raised before, linking them to the second and third questions you asked the public to consider.

Given the complexity of the tasks with which you are charged and the size of the budget the community has allocated to our school system, it is essential that you make every effort to communicate clearly and candidly with all elements of the community. We repeat our concern that so many of your public documents are needlessly obscure. This includes not just budget documents but also such publications as Board policies and the Strategic Plan itself. You must avoid jargon and obscure acronyms. You must use words clearly and precisely, with the overall goal of encouraging the public to read them; to convince the public that you intend to listen to such comment as this; and then to incorporate our collective wisdom into your action plans. You must convey to us the sense that every one of the precious dollars expended in producing such publications has been wisely spent.

We remain convinced that the Board does not have adequate staff to assist it in the range of oversight tasks with which it is charged. Since we first began to urge you to increase your staff by 2-3, it has in fact shrunk. How can you carry out appropriate analysis and research, give adequate oversight to the Superintendent, and do the outreach necessary to cement community support for quality education if you lack adequate staff support? With now only approximately one-quarter of the taxpayers of Montgomery County active users of your product, it devolves on you to make the case for adequate funds. So long as significant parts of the community believe that our elected officials do not understand the MCPS budget how can you expect the community to devote the effort it takes to assist you in preparing that budget, let alone listen to you when you try to make the case?

Montgomery County is rich in diverse resources and talents. The community wants our school system to succeed for all students. At the September 21 event, by which you began this yearly cycle of strategic and operating budget planning, I was struck by the number of people who spoke -in the break-out session -of the need to better use members of the community to help MCPS staff in such tasks as advocating for children who do not already have strong advocates. Too many concerned citizens feel that volunteers are not recruited as actively and used as effectively as they should be. We urge you to consider allocating more resources to the Family and Community Partnerships Unit, especially to the offices charged with Mentoring and with Parent Information and Training.

We support efforts to enhance teacher training, but urge that the expertise thus developed be used to benefit all students and not be allocated disproportionately to support special programs for students who are already performing above the average. Teacher time must not be wasted in gathering data that is intended primarily to support the argument that MCPS is doing a great job. We recognize that laws such as No Child Left Behind require documenting outcomes. But we question the extent to which teacher time and expensive technology is being used to gather data that burnishes our reputation but does not help us evaluate the needs of individual students, inform parents of the evaluation results in a timely fashion, and implement individualized plans to address those individual needs.