


MONTGOMERY COUNTY BOARD OF EDUCATION
Rockville, Maryland

November 23, 2011

MEMORANDUM

To: Members of the Board of Education
From: Laura Steinberg,  Staff Assistant
Subject: Community Conversations

For a second year, the Montgomery County Board of Education invited a broad spectrum of the community to participate in conversations about the strategic plan and operating budget. The first event was held on Wednesday, October 12, 2011, at Northwood High School in Silver Spring, and the second event was held on Thursday, October 27, 2011, at Watkins Mill High School in Gaithersburg. The Board's goal was to hear from the community ideas on how to make our world-class school system better and to incorporate those ideas into both the strategic planning process and budget deliberations. Using a roundtable format, community members engaged in conversations around three key questions:

- What do you value most about MCPS?
- How do we continue our commitment to equity and excellence in a challenging fiscal climate?
- What information would be helpful to you? What information do you need to know about the budget and budget process to strengthen your advocacy?

To assure broad-based participation, local schools were urged to invite their community members and leaders. Childcare, sign language, and foreign language interpretation services were made available to community members. A total of 91 community members attended the events (47 at Northwood High School; 44 at Watkins Mill High School). Participants reported overall satisfaction with the discussions and that the quality of the conversation was very good.

When the participants were asked to identify what they valued most about MCPS, their responses fell into five broad categories: curriculum/programs, culture, staff, community engagement, and operations. Within the area of curriculum/programs, the participants said they most value the academic opportunities available to students through a rigorous curriculum; the wide array of academic, cultural, and language opportunities for students; as well as the many opportunities for accelerated and enriched instruction. With regard to the school system's culture, participants said they highly value the

student diversity within MCPS. They also indicated that they value the system's transparency and willingness to look at both successes and failures as a way to improve and be innovative. With regard to staff, the participants said they value the high quality of teachers and administrators and their commitment to doing what is in the best interest of students, as well as their dedication to continued self improvement. With regard to community engagement, the participants said they value the effort the school system makes to keep parents informed and connected. And lastly, participants said they value the fact that the school system is well managed and has available resources (Attachment A).

The participants were asked to rate the operating budget interests that were identified by the Board of Education earlier this fall. Overwhelmingly, they said the highest budget priority should be to make sure all students achieve, regardless of demographics. Participants also felt strongly that the budget should provide funds to ensure a healthy and safe environment for all students, focus on programs that prepare students for the future by providing multiple paths for college and career, and continue to support professional growth (Attachment B).

In response to what information is needed to better understand the budget, suggestions fell into several categories. First, there was significant support for more user friendly information. There was equal interest in more details (i.e., line item costs) as well as explanations about the operational impact of budget decisions. Finally, while there were some requests for more information about the budget process, there was a keen interest in learning better advocacy skills (Attachment C).

Attachments

Copy to:

- Dr. Starr
- Mr. Bowers
- Dr. Lacey
- Mr. Ikheloa
- Mr. Edwards
- Ms. King
- Mr. Davis
- Ms. Stultz

	Values	Total # tables identifying as a value
Curriculum/Programs		
	Excellent academic opportunities for all students – rigorous curriculum	17
	Wide range of academic, cultural, and language opportunities for students	16
	Accelerated and enrichment opportunities	9
	Special education programs	6
	Special programs for Gifted and Talented, ESOL, and Special Education (spectrum of learners)	5
	Well thought-out, centralized curriculum from pre-K to Grade 12; early childhood to college readiness	5
	Extracurricular opportunities (clubs, sports, academic)	3
	Classroom technology	2
	Reasonable class size	1
Culture		
	Diversity of student population and county	10
	Open to new ideas, always looking to improve, evaluate for success and failure, transparency, innovation	9
	National reputation	8
	Recognition of student needs and taking proactive steps to provide support	7
	High expectations, with focus on learning	7
	Desire for excellence	1
Staff		
	High quality staff with commitment to their jobs and to doing the best for students	17
	Dedicated staff committed to continuing their education and improving skills	3
	Teachers are highly motivated and genuinely care about the students, quality of counselors is very good, support staff is committed to children, strong administrators	3
	Excellent in-service training/professional development	1
Communication/Engagement		
	Many parents are informed, connected, and involved; good communication (multiple languages) from MCPS	10
	Listens to input from the community	4
	Community engagement efforts	3
Operations		
	Well managed school system with available resources	3
	World class transportation—gets kids to school on-time and safely	3
	Facilities (school buildings are kept-up, remodeled, built)	1

Interests	Total # tables identifying as an interest
Make sure all students achieve, regardless of demographics	20
Provide a healthy and safe environment of all students	14
Focus on programs that prepare students for the future by providing multiple career paths for college and career	13
Continue to invest in professional growth	10
Maintain commitment to equitable distribution of resources to our schools	9
Retain, support, acknowledge, and reward all staff	8
Youth programs for students that promote a healthy lifestyle (after school)	8
Continue to invest in things that really engage students and make learning exciting	8
Provide timely and adequate remediation to students not on grade level	8
Protect classroom resources	8
Continue to invest to reduce variability between schools and within each school	7
Maintain and improve our array of special education programs	7
Don't balance the budget on the backs of our most vulnerable students	7
Continue to invest in pre-school (Universal pre-K)	6
Continue to invest in technology for students and staff	6
Improve the academic performance of our middle schools	5
Maximize schools as community assets	4
Address secondary literacy issues	3
Address the math curriculum	3
Maintain the academic success of our programs	3
Ensure we graduate students prepared to be full participants in our democracy (civics and history)	2
Invest in learning opportunities to enhance students' appreciation of our role as environmental stewards	1
Balance student enrollment across district to provide opportunities to support equity	1
Culturally competent educators (value system)	1
Equip teachers to address the range of learning styles and needs in the class	1
Maintain Edline and expand to elementary schools	1
Maximize communication efforts of schools and school system to ensure involvement of non-English speaking parents	1
Multiple pathways to keep all kids in schools	1
Provide multicultural education for administrators and teachers	1
Reach out and retain drop-outs	1
Support for ESOL students and families (language support)	1

	Suggestions	Total # tables identifying as a suggestion
Process/Budget Explanation		
	Make budget information user friendly and more understandable	8
	Amount spent on each school, including principal role	5
	Breakdown by funding source (i.e., federal, state, county)	3
	Budget history and how specific numbers arrived at	2
	Explain discretionary vs mandatory spending	1
	Explain how priorities determined	1
	Provide a budget analysis that includes detail of what it means	1
	Timeline of BOE meetings	1
	Help us know what decisions are being made at different levels	1
Line Item Costs		
	Annotated budget with line items	6
	Program costs (i.e., Curriculum 2.0, after-school activities, etc.)	4
	Amount and source of funding	2
Advocacy		
	Provide advocacy talking points	8
	Help people know how and to whom to advocate to: BOE, county, state	5
	Coordination among MCPS, parents, students, and community	2
	Inform parents/community to better advocate	2
	Effective awareness campaign	1
	Inform earlier of potential cuts so that people can advocate for areas of interest	1
Cuts		
	Explain how cuts will affect the students and classrooms	4
	Cost estimates of initiatives that were cut	2
	Inform parents, staff, and students about proposed cuts earlier	1
	Be open about what programs are at-risk	1
Cost Benefit		
	Metrics used to make decisions	2
	Provide clear budget synopsis and statistics on expenditure effectiveness	1
Accessibility		
	Information in varied forms and multiple languages	4
	Information more prominent on the web site and easy to read and understand	2
	Public access to more data and information about issues	1
	Online access	1
Public Input		
	More and different opportunities for public participation in budget development	3
	Opportunities for student input	2
	More and varied advertisement of public meetings	1
	Expand input opportunities (i.e., meeting times, places, easier participation, etc.)	1
Additional Data		
	Spending trends and comparisons with other districts	2
	Shared county resources/duplication of services	2