

APPROVED
24-1995

Rockville, Maryland
May 15, 1995

The Board of Education of Montgomery County met in special session at the Carver Educational Services Center, Rockville, Maryland, on Monday, May 15, 1995, at 7:40 p.m.

ROLL CALL Present: Mrs. Beatrice B. Gordon, President
in the Chair
Dr. Alan Cheung
Mr. Blair G. Ewing
Mr. Reginald Felton
Ms. Ana Sol Gutierrez
Mrs. Nancy King

Absent: Mr. Stephen Abrams
Ms. Wendy Converse

Others Present: Dr. Paul L. Vance, Superintendent
Mrs. Kathryn W. Gemberling, Deputy
Mr. Larry A. Bowers, Acting Deputy
Mr. Thomas S. Fess, Parliamentarian
Mr. Charles McCullough, Board Member-elect

RESOLUTION NO. 340-95 Re: APPROVAL OF THE AGENDA - MAY 15, 1995

On recommendation of the superintendent and on motion of Mr. Felton seconded by Ms. Gutierrez, the following resolution was adopted unanimously:

Resolved, That the Board of Education approve its agenda for May 15, 1995.

Re: BOARD OF EDUCATION ACTION AREA --
COMMUNICATION

Mrs. Gordon reported that one of the Board's Action Areas was on communication. Board members believed that they needed to improve internal and external communications. Dr. Vance introduced Mr. Brian Porter, director of the Department of Information. Dr. Vance called attention to the paper before the Board and noted that the paper provided Board members with information to begin its review and discussion of communications. The focus of the Action Area was to develop and implement strategies for more effective internal and external communications. Internal communications should be strengthened to make all educational issues understandable, to add focus to public discussions, to allow more time for exploring options, and to bring issues forward in a more timely manner.

Mr. Porter stated that communication was in the eye of the beholder. Whenever one looked at communication through a prism of one's own expectation, communication had multiple meanings and definitions. In response to the Board's request to look at internal and external communications, the superintendent took a broad-based look at this issue and how it could be applied to MCPS. He felt that this was a timely discussion because it was very useful for a successful organization to have a reasonable level of communication.

Dr. Vance invited Dr. Joseph Villani and Dr. Phinnize Fisher, associate superintendents, to the table. Dr. Villani commented that in OIPD they were doing a lot to put forward the quality work done in MCPS. In OIPD they had the advantage of an infrastructure for communication including cable television and FirstClass. They were trying to give people more than the usual public relations information by providing information on actual programs. For example, last week they had an international tele-conference on event based science. They had installed all of their curriculum documents on FirstClass, and it was gratifying to him to see people reading these documents and downloading them. He believed they were building support and awareness in the community as well as client base which would strengthen the process.

In regard to FirstClass, Mrs. King stated that the more she was on that program, the more she realized that PTA and community members were using the program. She had heard from everyone involved with FirstClass that it was working very well as a means of communication.

Ms. Gutierrez encouraged staff to walk them through some of the specific things they had done to improve communication. She believed that an enormous effort had taken place in the five years she had been on the Board. She said there had been some specific external initiatives they had undertaken, and she would like to hear a sense of how effective these initiatives had been and to hear about where they were encountering barriers. She had recently started browsing on FirstClass, and she was very much impressed with the truly effective communication exchange that was occurring. She was excited to see participation by teachers because they were now able to have colleagues answer questions or provide ideas. Traditionally teachers felt very much alone, and this rather simple technology was providing an immeasurable amount positive communication at all levels.

Mr. Felton commented that he continued to be impressed with their very sophisticated system of communicating both internally and externally. However, he was concerned because the average parent, average neighborhood, and the average family continued to believe they did not have access to information. They had difficulty in finding out very basic things about the school system. He wondered if staff had identified ways to build that communication bridge to these people who probably did not have computers. He believed they were reaching the higher income and higher intelligent groups in the community. He did not want them to make the assumption that all parents felt comfortable with the communication system. He encouraged staff to continue to work with community and parent groups. He thought that many people were discouraged because they did not seem to know how to bridge the information log.

Mr. Porter remarked that there was a fascinating article in the Post today on the decrease in readership of newspapers. It showed there was a huge gap in people's trust and confidence in government which had now shifted to their trust and confidence in newspapers and the news media, in general, as purveyors of what the government said. What this meant was that it would become increasingly more difficult for government agencies to communicate directly with parents by using the news media. Therefore, it would become increasingly more important for local principals and teachers to become conveyers of the information MCPS was trying to disseminate. Principals had recognized this, and he had been invited to lecture and talk about the importance of communication. For the first time last year, the principal interns had a seminar on newspaper relations and communication strategy for communicating with parents and staff.

Mr. Porter explained that there was a growing recognition of the potential for isolation. Some schools had parents who might not be as actively involved as others. They might not be part of a grapevine network of the PTA. They might be isolated because of their work schedule, family commitments, or language barriers. Those were issues peculiar to individual schools, yet similar

across boundaries. In some ways this issue was only reachable through a local school. One of their greatest strategies would be to reach the average mother, father, or guardian through the local schools. For example, when they tried to interest a reporter in a local story, it was far better to have the principal call than the director of the Department of Information.

Dr. Fisher reported that they had made an effort to work with local principals along with new principals to let them know they controlled that local school community and local school network. Principals must be able to explain that local program. Principals received a full day of training on communication, and in addition communications had been made an integrated part of all training. As staff trained on particular areas, they also included communication. They had invited Mr. Porter to some of the sessions on selling school programs. They wanted principals to be able to communicate what was happening to children on a daily basis so that parents could gain more confidence in the school and feel that the school was a safe environment where students received an appropriate education.

Dr. Cheung recalled that when he had studied communication they had talked about a sender, a receiver, and medium to transmit the information. People received information, but there was no assurance that that communication was effective. The missing link was the feedback loop. They had been hearing that there was too much data and there was information overload. If people became desensitized and overloaded, MCPS was not achieving its objectives. Therefore, it was important to discuss whether they could determine the feedback from people who received information both internally and externally. They had talked about a customer satisfaction survey which would give them information on access to information, the quality of the information, and whether people were getting the message. When he read through the paper, he was looking for effective communication and a feedback loop to look at quality and satisfaction.

Dr. Fisher replied that as part of Success for Every Student plan they included a survey every three years. The survey was user friendly and went out to community, students, and staff. It was tabulated by DEA and gave a picture of the total school environment including the program and climate. The survey provided the local school with ideas on what to do better next year. Most of the schools had programs, and they knew the programs that were big drawing cards; therefore, schools used certain programs to communicate different components of the instructional program. Some schools used the survey on a yearly basis to get local feedback while other schools used the third year DEA survey.

Dr. Cheung recalled that the Board had discussed having a customer satisfaction survey annually. MCPS had gone from a productivity focus to the quality focus to a customer-centered approach. One way to do this was to get feedback from a customer regarding the individual school and the school system. He hoped that schools would do this more often than every three years. He believed that individuals needed to be evaluated by their supervisors as well as by their subordinates. Mr. Porter replied that MCPS used to do extensive community surveys, but these were eliminated about 1990 as part of initial budget reductions. He agreed that they did not know whether or not people understood what MCPS was trying to tell them. However, a marketing survey that was required to get a glimpse into that was costly. The third parent satisfaction survey would be completed this year, and DEA would publish a study this summer. This might serve as a model for further discussion to decide what it was they wanted to know.

Mr. Ewing stated that the paper reflected substantial and significant progress in recent times in terms of the extent and the quality of communications with the general public. It seemed to him they had also made progress in terms of reaching out to public in a variety of ways and making information more accessible. He thought they continued to have difficulty with that and difficulty

with the credibility of the information they published. The more they attempted to make a case for a policy or a budget position, the more problem they had with credibility.

Mr. Ewing indicated that a couple of Board members had attended a number of meetings of the Community Coalition for Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School. These people were community leaders who had been active in PTA and civic associations over the years. When they came to look at models for improving the school, one of those was the International Baccalaureate Program. They went to Fairfax County to look at the program because they were totally unaware of the IB program at Richard Montgomery High School. The other day a statement was made that there had been a steady downward trend in the SAT scores and in admissions to distinguished colleges by MCPS graduates. He informed them that the reverse was true.

Mr. Ewing was sure that people were not deliberately fostering ignorance, and yet there were large gaps in the knowledge of parents. He thought they needed to remember that there were a great many well-informed people as well as average families who were not very well informed. It was true that the leadership in the community tended to turn over fairly rapidly; therefore, the school system was endlessly engaged in educating new people. This was an endless task.

With respect to the credibility issue, Mr. Ewing thought that one of the things they could do more of was to speak about the achievements of students, teachers, and other staff. At the same time, they should be candid about the problems that remained to be solved. At times they were so eager to get good press that they neglected the opportunity to speak about problems.

Mr. Ewing indicated that he heard over and over again that there was a lack of an authoritative source or compendium of information that people could turn to. There was the budget, but it was not easy document to read. He pointed out that the budgets of most large organizations were complex. He was astounded that there were civic leaders who thought the MCPS budget could be simplified. He thought they needed an annual accountability report which might be a good place to turn when people had questions.

Mr. Ewing suggested that they take the results of this discussion and develop a communications strategy for the future. It should incorporate what they had already done as well as some other things which would have price tags. He was well aware that over the years the Department of Information had grown smaller. In other areas where a lot of time used to be spent on communications, they also had less resources. Principals had less time for everything. He strongly supported surveys and wished they could afford to do more of them. The surveys used to give the Board courage when they appeared before the Council because the results of the surveys revealed vast support for the public schools, not just among parents but throughout the community. He pointed out the small survey that the Gazette had done on trusting people to allocate resources to the public schools. The Board of Education came out ahead by a substantial margin.

Mr. Ewing said his final point was on answering critics. The Board had had that debate for a good ten years. At one point a local writer had challenged the Board to a debate, but the Board refused to debate. When critics spoke and there was no answer, many people assumed that what the critics said was true. He believed they needed to consider that as part of a communications strategy. He did not think they had to answer every single criticism, but he thought they should answer the more egregious ones.

Mrs. King recalled that as MCCPTA president one of her biggest frustrations was the fact that they would send out so much information from the school system to people who would still call and say they had no information. No matter how much information they had, if people did not

read it, it was useless. She had been told that people would not read a five- or six-page document because they did not have the time. She knew that it was hard to put information on one or two pages, but people would read these documents. The same issue was true of the budget because new PTA presidents did not know where to begin when they received the full budget. She did not know whether there was a way to simplify that budget. She wondered about the possibility of having a workshop to explain the budget format. She knew that MCCPTA had done some of that, but there were a lot of people who were in the dark on the budget.

Mrs. Gordon thought they had done a tremendous job of communicating, but what they needed to discuss was how effective their current communication had been. They needed to look at how they might change that communication to communicate in different ways. They could not go to a person's home and present a piece of paper. They had to rely upon individuals to accept some responsibility for getting information beyond just sending it out to them. However, even people in leadership positions in the community did not have the knowledge that had been communicated to them. This pointed to the need to improve the internal communication. If they looked at the local school as being the place where people would come for information, they had to make sure that the local school had the information that the Board or system wanted them to have.

Mrs. Gordon thought that surveys were an outstanding way for them to get information, but she had filled out a parent survey last year and had never received feedback on the results of the survey. She wanted to know the results of the survey and what the system was doing about the issues. She stressed that they had to establish two-way communication. They would turn people off if there was the feeling that the information they provided was not being used.

Mrs. Gordon said they needed to look at what they were already doing to see if they needed to continue to do all of those things. They knew they would have limited resources for communication, and if they were doing things that were not producing results, these should be examined. As they looked forward to establishing some kind of a plan, those were the things they needed to look at. If they could determine what was particularly effective, they could expand those and eliminate some of the others. In response to Mr. Ewing's comments about responding to criticism, she was not afraid to debate, but they needed to begin to take some kind of a position on how they were going to respond to that. Increasingly this year they had responded indirectly, and at some point the Board might want to respond directly to incorrect information. On the other hand, if they responded, the accusation was that they were on the defensive. She suggested they look at going on the offensive and getting information throughout the year as they developed a plan for communication. They should be communicating on student achievement, on policy issues, and on the budget. When they did respond to criticisms in the media, it would not be viewed as something that was out of character for the Board.

Ms. Gutierrez thought that they had the beginning of a consensus. She was hearing her colleagues say that they needed a written communications strategy document plan. They needed to build on the concepts that were here. They had seen there were two forms of communication, external and internal, and they needed to disaggregate that to see what it meant. They had talked about principal training. They also had to look at what they wanted to do with parents, students, and administrators. Externally, they had identified a lot of their efforts and a lot of the stakeholders and customers including the non-parents and the taxpayers. She said that after doing that kind of analysis of the external recipients they needed to come up with a strategy within that plan as what they wanted to do.

Ms. Gutierrez remarked that they had made significant efforts toward communication. They had been lucky attempts because they had been successful. Nevertheless, she was concerned that

these attempts were not part of a strategic approach to communications. She thought they should attempt to produce this.

Ms. Gutierrez said they had to look at the effectiveness of communications and the barriers to communication. There were some issues they had not discussed. One was the formality of their communications as a Board. There was some indication that they needed some more informal means of communicating. They also had to look to see if they were monolingual in their communications because they were not monolingual as a school system. If they recognized that language was a barrier, they could look at how each school began to deal with that more effectively. They had to have a plan for meeting the multilingual needs of the community. They should not be doing things ad hoc but should be doing them systematically.

Ms. Gutierrez had a little brochure on the Arlington schools. It was a quick and easy document with lots of information, and she thought that at one point Prince George's had a similar brochure. It was a very nice marketing tool with factual information about the school system. They should consider doing this in Montgomery County. The Board should hold press conferences. They needed outreach through public forums away from the Board table. They had talked about having an annual report, but they never made a decision about it. They were underutilizing their own television channels, and they needed a strategic plan to make more use of cable television.

Ms. Gutierrez called attention to the document before the Board. It was all words. There were no tables, no lists, no quick assessment to communicate information, no figures, no graphs, no side headings, or no mixture of fonts. With desktop publishing, they had to look at how they effectively communicated ideas and how they presented ideas. A picture was worth a thousand words, and they had to look at whether they could improve in this area. Their presentations using computer graphics were very effective, but she still thought that the written documents needed improvement.

Mr. McCullough thought that the two big stars were public relations and access. Television would be invaluable, especially in dealing with the budget because some people were audio and visual learners. He recalled that when he was in elementary school, people had a little piece of paper showing the major things happening during the school year as well as the telephone numbers of different departments within MCPS. If someone had a problem, they would have easy access to telephone numbers. He pointed out that almost everyone had a phone and willing to dial a few numbers. They could have a comment box because people could call and leave a message. People were reluctant to fill out a survey because they did not think it would be read, but people might be willing to comment on the telephone.

Mr. McCullough suggested that the Board consider visiting schools during the afternoon of every other all-day meeting. This would give them an idea of how students were progressing. Board members could not get out to all the schools. He had tried to do this during his election campaign, and it could not be done. He thought that if they focused on access and convenience, the school system would be seen as something to help people. He did not think that the general public knew who Board members were, and this was something they had to work on because parents did not know the Board was there to help.

Mr. Ewing was interested in the discussion in the paper of what might be done to upgrade the television presentation of Board meetings. He realized there were costs involved, and it occurred to him that they might ask the Television Foundation to work with MCPS on this. Several Board members had noted that it appeared to be regarded inappropriate for the Board and MCPS to attempt to put their views forcefully before the public. He suggested it might be worthwhile to

talk to editors about that issue. He did not think it was wrong for them to be in the forefront to advocate for public education and to set their views before the public.

Mrs. Gordon said that she had thought about this. She had met with the editorial staff of the Gazette, and they had commented about several pieces of information MCPS had provided. As they pursued this issue of communication, she thought they should talk to the media, both print and television, to find out what were effective ways to communicate. The media had criticized the way in which information was presented, and she thought they should be asked for their suggestions about improvements that would make it easier for the media to understand information provided by MCPS.

In terms of television, Mrs. Gordon agreed they should use it more. They had started to use it for the budget, and they needed to go beyond that. They broadcast and rebroadcast Board meetings, and for an all-day Board meeting that was a tremendous amount of time for someone to invest in watching. They might want to look at some kind of summary similar to what was done for the Bulletin. She reported that the Council had a summary of previous Council meetings before the telecast of current meetings.

Mrs. Gordon stated that she also wanted to talk about personal communication. It was incumbent on Board members to address this action area as individuals. It was important for individual Board members to take on the responsibility of communicating with various groups and individuals that they had access to. If they were serious about this Action Area, they had to make a commitment to do this. Time and time again when they talked about issues, everything came back to communication.

Dr. Vance indicated that he had been taking notes to get the sense of the Board. As they talked about having a strategic plan, he would hope that they not be overly absorbed with the plan. Much of what he did with communication, he did intuitively. He thought this had been productive. He hoped they would not become so wed to a plan that they did not feel free to do what they felt intuitively in matters of communication.

Ms. Gutierrez sensed that the Board wanted to change. Their path had been traditional, low-risk, and safe. They made sure that their communications were checked two or three times. For them to have that effective communication with the general community, they needed to change the way they had been communicating as a Board and as a school system.

Mrs. Gordon thanked staff for their presentation and said they would look forward to the next discussion.

Re: ADJOURNMENT

The president adjourned the meeting at 9 p.m.

PRESIDENT

SECRETARY

PLV:mlw