

Public Comment before the
Montgomery County Board of Education
By
Doug Prouty, President
Montgomery County Education Association
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Good evening President Brandman and members of the Montgomery County Board of Education. This is my first opportunity to come before you during Public Comment as the newly elected President of the Montgomery County Education Association. On behalf of the almost 12,000 members of MCEA, I want to take this opportunity to speak about the needs of the frontline educators in the Montgomery County Public Schools, and our priorities for the coming year.

As you know, MCEA and the Board of Education will soon begin contract negotiations over the terms of our collective bargaining agreement. We enter contract negotiations at a challenging time. Economically, we are well aware of the uncertainties of funding for public education resulting from the current recession. Revenue shortfalls at the state level pose questions about whether MCPS will receive all the state aid we are entitled to by formula. At the county level, there are those who already assert that the County will not meet its 'Maintenance of Effort' obligation to provide funding for our schools at the same per-pupil spending level as in the current year. As you know, the Maryland State Attorney General's Office is expected to issue an Opinion Letter soon as to whether the Montgomery County Government even met Maintenance of Effort in the current year.

How tragic that even though Montgomery County continues to be one of the wealthiest counties in the nation, we cannot rely on the county government to at least maintain the same level of per-pupil spending. If the State Attorney General's Office does not rule correctly on this question, there will no longer be any guarantee, or expectation, that the Montgomery County government will provide our schools with the same level of per-pupil spending as it has in the past. It is difficult to accept that 20 of the 23 local governments across Maryland were able to meet Maintenance of Effort this year, but Montgomery County was not.

Our members appreciate the commitments this Board of Education made last year when we renegotiated our contract. It was not easy for the employees of MCPS to voluntarily give up \$89 million in negotiated cost-of-living adjustments. Our cost of living has not gone down, but as a result of that agreement, our salaries are not keeping pace. Thousands of MCPS employees saw their take-home pay

actually go down this year, as a result of stagnant salaries and increasing costs of health insurance premiums.

That is why it is so important to our members that this Board made a commitment to restore those lost cost-of-living increases as soon as possible, and to do so before spending any newly available funding on new initiatives. Our members also placed great importance on your commitment to maintain the current health insurance premium cost-sharing formulas for four additional years. Our members have consistently placed a high priority on ensuring affordable, comprehensive health insurance for our families, and we appreciate your commitment in support of that goal.

We recognize that forces outside of our control will largely determine the economics of next year's schools budget. Every day there are new economic reports indicating that the recession has bottomed out and the recovery has begun. It is too early for anyone to know how quickly the economy will recover, and how quickly that will restore growth in county and state tax revenues.

The decision of the State Attorney General's Office also looms large over the future of the MCPS budget. We hope that the AG's Office will affirm the legislative intent of Maintenance of Effort.

Both of those factors – the speed of the economic recovery and the integrity of the county's obligation to maintain local per-pupil spending at no less than the prior year's level - will largely determine the framework for the economic issues we will be discussing in the upcoming contract negotiations.

However, we are entering contract negotiations at a challenging time in other ways. Eight years after passage of the federal No Child Left Behind Act, I do not exaggerate in saying that our teaching workforce is at a breaking point. Teachers and other frontline educators are being overwhelmed with demands on their time. The ever-growing demands around data entry and paperwork alone are making the job of teaching much more difficult. Our members went into teaching because of their commitment to students. Yet more and more they find themselves unable to spend the time they want to – and need to – preparing for and working with students, because of the demands around paperwork and data entry.

Let me give you just one example. Last year, MCPS began requiring teachers to fill out a new form – Form 272 – in order to provide more detailed documentation of services provided to special education students. Form 272 itself is not a federal, nor a state requirement. It is an MCPS requirement. A typical middle school general education teacher is going to have to fill out this three page form four times during the school year for each special education student he/she teaches. So a middle or high school teacher with 25 or more special education students in their classes now has to fill out more than 100 copies of this single form every year. And every time s/he fills out the form s/he has to attach samples of student work as evidence. This one form alone is requiring hours and hours of additional paperwork from each of the thousands of teachers who are required to fill it out.

The 272 form is an example of the ways in which technology can be used to reduce workload. The Office of Special Education and Student Services is working to do just that - gather the necessary data in a much more efficient and teacher friendly way. But even once it is put online, it will still consume

thousands of hours of time from teachers all across the system – time that is then taken away from direct work with students.

Let me give you another example. Just last week, the administration at one high school informed its teachers that there was yet another new form they had to fill out, for teachers to document every single instance of ‘academic support’ which they provide to every single student. If the student stops by a classroom after school with a question – this needs to be recorded. If students are getting extra help during the lunch period– this needs to be documented. Other high schools are considering the same thing. There is nothing about such documentation that improves the teacher’s ability to work with students. Such obsessive documentation impedes a teacher’s ability to work with students. Teachers have less time to work with students because they need more and more time filling out forms to document their work with students.

This brings me to what I believe is the most fundamental question we must collectively address in the upcoming contract negotiations. Teachers across MCPS increasingly feel that their professional judgment as educators is not respected. We are not simply told what the expectations are; our time and our work lives are micro-managed down to the smallest detail over how we are to meet those expectations. There is a great deal of talk within MCPS about developing the skills of our teaching workforce, but the reality in schools and classrooms is often very different. For example, teams of middle school educators are not simply told what they need to accomplish, they are told when they have to meet with one another and what the meeting agendas need to be. Teams of elementary school teachers not only are told when and what to meet about, they have to take time to write up notes from the meetings and submit them back to the administration to document what they talked about. They have less time to actually write up lesson plans because they are required to write up reports for their administrators that document what they do when they are not directly working with students. We are reduced to arguing over how many minutes of individual planning time a teacher has to have per week because absent such guarantees, the monitoring agenda would script out every single minute of a teacher’s day and leave them no time for the individual lesson planning that is supposed to be the essence of their work.

So that is a central element of our message to you: treat us as professionals. Define the goals. Define the expectations. Hold us accountable for results, but don’t micro-manage every single minute of our day. We are highly trained professionals. MCPS has rightly invested a great deal in our ongoing professional development and in creating opportunities for collaborative work among educators. But when we are required to spend more time documenting how we do our jobs than we have time to do the lesson planning, reflection and analysis that is central to our work, the system has gone awry.

Over the last eight years, MCPS has become an increasingly top down school system. Parents, teachers and students alike are concerned by the extent to which decision-making has been removed from the classroom and from the local school. Our call to you is to return instructional decision-making to those who are closest to the work.

We are not calling for a decentralized school system with no standards or accountability. MCPS has made important strides in raising standards, decreasing variance of results, and increasing accountability. And we have seen the results in increasing student performance and narrowing of the achievement gap. An important foundation has been laid. But we will not be able to continue to improve student success with a one-size-fits-all approach to instructional decision-making.

We call on you to empower local schools; local school leadership teams, grade level and departmental teams, and individual teachers to use their professional expertise to make decisions about how to improve student learning. Those closest to the work are in the best position to decide how to meet each student's needs.

Last month, MCEA asked its members what they thought local educators and local schools should have more control over. The response was overwhelming. In a matter of just three weeks, more than four thousand five hundred MCEA members responded in writing with their thoughts and suggestions. Clearly, we had struck a chord. Clearly, those most responsible for student learning were saying that they did not feel they had enough control over the instructional decisions that affect their students. From use of time, to curriculum, to professional development, to school scheduling, to discipline policy, teachers felt that too much of their professional work was not within their control.

I am here tonight to present to you the feedback forms from more than 4,500 individual educators in MCPS who wanted their thoughts conveyed directly to you on how to return instructional decision-making back to those who are closest to the work. I hope you will each take the time to review the many thoughtful – and heartfelt – pleas from your teachers about what is keeping them from doing their very best for our students.

In these upcoming contract negotiations, we need to tackle some very big questions about local school decision-making. We need to tackle some very big questions over the use of – and control of – teacher time. This is not a contract negotiation where we can simply tinker around the edges. This is not a contract negotiation where employee satisfaction will come as a result of a big pay raise. This is a contract negotiation in which we need to make some significant changes that will help restore our members' sense of ownership of their work that is essential to student learning.

The turnover of new teachers in MCPS is increasing for the first time in many years. The teaching profession in MCPS is no longer what more and more young educators want, expect, and demand. I hope that during these upcoming contract negotiations we can work together to re-establish respect for the professional judgment of educators. If we do so successfully, I believe that MCPS is poised to accomplish great things. If we don't, we will have failed not only our teachers, but our students as well.