

"Federation Corner" column  
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### **Policy FAA, FAA-RA, and the role of citizen task forces**

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Last year, when our committee learned that the PTAs were alarmed about proposed revisions to Board of Education (BoE) Policy FAA, which covers Long Range Educational Facilities Planning, we joined them in expressing objections to the proposed revisions. Everyone feared that taking many crucial elements out of the policy document (FAA) and putting it in the easily changed regulatory document (FAA-RA) would greatly reduce all citizen input. Many argued that regulations prepared by the Superintendent's office were routinely approved by the BoE, with little citizen input. Although certain BoE members assured us that citizens would continue to have input into both FAA and FAA-RA, we protested the drastically revised policy, which was nevertheless adopted. [See our website for Newsletter articles and Sentinel pieces about this.]

After adopting the revised Policy FAA, the BoE and the Superintendent quickly prepared an Interim FAA-RA, included it in the CIP, then invited members of the PTAs, MCCF, and other groups to serve on a Working Group that spent several months reviewing the interim regulations and proposing detailed revisions. We have reported on that process, our position paper (also on our website), and the Working Group recommendations. The BoE Policy Committee reviewed the recommendations and presented no significant changes to the Superintendent. We have now examined the new FAA-RA regulations and the Superintendent's memorandum (sent to the BoE) explaining which Working Group recommendations he accepted or rejected. They shed light on the disregard with which MCPS treats citizens when they work together on such documents.

As adopted, FAA-RA regulations include three decisions by the Superintendent that we do not accept.

1. Preferred Range of Enrollment: The Superintendent declared that such enrollment numbers be increased, in part because some schools are already operating above the previous range. He claimed that keeping the previous range would create "unreasonable" expectations for smaller schools and that studies of optimal school sizes have been inconclusive. However, our recommendations were NOT for small schools: both the Superintendent and the Working group agree with the lowest numbers of 300 for ES, 600 for MS, and 1000 HS. We wanted the upper end to remain as previously and our recommendations were just a little lower than what was inserted into FAA-RA: 620 vs. 750 for ES, 1125 vs. 1200 for MS, and 1800 vs. 2000 for HS. We believe the real lesson here is that the Superintendent will always choose his preference over those of the parents and other citizens. And MCPS is doing all it can to redefine what is the right size of schools so that no school will ever need to be recognized as so overcrowded that everyone would be forced to deal with the larger problem. The "preferences" in FAA-RA are NOT those of the parents and other citizens who pay for the operation of the school system. Rather they are the preferences of the Superintendent and the various elected officials who make decisions in these matters, insist on "growing" our county without "growing" the funding sources needed to assure adequate public facilities, and then declare "preferred"; the overcrowded schools that their ill-advised decisions have helped create.

2. Relocatable classrooms: These were barely mentioned in the Interim FAA-RA. We recommended defining conditions for their use and standards for the maintenance of portable classrooms that would minimize negative impacts on the surrounding community. The Superintendent decided our wording was "vague" and chose to simply delete the parts that addressed impact on communities. While the Education Committee knows of portables that are an eyesore and a blight on adjacent neighborhoods, we welcome

brief reports (with pictures) from delegates who see the same problem. We hope to use such material to educate our elected and appointed officials on the need to do much better.

3. Community involvement: Our major goal in participating in the Working Group was to help create a document that ensured involvement of the wider community in the school planning process, because both PTAs and other citizens are needed to plan the best educational facilities. The Superintendent's version of the FAA-RA regulations sent to the BoE contains many, but not all, of our suggested revisions. Our recommendation to include civic associations in the Site Selection Advisory Committees (SSACs) was not accepted. There had been much discussion of this issue by the Working Group, including the concern that SSAC community members, worried about the impact of a particular school site on their property values, might have a conflict of interest that impacted the negotiations to acquire such sites. Again, the Superintendent deleted our suggestions without offering alternative wording. It is an insult to the civic community - and citizens in general - to suggest that those who work on SSACs as representatives of the PTAs can work with MCPS staff, but that other citizens should not. EVERYONE knows how important MCPS is to our property values and our taxes. [We urge you to read Section VI.2.a.3 of the Superintendent's version - draft dated 2/22/06 but not yet posted to the BoE website - and tell us what you think of the decision not to include the broader community in SSACs.]

We devoted much time and effort to the dialogue on Policy FAA and to revising FAA-RA regulations. Despite the Superintendent's dismissive attitude toward us, the effort was worth it, because we learned how complex the process is, how factors such as concern about lawsuits affect decisions about wording, how hard the PTAs work on these matters, and how much they can teach us. We will continue to participate and will continue to ensure that the voices of the community are heard.