

"Federation Corner" column
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The community must pay attention to what MCPS says and does

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Despite the fact that our public school system enjoys an excellent reputation, it has been the focus of a number of criticisms in recent years. Many accuse MCPS of not being transparent (in terms of budget, planning, reporting of crime, etc.). Another theme of critics is that MCPS is not sufficiently responsive to "the community." Our columns have stressed the point that "the community" involves all residents of Montgomery County and not just families with kids in the school system. We have argued that all of us must pay attention to what MCPS does and the language it uses in publicizing its actions. When the Board of Education (BoE) and MCPS officials use meaningless terms like "world-class education" we should ask what is really meant and carefully examine the response. Are we being sold a bill of goods? Are we believing that what we **want** to be true is true?

A case in point is the recent report on "Grade 2 Global Screening in Spring." Global Screening is the process by which all second grade students are evaluated for possible designation as being "gifted and talented" (G&T). The parents of children so designated are urged to pursue one or more paths of accelerated or enriched instruction. As BoE members and MCPS officials tell us, Federal and State laws mandate that all school systems must identify G&T children and provide enriched instruction so the special potential of such children is not wasted. What we are **not** told is that the laws fail to provide any meaningful definition of G&T; nor do they stipulate mechanisms for identifying such children. BoE policy IOA (last revised in 1995) does not do any better in this regard and the related document IOA-RA is distressingly lacking in "beef" when it comes to explaining process. None of these laws, policies, or regulations provides any guidance as to how many students one might reasonably expect to be sufficiently exceptional as to warrant G&T designation.

Many professional educators believe an appropriate number is about 2-5% of the student population; nationwide, most school systems identify about that percent of their students as G&T. In the 2006 school year MCPS determined that 40% of all grade 2 students are G&T! That the number is so large suggests that, in Montgomery County, G&T is being operationally defined as "above average." Over recent years the number has varied widely (in the 35-45% range) and the process has been the subject of much controversy, in part because African-American and Hispanic second graders are far less likely (by at least a factor of two) to be designated G&T than are Caucasian or Asian-American kids. Last year, in response to complaints by several groups about this, MCPS appeared to acknowledge the problem. "Short term, we need to come up with something different for this year," Deputy Superintendent Frieda K. Lacey said. "Long term, we need to revamp this whole global screening and just do something completely different." The results of this year's screening show clearly that MCPS has neither done something completely different," nor achieved any significant improvement by whatever "revamping" it has done.

As a citizen of Montgomery County, you have access to a "Testing Brief," posted to the MCPS website, which provides a summary of the data on Global Screening and G&T designation. The report alludes to efforts that are being made to refine the screening process and mitigate its "discriminatory" results. We suggest that, by not defining reasonably what is meant by G&T, and by failing to establish a process that leads to designation of a "realistic" number of children, all the officials to whom we have delegated authority have cheapened the meaning of yet another phrase. And we have allowed them to do so. This is not simply a semantic issue. Because, if nearly half our children are "gifted and talented" but half are "not," we have created a process that deceives many, disappoints many others, ignores the special

needs of the small percentage of our children who are truly exceptional, and diverts valuable resources in a futile effort to make a flawed process work. Why do we accept this? Because we believe so many of our children are exceptional, or because we **want** it to be so? How much staff time is spent trying to make a flawed process yield an acceptable result? How many students who are not designated G&T are given an inferior education because resources are spread unevenly (the best teachers for the "best" students, the most innovative programs for the students deemed most likely to benefit)? The dialogue about this process is replete with jargon and accusations. Am I suggesting that G&T be eliminated? Of course not. Do I want the curriculum "dumbed down"? The answer is - defiantly - NO.

The real issue here is whether we are doing the best we can for all our children. Are we using our resources as wisely as we can? What is the most effective way to identify the strengths and weaknesses of each individual child and then provide each with the most educational support possible? It is a complex issue that warrants the attention of all of us. The BoE and MCPS are asking for community input in the process of preparing the FY2008 MCPS budget and revising the MCPS Strategic Plan (details are available on the MCPS website and in our October Newsletter). Please think about it and provide your insights to the BoE. And while you muse, ask yourself an additional question: Is a school system really "good" if over 50% of its students are "not"?