

“Federation Corner” column

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## **Now it's time for the Federation Budgetpalooza**

By Paula Bienenfeld

Every year at this time the Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) superintendent announces his operating budget for the upcoming fiscal year. And every year, with little or no discussion, the Montgomery County Board of Education and the County Council approve it.

This year, the proposed budget is \$2.4BILLION. As we say many times, this amount is half of our entire county operating budget. Every other thing that we ask our county elected officials and our county employees to do, from keeping our libraries open and running, to our arts programs, to first responders who save lives, our police service, our parks, our health and human services, taking care of the needy and the homeless, all of it, every penny, comes from the other half of our money. So, it's worth a close look and robust discussion.

Is this the best way to spend \$2.4B of our hard-earned money? Let's find out. Let's have a *Budgetpalooza!*

What do we find out? Every year there are surprises. Here's an example from our *FY14Budgetpalooza!*, part of an analysis by Gordie Brenne, Taxpayers League Vice President:

“The Taxpayers League compared green and red zone performance and salaries. After a decade of efforts to boost red zone performance, math and reading scores are still lower (-12% and -5%), and red zone teachers are paid 4% less reflecting their lower levels of experience. Surprisingly, there doesn't seem to be much of a correlation between salaries and test scores in either zone, although red zone salaries are slightly correlated to improved performance. There is absolutely no correlation between green zone salaries and performance in math, showing MCPS has reached the point of diminishing returns with higher salaries in the green zone.”

We know the Board of Education isn't going to discuss the money allocations. So, let's do it ourselves. Let's find out.

The third annual *Budgetpalooza!* is coming soon. The date this year is Thursday, February 26th, the time is 7-9:30 pm, and the place is the Bethesda-Chevy Chase Regional Services Center, at 4805 Edgemoor Lane in Bethesda, convenient to the Bethesda metro stop on the red line. As usual we are teaming with our partners, the Montgomery County Taxpayers League, and the Parents' Coalition of Montgomery County to go through the MCPS FY16 budget chapter by chapter.

We need you, the residents of this county, who pay for every penny that the Board of Education spends, to sign up and take a chapter. To sign up, go to <http://www.signupgenius.com/go/10c094cadac28a3fb6-mcps>. The event is titled, 'MCPS FY16 Operating Budget Budgetpalooza! There are still chapters to choose from. There are 11 chapters in all and appendices. Each chapter discusses budget and staffing allocations, with some explanatory text on programs.

Let's take a peek at Chapter 1, K-12 Instruction. There the budget has increased from \$942,015,166 to \$983,334,751, an increase of \$41,319,585. Why? Travel alone is over \$1M. Why? I'll let you read through and find out.

How about Chapter 6, the Office of Shared Accountability? This is the office that includes the 'Division of Accountability Initiatives.' Here the budget actually went down. Why? Because, according to the budget text, "There is reduction of \$150,000 for a FY 2015 study of special education programs and services which will not require funding in FY 2016. In addition, a .5 evaluation specialist position and \$35,000 was budgeted to conduct a study of the Kennedy Cluster project. This study is expected to be completed in FY 2015."

Has everyone seen the study that we paid for?

And here's an interesting section, Appendix E, 'Non-Operating Budget Positions.' What's that doing in an Operating Budget? Let's find out. Here we appear to have dozens of staff salaries paid for out of the Capital Budget and Trust Funds, and not the Operating Budget. These include positions in the Office of Communications, and the Office of Chief Technology Officer, positions like, 'IT Systems Engineer,' and 'Environmental Safety Specialist.'

The appendices include nuggets on salaries, and an appendix titled, 'Special Education Staffing Plan and Budget Guidelines.' If you are interested in Special Education, we would appreciate your taking that appendix and reviewing it. Let us know what you think. Is our money well spent? Any interesting patterns in budget, program or staff allocations?

The chapter by chapter analysis is simple and will only take as much time as you want to put into it. Please step up and help your community to understand how our \$2.4Billion is being spent. Because we know the Board of Education won't.

The entire budget, by chapter, is here:<http://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/departments/budget/fy2016/superintendent/index.aspx>.

And this is how we do it.