

"Federation Corner" column
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New BOE worse than old BOE in defying community expectations

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It was the behavior of the "old" BOE concerning the Seven Locks Elementary School (SLES) Projects that became the hallmark of its multiple failures to be transparent and to listen to community concerns, ultimately persuading several BOE members not to seek reelection. It is the very recent behavior of the "new" BOE concerning Special Education Learning Centers (SELCs) that may become the hallmark of its failures to be transparent and to listen to community concerns, perhaps having similar effects on their political aspirations. There are striking parallels in the behavior of both MCPS and BOE on these two matters. In both cases, amateur BOE members could not provide oversight or stand up to the manipulations of a hardened professional superintendent.

The SLES failure began as a response by the superintendent to an inquiry about surplus school sites from the County Executive. The SELC failure began as a response by the superintendent to an inquiry into MCPS efforts to mainstream more special education students from state education officials. The superintendent concocted an elaborate scheme to build an expensive new school on an inadequate site in order to give away the SLES site to please the County Executive. The superintendent concocted an elaborate scheme to close SELCs and dump the students into inadequate general classrooms in order to please state education officials.

MCPS officials concealed less expensive SLES options from the SLES PTA, the larger community, and the County Council, with the support of a majority of the BOE, in possible violation of state education regulations. When the county inspector general, in response to community concerns, investigated and then issued a report critical of MCPS, BOE defiantly sought to stand by its decision while trying to repudiate both the report and the authority to research and write such reports by seeking and receiving a favorable opinion from the state Attorney General.

Beginning last summer, MCPS officials completely concealed plans to close SELCs from special education parents and stakeholder groups, yet received immediate, unconditional support of an even larger majority of the new BOE, in possible worse violations of both state and federal laws.

Three top MCPS officials repeatedly tried to place full responsibility for the SLES mess on one of three volunteer parent cluster coordinators based on her alleged suggestion at a single meeting to relocate SLES. MCPS and BOE both sought to repeatedly mischaracterize the motives of the SLES PTA and the larger community for wanting to keep the current SLES and enlarge and modernize it.

So far, in response to the reaction to the SELC sellout, one BOE member has tried to silence a special education parent by pressuring her ES principal, her PTA president, and the larger MCCPTA to repudiate her statements and claims concerning SELC closings. The top BOE administrator has tried to characterize a secret briefing of BOE members of the secret plans for the SELC closings and how to handle community reaction as something else. This secret briefing may have violated the state Open Meetings Act.

Why has this happened again? Why was MCPS and the old BOE so willing to risk and lose so much over the SLES mess just so they could have their way on the plans for one out of 125 elementary schools? Why are MCPS and BOE so willing to risk and likely lose so much over the SELC sellout just so they can have their way over how 600 out of 138,000 students are taught?

As part of this latest ill-fated journey, new BOE president Nancy Navarro and new BOE vice president Shirley Brandman stand accused by special education parents of breaking explicit campaign promises made to them and the larger community just a few months ago. In response to the question: "Do you believe that the parents of special education students should be free to choose the desired LRE [Least Restrictive Environment] setting for their child, similar to the choices that MCPS gives to families in the high school consortiums and magnet programs?" Nancy Navarro wrote: "Access to a quality education is a civil right. Parents should be able to choose the best arrangement for their child. We have number of choice programs in place; this should not be any different." Shirley Brandman wrote: "I firmly believe that students all across the special education spectrum should have choices. MCPS must provide a full continuum of program options to meet the diverse need. Within each of our clusters, we should be expanding the range of instructional opportunities for special education students so that they can opt for the most appropriate, least restrictive program in close proximity to their home neighborhoods. Parents must be meaningfully engaged in the choice of which LRE placement best meets a student's individualized needs."

Nancy Navarro's campaign website states: "Our teachers and our schools cannot insure excellence for all students without an authentic partnership with parents and families... We owe it to taxpayers, whether they have children in the system or not, to be fully accountable and transparent about how decisions are made and how money is spent... As a member of the [BOE] it is my duty to provide oversight of MCPS, and I take that responsibility seriously. I support making our [BOE] more effective in performing its responsibilities. I support open meetings and allowing parents and community members to state their concerns and make suggestions before a Board work session is held." Shirley Brandman's website states: "... we must engage parents, guardians and the larger community as meaningful participants in the debates that affect the education of their children. Our [BOE] needs to hear the voice of the community to understand the challenges our students face and the services they need."

The following statement is in an email from the special education parent about the secret decision to close SELCs: "[An MCPS official was asked] how long MCPS had been working on the plan and what input they had had from parents. [The official] replied, 'We made a decision not to include parents in any of our discussions over the summer because we made that decision internally. We made that decision because that was a decision we made.' This is especially troubling after several Board of Ed members reported that they had been told by [the official] that parents had been active participants in the planning discussions. They were given incorrect information."

It was BOE member Sharon Cox who responded to this parent: "Having several years experience in PTA, I support and encourage discussion over the importance of parent involvement and the form it should take in public education. However, I am concerned that your message does not further that debate but instead focuses on an individual's integrity based on purported conversations, characterized by people who were not party to those conversations."

Strangely, Cox also wrote this: "To my knowledge [the MCPS official] has been consistent in her statements and has never contended 'that parents had been active participants in the planning discussions.' In fact, no member of the MCPS staff, including [the MCPS official], ever represented to me that parents had been active participants in the planning discussions, in any conversation I have had, individually or in the presence of other board members, on the issue."

What makes this statement so remarkable is that Cox seems to clearly emphasize the deliberate efforts by MCPS to EXCLUDE parents and the apparent acceptability of such actions by BOE members. Cox also wrote, in wondering whether or not the parent was speaking on behalf of her PTA, "... If not, I would ask [the PTA president] to let the recipients of your message know that you were not acting in your official capacity in regard to any comments made about the actions of a member of our staff." It may be no accident that this effort at unsubtle intimidation also includes Cox referring to an MCPS official as BOE staff, especially since

the BOE has disregarded community efforts to support the hiring of more BOE staff so that BOE can do its job of providing objective oversight of MCPS.

BOE members were pressured by many parents to not reappoint the superintendent. However, with no time available to evaluate Weast's performance and consider alternatives before the legally mandated deadline of March 1st, one could not have reasonably expected such a decision. They also did not have any time or any BOE staff to evaluate the massive MCPS budget before blindly approving it. However, with much time available to carefully consider the place of SELCs and to also include all of the parents in the evaluation process who had been deliberately excluded up until then, the BOE could have been reasonably expected to wait at least the one year sought by these parents before making a decision such as closing the SELCs.

Instead, MCPS and BOE sought to save face while still making a bad decision by allowing six years to close SELCs instead of the originally proposed three years, similar to alternative schemes that MCPS and BOE tried to orchestrate as the SLES opposition grew in size and strength. Since determined special education parents have quickly gotten the support of other education activists, have contacted the Inspector General, and have appealed directly to the County Council, the fight to save SELCs may follow the path that saved SLES. No matter what the specific outcome about SELCs, the new BOE has already lost its credibility. It will take extraordinary efforts by the BOE to win back this lost trust, something they may be incapable of doing. The ignoble start of this new, "reform" BOE may foreshadow years of conflict that could rival and exceed that of the previous BOE.