

“Federation Corner” column

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Moving on to the next step in finding a superintendent

By Paula Bienenfeld

A lot of ink has been spilled by reporters and bloggers complaining about why the Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) superintendent was let go. His last day was February 16th. It's over. And now is time to move on, to select a new superintendent.

Except, the Board of Education can't quite move on. The signs are there. The Board voted unanimously to hire the same search firm, Hazard, Young, Attea & Associates (HYA) that they had hired for the last two superintendent searches. There was no competitive bidding; HYA got the job and the Board just spent our money, no questions asked. And the process, according to an article in *The Sentinel*, is to be the same. Translation: the Board of Education doesn't want the public involved in their secret search process. They are the deciders.

So let's review the outcomes the last two times the Board used this same search firm, and same process, to hire, at taxpayer expense, the MCPS superintendent.

The first time, in 1999, HYA, recommended Dr. Elfreda Massie, then Deputy Superintendent of the Baltimore Public Schools, as superintendent and in April of that year the BOE announced she was their choice. The board had a different make-up with the exception of Patricia O'Neill, who was the Vice President at the time. (She is now the president.) But a few weeks later, Dr. Massie withdrew her name. Why? According to a May 6, 1999 *Washington Post* article by Manuel Perez-Rivas, "...revelations of her personal bankruptcy filings stunned school board members." At that time the public voiced concerns that they were not involved in the selection process. "The Board has played it too close to the vest." said Mark Simon, then-president of the Montgomery County Teachers Association. Also quoted was Sharon Cox, then-president of the Montgomery County Council of PTAs (MCCPTA), who said she was "very disappointed." In the end the Board hired Jerry Weast.

The Board hired HYA again when it came time to choose the next superintendent, in 2010. Did they change the secret process? Not so much. HYA, we assume at the Board's direction, held public 'forums' and secret focus groups, the latter consisting of people who the Board later claimed represented some organizations. But no one in those organizations knew that one of their members sat on the focus groups. So how could they represent anyone? The secret members of the focus groups received letters, which said in part, "We are delighted to invite you to participate in a focus group meeting to be conducted by a consultant from HYA." These people met with the three finalists for the superintendent job. Who were the finalists? Apart from Dr. Starr, we still don't know. There was no public input, and the people invited to the secret focus groups signed 'confidentiality' agreements. Even though these agreements have no legal standing, these people refuse to this day to talk about what went on during those discussions.

HYA even set up an online survey as part of the 'public' process, accessible to all 'stakeholders.' In fact, it was so 'public' the survey was accessible to everyone with an internet connection. So, how accurate was that survey? Not so much. And how focused on our school system and student population was it?

Again, not so much. The survey was the same survey given to the public in other communities that also hired HYA, communities like Chappaqua, NY, and Marblehead, MA. It will be fun to see if we get the same survey again!

And how did that work out for us? Not so well, as we see Dr. Starr suddenly departing.

Sadly this faux public process is just the type of window dressing we are used to – and tired of – in Montgomery County.

So, here we sit today, February 2015. Another superintendent search. But the same old process.

We urge the Board to have a true open transparent process this time. Other boards around the country do it. In fact, New York City does it. Otherwise, how would we have known that Dr. Starr was interested in the chancellor position there? Third time's the charm, right? The Board could get it right this time.

And to our fellow civic activists: Don't like business as usual? Step up. Be a good citizen and get involved in your government. Better yet, as the late Steve Abrams, also on the BOE in 1999, said in response to the complaints of Ms. Cox and Mr. Simon, run for office. "Get them a nominating petition."

And on that note, in the interests of transparency and real democracy, we remind everyone that the Third Annual *Budgetpalooza!* is coming...Thursday, February 26th, 7-9:30 pm, at the Bethesda-Chevy Chase Regional Services Center, 4805 Edgemoor Lane, Bethesda, easily accessible by bus and metro. Take one chapter and join your fellow residents in finding out how the current Board of Education plans to spend \$2.4Billion of your money.

To sign up for a chapter, go to <http://www.signupgenius.com/go/10c094cadac28a3fb6-mcps>. See you then. Because, sometimes you have to step up and do it yourself.