

January 19, 2015

An Open Letter to the Montgomery County Board of Education: Can MCPS Afford Four More Years of Dr. Starr's Leadership?

The burning question in Montgomery County Public Schools is whether the school board should vote to renew the contract of Superintendent Joshua Starr for another four years. In order to answer this question, we must look at what he has accomplished over the last four years. His accomplishments or lack thereof are a good indicator of how he will operate during the next four years.

With a budget of approximately \$9.6 billion over the last four years, has Dr. Starr moved the school system forward? Is the school system better off today than it was when he became superintendent on July 1, 2011? Moreover, has the school system gotten its money's worth in terms of the half million dollars in salary and benefits it has paid him each year?

Dr. Starr has been a good cheerleader for the school system and has had accomplishments in the area of technology (Chromebooks) and increasing cultural arts opportunities for elementary school children. Recently, we have been hearing about how much he loves his job. He is omnipresent on social media. However, that presence does not provide an enlightening window into who Dr. Starr is, what he believes, and what he values. Instead, the messages he sends to the outside world are mixed at best, and an example of how his leadership of the school system lacks focus. Instead of proactively identifying the problems the school system faces, he reacts to situations and does not move with urgency to solve these issues so that staff can provide the best instructional program for all of our students.

Dr. Starr went on a yearlong listening tour that we were told would help him assess the state of the MCPS instructional program. However, it is unclear what he learned and what he's done in response to his learning. What focus and vision does he have for the system? Has he turned out to be what we wanted for the students, staff, and parents/taxpayers in Montgomery County? There have been many missteps from this "experienced" superintendent, who was never a principal, that have led to low morale and a culture where administrators/leaders do not feel free to say what they think. They know that Dr. Starr only champions those who agree with him, and they do not want to lose their jobs. It is all about protecting the MCPS brand. Who does Dr. Starr listen to? Who does he take advice from? Who does he reach out to on the phone to just check in?

When he came to MCPS, Dr. Starr moved highly effective central office staff out of their positions. No one begrudged him hiring people he knew and trusted, but at least three of these people (who have since left) were not effective and others remain. Some of the people he has hired have no business supervising administrators. His appointments make it clear that he does not value the experience of older employees. He does not respect women or see the need to

encourage minorities to continue working in MCPS, but gives lip service to the need to diversify the MCPS workforce.

A particularly egregious misstep that adversely affected students and staff was his Innovation schools initiative. This program labeled high schools, undercut their principals, and was an appalling example of non-collaboration, lack of inclusiveness, and lack of transparency and communication.

Additionally, a good deal of time, energy, and money has been spent on the following initiatives that have not made a difference for students and staff: change in bell times, the hurried rollout of staff surveys, an alternative school that will make a difference for our at-risk students, closing the achievement gap, failing mathematics final examination scores, High School Plus, and community engagement. Students and staff have also been hurt by the lack of professional staffing to support new discipline guidelines; the lack of notification to parents about situations involving child sexual abuse; the lack of staff for HR hiring and investigations; the discontinuation of the Superintendents' Leadership program; and management issues related to weather delays and cancellations, the school calendar (Eid-Al-Fitr), non-national search and interviews to replace the Chief Operating Officer, and the budget.

Given the financial situation in the county and state, why was a budget of \$100 million more requested without doing zero based budgeting and taking an inventory of whether everything in the budget is really needed? **Schools should have everything they need to deliver and support the instructional and extracurricular programs. At present they do not despite a two billion dollar budget.** However, it is irresponsible to continue to propose a budget that has so much fat in it. The taxpayers of Montgomery County deserve the Superintendent's careful attention to the budget.

Finally, when staff members do not meet standards, they are given an improvement plan and/or demoted to a lesser position or eventually evaluated out. I am sure the BOE has shared its opinions about areas within the school system that need improvement with the Superintendent. I hope you will not vote to give Dr. Starr another four year contract. There are people out there who passionate about the education of all of our students, and can lead our diverse school system. The education of our children does not have the luxury of four more years of non-progress.

Sincerely,
Jeanette Dixon
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Education Advocate