

April 21, 2008

Editor

***The Maryland Independent***

7 Industrial Park Drive

St. Charles Industrial Park

Waldorf, Maryland 20602

Dear Editor:

As President of the Education Association of Charles County, representing almost 1900 educators in the Charles County Public schools, I would appreciate an opportunity to tell our parents and citizens the truth regarding education funding in this county.

It is a common misconception that public schools receive roughly half of every dollar of revenue the county takes in. For example, a misleading ad from the "League of Maryland Homeowners" printed in the Maryland Independent March 26<sup>th</sup> states "the Board of Education already receives 52 cents out of every dollar of county taxes." The formula this ad references was an agreement made almost ten years ago between the commissioners and the Board of Education – an agreement whereby the Board would get 52.4% of county revenue. This 52.4% figure is regularly bandied about as a given, particularly during campaigns for public office. But in fact, the Board of Education has not received 52.4% of the county's revenue in many years.

EACC has hired an independent fiscal consultant, RJ Pellicoro Associates, a firm that has 20 years experience in analyzing the budgets of public agencies. All of the documents used by our analyst (the county audit, its bond prospectus, etc.) are, of course, public record and can be obtained by any citizen.

The Pellicoro report clearly shows funding from the county declining. For example, it states that "from FY 2002 to FY 2008, the % of total General Fund Expenditures and Transfers appropriated to the BOE declined from 50.4% to 44.8%, a decrease of 5.6 percentage points." The loss of 5.6% represents a loss of \$16.8 million to our public schools this year.

The reason for the shrinking percent is that the county has underestimated its revenue consistently for the last several years, and the public schools' allocation was based on the inaccurate projections, not the actual revenue. Basically, when more money is received than projected, the county does not revise its funding to the Board of Education to bring the allocation in line with 52.4% of actual revenues.

Looking ahead, the county budget projections for the upcoming school year continue to be revised downward. Just since March, they have dropped their revenue estimates by \$3 million – a loss of \$1.5 Million to the Board of Education in less than a month. The more the revenue projections go down, the less the Board of Education gets. This is how we ended up with less than 52.4% over the last several years. We can't continue to be penalized by low- ball estimates. If there is a genuine shortfall this year, the county has the means to raise revenue and a fund balance to offset any optimistic projections that don't materialize.

As it is, our public school spending is hardly commensurate with our wealth. In 2005, Charles County ranked 7th in median household income in the state (\$88,350) of Maryland. But it ranked 22nd out of 24 in per pupil expenditure. We are not keeping pace with other counties.

Charles County is opening new schools almost every year, but no additional revenue is allotted for one-time opening costs. Thus, the Board has to take this money from its (already reduced) operating budget. These are funds that could be used for competitive teacher salaries, lower class sizes, and better instructional materials.

Our county continues to grow, and the reputation of our excellent school system attracts more and more students. At the same time, we are facing a critical teacher shortage in this state, and we need funding to attract and retain qualified educators to meet this need. The CPI (inflation rate) as of March 2008 is 4.7% Housing prices in this county are out of reach for most new teachers. Many of them leave the area and some even leave the profession to be able to afford to own a home and provide for their families.

All of our commissioners and Board of Education members have publicly stated their commitment to excellent public schools, and in general they have tried to live up to that commitment. But the measure of their dedication will show in how they act in tough times, not when budgets are flush.

The county budget hearing is currently scheduled for Wednesday, May 14<sup>th</sup> at the county building. The Board of Education has its own budget work session scheduled for this Monday, April 28<sup>th</sup> at 6 p.m. at the Starkey Administrative Building. Parents, educators, and other citizens need to let the commissioners know they expect adequate funding of public schools (email - commissioner@charlescounty.org), and they need to tell the elected Board of Education members to accurately represent the needs of our students in their budget request. Our children are counting on us.

Sincerely,

Bill Fisher  
President  
EACC

