

Lower Merion School Board, A Lesson In Civics

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I hope everyone was able to watch the latest Lower Merion School Board hearing as it aired on cable channel LMSD tv6 over the past few days. Well over 100 residents with varying opinions showed up to share their views. The stage was set for a meaningful debate that would inform the Board on how the community as a whole really felt. In many ways, this promised to be democracy at work. Or, did it.

At the onset, after a few residents shouted out to the Board, Board President Larry Rosenwald was forced to set the ground rules. While it was good to keep order from the start, calling in the Township Police may have been a little over the top. But, given that Superintendent Jamie Savedoff is no stranger to having fistfights break out at his board meetings, (he's run up big construction bills before!) perhaps erring on the side of caution made sense.

Of course, one might hope that with varying opinions being represented, a productive debate would have occurred. But, as resident after resident got up to ask the Board to exhibit a bit more fiscal responsibility in particular aspects of its budget, the answers came back loud and clear with equal frequency: "We need to build two new schools." Just like ships passing in the night, the Superintendent along with the Board members to whom he is aligned, have so conditioned their "supporters" that, like the these Board members themselves, they refuse to address or even consider the real questions being raised.

Clearly, the cheering section that came Monday night doesn't question any of the budget line items. As far as they are concerned, every dollar is essential, regardless of where it is being spent. We know this because the Board still refused to tell us where much of the money is being spent.

To the "Supporters of Lower Merion Public Schools," as they call themselves, life is simple. You either support the full budget or you're against our public schools, you either support building two new high schools at any cost or you're against our public schools, you either agree with them or you're against our public schools.

This Board's propensity to avoid the questions put to it and to instead give answers that serve its own values can best be summed up in my own experience at the May 30th Board meeting. At that meeting, the Board graciously gave me ample time to present a benchmark analysis of Lower Merion, Radnor, and Tredyffrin/Easttown (T/E) school districts. In response to my entire presentation, which I began by stating that I was not against the decision to construct two new schools, Board President Larry Rosenwald took an equal amount of time to state why we must construct two new schools! Both Jamie Savedoff and Larry Rosenwald declined to respond to one of the many questions that I put directly to them. They chose to stick to their mantra instead.

So why are the real questions being avoided? Superintendent Savedoff led the meeting with an entirely new presentation that had not been shown at any on the four scheduled budget

hearings. This new presentation began with an explanation of why the \$150M estimated cost that the Board gave to a Community Advisory Committee considering the question of two schools as opposed to one was really not intended to represent all of the costs of the two schools. He pointed this out to explain that the cost growth of \$88M to the current estimate of \$238M was not really cost growth. Superintendent Savedoff didn't explain why \$238M is the correct number or why the CAC wasn't given the real number in the first place. He did threaten, however, that if anyone dares delay the process, the costs will grow by, using his numbers, twice the current rate of inflation. If you think I'm making this up, I'll be happy to send you the CD.

This presentation compared certain aspects of our budget to neighboring Radnor and T/E school districts. Superintendent Savedoff showed a chart comparing our \$27M special education budget to \$9m for Radnor and \$10m for T/E, indicating that our high cost is due to the special education population that we have. He did not, however, provide us with any specifics regarding that population. Why not? Had he told us that, according to the PA Dept of Ed '04-05 data, the number of special ed students in Lower Merion was 1255 compared to 573 in Radnor and 781 in T/E, (excluding-gifted only, which the board has told us accounts for a negligible percent of special ed costs), he would have then had to explain why we a little more than twice the number of special ed students but three times the budget compared with Radnor. He then went on to relate the support services budget to the same special ed population, both line items leaving about \$11M unexplained. One resident said that when he first saw the handout, he thought those questioning the budget had prepared it. I think I'll charge for the CD!

Superintendent Savedoff then went on to explain why our transportation budget is three times that of Radnor and twice that of T/E by complaining that we are required to bus children to 120 private schools within 10 miles of the District's boundaries. He has pointed this out before, explaining that we have one of the highest percentages of children being taught outside the public school system. What Superintendent Savedoff and the Board have not told us is that our budget would have to be about \$260M if, rather than simply having to transport those children, the District had to actually educate them. For several budget meetings, the Board has tried to take credit for keeping our school taxes low, but the real reason they have remained low until now is that we have a disproportionately low number of students in the system. That tax advantage, however, will soon be gone forever.

Other highlights were the fact that our sports and activities budget is over \$4.2M compared to Radnor's \$1M, including our \$835,000 in fund transfers compared to zero in these other districts. The Board still refuses to tell us what these are for. Could some of the fund transfers relate to the District's recent down payment of its 2008 league fees for the football team? After all, with two brand new stadiums we will now be moving into a more competitive league.

Absent from this entire presentation was administration and staff salaries. Even though one of the primary answers to Superintendent Savedoff's question "why do we spend more than these districts?" is related to the fact that we have significantly more staff per student with the same class sizes as these other district's, the Superintendent chose not to go there.

And what about the real question, which is "why are we raising our already larger operating budget by 9.24% exclusive of debt for all of the new schools, past and present, when Radnor and T/E are raising theirs 5.87% and 4.48%, respectively?" The answer from Jamie Savedoff,

Larry Rosenwald, and the “Supporters of Lower Merion Public Schools” is the same. “We need to build two new schools.” But I asked about the operating budget *exclusive* of the two new schools? Reply: “We need to build two new schools.” So much for meaningful and informative debate!

But, the biggest disappointment of the night came in the follow-up to the special board meeting held last Thursday morning. At that early morning meeting, the Board demonstrated that the budget vote would not be a political decision, but rather one of principles. Diane DiBonaventuro expressed her belief that \$2M should be cut from the budget. Lyn Kugel, Jerry Novick, and Gary Friedlander all readily expressed their agreement with this proposal. And, Larry Rosenwald, Joss Gelfand, Lisa Fair Pliskin, and Marcia Taylor all took the opposing view stating that they would not vote to cut one dollar without a complete study to determine where it would come from. Superintendent Jamie Savedoff added that, “Things will suffer. Things don't get done when you make cuts.”

But, behind the scene, much had changed by Monday night. At Monday night's meeting, Diane DiBonaventuro offered a motion to decrease the budget amount by \$1M, a compromise. But the Board voted this motion down. After the obligatory allowance for public comment, closely monitored by Larry Rosenwald who refused to allow citizens to yield time to one another, in an effort to make sure he had time at the end of the night to tell a story about a horse trainer (I'm definitely selling copies of the CD), the budget vote began.

First, was a letter from Ted Lorenz, who had been on military reserve duty and could not be present. In his letter, he stated his intention to vote against the budget if no reductions were made. And so, the stage appeared to be set for a five to four vote against the budget. Sticking to their own words from the previous week and in light of the Board's denial to make the proposed \$1M cut, Diane DiBonaventuro, Jerry Novick, and Gary Friedlander all voted against the budget.

Sadly, however, Lyn Kugel chose politics over principles. Succumbing to the pressures of her party (let's not forget how she got “elected,” unopposed!), she flipped on her previous position and voted for the budget. Sadly for her she was victimized by the Board bully, and in a move that should disgust any principled person, she sold her own stated beliefs out for the party. I say this not because she voted in a way opposite to my beliefs. I say this because she voted opposite to what she told us days before. Oh, her reason. You guessed it, she voted for the budget because we need to build two new schools!

Can we ever have an informative debate when pat answers replace persuasive thoughts? Is anybody listening? If you are, email msdbudget.reform@verizon.net with *your* thoughts.